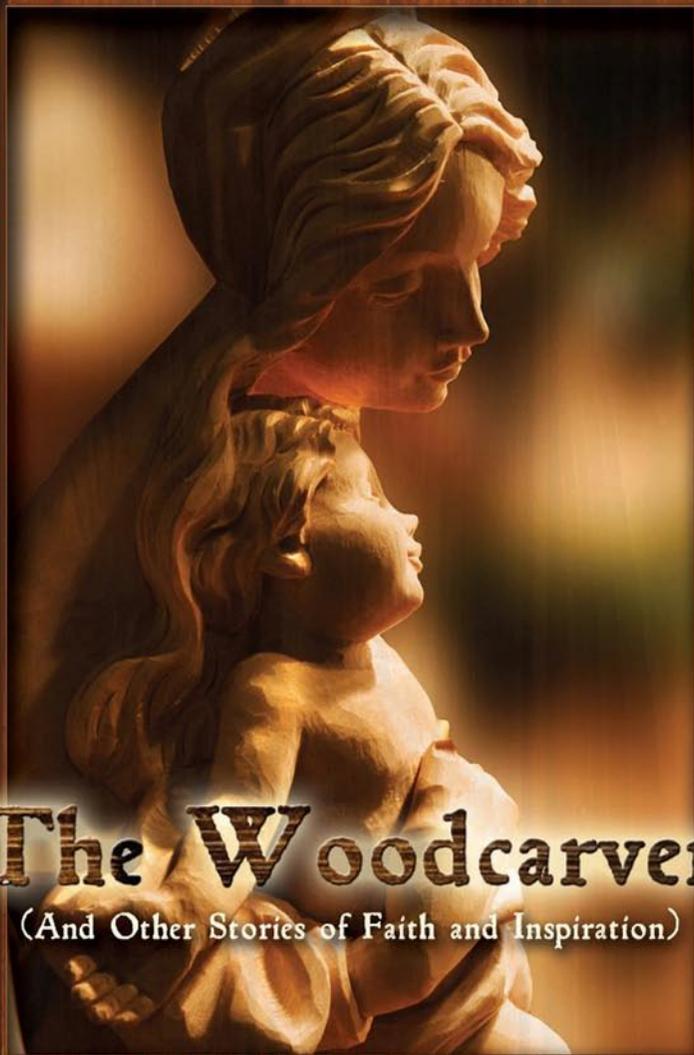


WILLIAM KEVIN STOOS



The Woodcarver

(And Other Stories of Faith and Inspiration)

The Woodcarver

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William Kevin Stoos

 **Strategic Book Publishing**
New York, New York

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Strategic Book Publishing
An imprint of AEG Publishing Group
845 Third Avenue, 6th Floor - 6016
New York, NY 10022
www.StrategicBookPublishing.com

ISBN:978-1-62212-638-5
SKU: 1-60860-103-X

Printed in the United States of America

Book Design: Rolando F. Santos

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Acknowledgements

To my wonderful family, the Carmelites who pray for us, the Holy Spirit who guides us, and to *Coincidence*—the name God uses when He wishes to remain anonymous.

'Are You a Minister?'



"Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me." —MATTHEW 25:40

I will call him "Jack," although I never knew the name of the grizzly, misshapen man who so painfully pulled himself around on two metal canes. He looked like a Jack. Before the accident that so badly deformed his body and damaged his brain, I pic-

tured him as a wiry, muscular man—a tough, hardscrabble guy who didn't take guff from anybody. He was anything but that now. He could barely walk and his face was cruelly distorted by a terrible palsy that made his face tremble as he talked out of the side of his mouth. His back was hunched over, his face bore a gray stubble and he always dressed in a dirty tee shirt and jeans—whether it was eighty degrees in

July or thirty below in February. He was probably younger than he looked. Life had not been good to Jack. I could not imagine more things wrong with a human being. I say with respect, that Jack was *pathetic*—as pathetic as one could be. I did not know what cruel twist of fate or divine plan led to his condition. I only knew that Jack was the kind of person that people instinctively ignored. Looking at him was inconvenient, so people diverted their gaze when they walked by him. It was easier not to look at Jack. He made you feel guilty that you had it so good. That you were healthy, not misshapen, and had a home and loving family to go to at night. People walked by Jack—myself included—at first.

