

K.D. WENTWORTH

'TIS THE SEASON

It's traditional, of course, for us to publish a Christmas story around this time every year, but there's nothing traditional about the following fantasy. K. D. Wentworth remarks that this story grew out of the observation that "in the hands of some people, religion is as dangerous as a controlled substance. "Ms. Wentworth lives in Tulsa, Oklahoma, and--as anyone who has read one of her novels knows, and as you'll soon see--has an imagination best termed "offbeat."

It was Christmas eve and a nasty, strung-out feeling of anticipation filled the air like a cheap deodorizer. I was cruising down the expressway in my squad car, on my way back from disposing of an illegal manger scene erected at the river park. Man, I hate all that insincere, pious yap about "peace on earth, goodwill towards men." If you let those stupid carols suck you in, you might actually believe the young turks really want to make the world a better place, that is until a couple of rabid Episcopalians knock off a Catholic priest for muscling in on their territory, or some Baptists torch a pile of Unitarian hymnals because they don't have no crosses on the front. Then you understand -- it's denomination eat denomination in this world, buddy, and every priest, shaman, minister, monk, pope, or whatever for themselves.

I was keeping a sharp eye out for graffiti, you know -- "Where will you spend eternity?" or "Buddha lives!" -- that kind of crap, spray-painted on underpasses right where impressionable schoolchildren could see it. Working the God-beat, of course, I've seen it all, the pastor-snatchings, the so-called mere "moments of silence" some closet-Lutheran announcer tries to sneak in before a basketball game, the really nasty tricks that can be played on the unwary with a Bible verse.

I admit, like so many others, I dabbled in this stuff when I was too young and stupid to know any better. It all starts with a harmless flirtation, just a weak moment of wondering "what if it's all true?" Then your average Joe smuggles home a bit of holly, or a missal, maybe lights a candle in some illicit roadside prayer house, and takes that naive first step down the road to perdition. "I can stop anytime I want," they say. "I don't really believe all that stuff."

Yeah, right. Tell it to someone who hasn't cleaned up after a baptism gone bad, or seen the havoc twenty whacked-out fanatics can wreak after a really wild first communion. The boys in Washington can legislate against this stuff all they want, but we'll never be free of it until we stamp out that spineless, sick craving for "absolution" and "the other world."

The last rays of the setting sun were painting the highway a faint rose when I spotted a broken-down van with the metal outline of a stylized fish just above the back bumper. The short hairs crawled up the back of my neck. Them fish guys have been some of my worst busts.

As I passed the van, I noted several scantily clad young skirts peering forlornly under the raised hood, so I slowed down and called into headquarters. "I got a live one here, maroon Chevrolet van, license number Ida Harry William one five five. It has that fish-thing on the bumper and a bunch of boxes in the back under a tarp."

Static crackled. "Computer says it's clean," the dispatcher said after a moment. "But you watch your butt, Al. We've had sporadic reports of caroling north of Greenwood and most of the units in your area are tied up."

"Roger, will do." I clicked off with a sigh, then swung my unit across the median and switched on my flashers. The two skirts looked up and their faces broke into relieved smiles. Neither of them wore a coat, although the temperature had been steadily dropping all day. The younger of the two, a creamy-skinned brunette with legs that just wouldn't quit, raised her arms over her head and waved. "Over here, officer!"

The air was damn cold as I crossed the median, one hand on my gun, just in case they wasn't the innocents they appeared to be. My breath turned to white fog and I started shivering. "What's the problem here, ladies?"

The brunette pouted. I noticed she had a dimple in her chin. She couldn't have been more than seventeen. "The engine died, I think. At least it won't go and we're not out of gas." She gestured at the raised hood. "Would you take a look? My dad's gonna kill me if I don't get home in time to do my algebra homework."

I pushed my hat back and fought to keep my teeth from chattering. "S-sure thing." I edged along the van as the traffic whizzed past inches away and eyed the boxes crammed into the back of the van. A bit of goldfringed white fabric hung out of one. It looked familiar, I thought, kind of like a fancy tablecloth my morn used to have, or maybe -- an altarcloth?

