

SHINING LIGHT

*Yet in thy dark streets shineth
The everlasting Light*

One of my favorite paintings of the Annunciation is by Henry Ossawa Tanner. The Virgin Mary, sitting on her bed, looks much like any self-conscious, suddenly startled teenager. And the Archangel Gabriel? He is portrayed as a vertical panel of yellow light—miraculously announcing the coming of the “everlasting Light.”

The angel-messengers in these stories are not heard but seen, transforming a dark night or situation—guiding in a December storm, comforting a dying boy and his family, and saving a farmer’s life. The last story is written in simple language, as if for a child. Its main character, ten-year-old Kari, asks her mother, “Do angels . . . bring good news to ordinary people like us?”

Her mother’s response? “They did on the first Christmas. . . . Why not now?”

Exactly. Why not now?

—E. B.



LEAD, KINDLY LIGHT

BY ANNA PENNER,
AS TOLD TO HELEN GRACE LESCHIED

Anna Penner, a German Mennonite, grew up in Ukraine, which was occupied by Russians in 1922. Then during World War II, her village was invaded by Germans, then taken back by Russians. To escape the crossfire, Anna, her sister Neta, and other German refugees left Ukraine. That's where we pick up her story, at age forty, haunted by the fear of war and displacement.

In March 1944, our train rolled into the station in Ratkersburg, a small Alpine town in German-occupied Yugoslavia.

To accommodate us, the Germans displaced the local villagers and gave their homes to us refugees. Some friends from my village and I were placed in a house high up in the Alps, about ten kilometers from Ratkersburg. Neta and her daughters lived about five kilometers away.

Naturally, the local people resented, even despised, us. As we'd feared the Soviet communists back home, we now lived in fear of partisan activity against us. Wild stories circulated. Local partisans wearing firemen badges had raped refugee women, plundered their homes, shot at young people. Living in fear, we kept our doors bolted. Women never traveled alone. Our young people kept a strict curfew.

By December 1944, the battlefield was once again too close for comfort. Searchlights fanned the night skies. Explosions rocked the windows as



Russian bombs hit or missed their targets. Once more our whole community feared for our lives and thought about evacuation.

I received a letter from my sister Tina, who had fled to Germany. “Come to Germany,” she wrote. “You’ll be safer here.”

Yes, I’ll go. It’s time to leave. So three weeks before Christmas, a friend named Anna and I hopped the milk truck down the mountain to town. We took a train to Graz, Austria, to apply for a visa to move to Germany.

It was toward evening before we started home. As the dark settled in, it started to rain. Anna fidgeted in her seat. “Miserable night to be out walking,” she muttered.

I agreed.

She thought for a minute and then announced. “I’m going to get off before Ratkersburg and spend the night at my son’s. You’re welcome to come with me, Anna.”

No. It didn’t feel right. I didn’t want to worry my housemates needlessly by changing my plans and not coming home.

The train slowed and my friend picked up her purse. “Coming?” she asked hopefully.

“Thank you, but I need to go home.”

Once she’d waved good-bye and disappeared into the dusk and descending fog, I sat there alone, suddenly desolate and gripped by fear. As we passed through the next village, I pressed my face to the cold window. I could barely make out the rooftops. The rain turned to sleet, pecking at the window pane. *Anna, I should have gone with you,* I thought, as if I were a child separated from my mother and wishing her back to my side. *If only I weren’t alone in the dark. . . .*

About eight o’clock, I stepped off the train in Ratkersburg. Since morning an icy wind had come up and it tore through my threadbare coat. My thin kerchief seemed useless. The sleet stung my face. Seeking out the shelter of the dimly lit train station, I sat on a bench and deliberated about the walk ahead of me: at least an hour uphill, on a black, starless night. The footpath lay between a cemetery and vineyards and dense forest—and I’d have to ford a rushing stream.



As I thought about the dangers, a panic flooded my being. In the last twenty years I'd braced myself for dangers and journeys. But tonight my courage failed me. Utterly alone, far from home in a foreign land, the dam broke. *No way!* I thought. *There's no way I can make that trip tonight. In the pitch dark. In this weather.*

The train had pulled out, the last train of the night. I looked around the lonely station and timidly approached the stationmaster. "Sir, could I spend the night here, please?"

