

Angel of Hope -

The Miraculous Story of the Christmas Box Angel

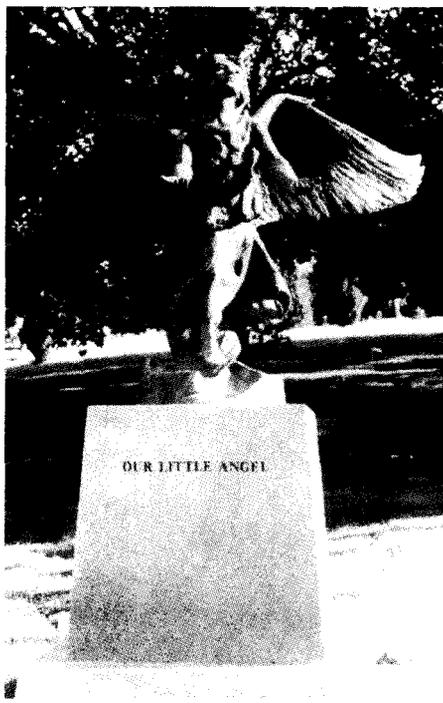
by Richard Paul Evans
Salt Lake City, Utah

In the shadow of the snow-clad Wasatch mountain range in Salt Lake City, a statue of a dove-winged angel stands watch over a cemetery. Though it rises above tombstones, it marks no burial. Though it claims no body, it itself is claimed by thousands. The angel's face is that of a child's, its arms raised as a child to be lifted. Subtly (almost imperceptibly) inscribed in its right wing is the word hope. This is the story of that angel.

It was only twelve days before Christmas. My book, *The Christmas Box*, had risen to number one on the national bestseller lists, and my book signings had become frenzied affairs - sometimes extending upwards of six hours. It was a harried Saturday afternoon close to the holiday, and the crowds were enormous. Suddenly a woman outside the roped stanchions of the line approached my table. As I glanced up I noticed that her eyes were filled with pain.

"I don't have time to wait in your line, Mr. Evans," she said loudly. There was a strange, desperate quality to her voice. The line quieted, and those near the table turned to see this peculiar woman. "I just want you to know that my little girl was killed by a car last Thursday. I have read your book every day since then, and it is the only thing that is keeping me going."

I walked around the table and embraced the woman as she buried her head into my shoulder and wept. A few minutes later I returned to the table. Those in line stood silent, stunned by the incident. After a moment, another woman said somberly, "I read that this



happens at your book signings."

"Almost every one," I replied.

The Christmas Box was a story I had written for my daughters to express my love to them in a way that would be timeless. I could not have imagined that this tale for two little girls would spread to millions throughout the world.

The very genesis of *The Christmas Box* was shrouded in spirituality. As I started to write, the story began to write itself - pouring into my mind in torrents of inspiration. It would come to me in the middle of the night or early in the morning. It came to me like a jigsaw puzzle with pieces here and there - chapters out of sequence. For four weeks I wasn't sure what the story was about...until one extraordinary morning.

At four a.m., the story woke me. Having already grown accustomed to my inspiration's poor sense of timing, I went out to the kitchen table and began to write. Just a few sentences in, I was suddenly overcome with emotion. I understood, for the first time, what this story was about - the pain my mother felt over losing a child. At that moment, something beautiful happened...something I had never before, or have since,

experienced. I could feel the spiritual presence of someone with me in the room. I believe it was my little sister, Sue, who had died when I was only two years old. Though I had never met her, there was something familiar about her presence. I said out loud, "Sue, you gave me this story for Mom." Instantly it came to my mind, in the same way the story had come to my mind, *Dedicate this book to me.*

I still had no intention of publishing *The Christmas Box*, but I knew that I needed to share it with my mother and family. I went to a local copy shop and had twenty copies made. Two days later, on Christmas Eve, 1992, I presented the books to my family. My mother wept as I shared my experience, because I now knew of her pain. I later learned that in the four weeks following that Christmas Eve, the twenty copies were passed on again and again and read more than one hundred and sixty times.

A few weeks later bookstores began calling with orders for the unpublished book. I sent the book out to local publishers, who wasted little time in returning it, claiming "it would never sell." We were still receiving steady orders for the book when my wife, Keri, and I decided to self-publish. Distributing locally, we sold 19,000 copies, but it was only the beginning. By Christmas of 1995, *The Christmas Box* had spread throughout the world, selling nearly three million copies in more than thirty countries and fourteen different languages. Just as surprising, were the number of calls we were receiving from grateful readers, sharing remarkable stories of grief and healing. Keri and I felt very grateful to be a part of something that was bringing peace so many.

