

CHRISTMAS DAY IN HANK PALMER'S BARN

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As I recall it, the living room was still covered with the wrapping paper remnants of the Christmas morning gift opening, my younger brother was still in his pajamas, and we were just sitting down for brunch...when the phone rang.

My mother sighed the great sigh of a small town veterinarian's wife, who had come to expect the phone to ring at mealtime, summoning my father out to care for some farmer's critter.

My father went to the kitchen and picked up the phone as my mother dished my plate and my brother's with her traditional Christmas Day brunch egg pie. We could hear from the kitchen bits of the kind of phone conversation we had grown used to in a veterinarian's house.

"How long? Been checking how often? When did you first notice she was down? Yep. Uh-huh. Okay...I'll come on out. Third road past the Grange Hall, isn't it? Right fork. Half mile up the gravel. Yeah, I remember, driveway on the left."

"Can you at least eat first?" my mother asked him as he walked through the dining room.

"No, I better just get on out there. It's old Hank Palmer. Got a cow down trying to calf. They can't afford to lose either one." Grabbing a roll from the table, he went to the basement to get on his coveralls.

My mother looked at me and said, "Why don't you go with him?"

I suppose I made one of those "aw mom" kind of faces, for she quickly added, "It's Christmas, you know. He shouldn't have to go alone."

With the egg pie I had been waiting for all morning still mostly uneaten on my plate, I too headed for the basement where the warmest outside clothes were hung by the furnace.

"Wear your long underwear and a sweater over your sweater," she called out as I started down the stairs.

"But Mom, I'm going to wear my fur lined parka," I called back.

"Long underwear and a second sweater," she called in answer to my call in answer to her call. "And your chopper mittens. It will be below zero even in the barn."

"I decided to go along," I said, meeting my father at the bottom of the stairs.

"I'm glad you decided that," he said, smiling. "But hurry, I don't want to lose a critter on Christmas Day."

"Mom, where are the felt liners to my Sorrel boots?" I yelled. "They aren't by the furnace where I left them. Somebody took my liners," I then mumbled, turning to find my mother standing right behind me, liners in hand.

"Nobody took them," she said in her best "what would you do without your mother" tone of voice. "You left them in the entry way again and I hung them up to dry."

"Now get going," she said, patting me on the backside. "I love you."

“Yeah, me too,” I yelled back, bounding up the stairs three at a time, even as I could hear my father starting the car in the garage....

It was a beautiful, clear, cold Minnesota Christmas Day. On the way out of town, we passed rosy-cheeked children on their way home to warm up, their new Christmas ice skates slung over their shoulders. Though there was virtually no traffic in town. It seemed to me that the only ones in town who weren't sitting down to a delicious egg pie were the veterinarian and his son.

“These folk have had a lot of bad luck,” my dad said, breaking the silence. “Lost one son in the Korean War. Another son lives in the state hospital for the mentally ill. And old Hank can barely get around on his bad leg. Tractor accident. Sure hope the calf can be saved....”

Snow crunched beneath the tires as the car turned onto the tire tracks that were the driveway. The inevitable two farm dogs came bounding out to meet the car.

I'd been to many farms with my father, and this one was one of the poorest-looking. The roof had collapsed on a couple of the sheds. Rusty machinery was parked helter-skelter. The barn needed paint ten years ago. And the house wasn't much better – the front porch distinctly sagging, as if to say, "There's been much sadness here."

My dad was right. These folk hadn't had much luck....

And my mother was right. It was below zero in that barn. And the wind found a hundred holes around barn windows that had long since lost their caulking and whistled in at the top of sagging barn doors. Any warmth in that barn came from the bodies and breath of the animals.

As we walked in, a couple of dozen bright peering critter eyes turned in our direction. The odor of manure and the sound of shuffling hooves gave a visceral sense of creatureliness.

The barn rafters were coated with years' worth of cobwebs which had caught the barn's moisture, which in turn had frozen, which gave the appearance that the barn was decorated with tinsel, which reflected the light from the hanging 40 watt bulbs.

“Over here Doc,” came a voice from a stall at the far end of the barn. “Golly, I hate to get you out, it being Christmas Day and so cold and all. But this calf just don't wanna get born.”

“I don't blame her,” Dad said. “It's a lot warmer in there than it is out here.” But he had that look on his face that told me he was worried, as he knelt down beside the panting, exhausted dairy cow.

And it was a life-and-death struggle. Dad and the old farmer and the cow, trying to help birth a calf who had managed to get turned the wrong way in the birth canal. And I stamped my feet to try to get feeling back into them, fetched things from the car, and carried warm water from the house, which my Dad could stick his hands in to keep them warm, because even in the sub-zero temperature he had to work bare-handed.

Finally my Dad, up to his armpit in cow, got the calf turned. The cow made a noise like the honk of a two-ton goose, and a black bundle slid to the straw-covered floor.

The calf raised its head, and then lowered it. The old farmer began wiping the calf with a towel. The afterbirth came.

I'd seen many a farm critter born, and each one was astonishing. Though I could have done without the mess. But I've since learned that with life, not much worthwhile or miraculous can happen without mess.

The calf tried to stand and fell smack down, its legs pointing in four different directions. "Got to get some more straw underneath her," the old farmer said. "There's some fresh over in the manger...."

And then he paused, as if surprised by the sound of his own voice speaking that word, manger.

My father looked at him. I stopped stamping my feet. We all three were thinking the same thing: Christmas Day...birth... manger....

For the story says it happened in a place a lot like this barn. Perhaps the only decorations that first Christmas were cobwebs and animal debris. It may have been cold that night, too, so that you could see the moist breath of cattle. And the manger, roughhewn like this one in Hank Palmer's barn.

The Bethlehem Child, born in a cow stall, just like this....

"There's some fresh straw in the manger," the old farmer had said. And the words took our breath away.

Oh, I understood even then that the nativity story is what it is – sacred story. But as I stood that Christmas Day in Hank Palmer's barn, what mattered, the truth of it, is the stunning insight of our faith – that in a barn, heaven and earth came together. And God – the Eternal Word, the Ultimate Love – literally embraced in Jesus all of our messy, flesh-and-blood, ordinary, vulnerable, and humanly beautiful lives.

So, in Hank Palmer's barn one Christmas Day, I helped carry straw from a manger. And I saw it and smelled it and heard it and felt it – that Jesus came for people like an old, limping farmer drying off his new calf and for a small town veterinarian and his son....

Later, when we were sure the calf was up and had found mother's milk, the old farmer insisted that we come up to the house for hot chocolate and his wife Nora's fresh-baked cinnamon rolls. So we did and sat at the table in Nora Palmer's kitchen, heated by the big wood-burning baking oven, warming our hands around the mugs of hot chocolate.

We lingered there, my father and I, one Christmas Day.

Lingered there...as if we had been touched by a holy mystery. Which, of course, we had....