I kept my cool as I reached the front of the van. "Did you try --" I turned back just in time to see this mondo crucifix descend toward my skull. I ducked, but not fast enough, then a galaxy of lights, all different colors, exploded behind my eyes.

"You didn't hit him hard enough," a tinny female voice complained from far off, Africa maybe, or Mars. "He's still breathing."

"We want him to breathe, stupid," another female answered. "How else is Father Lennie gonna baptize him?"

Alarm seeped through my fogged head. I considered opening my eyes, but couldn't seem to find them. My mouth tasted like the weed-choked bottom of one of them government-protected wetlands.

"He could just give him last rites instead."

"What good would that do?" asked the second voice, which had a huskier, more contralto quality. "An altar boy is supposed to receive all seven sacraments. Well, at least six, I guess, if he's gonna get into Heaven. I guess he don't need to get married, if he takes holy orders."

Holy orders...I tried to protest, but only a groan succeeded in making it past my lips.

"See?" the second voice said triumphantly. "He's fine." A small hand tilted my chin from side to side and bright-red rockets exploded at the base of my skull. "Welcome back to the land of the living, altar boy."

My eyelids popped open. I stared up through a crimson haze at a face surrounded with black over white, either a woman or the biggest damn penguin I ever saw. "What--?"

The head nodded. "Midnight Mass is in ten minutes. You'd better look sharp, or Father Lennie'll have your ass. You'll be on your knees saying Hail Marys until half-past Easter!"

"Now, Sister Prudence," another female voice said, "don't scare this poor turd to death, not before he gets himself baptized, anyway." She giggled.

I struggled up to a sitting position, which was blamed hard. My hands was bound before me with a rosary looped tight enough to cut off the circulation and my holster was empty. Damned if they wasn't nuns -- I should have known better. The fish icon was just a decoy to sucker me in. If I'd had any inkling I was dealing with the Pope's Crew, I would have hauled my piece out and called for backup, carolers or no carolers. These jokers have got a real deadly sense of organization.

They'd dumped me in a badly lit warehouse of some sort, crates piled up to the ceiling, and me, sitting there with my back propped against a forklift. The chill from the concrete floor had numbed my legs and I could still see my breath. There was a hint of communion wine in the air as I tugged at the rosary. The damned beads just bit deeper into my swelling wrists.

Sister Prudence patted me on the cheek, then dug a nail file out of a backpack and went to work on her black lacquer nails. Each one featured a different Station of the Cross, real hard-core stuff. I began to sweat in earnest.

She filed the edges delicately. "Now, all you gotta do is follow Father Lennie down the aisle and light the candles when he says. No big deal. You can do that much even with your hands tied."

I tried to remember all my training sessions for hostage negotiation, but my throbbing head felt like it had been stuffed with soggy communion wafers. "You ain't gonna get away with this," I said. "I radioed headquarters my twenty before I --"

"Your twenty?" the other nun asked. She reached up and tucked a bright pink lock of hair back under her starched black-and-white headdress.

"My location." A muscle twitched under my right eye. "And I called in your tag number too. They oughta be here in about ten seconds."

"Oh, that!" Sister Prudence dimpled. "Sister Charity steals us a new tag every day."

Sister Charity, she of the pink hair, winked. "Hey, the Big Guy helps those who help themselves." She shook out a white circle of cloth with a hole cut in the middle. "Here, put your head through this."

"I ducked back out of reach. "What is it?"

"It's your surplice, stupid," she said airily. "All altar boys wear them."

"I ain't no goddamned --"

"Well, what have we here, sisters?" a scratchy male voice on the leading edge of puberty inquired. "A sinner in need of redemption?"

"You betcha, Father," the two nuns said in unison. They thrust their hands inside their wide sleeves and inclined their heads to this pimplefaced dude dressed all in black, complete with a high black collar and the biggest crucifix I'd ever seen resting on his concave chest. He had to be all of fifteen.

