**The most unforgettable night.**

Rachel was sitting in the courtyard and her neighbour Judith could see immediately that she was looking annoyed. “Anything wrong?” she asked “If I’m not mistaken, Avrams’ shift finishes today, so why the frown? Won’t you glad to see him after such a long period away?”

“You’ve just hit the nail on the head” Rachel replied, unable to disguise the frustration in her voice. “I was be expecting him home earlier this afternoon. However, you know him as well as I do. The town’s bursting at the seams, and this usually gives him an excuse to go for a drink first. I say ‘a drink’ but in his case more often than not it’s several drinks, especially if he’s meeting up with old friends”.

Rachel had the evening meal ready, and the boys were home and saying they were hungry. She waited until it got dark, and sighed to herself. ‘He’s not coming now’. By seven o’clock she knew the stew would be ruined, so they all ate, without any sign of Avram.

It was after eleven o’clock, with the boys long fast asleep, when she heard him coming up the trail, singing loudly and clearly the worse for wear. She went out and grabbing him by the arm, pulled him into the house. “Where the hell have you been?” she shouted, as he almost fell into his seat at the table.

“You’ll never believe what happened tonight” he said very excitedly. “You’ll never guess, not in a million years.”

Rachel, hardly able to control her temper, said “I’m listening.”

Avram began, the words tumbling out of his mouth. “It was already dark, and as you know I was waiting for Baruch to take over from me. He’d been delayed. Then, suddenly, from nowhere, there was this stranger standing next to me. I’d never ever seen him before. I was going to ask him where he’d come from when this light began to shine all round him. It made my skin creep and I began to get frightened. He told us that he was an Angel of the Lord and had come with a message for me.”

Rachel stopped him. “Just to be sure about this, had you been having a drink to keep the cold out? I’ve heard about the hidden stills.”

“Not one drop” Avram replied. “Then this stranger pointed up to the skies. What happened next was utterly unbelievable. The whole of the night sky was full of angels, and they were singing praises to God. I’ll never forget that as long as I live.”

‘If this story goes on like this much longer’ Rachel thought ‘that may be sooner than you think!’

“Then the angel spoke to us, and told us that a very special baby had been born in Bethlehem, and one day he would be our new King. He would be the one who would bring us freedom from all the tyrants who’ve crushed us for so long. When he spoke these words the noise in the heavens became deafening. We all knelt down, even though we didn’t really understand what was happening.”

Rachel was still very annoyed, but also slightly baffled, because she could tell Avram believed what he was saying.

“What happened next?” she asked.

Avram paused “Well, you see, this may seem odd, but he told us to go down to Bethlehem to find the baby and his mum and dad. I knew how full the town is at the moment with the tax census, so I thought it would be impossible without knowing where he’d been born. I asked the angel if he knew, and he told us to go to the Bethlehem Arms, and to the stable in the back yard.”

If she had any doubts about this wonderful story they were now instantly dispelled. “Let me get this straight” she said with some force “You’re telling me that an angel of God told you a royal baby been born, and he’s somewhere at the back of the pub. If he’s so royal, wouldn’t your story have a ring of truth if you had to go to the Palace? Or, if he’s our long awaited religious leader, wouldn’t you have to go to the Temple? You just happened to have been told to go to the Bethlehem Arms. Funny how often, when you’re late home you always end up with your friends at the pub.”

Avram wondered if he should continue. He knew Rachel didn’t believe a word that he was saying.

“Listen” he almost pleaded. “Then we went to the stable as we were told to, and we found the baby and his parents. They both looked all in, as they’d only just arrived in town when she went into labour. We gave them our congratulations on the birth of their baby and wished them well for their future. We asked why the baby had been born there and not at the Inn and they explained it was full up. Joel, who was with me, had a relative who kept an Inn in town, and he went off to see if there might be a spare room. Then the angel who we met on the hill, appeared again. He thanked us for coming to the stable. He then suggested we might like to go and get a drink ‘to wet the baby’s head’.”

Rachel stood up, and flew into a rage. “So, the explanation you’re giving me tonight for your coming home drunk, is that an angel of God suggested it would be a good idea. Utterly unbelievable! How much have you spent tonight on this binge?”

Avram went very pale. Slowly he withdrew a few coins he had left in his pocket and put them on the table. Just a few denarii.