There are several parts of *The Christmas Box* that are not fiction. The angel monument at the heart of the tale actually had existed. I learned of the angel from a neighbor whom I often visited, an elderly widow named Leah Perry. As a

child, Leah had lived next to the Salt Lake City cemetery and would often play behind its walls. One wintry day, while walking through the cemetery, she heard a horrible wailing. She looked up to see a woman kneeling at the base of a sandstone angel statue, clawing at the frozen ground as if it held her from something she wanted desperately. After the woman left, Leah approached the statue. Etched in its stone base were three words: "Our little angel."

The idea of recreating the angel came to me two years later while at a book signing. As I sat alone, hoping for a sale, I noticed a woman across the hallway staring at me. Her eyes expressed her silent melancholy. After a few moments she approached, and I asked if she would like a book signed. She shook her head. "I have already read your book." She took a deep breath and sighed. "You're not old enough."

"To be a writer?" I asked.

"No. To have experienced this. The story isn't true."

"No, ma'am. It's mostly fiction."

She turned away sorrowfully. "I wanted it to be true. I wanted a place to go. I wanted to lay a flower at the angel."

I called Leah and asked if she would take me to see the angel. We drove up to the cemetery and began combing the area she had walked nearly eighty years before, but we couldn't find the angel. After searching for nearly an hour, Leah raised her hands in frustration. Then, hitting a granite headstone with her wooden cane, she exclaimed, "It was right here, by Mr. Bean!"

Leah called me the next day. "I phoned the Sexton," she said triumphantly. "He said there was flooding in that part of the cemetery, and many of the headstones were spoiled - especially the older ones. The angel was gone."

As I thought of grieving parents wandering the cemetery, I had the sudden wish to rebuild the angel - to provide a

place for them to grieve the deaths of their children.

When I told my mother of my desire, she began to cry. "Sue was never buried," she said. My sister had been stillborn, and in the social mindset of the day (one I still have difficulty understanding) the doctors, caretakers and clergy simply patted my mother on the back (figuratively and literally) and told her that it didn't count - that it wasn't really a baby - to go home and just forget. My mother carried the pain alone for thirty years.

I asked a neighbor of mine, a funeral director, if he knew where I could find an angel sculpture. He told me of a renowned local sculptor named Ortho Fairbanks.

"You could never afford him," my neighbor said, "But his son, Jared, is also a sculptor. He might be willing to help."

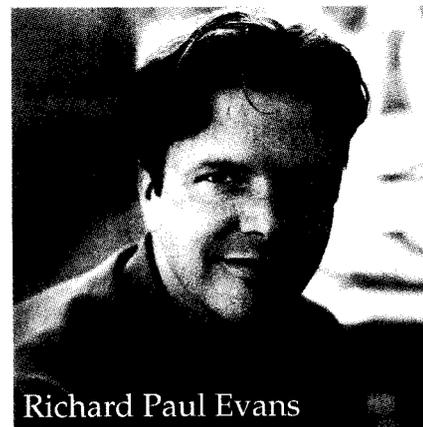
I phoned Jared and was surprised by his response. "You need to talk to my father," he said.

"I don't think we can afford your father."

Jared was insistent. "You need to talk to him," he repeated.

The next day I met with Ortho Fairbanks and his wife, Myrna, in their living room. As I explained the purpose of the angel, the sculptor pushed back tears. He went into another room, returning a few moments later with the casting of a headstone he had made for their own child. Myrna spoke for both of them. "Don't worry about the cost. Whatever it takes to build this will be done"

I felt strongly that the new statue, like the original, should be placed in the Salt Lake City Cemetery. I called the cemetery and explained my intentions to the sexton's secretary. She asked that I send a written request. I sent the letter, including with it a copy of *The Christmas Box*. The next time we spoke, she was excited about the prospect of the angel statue. She understood. She, too, had lost a child. "You'll have to meet with the



sexton," she said. "He's out of town for the week. If you can call back next Thursday, I'll arrange a meeting."

The following Thursday I called. The woman greeted me despondently "There's a problem, Richard," she said sadly.

"What's wrong?"

"You'll just have to talk to the sexton. He's available to meet with you tomorrow."

