

*The Day the Twins Stole Jesus*

by William Luttrell III

My name is Balthazar. I'm one of the Three Wise Men, the fellow with the green robes and the black skin who carries a goblet of myrrh. I was sleeping in my Nativity set atop the dining room table. In my glorious dream someone was spraying that wondrous invention called snow-in-a-can on our stable.

Then Ox bit me on the toe and woke me up.

"Ox!" I said in a voice that was not particularly gentle, "it's the morning before Christmas! Why did thou bite me?" Ox had lived with us in this old Nativity set for over fifty years. She'd never bitten anyone. Something had to be terribly wrong.

Ox said, "Sorry, Balthazar, but it's an emergency. The Twins just stole Jesus."

I looked at the manger. Baby Jesus was gone. Mary and Joseph were missing as well.

I shouted, "Figurines, wake up. Molly and Michael have kidnapped the Holy Family."

Melchior, the oldest of the Three Wise Men, was sleeping at my feet. He curled up in a ball, pulled his robe tighter around him and said, "I can't get up, Balthazar, I just can't."

I knew the cause of Melchior's discomfiture. Melchior had always carried a box of gold, his gift for the baby Jesus. But a few weeks ago Michael had decided to share his wealth with Melchior by inserting a nickel in his box. When Michael had tried to jam the coin into Melchior's gold box, the box had snapped off. Melchior was still getting over his great loss.

Donkey limped across the dining room table, stood in front of Ox, and said, "Why didn't you stop the Twins from stealing Jesus?"

Donkey's words to Ox were unduly sharp, but I didn't reprimand her, for Donkey was in great pain. Every night the five-year-old

Twins carried Donkey to the kitchen table, tied a bib around her neck, and tried to feed her spaghetti. All this roughhousing had knocked the plaster from poor Donkey's legs. Every step she took hurt her as she hobbled around on four bare wires attached to tiny hooves.

I said, "Donkey, remember the rules of our existence. Ox must remain still whenever people are near. And Ox can chase no one because of her broken back." Michael liked to slept with Ox, and last week he rolled over on her. A great crack now ran down the length of Ox's back.

Gaspar, the youngest of the Three Wise Men, sat down next to me, clutching his casket of frankincense. Gaspar said, "We must get baby Jesus, Mary, and Joseph back by tomorrow morning!"

Gaspar was right. Fifty-three years ago, on our very first Christmas out of the box, Grandma had set us up on her dining room table. She and the young-man Grandpa had stood next to our Nativity set. A neighbor had snapped a flash picture of our Nativity set and the beaming Grandma and Grandpa.

Every year since then, Grandma, Grandpa, and their growing family have posed with our Nativity set on Christmas morning and have taken a picture. Christmas was tomorrow. Grandma and Grandpa were coming over. If we didn't rescue the Holy Family by then, Grandma's Christmas-morning picture would be ruined!

Ox, Donkey, and Gaspar gathered around me. I looked at my fellow figurines and sighed. Once we had been beautiful. But when the Twins were born, Grandma had given us to Mom, the mother of the Twins. The Twins played with us too much, and because of them we were cracked and broken. Why couldn't the Twins leave us alone and let us gaze upon baby Jesus making holy faces, the way Nativity set figurines are supposed to?

My figurine family looked at me, fear showing on all of their hand-painted faces. I had to say something.

I said, "Donkey, please listen for us. Where are the Twins?"

Donkey twitched her ears and shuddered. "The Twins are banging on something in their bedroom," she said. "Is it the Holy Family?"

I said, "We have to get them back. Now."

Donkey's eyes widened. "The Twins are coming!"

I said, "Places."

We all moved to our regular stations on the dining room table. Even old King Melchior roused himself from the table top and posed, hands open, clutching an imaginary box of gold.

Molly and Michael entered the dining room. Michael was wiry and strong for a five-year old, with brown hair and freckles. Molly was skinny, with jet black hair and big blue eyes. She was the brainy one, and it was she whom I feared the most. Molly had a half-dozen plastic baby dolls, in various states of undress, tucked under her arm.

Molly studied me and said, "Balthazar looks dirty. He needs a bath."

Molly picked me up and carried me and the pink baby dolls to the upstairs bathroom. She put us in a little pile and ran water in the sink. I, Balthazar, a King, was now lying in an undignified heap with plastic baby dolls that smelled of powder. This insult was too great for me to bear. When Molly turned her back, I rolled over and separated myself from the baby dolls. This was a mistake.

Molly spied me and said, "Balthazar wants to go first? Okay with me."

Molly squirted hand sanitizer all over me and dunked me in the water in the sink. As she dried me with toilet paper, I saw green paint from my robe swirling in the water.