“How are we going to manage on that?” She was now so angry. “Don’t you ever stop to think what these nights in town mean for the children and me? “

After a terrible shouting match she led him to his bed. He fell asleep almost immediately. She sat by the fire. ‘Not again’. She felt hurt, but even more she felt so angry. Every denarius mattered and he had spent so much. Tonight felt like the last straw. There had been many tall tales; on occasions downright lies, but the story tonight beggared belief. As her thoughts’ became more entangled, she heard a knock at the door. Thinking that it must be Judith, who may have heard all the noise, and had called round, she opened it.

Outside stood a stranger, very smartly dressed. She was slightly afraid but realised that Avram was too drunk to help her. Looking her straight in the eye, he smiled, and strangely her fear vanished.

“I’ve called to apologise” he said “I think we might have got Avram into trouble.”

She paused. He looked quite wealthy so she held her tongue.

“I know he told you about his visit to the Bethlehem Arms.”

“So, were you with him then tonight?” she asked.

He laughed. “Well no. We sent him there with two of his friends. I couldn’t go with him.” He stopped for a moment. “Look” he said, “Come and sit outside on the bench.”

‘How strange’ Rachel thought. It was a very cold night, yet it feels so warm, and so peaceful now. She sat down beside her mysterious visitor.

“Look up into the sky” he whispered “and tell me what you see.”

Her gaze turned to the night sky. As it was a cloudless night, which had made it feel so cold, she could see myriads of stars. “I can see so many stars tonight.”

“Is that all you can see?”

“Yes” she replied, “Why?”

“Trust me” he said “Close your eyes for a moment.” As she did so she felt the palm of his hand pass across her face.

“Open them now.”

As she opened her eyes she gasped. Her whole body went totally rigid. She couldn’t believe what she was seeing. The whole of the sky was filled with ranks of angels, and they were all singing the most beautiful songs of praise that she had ever heard.

“These are all my friends” he explained. “Avram was on this occasion not lying to you. You are seeing exactly what he saw.”

She was completely overwhelmed. The incredible sight took her breath away. Knowing that this was somehow ‘holy’, she started to kneel down.

“I understand why you want to do that, but it’s not necessary. Stay beside me. No harm will come to you. Now, please close your eyes again.”

Trusting him completely she shut her eyes. A wave of well -being and peace passed over her. She heard him say “I have two further things to show you. Take my hand now. You have nothing to fear here. Open your eyes again.”

As she did so, she saw all the angels again, but now, they had stopped singing. Instead they were bowing before three great thrones that towered over them. They were all bathed in the most beautiful light. Her eyes were drawn to the figures before thrones. There were two of them, and they had their backs to her. Light shone from them, shooting high into the heavens. She gripped the strangers hand tightly. A sense of both fear and awe was overtaking her. Aware of her fears, he spoke softly to re-assure her.

“You are totally safe. Nothing can hurt you, for you rest under my protection. Please tell me what you see now.”

“There are three great thrones” she whispered, and I can see two figures before them, but only their backs.”

He looked at her in love and compassion. You cannot see their faces. If you did, you would die. You are looking upon the thrones of Almighty God.”

“I don’t understand” she said, her voice faltering now, as she tried to take it all in. “Why is there a third throne?”

“Watch” his single word of reply, almost feeling like a command. All the angels of heaven turned away from the thrones and turned instead to look directly down on Bethlehem. She watched in wonder and amazement, as they all knelt down.

Tears came to his eyes. “From the beginning of time we have ever known, he has been on the third throne. Tonight it is empty. He has left us.”  
 “Who is he, and where did he go?” she asked, utterly bewildered.

He paused. “I cannot answer that question for you. You must work it out for yourself.” As he finished these words the night sky emptied.

“I have a task for you tomorrow morning. Please go down to Bethlehem and find the Three Wheat’s Inn. A young mother and her fiancée are staying there now with their new baby. They have moved from the stable behind the Bethlehem Arms. Their names are Mary and Joseph. They are expecting you. When you see Mary, tell her what you have seen tonight. Tell her to expect three visitors within the next week. They will bring gifts that will allow her to provide for the new born child.”

She was still trying to take in all that she was being told. He stood up and told her he had just one more thing to say before he left.

“After you have seen Mary, you must never speak ever again of what you have seen tonight. In the coming months and years, your husband and his friends will tell and re-tell their story, but keep yours hidden in your heart.”

As he prepared to leave he handed her a small purse. “This will cover the money Avram spent. We should at least re-imburse you for his expenses this evening. He was after all only following our instructions!”

