

MIDNIGHT MASS

By

Ann Wehrman

Author's Personal Statement

My personal background includes serving for around a decade in my twenties and early thirties with an international missionary group of people from diverse racial, economic, national, and religious backgrounds. We shared ideals of a world family of peace and universal love and of all people being equal before God, and I still cherish those dreams today. The conflict and wars in our world, including in the Holy Land, break my heart and fill me with anguish, as they do many people everywhere; yet war goes on.

As an adult re-entry college student from 1998 to 2010, I earned a BA in English and an MA in English/Creative Writing. Those years were filled with learning and inspiration, including fantastic guidance in writing both poetry (the focus of my MA/Creative Writing program) and short fiction. I studied short fiction writing with Jerry Martien and Jim Dodge at California State Polytechnic University, Humboldt (then, Humboldt State University), and with Doug Rice at California State University, Sacramento. I've been a passionate reader of novels and short stories all my life, and practicing writing, learning, and discussing writing theory, and workshopping our original stories with each other in short fiction writing classes during those college years was fantastic!

Around 2004, I attended a beautiful Christmas concert given by a group of music students from my university. The event was held in a church one evening close to Christmas, and it included a candlelight procession and beautiful solos by the vocalists that formed the basis for Alel's performance in "Midnight Mass."

I wrote "Midnight Mass" in 2011 with all that as its background. I am grateful that Syncopation Literary Journal has included the story in its 2023 Holiday Supplement Issue. My sincere apologies for any possible errors I made when referring to details of Veri's Jewish faith, Alel's Palestinian culture, or other errors. Any such mistakes were unintentional.

The sun had finally set, and the deep, blue-black sky above Veri seemed to throb with the light of emerging stars. She shook her head and tightened around her thin body the man's black leather jacket, which, earlier today, she'd had the immense good luck to find. The jacket was still in a state of wearability that included the capacity to provide warmth. Veri had balked at first at taking the coat off a corpse but had looked around once more and then quickly peeled the thick jacket from the dead man, at the same time feeling sorry for his fatal head wound and blankly staring eyes. She had clutched the warm jacket around herself and run quickly away.

Peering from what had been her hiding place for the last several weeks, around the side of a blasted corner building, Veri had seen soldiers come today, immediately after she'd stripped the corpse, and then an ambulance to take the body to its burial, required for those of the Jewish faith—after the family had been found and notified, of course. Veri closed her eyes, huddling unseen in the doorway, and remembered her parents, the last day she'd seen them. The bomb had sliced neatly in half the cozy apartment which her father had managed to hold onto while the world seemed to go to pieces around them. The blast had rendered her parents' bodies into barely recognizable pulp, where they had lain together in their morning bed. Minutes before the blast, having wakened early, Veri had stepped out the back door into their garden where the morning sun had beckoned. Then a screaming sound and the explosion that threw her to the ground. She had run from the burning wreckage with only the clothes on her back and had hidden in the streets since, having no relatives left and not enough remaining of her parents' bodies to bury.

At first, she had survived on fruit and bread that she snatched from the market stalls when the owners' attention wandered, but she was getting too clumsy, since those stolen bites were all that she'd been eating and it had been so cold, especially at night. She knew that she'd probably be caught soon. Veri didn't want to talk to anyone about her parents' death, afraid that the bombers would come after her, too. She dreamed awful, incoherent dreams that she forgot upon awakening. Her parents had been no one to the bombers; just regular people—Jews, yes, but simple people, not political. If she had only gone in earlier to wake them up!

Veri looked down at her torn jeans and boots and absently twirled a snatch of her ratted, filthy, shoulder-length black hair between her fingers. She'd been hoping to start the ninth term in the spring, her father having decided that home-schooling was keeping her too isolated. She'd been excited to meet girls and boys her own age and had studied hard all fall to be prepared to enter at a respectable place in her class. The thought of studying with her father brought tears that rolled

down her chapped cheeks. She let them fall, thinking she'd never again see the father who'd held her in his arms and sang to her and the mother who'd brushed and braided her hair, who'd cooked warm soup and fragrant Shabbat challah. Veri curled into a ball in her doorway, hidden well from the blasted, empty war zones that were the streets of Bethlehem on Christmas Eve, and slipped into a thin, hunger-haunted sleep.

In her dream, a man held out a piece of bread to her and urged her to eat. Veri hesitated since he was a stranger although his face seemed kind. She woke then, and instead of a man, found herself face to face with a boy who appeared to be almost her own age, yet whose pale face and intense black eyes seemed somehow different than Veri's own features. The bread was unmistakable, though, and still being offered. Sleep banished, Veri took it from his hand and gave the bread a few fierce, famished bites.