For months I watched him. He hung out at the Uptown Grill—my favorite burger joint. I would see him from time to time, sitting alone in the corner of the restaurant—smoking and watching customers come and go. His crutches propped against the table, he sat and watched people. No one talked to him.

I was strangely attracted to Jack for reasons I did not understand. Perhaps it was the priest's homily about "street people" and Jesus that made me pay special attention to Jack. I had seen homeless people around town, served them at the Soup Kitchen and given them money for food—as many folks do—but Jack was different. The priest suggested one Sunday that we should show respect and compassion for street people, for the homeless, and for those in line at the Soup Kitchen because, as Jesus said, when we help "the *least* of His people," we are helping Him. We should, the priest said, assume that we are looking at the face of Jesus, when we look at the faces of these people and act accordingly. "Maybe," the priest said, "the man or woman you see on

the street, *is Jesus.*” That comment disturbed me. If it were true, I had certainly passed up Jesus a hundred times.

One day, I did not divert my gaze but instead engaged Jack in a brief conversation. I walked by his table after lunch and said “Hi,” not knowing how else to approach him. He lit up instantly and responded with a halting “*How are you?*” which was, for him, very difficult to say. He had a hard time articulating even the simplest phrases. His response took at least five agonizing seconds. I almost felt guilty making him suffer this. Yet, he clearly needed to talk and relished such conversation. “Fine,” I responded, and waved good-bye. Over the next few weeks, I made it a point to stop by and talk to Jack whenever I was in the restaurant. I think he looked forward to our brief chats. He always managed to utter a few words, but it was always painful to hear. I felt sorry for this man who had such a difficult time responding to anyone.

One frigid winter’s day I noticed Jack standing on the curb of the street in his usual tee shirt and grubby jeans, wearing no coat. If he was cold, you could not tell. He seemed oblivious to the cold. I politely scolded him for not wearing a coat and suggested that he needed one in such weather. He responded with a dismissive gesture saying: “N-o-o-o, I-I-I d-don’t n-need it!” his head shaking with every syllable. He was stubborn and did not want help. That evening I went home, found a heavy down-filled winter coat that my folks had given me a few years before. I had other coats and it was obvious Jack did not. I would force him to wear the coat. I took it to my office and waited for the right opportunity. A few days later, I found Jack again, wearing nothing but a tee shirt and jeans in the brutal Iowa winter.

I walked over to Jack and told him to put on the coat. He protested and pointed to the arm braces on his crutches. I told him it would still fit and he would die of exposure if he did not wear something. I helped him put on the coat. It fit perfectly—arm braces and all. Although mildly perturbed, he thanked me and hobbled off, wearing the warm coat. *I was probably too pushy, but ignoring Jack was a sin that I did not want on my conscience.*

I did not see Jack again for weeks. One spring day at the Uptown Grill, I noticed him sitting at a table, alone and smoking. His crutches, as usual, were propped against the table. People were, as usual, walking by Jack and looking past him as they did. I said hi and walked by. Jack lit up as he usually did and nodded in response. I ate lunch as he continued to stare at me across the room. When I finished, I paid the tab and walked out with my friends. As I passed Jack's table he grabbed my arm. My companions continued on. I stopped suddenly, startled and embarrassed. Then Jack blurted out something in his halting, scratchy voice that I did not expect: "*A -a-a-re y-y-you a-a-a m-m-m-inister?*" he asked me as he tugged my sleeve. I was speechless. I did not know if it was a question or a *challenge*. "No," I responded, "I'm not," whereupon I walked away, puzzled. It was *sur-real*. His words have haunted me ever since.

I have not seen Jack since that day. The Uptown Grill is closed. I don't know where Jack went or what he is doing. Most likely he is in another town sitting at another table, smoking and watching people come and go. That is, if he is still alive. Each time I see a person wandering on the street, at the Soup Kitchen, or pan handling, I think of his question. Was Jack an angel sent here to test us? Or was he just what he

appeared to be—a hard luck, pathetic crippled man, whom the world often ignored and who made you thank God for everything He has done? I really don't know. Maybe he was both. I often think that if God ever did want to check on us, He would send someone who looked a lot like Jack—grizzled, misshapen, struggling along on two crutches—*one of the least of His people*. Maybe God sends people like Jack into our lives to remind us to be grateful for what we have and to remind us that, but for the grace of God, *anyone of us could be Jack*. Perhaps He sends people like Jack into our lives to test us—to see whether we really believe Christ's admonition that when we help the Jacks of this world we are really helping Him.