She watched him walk down the hillside, and then, still on the trail, he vanished from her sight. She couldn’t sleep until the early hours of the morning.

When she woke up her very first thought was ‘What an incredible dream’. Then she picked up the pouch and emptied out the coins. She shivered. Preparing breakfast she knew, beyond all doubt that she had to visit Bethlehem. She said nothing to Avram and the boys as they left the house.

Later that morning she was in the town, finding it difficult to make her way through the streets, because of all the visitors there for the Census. Eventually she found the Three Wheat Inn, and entered. The innkeeper resented her ‘scruffy’ appearance, but told her where to find Mary and Joseph.

She went upstairs and finding their room, knocked. The door was opened by a very young woman. “Come in” Mary said “we’ve been expecting you.” Joseph was holding the baby while Mary was resting on the bed. They asked Rachel to sit down. Nervously, she told them the message she had been given. She noticed none of what she said came as any surprise to them. As Mary thanked her, she asked Joseph to go down and see if he could get some food for them all. He laid the baby in the wooden crib and went out of the room.

“Now” Mary said, sitting up “you can tell me everything that happened last night.”

It was relief for Rachel to be able to share all that she had seen and that she had been told by her strange visitor.

“Did he tell you his name?” Mary asked.

“No. I don’t think I ever even thought of asking him for it” Rachel replied.

“Typical of Gabriel”. Mary laughed as she said it. “It wouldn’t have taken him a few moments to introduce himself. Wait till I see him again. Anyway, I’m being just as rude. Looking at her baby, she said to Rachel, “Let me introduce Jesus to you. Would you like to hold him?”

Mary paused, and then turning her face fully to Rachel said “Everything that you have seen and heard will still have never prepared you for this moment.” She handed the sleeping infant to Rachel, who cradled him in her arms.

“He’s beautiful” she said.

He opened his eyes and looked full into her face. Rachel went very quiet, unable to do anything else than gaze into his eyes. Time stood still. She thought, just for the tiniest fraction of a second, that she saw something in the corner of his eye – an empty throne. And then, it was as if scales dropped away from her eyes. She saw and understood everything. She knew why the angels had all turned to look down on Bethelehem. The room began to fill with an overwhelming sense of the purest love she had ever known. It took over her whole being. She had never felt so completely accepted, so completely loved.

Mary came and knelt beside her. “What do you see?”

With a voice full of wonder, and trying to describe the utterly indescribable, Rachel whispered “I am looking into the face of God Almighty”. The room filled with same light she thought she had seen in the heavens. They bathed in its’ wonder, each of them holding Jesus’s hands. They had no memory of how long this all lasted. It may have only been a few seconds, but it felt like it had gone on forever.

Later that afternoon, Rachel was making her way back home. She was lost in thought. Suddenly she was aware of the lightest of winds behind her and she turned. Gabriel drew alongside her. He spoke very quietly and gently.

“I guess you have so many questions?”

Rachel couldn’t answer immediately. Eventually, struggling to find the words, she dared to ask him “Is the baby Jesus I held in my arms, God Almighty in our world?”

Gabriel looked into her eyes, sensing her struggle, and replied “Once again I cannot answer that question for you. You alone can work that out, but I think that deep down, you already know the answer”.

Rachel continued “But if he is the King of all Kings, where are all his guards? Where are all his armies to protect him and keep him safe?”

Gabriel looked upwards. “You saw them in the night sky, but they cannot defend him or fight for him. He is as defenceless as any other new born baby”. He saw the change in Rachel’s face.

She told him “There’s nothing I’m sure about at the moment, except that I know that I loved totally and completely”.

Gabriel paused before he replied. “You are feeling the miracle of this past night. It has changed you. It has changed the world forever”. He asked her to sit with him, on the trunk of a fallen tree.

“I must leave you soon to re-join all my friends back in heaven. I can tell you that in time Jesus will return to us, and will once again take his seat at the right hand of his Father. Before that return to glory he will grow into manhood, living among you, here on earth. He is love in your world, and he will invite others to share and know that love, as I know you do”.

Rachel thought over his words in silence. She closed her eyes, reflecting on everything that had happened. When she opened them, Gabriel was leaving.

He turned to her for the last time, sharing final words, that for the rest of her life she would never forget. “Remember this, God so loves your world, that he has given you his only Son”. Walking away from her, he disappeared.

**THE END OR JUST THE BEGINNING.**

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