Sister Prudence grimaced. "I knows he's pretty ancient, but --"

"Ancient?" Sister Charity rolled her heavily outlined blue eyes. "He's practically morgue-fodder!"

"But-- !" Sister Prudence glared. " -- those freaking Whittier Baptists from over on Archer Street ran Franky down with their hearse this afternoon. There's not hardly nothing left of him but a black and white smear in the center of the road." She gave me a smoldering look. "This joker's the best we could do on short notice."

"Poor Franky." The priest, for that was what he had to be, frowned. "May the Lord have big-time mercy on his soul." He zipped the sign of the cross in the air, then smiled wide enough I could see his braces, decorated with tiny crosses where the wires intersected. "Never mind, sisters. Our lost brother Franky has gone to a for-sure Better Place, and this poor bastard looks in sore need of redemption. We'd better do the baptismthing before Midnight Mass rolls around."

They grabbed my arms and hauled me upright. My head began to throb again. The warehouse wavered and my stomach wasn't sure what action it wanted to take. I swallowed hard. "Now, wait just a goddamned minute." I jerked out of their hands and stood there wobbling on my own. "Kidnapping is a felony! You three turkeys are looking at ten to twenty --"

"Jeez, sounds like we're in serious need of a vow of silence." Father Lennie whipped out a smudged handkerchief.

I staggered backwards against the forklift, prepared to defend myself, but Sister Prudence slipped up behind and threw a choke hold on my neck that would have done credit to a professional wrestler. "There, there," she whispered into my ear as the warehouse spun and darkened, "it's for the good of your immortal soul. Someday, you'll thank..."

When I could see again, the handkerchief was balled and stuffed into my mouth and the white surplice had settled over my shoulders.

"Cool!" The pimply priest rubbed his hands together. "Now, where did I put that vial of holy water?"

Worshippers were filing in, parishioners, I guess they call themselves, hard-bitten regulars too, by the look of them. They all wore suits and hats and ties, even St. Christopher medals. I counted at least five more nuns and two priests among them, both of the latter younger than Father Lennie. They gave me a nervous glance, then seated themselves with an air of expectancy on crates lined up before the cloth-covered altar.

Father Lennie slapped first one set of pockets, then another, apparently finding them all empty. "Jeez, I hate it when my mom goes through my pockets!"

Sister Prudence whispered, "You wanna borrow mine?"

He scowled. "Like, how do I know it's the real stuff?"

She reached inside her robe and pulled out what seemed to be a bottle of Perrier. "Hey, I only buy from Harvey the Saint down on Boulder Avenue. He has visions and everything."

Despite the chill, a drop of sweat trickled down my temple as he held the bottle up to the light, then screwed the cap off and sniffed. I edged back toward the forklift, thinking maybe I'd find a sharp edge somewhere to cut the rosary beads, then hoof it out into the night and lose myself. I didn't want to wind up dead just because I couldn't muster the proper expression of religious ecstasy on my face.

More people streamed in from a door somewhere over on the left. I couldn't see it for the crates piled up almost to the ceiling. These new parishioners brushed past me and I noticed they was dressed differently, all in polyester warm-up suits of a white so bright, it half-blinded me, and carrying monster-sized Bibles under their arms.

"I guess this stuff is okay." Father Lennie motioned to me. "Come here, my son, and kneel."

"I turned tail and fled.

"Oh, no, you don't!" Sister Charity tackled me from behind and brought me down, face-first, on the concrete floor.

I lay there, my nose scraped raw, the wind knocked out of me, trying with all my might to remember how to breathe. Father Lennie stood over me and poured a healthy dollop of "holy water" on my head. "I baptize thee in the name of --"

"That's far enough, padre!" a male voice boomed. "Put down the funny H[sub 2]O and nobody gets hurt."

Father Lennie turned on Sister Prudence. "I thought you two posted guards!"

"We did!" She looked green. "Six of 'em, not a day under twelve."

"Jeez, can't you nuns do anything right?" He set the bottle down next to my ear and backed away while "holy water" dripped off my nose onto the concrete. "N-now don't nobody get nervous," he quavered. "It's Christmas. You know -- God rest ye merry gentlemen and all that crap."

