

The Wide Men – A Christmas Tale

by Don Kilcoyne

Nicky loved Christ Child.

On the first Saturday of December, every year since he'd been born, Mike and Diane Mahr (Mommy and Dad to Nicky) carefully unwrapped the pieces of a tiny china nativity scene and positioned them in the living room bay window. Every statuette held his or her own precise place facing the empty, hand-painted manger.

Joseph and Mary knelt on either side, Joseph on the left, Mary on the right. Two shepherds watched over four sheep a respectful distance—about six inches—away. Behind them stood the larger beasts of the field: two cows and a donkey. And all the way across the room, atop the mantle of the fake fireplace, stood the “three Wide Men,” looking toward the East, over the sofa and across the coffee table, to the bay window Bethlehem, where Christ Child would arrive in about three weeks. Each night, when Nicky was in bed, Diane would move the Wide Men a foot or so farther on their journey across the Bronx brownstone living room.

Christ Child himself was entrusted to little Nicky. For five Advent seasons, since he was old enough to walk, Nicky

nestled the precious porcelain infant, wrapped in white tissue, safely in the middle of his sock drawer. Each Christmas Eve, Nicky would hand-deliver the baby safely into the manger. Then, on Christmas morning, he'd join his mom and dad in singing "Happy Birthday, Dear Jesus," after which he'd open up all the presents Santa had left for him. Around mid-day, Mommy would invite Nicky to pick out his favorite present. Nicky would think about it, pick up each of his gifts and judge whether they were just great or truly the most favorite thing of all. When he'd decided, Nicky would place that gift at the side of the crèche.

"Happy Birthday, Jesus."

"Thank you for what you have done," prompted Diane.

"Thank you for what you done,"

"And for what..."

"I know it!" said Nicky, proudly, "and for what you will do for us. Amen."

He wouldn't touch the favorite gift again until January 6th, the Feast of the Nativity, when the Wise Men finished their trek across the living room and delivered their own gifts of "gold, Frankenstein and mur."

Seven Christmases in all. Five with the all-important job of delivering Christ Child to his porcelain parents. Five Christmases of sharing Santa's generosity with the tiny statuette that seemed to mean everything to Mommy and Dad. Seven

year-old Nicky loved Christ Child. But one month before his eighth Christmas, on Black Friday, eight-year old Nicky was stolen by the vampires.

The Frenzy still raged around the world. The eternal cold war between humanity and the nocturnals had exploded into open battle less than nine months earlier. The Wampyr and lycanthropes were about to unveil their most terrifying strategy of the war.

The dog howled and howled. Diane and Mike tossed and snored, but slept on. Every time Nicky drifted off, the howl shocked him awake like a cold splash. The poor dog had to be in pain to scream like that.

Nicky knew the rules:

- Never let a stranger into the house.
- Never move the garlic from the windows.
- Water the wolfsbane every day.
- Close your curtains at night and never open them until morning.
- When the sun went in, so did the family.
- Dogs were bad.

But that's the one that tripped him up. See, Nicky was a boy. And no matter what his parents and teachers said, dogs were always good. Cats? They could be bad. But dogs had hearts made

of justice and courage and loyalty. And this dog was hurt. Probably trying to save a little boy from a vampire!

Nicky climbed out of bed.

Outside, three men in long robes waited in the shadows.

"The Wide Men," Nicky whispered in wonder.

The police tried their best, but too many children had been taken, and too quietly. "Obviously they've been taken by vampires or werewolves or..." the young officer looked at his shoes. "... well, best not to think about the other things called up by this damned war." That's how bad things had gotten: werewolves and vampires were the lesser of countless evils.

Diane cried herself to sleep ten nights in a row. Mike joined the Neighborhood Watch, praying for a chance to bring the true death to one of the damned things that had taken his son.

Mike's dad, Nicky's granddad, whispered to Diane, "He's not just looking to kill one of the things. He's hoping to get killed." And he almost did, more than once. But the Wampyr, in general, are not stupid. They didn't get to be virtually immortal alpha predators by going toe-to-toe with every angry mob that came after them. So for ten days, Diane barely rose from her bed, and Mike never climbed into it.