I think of people differently after meeting Jack. I have learned to see the face of Jesus in every Jack I meet. I have learned that God gives us opportunities in life to act on His Word, and that He speaks to us through such random encounters—if they are random in fact. And I have learned that if we do something in His name—even little things—to help one of His people, then we are ministers, even if we do not intend to be. Imperfect, though we are, but ministers nevertheless.

The Woodcarver

(Nazis, Blacks, and a Lesson in Stereotypes)



The Holy Mother stands silently, frozen in time, gazing softly at the Infant on her right hip. Her left hand gently gathers the soft folds of her flowing robe. She wears a crown. It is not gaudy or bejeweled. It is regal, yet understated. The Baby holds a small cluster of tiny, perfectly carved grapes in His tiny, perfectly carved fingers. His soft, tight locks hug His tiny head. His facial features are gentle and kind. He smiles sweetly,

His nose and eyes no bigger than a pinhead. It is hard to imagine how the oak that I cannot drive a nail through can be fashioned with such minute precision. The statue is exquisite, delicate, and perfect. Carved from a 500-year-old oak beam salvaged from a Catholic church destroyed by war, it is the most beautiful carving I have ever seen. Each time I

gaze at the holy pair I am reminded of the grizzled old man whose love found expression in that old oak beam.

I was raised to be tolerant of all faiths, religions, and customs. My father grew up in Philly, among people of all races and ethnic groups. He detested prejudice in any form. My mother was a small-town girl raised by good-hearted German immigrants who settled in Iowa. Her parents were proud, patriotic Americans living in a country at war with Germany. They lived in constant fear of deportation by the adopted country they loved. Derogatory remarks about another's religion, race, or origin were not allowed in my parents' home. There were no exceptions.

After college I joined the Army. Both my home life and my college life had reinforced my belief that the greatness of our country was in its diversity. I was proud to serve in the Army, just as my father did.

When I was ordered to Germany on NATO exercises I was excited. I spoke fluent German and viewed the NATO maneuvers as a great opportunity to see the country I had studied for years—the country of my ancestors, the country that my father and uncles fought in World War II, and the country whose tongue I now spoke with ease. Until I got to Germany and drew the curious looks of Germans who asked why I was wearing an American Army uniform, I did not realize that I spoke German with a German accent. All of my college instructors had been German nationals. So, when our unit was sent to the Schwabish Alps, I was elected unofficial tour guide, historian, and interpreter.

Our unit driver was a young black private from southern Louisiana. Charles was a quiet, shy kid who had never

been outside his tiny hometown except to join the Army. Although I was tolerant, open-minded, and never stereotyped people, *or so I believed*, I felt a special responsibility for Charles. Not just the responsibility conferred by the chain of command, but to protect him from the insults and derogatory remarks that I expected. Although both of us were American small-town boys, I was a white, blond-haired, German-speaking officer of German extraction, and Charles was black. And we had entered a country that—*at least in the past*—was not exactly known for its racial or ethnic tolerance. A country that once sought to exterminate Jews, Gypsies, and any other minority group that posed a threat to purity of the mythical Aryan race.

Although we were allies now, I was still uneasy about the Germans. We had heard about the rise of the neo-Nazis. So, my antennae were up. After all, were not all Germans racists at heart? And didn't persons like Charles need the protection of a white American like me? *I did not yet fully appreciate my own hypocrisy.*

As we traveled throughout the beautiful rolling countryside of the Schwabish Alps, we would stop occasionally to sample the food at the local Gasthauses. Each time we entered a Gasthaus, I was on guard, certain that the time would come when I would have to defend Charles. Few black faces were seen in this part of Germany. Subtle and not so subtle looks were plentiful. However, we always managed to avoid problems.

One cool autumn evening we ate at our favorite watering hole, the Loewen Gasthaus in Kettenacker, Germany. Our group—four young captains, an older sergeant, and Charles—ordered dinner and sat quaffing steins of

our favorite local beer. As we talked, I noticed a tall, quiet man with rough-hewn features, drinking beer and smoking at a table next to us. He sat by himself. He was a dark, almost brooding presence. I was at once apprehensive of him, yet curiously attracted. His craggy face occasionally gazed down at the wooden statues on the floor next to the table. Now and then he would reach down to the floor and pick up a statue in his gnarled hands, caress it, inspect it, and return it to the floor. These were religious figures of some sort. He saw my interest. He looked like a peddler who had stopped for dinner on his way home.