After Molly returned me to our Nativity set, I gathered my figurine family around me for a meeting. When I heard Mom coming down the stairs, I had an idea.

I said, "Figurines, fall over!"

Mom walked into the room. She had dark eyes and dark hair and was serious, always serious, even when Mom had been a little girl. Mom saw us lying on our sides like captured chess pieces.

She said to us, "How did you guys get knocked over?"

Mom picked up Gaspar. He didn't have any feet, and Mom ran her finger over the jagged stubs where his feet used to be. Mom bit her lip as she studied Gaspar. I knew why.

When Mom was a child she had given Gaspar a ride on a toy train. Gaspar had fallen from the train, and both his feet had broken off. Little-girl Mom had cried for two days. I knew she still felt guilty about injuring Gaspar.

Mom looked for the Holy Family. When she couldn't find them she called for the Twins. They tumbled down the stairs and stood in the dining room next to our Nativity set.

"Do you have the Holy Family?" Mom asked the Twins.

Michael said, "We're...we're..."

Molly interrupted him. "We're playing with them."

Mom said, "Be sure to put baby Jesus, Mary, and Joseph back in the Nativity set in time for Grandma's picture tomorrow."

After Mom left the room, Molly whispered to Michael, "Mommy doesn't know what we did to them!"

Just before dark on Christmas Eve, I felt a draft of cold air as the front door opened. Grandma and Grandpa had arrived! Grandma and Grandpa were considered short by people standards, something I never understood, for they had always seemed like giants to me. As they grew older, Grandma and Grandpa had looked more and more similar, like matching salt-and-pepper shakers.

Grandma walked over to us and said, "Hello, old friends. Everything okay down with you?"

How I wished I could speak to Grandma, and tell her how the Twins were mistreating us!

Grandpa took out a Bible from his suitcase and laid it on the dining room table next to our stable. Grandma called Mom into the dining room.

Grandma said, "Alice, the Holy Family is missing."

Mom said, "The Twins have them, in their room." Mom picked me up and showed me to Grandma. "Look at Balthazar, he's so faded. The Twins are too rough with these old guys." Mom headed for the stairs. "I'm going to take the Holy Family from them."

Grandma said, "Don't do it for my sake, dear. I'm sure the Twins won't harm them." Grandma looked at her watch. "Isn't it time for dinner?"

Our people family ate dinner and stayed on the first floor for all of Christmas Eve. This prevented us from sneaking up to the Twin's bedroom and rescuing the Holy Family. We spent the night before Christmas without baby Jesus, Mary, and Joseph for the first time in our lives. None of us slept a wink.

Christmas morning arrived. I heard Molly shout, "It's Christmas morning! Everybody, get up!"

Grandpa walked into the dining room, his gray hair sticking up in the back. Grandma looked bright as mid-day in her red nightgown. Mom shuffled in, carrying a cup of coffee that matched her brown robe.

The Twins came down the stairs in single file, Michael first, wearing dark blue pajamas, and Molly in a pink nightgown. Molly carried a blue, plastic box, the kind that holds fishing tackle.

Mom said to the Twins, "Merry Christmas, kids. Do you have Baby Jesus?"

Molly nodded. She undid the latch on the tackle box and opened the lid. Michael reached inside the box.

Grandpa opened the Bible and read from it.

"And Joseph also went up from Galilee, out of the

city of Nazareth, into Judea, unto the city of David, which is called Bethlehem..."

Michael took Joseph from the tackle box and placed him in our Nativity set. I almost fainted.

The Twins had wrapped Joseph in a sequined jacket and had placed a small top hat on his head. Joseph's staff had broken off years ago, and now he held a curly Mickey Mouse drinking straw. The Twin's had maimed our gentle Joseph! Grandpa must not have noticed Joseph's awful condition, for he read from the Bible.

"...to be taxed with Mary his espoused wife, being great with child..."

Molly took Mary from the blue box and placed her in our Nativity set. Mary was kneeling, with her hands outstretched in front of her, but her hands were covered with tiny mittens made from red construction paper. Mary's blue cloak, which had faded to white long ago, was now bright pink, and Mary smelled of permanent marker. Grandpa continued to read.

"And she brought forth her firstborn son, and wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger; because there was no room for them in the inn."

Molly laid baby Jesus in the manger. He was wrapped in a cocoon made of tissues and clear tape. Each fingernail had been painted with red nail polish.

Molly closed the tackle box. She and Michael turned to their grandmother and smiled.

Grandma burst into tears.

Mom's face was a mask of fury. "Molly! Michael! How could you? You ruined Grandma's Nativity set!"

Michael's smile turned to a look of horror. His lower lip trembled. Molly let out a yelp, like that of a camel who had been stepped on. For a few seconds our people family didn't move, all of

them frozen in a human-sized, Christmas-morning tableau.