During the first week after the bombing, she had learned to chew everything slowly after throwing up the remnant of a cheese sandwich that she'd retrieved from a trash can and eaten too hastily, the first thing she'd eaten in days. Veri mumbled her thanks in Hebrew. He stared at her for a minute and then answered her in what sounded like Aramaic. Thank God she'd learned more than Hebrew from her father!

"Are you not Jewish, then?" she asked, knowing the answer, and dreading it, her throat tightening despite the innocent face of the boy.

"I am Palestinian, and I am a Christian; my name is Alel." He held out a grimy hand.

Veri took his hand, still cautious but grateful that he wasn't an Islamic soldier. They were often children younger than she, usually armed and, Veri knew, unafraid to kill.

"Tell me what you are doing here, and what is your name, anyway?" Alel said, seating himself on the concrete curb, a little to Veri's side. Looking into the deep, black, friendly eyes of the young man, Veri let go and told him her name and some of her story, leaving out the most painful details of the bombing. Alel reached out and touched her hand, a gentle, comforting touch, halfway through her tale. When she finished, he pulled her carefully to her feet.

"Let's get out of here, Veri," he said. "There is a midnight service at the Church of the Nativity; we'll go there, and the brothers will help you."

"But I can't go to a church; I'm not a Christian," Veri protested.

"Don't worry; anyone can go." Alel led her through the shelled streets, their buildings boarded against further attack—past scuttling rats, paper debris, and scraps of metal and other remnants of recent fighting. The city was deserted, having been locked down for weeks and under curfew. However, on this holy night

of the Christian faith, the night Christians celebrated the birth of Jesus, the curfew had officially been lifted. Still, no one was on the streets, the fierce fighting of the past months and years having come to such a head recently that the survival of the Holy Land seemed in question. The land itself would be destroyed if the fighting kept up, especially if it led to nuclear war; already beauty and life had been stripped from the city, all its trees were dead, the grass replaced with dust and cement, broken glass, and rocks.

Bloodstained ground and walls, slogans of the PLA and Islamic terrorist groups scrawled in black on walls everywhere, and windows of broken glass or no glass at all anymore made up the landscape, rather than happy faces of families and warm holiday lights. Veri clung to the strange boy's hand and trudged along beside him. Finally, the two reached the Church of the Nativity, said to have been built on the birthplace of Jesus.

Alel took Veri around back and in through the kitchen door. "Father Johan," Alel called, "I have found someone, a girl, in the street!"

"Bring her here, son," answered a tall, dark-eyed man, and he reached out to Veri, surrounding her shoulder in a comforting hug. "Hello, child," he said quietly.

Veri's eyes searched his face but found herself without words. She looked down at the floor, ashamed and afraid—then squared her thin shoulders and looked into the priest's eyes. "Sir," she said softly in Palestinian Arabic, "I need help, please."

"Child, tell me what you are doing here," Father Johan directed her to a bench against the stone kitchen wall. Alel slipped down to sit on the floor at their side and listened as she repeated her tale.

"Veri, we will help you, don't worry anymore," the priest said as she finished. "First, let's get you two something to eat. Then Alel must get ready for tonight—right, son?"

"Yes, Father," Alel smiled a charmer's smile at Veri.

The young people greedily spooned in the steaming vegetable soup that the priest placed in front of them and chewed more of the same bread with which Alel had tempted Veri back at her hiding place, only a few hours ago. Veri's body gradually warmed, and although aware that she needed a bath badly, she just wanted to sleep. Alel caught her nodding into her empty bowl and giggled at her.

"Hey, let's get you a shower before the Mass. I will sing in the choir," he confided to Veri's surprise. "I have to go get ready." He first poured the girl a cup of hot coffee. "Here, wake up; you'll sleep well tonight after the service, but I want you to come first; will you?"

Veri didn't know how to answer him, so she nodded in assent. She was overwhelmed by merely being warm and these strangers' kindness. "You said, a

shower?”

“Follow me,” Alel nodded.

Veri trailed him down a stone staircase, and in the basement of the scullery, she found a clean though rudimentary shower with hot water and strong, yellow soap. She scrubbed off the first several layers of street and personal grime and lathered, then rinsed, her hair. Toweling herself dry with a thick cloth Alel had left, she saw shelves that held clean clothes and selected some that more or less fit her: a long, denim skirt, a woman’s white underwear, and a worn flannel shirt. She put on her boots again, and the leather jacket, and after a moment’s hesitation, stuffed the filthy rags that once had been her own sweater and jeans into the trash bin by the wall. She took the towel upstairs back into the warm, fragrant kitchen, but Alel was no longer to be found.