At midnight on December 3rd, Mike was out patrolling with a shotgun in one hand and a broken table leg in the other. Diane

lie curled in her bed, a rosary in one hand, a vodka in the other.

Nicky knocked on the door.

Diane sat up wide-eyed, splashing her drink. "Mommy! Dad! Can I come in?" A soft small knock. Knock knock. "Mommy! Please can I come in now?"

Diane pulled the curtains from her bedroom window and saw a pale blond head at the top of the stone stoop, just a foot from the front door. "Nicky!"

"Mommy!"

She ran through the house, threw back three deadbolts and wrenched open the front door. Nicky had been leaning against it and he fell. His right knuckles smacked the hard tile inside the foyer and he yanked the hand back, shoving the knuckles in his mouth to soothe the pain.

"Nicky!" Diane reached for her boy and tried to pull him into the foyer.

"Mommy! Can I come in now?"

She pulled at him, trying to wrap him in her arms, but he pulled back. "Can I come in now?"

"Of course you can come in! Come in with me!" He leapt into her arms. They both collapsed onto the tile floor and hugged each other. Diane stroked his hair, laughed, cried, screamed in

joy, hugged, kissed and never once voiced the dreaded question: where the hell had he been?

Just before dawn, Mike's Neighborhood Watch crew dropped him off to find the front door wide open. His heart jabbing his ribcage like a prizefighter working a speedbag, he ran up the stoop and tripped over his wife and son, asleep in each others' arms just beyond the threshold.

"What do you remember, Nicky?" Father Joseph Cipriani held both of the boy's delicate white hands gently in his big calloused, liver-spotted right hand. With his left, he held a small flashlight in front of the boy's eyes, testing for sensitivity, looking for signs of the devil.

"Nothing, Father." Nicky sat quietly. Across the kitchen, Mike wrapped his arms around Diane and waited for their parish priest to finish his examination.

"You've been gone for ten days, Nicky. Surely you remember something."

"I remember the dog. I'm sorry, Mommy you told me never to open the door but the dog was scared and I'm sure it was hurt so I went outside for just a second..."

"Shhhh. It's OK, Nicky," his mother soothed. "Just try to answer Father Joe's questions, OK, baby?"

Nicky sat up straighter. "That's all I remember, Father. I stepped outside to see if the dog was OK, and then the Wide Men were there, and then they weren't and I couldn't get back in. The door was closed and felt wrong." The priest and Nicky's parents realized the Wide Men must have been the kidnappers, wrapped in cloaks.

"The door felt wrong?" The priest shook his head ever so slightly. "How do you mean 'wrong'?"

Nicky looked to his Mom for support. She nodded. "Like it wasn't my door anymore. I mean, it was closed when just a second before it was open. That was weird. But I didn't think it was OK to come in. That's what I mean 'wrong'."

"Alright, Nicky. You run along to your room. I've got to talk to your Mommy and Daddy. OK, little man?"

"Bye father!" Nicky bolted for the stairs.

"Sit down, please, both of you." On the table were a half-dozen tools of the priestly arts: a bible, a plastic vial of holy water, a silver crucifix, a golden pix filled with Eucharistic wafers, a string of rosaries and a small unlit censer. He started packing them in a leather satchel.

Diane was confused. "Aren't you going to run your tests?"

"What's the point, Diane? The boy's clearly been turned."

"No! You don't know that!" she insisted in an angry whisper. Mike remained silent.

"Yes, we do. I am so sorry, Diane. Michael. Your boy has no heartbeat. His hands are room temperature – and it's December cold in here. His pupils don't respond to light. Now, I can run other, priestly tests, but they're just going to cause him pain. Why make him drink the holy water when we already know it will burn him?"

"But you don't know!" She insisted again.

This time Mike spoke up. "Yes, we do, honey. Nicky's gone. This... this thing..."

"Stop right there, Michael," said the priest.

"What...?"