All evening the dark man sat drinking, smoking, and looking at us. He watched Charles intently. I noticed; if Charles did, he did not say so. After a few hours the man waved his hand as if to invite us over. In slightly slurred German, he spoke to me: "*Kommen!*" We went over. After some small talk, Josef ordered a round for his guests. We raised our steins to him. His passion was wood carving. He did it to pass the time, he said. He sold a few pieces now and then. I told him it was the most beautiful work I had ever seen. He shrugged it off. He caressed a small statue of Mary and the Baby Jesus. He handed it to me and explained its origin. He had salvaged the beam from an old church. His grizzled hands and furrowed face spoke of harshness and suffering. Yet there was kindness in his voice. His gruff exterior belied the heart of a gentle person. He was apparently a devout Catholic. All of his figures were the Madonna and Child—in different poses and sizes.

The inevitable subject of the War came up, largely through my gentle prodding. Where had he served? Whom had he fought? What was it like? "I was at Stalingrad," he replied softly. I understood. It was a ferocious, brutal cam-

paign. This was much better than a history book. This was the real thing. He glanced again at Charles. I thought I detected a smile. "How was it at Stalingrad?" I pressed Josef further. His face darkened again as he recalled. "*Cold . . . terrible*" were the only two words he ever spoke. He did not want to discuss it further. He was staring at Charles now. Charles was visibly uncomfortable.

"What unit was he in?" I pressed him. He told me that he was *Infanterie*. And he had been a Nazi. He was sent to the Russian front with the most elite units that the Reichswehr could field. He joined the Nazi Party, he explained, "because all patriots did." He was not proud of it now. I translated for my buddies: "This man was a storm trooper." No one replied. A jackbooted, black-helmeted, death's head, storm trooper. The guys who had blown up my uncle's tank somewhere in Germany. The kind I had read about in Army comics when I was a kid. I did not know whether to hate this man. My feelings seemed irrelevant. That was, after all, a long time ago. What I saw before me was a kind, grizzled old man who loved the Virgin Mary and her Child. The contradictions were overwhelming. I sat silently, drinking my beer.

After studying Charles again intently, he pulled on his cigarette and pointed at the young black kid from Louisiana. I knew what was coming. "*Die Schwarzen . . .*" his voiced trailed off. He pointed at Charles again. Here it comes, I thought. *It was time to go*. I suggested to my comrades that we pack up. It seemed to be the right time. Josef continued as we started to get up: "...Ich liebe die Schwarzen. . . ." He took another drink of beer. I sat down, stunned. I interpreted again. No one else spoke. He loved the blacks? But

why? Charles and the rest perked up. "I was captured by the Americans," he continued slowly. "They took me to your South. I was put in a camp." He looked at Charles again, this time almost affectionately. *How was he treated*, I asked, sure that we had treated our prisoners better than the Germans had treated theirs. Josef frowned. "Terrible. I hated it. I hated Americans . . . *at least the white ones.*" I translated once again, awestruck, unprepared for what I had heard. "The black ones," he continued, "I love them. They were good to me. They were the only ones." He paused. He reached over and shook Charles's hand. Charles was embarrassed, unsure how to react. He smiled faintly at the former Nazi. "They sneaked me candy and food. They were kind to me." I translated again. Josef was thanking this nervous young private for all the kindness that his race had shown him in his captivity at the hands of white American troops. Perhaps they understood Josef's plight. Perhaps they knew what it was like to be treated as a second-class citizen, to be chained, to be the object of scorn and derision. *This young black kid and this grizzled old Nazi had a bond that none of us could begin to understand.* It was a stunning, poignant moment that I will never forget.

This white ex-Nazi was not a racist, if he ever had been. In fact, he liked American blacks far better than whites. This young black private did not need my protection, if he ever did. He was, in a strange way, bound more closely to this old man than to me. And I saw more love in the carvings and in the words of this former Nazi than I had ever seen in any man of the cloth. The irony overwhelmed me.

I bought Josef's Madonna and Child before we left the Gasthaus. He had more at home. He said I was welcome

