

Wild Children

The children were in the pew in front of me.

We had not arrived early enough at my sister's church for the Christmas Eve service to secure a seat in back, so we were in the fourth row. The first row is never used by anyone, the second row is only for people who arrive impossibly late. The third row is, for all intents and purposes, the front row and that's where these two wild looking children were.

The children were provisioned with colored pencils and drawing paper but, other than that, looked rather neglected. Neither one had seen a comb in a long time. Both were dressed in a combination of outdoors wear and pajamas. Neither was actually sitting on the pew. The girl was sitting on the floor, using the bench as a drawing table, the boy was sprawled out across the bench, arms and legs akimbo. I felt myself making judgements. I get that way sometimes.

"Seriously," I thought, "is getting out of their pajamas too much to ask?"

The children paid no attention to the service. When the congregation rose to sing, the children remained where they were. When the other kids went up for the children's' sermon, the boy disappeared outside and the girl remained where she was.

"Where has he gone?" I wondered. These children seemed feral to me. "Probably raised by wolves," I said to amuse myself. "He's gone out to hunt squirrels," I conjectured. "Likely he is eating one now." The boy returned and lay back down on the pew. "Why are they even here?" I wondered.

I looked at the skirt I had put on for the occasion, the good coat I had brought for wearing to church, the time and effort the other parishioners had taken before leaving their homes. These children (and whoever had transported them to church) had clearly missed the memo.

I was surprised when, as the service was about to end, a man joined the children. The boy suddenly snapped out of his lethargy and went to the man who wrapped him in a hug. The boy and the man remained that way for a long time, oblivious to the service, enfolded in a hug.

“Did you see the organist’s kids in the front row?” my sister asked her husband, after we got home.

“Yeah,” he said. I was about to make some snappy remark about their lack of grooming when my sister continued.

“Her husband left them just a couple weeks ago. He won’t even answer his phone when the kids call. Her son is autistic and she is just beside herself.”

“The husband was there,” my brother in-in-law told my sister, “he came into church at the very end.”

“Really?” my sister said, and shook her head.

I realized what a colossal ass I was.

There are so many troubles I have never known. There is a world of pain I have never experienced. While I was dwelling on a couple of hastily dressed kids, with messy hair, quietly doodling in the front pew, there were wells of pain and loss and confusion right in front of me that I could not imagine.

I do not like that prissy woman in the nice skirt who sits in judgement of those poor kids. I do not like her and I don’t want to be her. While I was focused on grooming and decorum, a tired, lost man took his child in his arms and—right in front of me—a Christmas miracle occurred, a miracle I was too blind to see.

Till next time,

Carrie