A ruddy-faced guy, pushing sixty, if he was a day, kicked the holy water bottle aside, narrowly missing my ear. He was wearing one of those white warm-up suits and sporting an AK-47. "Hallelujah, brethren! Raise those lily-livered hands over your heads and back up against the wall." He gestured with the gun.

Rolling his eyes, Father Lennie did as he was told. The two nuns followed, hands raised and little pinkies elegantly crooked, real refined. The parishioners mumbled and milled about the packing-crate sanctuary.

"I'm Pastor Buck of the Fifteenth Street Methodists," ruddy-face said, "and I want to welcome you all to our service. Our sermon for today is 'Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you.' Amen. We will now pass amongst the congregation and take up the Christmas offering." He winked at a silver-haired granny who flashed her dentures in a chilling barracuda smile, then hauled a bronze tray out from under her warm-up jacket and proceeded to shake down the newly formed congregation.

I squirmed up into a sitting position, working at the rosary. The cord was just cheap string and I could feel it beginning to fray. Over at the impromptu offertory, one grizzled-looking fellow shook his head as the tray paused underneath his nose, so the granny flashed him a peek at the knife she was packing, which looked to be about right for disemboweling a whale. He flushed and surrendered his wallet.

"That's it, brothers and sisters!" Pastor Buck's fat face beamed. "The Lord loveth a cheerful giver. As the Good Book says, we must all give until it hurts."

The rosary cord parted and the damn beads clattered across the floor, calling

his attention back to me. I jerked the gag loose and stumbled back onto my feet. "Thstop in the name of the law!" I lisped, my mouth dry as the Sahara.

"Death before excommunication!" cried Father Lennie, darting forward as the AK-47 wavered toward me. He snatched up the vial of holy water by the neck and smashed it against the nearest crate, transforming it into a jagged bottle top. The old granny with the offering plate squealed like a stuck pig and whipped out her knife. The congregation scattered like chickens fleeing a pack of rabid wolves.

Pastor Buck swung the AK-47 back and depressed the trigger. I hit the floor again, both arms over my head as the recoil from the first round sent him stumbling backwards onto the loose rosary beads. He went down like a poleaxed buffalo as bullets stitched neat holes across the ceiling.

My heart was pounding like a steam engine struggling up Pike's Peak. Common sense whispered that I should just let them shoot it out, then round up the survivors, but unfortunately my job description says "to serve and protect." I hitched across the concrete on my knees and forearms toward the nearest pile of crates, cursing all the way, wishing those idiots who keep lobbying for legalization of religion as a so-called "victimless crime" could see this mess.

Father Lennie and the nuns had mobilized their stunned parishioners into an army of sorts and were now duking it out with gray-headed Methodists in white warm-up suits. The latter were using their oversized Bibles as both shields and bludgeons to middling fair advantage, but Father Lennie and the sisters was laying them out right and left with rhinestone-entrusted crucifixes, obviously the better designed of the two weapon systems. Pastor Buck must have hit his head when he went down, because he was still sprawled on his back, out cold as a dead mackerel.

Just as I reached the dubious cover of the crates, another volley of bullets ripped across the far wall. The two opposing forces hesitated. I couldn't see the doorway, but heard a calm male voice say, "Now that I have your most excellent attention, can anyone here tell me what is the sound of one hand clapping?"

Shit! I pressed my back against the crates. Not a Zen Buddhist! Anything but that! They roamed the city alone, rather than in groups, but each one of them was as crazy as the proverbial bedbug.

The two rival gangs dropped their Bibles and crucifixes, then backed away, dragging their wounded along with them. I heard bare feet slap across the warehouse floor. "No answers? My, but you are a dull lot, aren't you?" the bemused voice commented. "I'll give you one more chance, before I speed you all on your way to Nirvana -- When the Many are reduced to the One, to what is the One reduced?"

Despite of the gravity of the situation, Father Lennie snickered. "Peanut butter?"