"That 'thing' still thinks it's your son. He didn't go out looking to become a creature of the night. He's a victim. Like any other abused child. It's not his fault. Now, I can't tell you what to do. I'm not a parent. But I can tell you what I believe: the 'thing' upstairs still has your boy's soul inside of it. A terrible crime was committed against that soul, but the boy is blessed not to remember any of it. Now... whatever you do now... this is what your son – or your son's soul – will remember. Think before you act. Think and pray."

"What do we do with him, Father?" asked Mike. "He's a... what do we do?"

"He's a child, Michael. You protect him. Shelter him. You feed him."

Diane shrieked into her hand. The smell of vomit wafted across the room as she ran for a glass of water.

"No! Not that way! The war. It's been going on for nearly a year! The city. The government. It's ready for things like this now." The priest wrote down a series of phone numbers. "Call these people. You can get blood. And advice. Help. You'll be alright. And heaven help us, you won't be alone."

Father Joe was right about that. He'd told Diane and Mike everything he believed, but chose not to tell them everything he knew. Specifically he chose not to tell them that theirs had been the fourth house he'd been to that morning. The fourth child he'd examined. But the first child he'd spared from the holy water test.

Mike made the phone calls Father Joe advised.

The next day, an armored van pulled up in front of the Mahr's house. Mike walked out to the drivers' side, signed a clipboard and was handed a small cardboard box. When he got back inside the house, he opened it to find a small bag of human blood. With a sippy straw.

The same van pulled up at the same time from that day forward.

The war raged on. The Mahrs adapted to their new reality. Nicky stopped going to school. He stayed in the house 24 hours a day. Mike and Diane took turns going shopping and running

errands because, by emergency decree, they couldn't leave the boy alone. The police put a sign on the house warning the neighbors about the young vampire – and warning them that vigilantes would be shot. Three other houses on the block had the same sign.

The Christmas season approached.

Nicky, Mike and Diane decorated the brownstone as they'd done each year since Nicky's birth. Nicky stayed home when Mike went out to buy the tree; no one kept shops open after dark. But he was able to hang the ornaments and string the garland as if nothing had changed. They all sang Rudolph, Frosty and Jingle Bells together, ate pecan pie, drank hot chocolate and watched the original Grinch on DVD. They took a break around midnight to let Nicky have his sippy bag. He tended to do that alone in the bathroom. Not his idea; Diane couldn't watch and Mike had to hold her tight so Nicky couldn't hear her sob in the hallway. Nicky heard her anyway. He was a vampire, after all.

As always, they left the best part for last. Diane opened the nativity set and carefully placed each item in its familiar place. When she'd finished placing Balthasar of the "Three Wide Men" on the mantle, she dug her hand one last time into the storage box. "Oops! Who's missing?"

Nicky's face beamed. "Christ Child!"

"That's right! And why isn't he here?"

“‘Cause it’s not Christmas yet and Christ Child doesn’t get born until Christmas!”

“That’s right again!” She hugged him. “Who’s the smartest little... boy... in the world?”

“I am!” Nicky noticed that his mom choked on ‘boy.’ “It’s OK, Mommy. I’m a vampire, but I’m not the only one, and I’m still your little boy.”

“I know that, Honey.” She wiped the first damp of a tear from her eye. “I know. Now do you know where the Christ Child is?”

“Is he?”

“Go check.”

Nicky ran for the stairs, a blur in blue pajamas. He threw open his sock drawer and there, in fresh white tissue paper, rested the tiny porcelain savior Nicky had protected for five Christmases in a row.

Down in the living room, a germ of a thought entered into Mike’s head. He shot a look at Diane. Her eyes flew wide. Together, they ran for the stairs.

In his room, Nicky lifted the paper package, gently peeled away the layers until he exposed the child’s painted face, and placed a gentle kiss on the statuettes’ forehead.

Mike and Diane burst into their son’s room in time to hear Nicky murmur “Thank you for what you did and for what you will

do." He placed the re-wrapped statue back into his sock drawer and turned to greet his parents. "I'll take good care of him."

