

The Defective Savior

By Garry Wills



Jack Ruby and Friends

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Christmas is scary—there is no time like it for committing suicide. Memories drag us backward into our families, our past, ourselves. Dickens was right, at least through all the earlier parts of his *Christmas Carol*—Christmas looses ghosts. The season is self-rendering because self-rendering. All our many selves cluster in, too often as accusers. We holiday with our ghosts of Christmas past, weeping for what we were and for what we have become.

But my grisliest Christmas, that of 1966, was spent with a ghost of Christmases yet to be. I had just taken up a new trade, that of journalism—and it separated me from wife and children with premonitory casualness. Jack Ruby was dying in Dallas, and I was supposed to interview him if I could. Ovid Demaris, the expert at reaching hard-to-reach people, was already in Dallas

Continued on page 13

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Remembrance, from page 11 working on the Ruby family and lawyers and friends, and on law officials, to get an esquire team in to see the man before he died. I left Baltimore right away, rachitic with flu bugs my children seemed to be keeping as pets that year, passing them back and forth among themselves—and, finally to me. As Christmas approached, I spent my days in bed at the Dallas Hilton, listening to tapes Ovid had made in his interviews with all the people who knew Ruby. When I was too tired to concentrate, the TV wove Christmas carols in among these taped conversations with lawless Texas lawyers and with Ruby's demi-mondaine acquaintances. I was getting curious to meet the owners of these drawling hilarious voices. It was not till Christmas Eve that I felt strong enough to start making the rounds with Ovid—our first stop was at sheriff Bill Decker's office, to see the legendary man who was said to shoot first and ask questions later—just the thing that got Ruby into trouble. Decker made it clear that no one was going to see Ruby now to repay him in kind—or for any other reason.

We spent that night in a dim blue cave—Ovid, his wife (who had just flown in to spend Christmas with him), and I. The place was run by Barney Weinstein, who was celebrating a kind of kosher Christmas in the office of his own strip joint. His wife had baked cookies for the occasion, and the strippers ducked by before doing their act to wish and be wished Merry Christmas, and to eat a homemade cookie as their holiday bonus. Each girl flirted with a crusty old parrot in the office, trying to make it talk dirty. "Merry Christmas,

Polly." "F—you."

Most Christmas Eves I had spent at Midnight Mass. Staying up late for it was a dear privilege in childhood. More recently, I went to Mass while the children went to sleep; afterward, I could assemble their presents. This Christmas Eve, I was paying my first visit to a strip joint—still too sick to enjoy it much, and lonely, and hating Dallas. We were there to talk with several of the strippers who worked for Ruby, and to meet Bill Willis, one of Ruby's close friends, a young drummer who was—*bump!*—giving audible shape to the rather

shapeless grinds of "Tammy True." (The star of the club, "Jada" was also sick with the flu, and sat by the stage sniffing over Cokes.)

After Tammy had done her upsidedown peek-through-her-legs routine, breasts just about touching the floor, we went back to her dressing room—a little cupboard that barely held us. I had to sit under the gown rack (amazing how many clothes it takes to accomplish a theatrical

nudity). Tammy had only a light robe on—it probably weighed less than the vivid outworks of her eye makeup. Bill Willis, an ex-wrestler and one-time "Mr. Texas," wedged himself into place across from me and started remembering Jack.

There would have been Christmas presents for the girls in any of Jack Ruby's clubs. He was always buying them things, to show he was a bigshot. He got involved in their lives, gave them advice, beat up husbands who mistreated them, gave them lie detector tests when he thought they were running their own action on the side. He boasted that his club was clean, and did everything to lure policemen in and prove it. He sought respectability, in self-defeating ways—he thought running a strip joint was the road to fame, fortune, politics, and a reputation for philanthropy. He was going to impress his adopted city, and be loved by it.

Everyone knew him, and laughed at him; most every one liked him; but they all trod carefully around him—he was unpredictable. His hug could turn into a wrestler's desperate grip. He grabbed at you in friendly ways, then began absentmindedly to strangle, out of self-doubt. He was always trying to help, and most often making things worse. By the time he punched out a husband who had been mean to one of his girls, the stripper had normally gone back to the man and wanted him left alone. Story after story tumbled out, of a poor fool trying to impress Protestant Dallas, a klutzy muddled Christ of whose emptiness they had all received—defective savior of his very own city and his very own "starlets," a man who tried to win the world over with his fists and his gun. No wonder Christmas is scary and self-rending. Every form of love is. ■