"No, ma'am," he said emphatically.

"I have so far to walk. . . ."

"Ma'am, I can't allow it," he said abruptly. He grabbed his coat and hat and fished for keys in his pocket. Then he headed for the door.

The panic mired my feet. *I can't go up that mountain.*

At the door the stationmaster grew downright impatient. "C'mon. I'm locking this place up." He must have read the alarm in my eyes. More kindly he added, "During an air raid, you'll be safer up the mountain anyway."

It seemed a small comfort. I listened to the receding crunch of his boots on gravel; the only man who could have helped me vanished into the icy mist.

For a few moments, I stood under the eaves of the straw roof. Finally I turned to the heavens, to the One my mother had turned to so often. "Father," I whispered, "I'm so scared. Take away this terror. Walk with me."

Suddenly there came a light, whiter than white and shining. It surrounded me.

Oh no, the bombers!

I scanned the sky for the telltale flares that preceded an air raid. I waited for the roar of planes, for the explosion of the hit.

Nothing. The sky was empty. Yet all around me the light shone. I felt as though I were standing in a dome, a huge globe of light about six feet across. Inside, it was bright as day. Outside, the night was black and strangely silent.

An indescribable peace suddenly filled my heart. I knew I could head toward the mountain. *I'll start out walking*, I thought with a robust confidence that I didn't have to force. With each step, the light moved with me, shining the path at my feet.



Instead of panic, joyous hymns welled up. “Oh, take my hand, my Father,” I hummed softly, thinking it wise to stifle my strong urge to belt out the hymn tune with my lusty soprano.

As I started my ascent, the wind stopped, then the sleet. In fact, it grew warm as a summer’s night. I loosed my kerchief. *How strange to be so warm in December.*

When I reached the dangerous stream, the water glistened like a thousand diamonds. I clearly saw the series of flat rocks scattered across the foaming water. Surefooted, I stepped from one to the next to the next until I reached the far bank.

The light guided and cheered me all the way up the mountain. As I neared the old house, I looked back over the treacherous pass. Like a ribbon of light, it lay behind me. Excitedly I knocked on the door, wanting to show my friends the awesome sight. The door opened. A strong gust of wind grabbed it, almost tearing it off its hinges. “Anna! Come in!” my friend yelled, pulling me inside. My housemates crowded around me. “Such a dreadful storm! Weren’t you afraid?” one asked.

“No,” I shook my head. “The storm died. . . .”

But I got no further. I suddenly could hear it too: the howling wind, the sleet pelting the windows, the moaning of the house.

While one friend busied herself with my supper, another took my coat. “It’s dry,” she said. Not quite believing what she was seeing, she repeated, “Anna, your coat’s dry.”

“I know,” I said matter-of-factly.

I did my best to explain, but my friends looked at me with that puzzled expression I’ve come to expect. You see, from that night on I haven’t known real fear, even in the succeeding months and years, when the pandemonium of the war—and the Cold War—separated me from my family.

For months I lived in a refugee camp in Munich, Germany. Then I went to Paraguay for nine years before coming to British Columbia in 1955. I was reunited with my three sisters, nieces and grandnieces—all had emigrated to western Canada.

In Paraguay I worked side by side with German Mennonite men, hack-



ing out a place for our people in the dense jungle. Well into middle age, I carried buckets of damp earth away from a well-digging site. I cooked meals over primitive fires, feeding the men who built our houses. Eventually I owned a small hut with a straw roof—a home of my own. I lived alone, and at first I had no glass or wire netting to cover the windows, no lumber to build a proper door.

At times people warned me of thieves in the night or of poisonous snakes that would slither into open houses. Before December 1944 I would have been terrified. But no more. If fear drew near in the evenings, I'd start to sing, maybe "Oh, take my hand, my Father." Or I'd recite the poem I'd learned as a child: "Don't be afraid. God is here."

Don't be afraid. For fifty years it has been a theme of my life.

Don't be afraid. By the illuminating warmth of a kindly angelic light at Christmastime in wartorn Europe, it was God's word to me, a forty-year-old woman alone, afraid of the night.