Mike tossed the boy over his shoulder and headed back to the stairs. "You always do, Magoo!" Nicky giggled.

Each day, as Nicky slept, Diane moved Caspar, Melchior and Balthasar a few inches closer to Bay Window Bethlehem. Each night, alone in his room, Nicky kissed Christ Child on the forehead and thanked him for making his family almost normal.

The Mahrs had to make a few adjustments for Christmas Eve. Nicky slept during the day and stayed up all night, so the family rescheduled the "birth" of Christ Child until just before dawn. The night became a marathon of Christmas movies, from Charlie Brown to Scrooge to The Year Without a Santa Claus. They ate cookies, drank egg nog, told the dumbest knock-knock jokes they could think of ("Knock knock!" "Who's there?" "POOP!" "Poop who?" "POOP ON YOU!" Gales of laughter.) When Nicky's sippy time came, Diane handed it to him in front of the tree. He headed for the bathroom, but she slipped an arm around him and sat him on her lap.

"It's OK, Honey. It's Christmas." And her chest filled with a liquid gold joy she hadn't felt since Nicky's first Christmas.

With a little more than an hour before sunrise, a knock came at the door. Mike peeked out and saw Father Joe. They'd been expecting him.

"Come in! Come in, Father and thanks for coming."

"It's my pleasure, Michael. Am I in time for Holy Birth?"

"You sure are, Father," said Diane. "In fact, we're about to have Holy Birth time and then open presents." She poured Father Joe an eggnog with a shot of rye, just the way he liked it. "Nicky? Would you go get..."

Nicky virtually flew up the stairs. He extracted the baby figurine from his dresser drawer. He unwrapped it, gave it a gentle kiss on the brow and walked slowly back toward the living room, holding his precious cargo in both hands. As he reached the top of the stairs, he looked down to find both his parents beaming at him, just like they used to do before the vampires had stolen his childhood.

Nicky started down the stairs. Diane, overcome with gratitude for how normal her new weird life had become, whispered a prayer to the tiny child in her son's hands. "Thank you, for what you've done..."

Nicky screamed. Smoke, stinking of charred flesh, rose from his hands. He threw the statuette away, then saw what he'd done and ran to catch it again. "No!" He screamed, and caught the figure one-handed. He pulled it in close to keep from dropping

it and it pressed into his neck, where it seared the soft white flesh like a hot grill. He screamed again, struggling to hold onto the child, but he couldn't. It fell and rolled the rest of the way down the stairs.

Diane and Mike ran to Nicky but they couldn't touch him. His hands and neck were burned raw. He flailed his arms in agony, with a vampire strength that could shatter human bones. Mike tried to grab his son, and pulled back a broken wrist. Nicky saw what he'd done, but couldn't stop himself. "Mommy! Help me!" But she couldn't.

Both parents looked around frantically for anything that could soothe their suffering boy. They looked to the priest, but he may as well have been carved in stone. Mike saw the baby Jesus lying on the carpet, his son's grilled skin still hanging from it. He thought, "This is what did it," and he reached to smash the statue.

"No!" bellowed Nicky. "That's Christ Child! 'S not his fault!"

Diane realized the boy was right. He'd been carrying the little statuette calmly and peacefully. He'd been kissing it good night every morning for three weeks! It wasn't the statue. She wheeled on Father Joe. "It's you! What are you doing? Is this one of your damned tests?" She swung both fists wildly at the old man, but he caught her wrists and held her gently until

her rage passed. "You know he's one of those things! You said you wouldn't have to hurt him!"

"It's not me, Diane," said the priest quietly. "I assure you it is not me."

"Then what the hell?" demanded Mike. "It's not a cross or holy water. It's just a toy. It's a figurine!"

"To somebody here it's the baby Jesus," said Father Joe. "I think it's you, Diane. I heard your sweet little prayer. That's when Nicky had to drop the statue."

Diane stared at the little baby, and at her son, huddled over it, not daring to touch it, but not willing to let any harm come to it, either. She ran into the kitchen. Closed her eyes. Father Joe followed.