The Zen Master strolled into view. He wore a saffron robe, dropped stylishly off one bare shoulder, and his shaved pate had been polished to the reflectiveness of fine marble. He shook his head gently with an expression of profound regret. "I am sorry to say that answer shows you to be a woeful waste of resources in this world of ever-diminishing supply." He sighted in on Father Lennie's head. "May you achieve a much higher state of enlightenment in your next incarnation."

Father Lennie hit the ground and rolled, his pimply face gone the same pasty-gray as the concrete. The Luger spat a line of bullets that chipped through the packing crates above his head. "Act without thinking." The Zen Master smiled beatifically. "Work without effort."

I heaved to my feet. "W-what happens to the hole when the cheese is gone?"

He turned in my direction and bowed, his blue gaze fixed upon my face. "Nice," he murmured as he straightened. "I thought no one here had the wit to spar with me." He cocked his shaved head so that the overhead lights danced across its surface. His eyes glittered with amusement. "Shall we say winner takes all?"

I nodded tersely, though I doubted, despite my misspent youth, that I could actually take him in a Zen koan duel. It had been a real long time and I had done my best to forget all of that. If I didn't try though, we were all dead meat. I squared my shoulders. "What is the color of the wind?"

He smiled. "What is your original face before your mother and father were born?"

"Wh-what..." My mind went blank. My hands clutched vainly at empty air. "What is..."

Sensing blood, my opponent advanced upon me, triumph bright in the confident set of his face. "Say one word with your mouth shut!"

I fished in my memory for every day I'd ever spent on a street corner with my begging bowl, the feel of saffron silk on my naked skin, bare feet walking the icy pavement in the middle of the winter, all the long-buried sensations I thought I'd put away forever. "Every exit is an entry somewhere else!" Breathing heavily, I stood my ground.

Behind him, I saw the hostages creeping out the door in a steady stream. Another koan or two, and then I would be free to deal with this miscreant on my own.

For the first time, he was forced to fumble through his own repertoire and no longer looked quite so confident.

Over his shoulder, I saw Father Lennie and the nuns drag two of their fallen comrades out the open door. At least half the Methodists had already made their escape.

The Zen Master sucked in his breath with a pleased gasp. "If you cannot find the



truth right where you are, where else do you expect to find it?"

Solidly back in my court again. I winced and dredged my failing memory for yet another round. "When the student --" The loud clink of a dropped crucifix broke my train of thought. I began again, hoping to distract my opponent. "When the student is --"

The Zen Master's head turned just in time to see the last of the parishioners and Methodists scamper out of the warehouse. "Cheat!" he spat at me, then dashed outside and took aim.

I followed, seized his shoulder and spun him around to meet a solid right-hand punch to the nose. He wilted to the frozen ground and the Luger went clattering across the parking lot. A hundred yards away, Father Lennie boosted Sister Charity into the maroon van, then hesitated. "You know, I think you got yourself a real serious calling there. Are you sure you don't want to take holy orders?" He gave me a big thumbs-up sign, then clambered into the driver's seat and screeched away. There was no sign of the Methodists or my squad car.

I sagged back against the corrugated iron of the warehouse and closed my eyes. Man, I told myself, you're getting too old for this stuff. You gotta get a different assignment.

Returning inside, I tied-up my defeated opponent with strips of altarcloth, then grabbed a handful of stale communion wafers to munch while I searched for a phone.

By the time I found my unit, it had been painted with all the verses of "Oh, Little Town of Bethlehem" and would be out of service at the Division repair shop until a new coat of paint dried, so Dispatch stuck me on milk runs with old Joe Fusco, who's close to retirement and only answers silent alarms these days. I sit in the passenger seat as we speed toward another electronic hiccup, or some old dame who can't punch in her password fast enough, and I can't get it out of my mind -- "What is the sound of one hand clapping?"

A bead of cold sweat runs down my neck and my hands shake. I knot them together and go over all the stuff I learned down in Rehab after I came off the streets and turned in my begging bowl.

One day at a time, as they say. One day at a time.