Mom said to Grandma, "I'm so sorry. I'll clean them off right away." She reached out for baby Jesus.

Grandma touched Mom's hand and stopped her.

"They're...so...beautiful." Grandma said. She pulled a dusty tissue from her sleeve and dabbed her eyes.

"What did you say?" said Mom.

Grandma picked up baby Jesus and held him to her heart.

"They're perfect in every way."

Mom said, "That nail polish doesn't come off. And they used a permanent marker on Mary's robe!"

"Thank you, Molly and Michael," said Grandma. She reached out her arms and the Twins buried their faces in her robe. Grandma said, "Alice, don't you see? The children tried to repair the Holy Family, not hurt them. Isn't that right, Molly?"

Molly was crying as she spoke. "Baby Jesus has boo-boos. We tried to fix him. We love the little people. That's why we play with them all the time."

Then it hit me. Grandma was crying tears of joy!

Grandma said, "Alice, do you remember when you were little, and Gaspar's feet broke off on his train ride?"

Mom nodded. "I still feel bad about it."

Grandma picked up Gaspar. "From that moment on, Gaspar has always been my favorite. When I look at his broken feet, I see you as a little girl. The Twins will grow up and leave you some day, Alice. But every time you see Jesus with his red fingernails and Mary with her new mittens, you'll remember Molly and Michael, just as they are this morning.

That's why I so love this Nativity set. Every crack and chip reminds me of someone I love. To me, they're more beautiful now than they were the day Grandpa and I first took them out of the box."

Mom knelt on the floor. "I'm sorry, kids." Molly and Michael ran to their mother and hugged her, and for a few minutes our people family had a good cry. I felt ashamed of myself for disliking our imperfections and the Twins.

Grandpa pulled a white handkerchief from his pocket, blew his nose and said, "After all these tears, I'm not quite ready to be photographed. Let's get some coffee before Grandma's picture."

Our people family left the room. I peeked at baby Jesus, and my marble eyes almost popped out. As I watched, his red nail polish faded. His tissue-paper blanket disappeared. Baby Jesus looked brand-new again!

Mary's robe shifted in color from pink to its original cobalt-blue. Her paper mittens disappeared. Mary looked as if she had just left the factory!

Joseph's top hat and curly-straw staff vanished, replaced by a fine head-covering and wooden staff.

Donkey's bare wires were gone, and sturdy brown legs took their place. The crack in Ox's back shriveled up and disappeared.

A shimmering box of gold appeared between Melchior's outstretched hands. Gaspar lifted up his robe: his feet were back!

I stood on my tip-toes and looked at my reflection in the chandelier overhead. My beautiful black skin had returned! My robe was green again, green as it was the day I was first painted!

Somehow we were beautiful and new-looking again!

Gaspar and Melchior came over to me, arm in arm, grinning madly. Melchior cradled his box of gold in the crook of his arm and said, "Once again we look like Kings, do we not?" I laughed and clapped them both on the back.

Gaspar said, "Balthazar, all of our wounds have disappeared. How did this happen?"

I said, "I'm not sure, but I think it's a gift. From Grandma. Somehow we now see ourselves the way Grandma sees us; perfect in

every way."

Melchior clutched his gold box to his chest. "These changes aren't real?"

I said, "How does thy box feel?"

Melchior said, "Divinely heavy."

I said, "Isn't that all that matters? Everyone in this house loves us just as we are. Even the Twins. We know that now. That's why we see ourselves as beautiful once again."

From the kitchen I heard coffee cups being put in the sink, and the scrape of chairs on the floor. Our people family was coming back.

I whispered, "Places, everybody."

Mom entered the room and glanced at me. Her expression did not change. That told me my guess was correct. To the stranger's eye we were still an old, broken-down Nativity set. But to those who loved us, and now, to ourselves, we were beautiful.

Grandma, Molly, Michael, and Mom gathered around us.

Grandpa pushed a button on the camera and said, "Everybody, look at the camera. And smile." Grandpa sat down next to Grandma, and the camera flashed.

Next time thou sees Grandma, ask to see her picture from the day the Twins stole Jesus. Mary will be wearing red mittens. A crack will run down Ox's back.

But take a closer look at me, Balthazar, the Wise Man who became much wiser, thanks to Grandma and the Twins. I'm the fellow in the picture with the washed-out green robe and faded black skin, who carries a chipped goblet of myrrh. The other figurines in my beautiful, beloved Nativity set will be gazing at baby Jesus and will be making holy faces, as they're supposed to.

But you'll see that I took Grandpa's advice. I'll be looking straight at the camera. And I'll be smiling.