From the tone of her voice, I knew that our request had been denied. The next day I drove up to the cemetery, contemplating the doomed meeting and wondering if an appeal was possible. For the first time I began to wonder if the angel would ever stand in the cemetery. Suddenly there came a strong impression: *The place has been chosen*. Doubt replaced the thought. They're not even going to let me build it, I thought. The impression came again: *The place has been chosen*.

The sexton had never heard of *The Christmas Box* and probably would not have cared if he had. "I've heard your request, Mr. Evans, and I'm going to have to deny it."

Despite the secretary's warning, his response still came as a surprise. "May I ask why?"

He sat back in his chair, his fingers knit behind his head. "I get a lot of requests like yours, and I just can't do it. In the first place, this would have to be approved by the City Arts Council, the director of parks, the city attorneys and

architects, the city council, probably even the mayor. The red tape is considerable. It couldn't possibly be done by this fall, even if I had the desire to go to that much trouble, which, frankly I don't have time for. Besides, there is no place to put a monument. This cemetery is one hundred and fifty years old. The plots are all privately owned. I'm sorry, but we just don't have the space."

The sexton returned to his paperwork. I just sat, my mind reeling in confusion. I thought I had received inspiration. Not knowing what to do, I did nothing. I just sat there. After a few minutes he looked up again, no doubt wondering why I was still in his office. "What is it that you are trying to accomplish. Mr. Evans?" he asked.

I looked down for a moment then back into his eyes. "I just want to build a place where people can come to grieve and be healed."

I may never fully understand what happened next. I consider it nothing short of miraculous. The sexton's countenance suddenly changed. He stood up, walked over to a map on the wall, then, with a pen, made an X in the center of the cemetery "Here," he said. "It could go right here."

The statue was set in place only two days before its dedication. By noon of Decem-

ber 6, 1994, flowers, sent from around the country, had already piled at the monument's base until much of the four-foot granite base was concealed. Nearly four hundred gathered that winter night in the bitter cold of the cemetery - illuminated only by the candles they held, which somehow defied the waves of freezing rain that had already drenched the crowd.

My mother, June Evans, laid the first flower, a single white rose, for Sue. She was followed by Myrna Fairbanks, the sculptor's wife, who placed a white flower for her son, Hyrum. As the crowd proceeded toward the angel to lay their own flowers, reporters and television camera crews were observed brushing back tears from usually stoic faces. "In twenty years of newscasting," said one hardened newscaster, "Nothing has gotten to me before. Not like this."

A woman, mourning her own stillborn child, poignantly summed up the event: "Finally someone has said it is okay to cry."

Since its dedication, the statue has attracted a steady flow of visitors. Its base is adorned, year 'round, with flowers and notes to loved ones. Even tourist buses wind their way through the cemetery. We announced at the statue's dedication that the ceremony would be held every year on December 6th, and as word of the

angel continued to spread, the crowds at the ceremony grew considerably, with many attendees flying in from other states. Others, unable to attend the event, held their own angel ceremonies, lighting candles and laying flowers at the base of an angel.

That first night, as I witnessed the procession of those laying flowers, I understood finally that I had been a cog in some great cosmic machination - a process where the end, perhaps, was known from the beginning. The realization dawned that someday people would come from all over the world to find solace in the statue's presence and to rest their grief in the outspread arms of an angel...a stone angel...an angel with hope in its wings.

Utah Governor Michael Leavitt has proclaimed December 6th as The Christmas Box Angel Day - a day of healing and remembrance. Every December 6th a candlelight ceremony is held at the angel statue in memory of those who have lost children. The public is welcome. Flowers may be sent to: Christmas Box Angel, City Cemetery, 200 "N" Street, Salt Lake City, Utah 84103. Correspondence regarding the angel should be sent to: Richard Paul Evans, PO Box 1416, Salt Lake City, Utah 84110.



The Christmas Box Angel of Hope

The Christmas Box Angel Foundation has graciously granted Bereavement Publishing permission to distribute this exquisite replica of The Angel of Hope Statue. This eleven-inch-high angel makes a beautiful memorial treasure to hand down for generations. Cast from snow-white crushed marble, it perches on a lovely stacked marble base that is perfectly adapted for a small memorial plaque of your own choosing. Each angel statuette comes with a consecutively numbered certificate of authenticity as well as one soft-cover edition of *Food for the Soul*, our popular poetry book containing the poem, *Rise up Slowly, Angel*. Order #1680 \$89.95 (Please allow up to three weeks for delivery)