Father Johan, however, stood by the table and greeted her with a smile. “I think you might be feeling better, now?”

“Much better, thank you.”

“We will sort out what’s happened to you and your family tomorrow, child. It’s almost time for the Mass, and I must prepare. Please give thanks as you feel comfortable, or just listen and feel at peace, if you can. You are safe here, and your God is our God. Afterward, you will sleep, and then tomorrow, well, we will do what we can to help you.” The priest smiled into her eyes, and Veri dipped her head and then smiled back, her overwhelming tiredness somewhat relieved by the coffee and shower.

“Good girl,” the priest said. “Follow me, take a seat in the church, and afterward Alel will show you where you can rest tonight.”

“Thank you, sir.”

He guided her, black robe swishing over his leather-sandaled feet, to the side door that opened into the nave of the Church of the Nativity. Veri gasped as she took in the interior, lit with candles, and filled with worshippers. She had not willingly been around strangers since the morning her parents had died; this was a lot to take in, and for a moment she worried that she was not safe, even amidst these Christian worshippers. Her imagination recreated the possibility of bombers hitting here—she knew they had no scruples; yet it wasn’t likely, since the Jews were their real enemies, not the Christians. She stood, paralyzed. Then she felt Father Johan nudge her forward, with a warm hand on her shoulder.

“Go, Veri; it’s OK,” he encouraged her. She stepped into the church and took an empty space in a side pew next to an old woman, who peered sideways at her, smiled, and then returned to her prayers. Veri looked back for Father Johan, but the priest had closed the side door behind her and vanished. She sat in the wooden pew in silence.

Her reverie was short-lived. The lights went down, then off, except for the tall yellow candles on the altar and the twinkling votives on the corner tables. Veri worried at first, but soon, to her delight, slowly and ceremoniously up the center aisle walked pairs of young men holding candles, the glowing lights further banishing the darkness. She caught Alel's profile among them, although he stared ahead as if transfixed and didn't return her look. Who, after all, did she really know, here—in fact, what was she doing here?

Doubts swirled in her mind, despite the drama and beauty of the moment. Then she heard a perfect tenor sing out, "Oh, Holy Night..." and, delighted, she recognized Alel. What a beautiful song, and what a beautiful voice he had! She felt glad and proud that such a talented boy had rescued her, even though she stood swaying in exhaustion, her parents gone, and surrounded by strangers in a Christian holy place. Veri then drew within herself during the rest of the service, staring ahead as she sat on her bench, heavy and overcome with the intensity of her experiences, as all around her the Christian worshippers kneeled, rose, and prayed. She hoped her actions looked all right—she was doing what Father Johan (regal in his robes as he administered the service) had instructed her, but her actions were only those of a guest, a stranger.

Finally, the service ended, and the parishioners left. She waited in the pew until the last old man left, then tried the handle of the side door that led back into the hall, and, finding it unlocked, followed the corridor back to the kitchen. The high-ceilinged room was still toasty, warmer than the church had been. Veri perched on the bench before the table.

"Was I OK?" Alel asked, with a grin stretched across his pale, long face.

"You sing beautifully," Veri replied with a shy smile, and then yawned, despite her pride which hesitated to show this young man how vulnerable and afraid she still felt. "Father Johan had said you would show me where I should sleep tonight."

"Of course," Alel turned and beckoned for her to follow him out into and down the hall. Trembling with fatigue, Veri trudged after the youth, and after winding up a back staircase in the huge building, they reached the door of a narrow room with a clean, white-blanketed cot and a small electric lamp burning on a bedside table. Veri noticed a worn book by the lamp; probably the Christian holy book, she thought.

"Sleep well, Veri," Alel told her with a shy smile. "I'll come for you tomorrow after service, and we'll talk with Father Johan over breakfast about what you should do. God bless you," he added.

"Good night, Alel. Thank you," Veri answered. She shut the door behind him, shrugged off her jacket and outer clothes, and peeled off the dirty boots,

regretting having to place them on the immaculate floor. She slid between the sheets and pulled the lamb-soft, white blanket over her body, too tired now that she was finally warm and clean to think over what had happened today and during the last few weeks or too long for her parents. She reached out and switched off the lamp at her side. Just before she slipped into sleep, Veri looked out the window from under her heavy eyelids into the hard face of the waning crescent moon, riding high across the same midnight blue sky peppered with stars that she had seen just a few hours ago, before Alel found her.

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