

CHRISTMAS EVE WRESTLING

I arrived home from college for the Christmas break. Christmas would be different this year since Dad had died from a heart attack in July. I was the oldest of eight kids—six boys and two girls. I carried my suitcase upstairs to the west bedroom of the old farmhouse. The bed was filled with stuffed animals. There was a lot of giggling in the hallway. I knew that tomorrow morning the little ones would be pouncing on me as I feigned sleep. I knew that I had missed them and they had missed me.

My mother had so much to do. She was happy that I was home, but she seemed tired and despondent. It had been no picnic being responsible for seven children and running the farm depending on help from relatives and neighbors. Dad had died without leaving a will, so my mother had to deal with probate court and anxious creditors. I helped her and my brothers with chores and errands. Then I drove up to the old country church to help the neighbors with Christmas decorating.

The church stood on top of a hill at the intersection of two gravel roads. Its high steeple housed a big bell that chimed for Sunday services, weddings, and funerals. Even though our farm was more than a mile away, we could always hear the church bell. It would be chiming again tomorrow night, Christmas Eve.

It was snowing and a brisk wind was blowing from the north. The only exterior Christmas decoration that we decided to put up was a heavy-duty string of large blue electric lights to frame the entrance. I had made that string of lights during my senior year of high school while helping my Aunt Luella at her electric appliance repair shop. Inside the church two tall spruce trees dominated the front. We decorated the trees with enormous glass balls, angel ornaments, and lots of tinsel. A star topped each tree. The trees were strung with large white, round fluorescent bulbs that glowed with soft pastel colors when they were lit.

The children of the congregation had spent Sunday afternoons for the past month practicing for the Christmas Eve program. Every child old enough to walk and talk had a “piece” to memorize and recite in front of the entire congregation. My brother, Tony (age 5), and sister, Cindy (age 4), also had short pieces to memorize and recite. However, my mother had told me that Sunday practices had not gone well since they kept fighting with each other.

It was Christmas Eve and the church was full of farm families and relatives. My brothers and sisters sat up front with the rest of the children waiting their turn in the program. I sat with my mother toward the rear of the church. She was not a big fan of the children's Christmas program and was counting the seconds until it would be over and we could all go back home. The pastor got up and said a prayer. Then the program started.

First the little kids filed up to the front of the church holding hands. Their Sunday school teachers lined them up on the steps in front of the altar between the two big trees. The kids were distracted by all the people and the towering, glowing Christmas trees. Cindy was standing in front of Tony. A little shove here, a little poke there and a brother-sister wrestling match started in front of the altar. One of the horrified Sunday school teachers rushed up to quell the disturbance while another teacher tried to get the rest of the kids to start singing. I looked at the tears running down the cheeks of my poor, embarrassed mother. Then I started laughing too. It was so wonderful to see her laughing again, even though the whole scene was so stupid.

When all the carols had been sung, pieces recited, and narratives narrated, the ushers passed out small brown paper bags containing peanuts, candy canes, hard candy, and small trinkets (age-appropriate, of course). The church was filled with a glowing atmosphere of joy and relief. As we filed out of church into the crisp winter air, our boots crunched the snow. The big bell began to chime; we could still hear it ringing when we piled out of the cars into the farmhouse. Tony and Cindy had stopped fighting. There was peace on earth.