"Lord," she prayed, her voice like a curse, "I thank you for returning my son to me. He is my son. But how could you do this to him? He loves you. He loves your son. I can't believe in a god who would let this happen. I know. I know I'm talking to you and saying I don't believe in you and I don't know what to do my son is burned! Burned! By the Christ Child! He's just a boy! He doesn't know about sacrifice. And suffering. He's just a boy. Take this away from him!"

She paused. Her son's anguished screams continued.

"Take this away!"

Joe put his arm around her shoulders. "The Lord cannot take away the faith that burns your son. Only you can do that."

"What? How?"

"Think about it, Diane. If a candle is burning your fingers, you either move the candle or you move your fingers. This is a house filled with faith. That makes it a minefield for your son. You can remove your son from this house or remove the faith from it."

"But that doesn't make any sense! Nicky still believes!"

"It doesn't work that way. A vampire's own faith doesn't burn him. Just other peoples."

"How do you know this?"

"I can't pick up the Christ Child either." He parted his lips just wide enough to expose canine fangs.

She flinched and fled to the other side of the kitchen.

"Two weeks ago," said Father Joe. "One of the children down the street came to me and paid me back for my 'priestly tests.' I am still me, but I'm one of them as well. I'm as much priest as I can be, but that's not much."

Diane stared, paralyzed in indecision.

"I can take the child back to the rectory. I've stripped it of the trappings of faith. He'd be safe there."

Diane squeaked a tiny "no!"

"But I don't think that's a good idea either. He has a home here. And he has faith. Diane, your son has lost his friends, his school. The sun. I don't think we can take away his faith. His family. His soul has been terribly damaged and he'll need his faith more than any of us. Diane, what would you give up for your boy?"

"Anything."

"Then follow me."

They returned to the living room, and found that Mike had gotten Nicky calmed down enough to move him up the stairs and into bed. Father Joe stooped and picked up the infant figurine. His hand started to smoke and he stifled a scream by biting his lower lip. Blood dribbled down his chin from the two fangs, but he didn't let more than a whimper escape.

"What are you doing?" demanded Diane.

"Reject..." he grunted, his back curling over like a burning page. "Reject your faith and turn off the pain."

"I can't reject my faith!"

"Of course you can. People turn away from God every day. For the sake of your son, reject His Son. Do it or give up your boy!"

"I don't know how!"

"You were well on your way in the kitchen. What kind of God allows this to happen to children? What kind of god Agggh!" He

nearly dropped the baby, but grasped it with both hands. "What kind of god creates monsters like vampires and shapeshifters and lets them hunt his people? Are we just animals to Him?"

The pain abated. Father Joe stood up straighter, held the figurine tighter. His hand still sizzled, but he kept talking. "I'm a priest, damn it! If they can get me, all this is just a lie! A trick! The power that burns me now is not God's power but your power! You control it! You can turn it on and off!"

The golden joy that had filled Diane just minutes before had turned to a jaundiced bitterness. She pictured the Sundays, loyally trooping into Church with her family in tow, receiving the Eucharist, reciting the Creed. Lies. Just complete bullshit. There was no god. Not if her son could be allowed to suffer like this. No god she wanted any part of.

Father Joe felt the nerves in his hands tingle back to life. It hurt like a bitch, but at least he could feel something besides hellfire below the elbow. He squeezed the baby Jesus. Nothing. No pain. No smoke. He held it against his forehead. Still nothing. He kissed it and placed it gently in the manger.

Mike tried to put his arm around his wife, but she brushed him away. Father Joe said, "It's a very selfless thing you've done. But you can't tell Nicky. He would never understand. He needs his faith, and he'd never understand how his mother could give hers up."

Upstairs, Nicky lay awake in his dark room, eyes wide open, listening. He understood perfectly. It was his parents and Father Joe who didn't get it. Mommy wasn't giving up God forever. She was just putting her favorite thing aside for a while. That's what you did on Christmas. Someday the Wide Men would come again, and she could have it back.