

Silver Bells, and Other Short Snips Celebrating the Birth of Jesus

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GOD REST YE

It was cold that Christmas, colder than we usually get these days, and the snow was drifting down in white helixes against a sky like, I don't know, like your mother's velvet Christmas dress when you're a very small child.

Not that I was much more than a child, that year. Twenty? Maybe nineteen? Or maybe I was a little older than that and I'm just trying to let myself off the hook.

It was my second Christmas at St Timothy's, that big, handsome church over on Colborne Avenue, and they trusted me enough to close the place up on my own.

I didn't love the idea, to be honest. It was such a big, dark building when it was empty, especially in the long, dark months at the bottom of the year, especially in the long dark hours after a midnight mass.

But it was a twelve-hour shift at time-and-a-half, and if I worked Christmas Eve, then they wouldn't ask me to come in on Christmas Morning. Altogether, it was a good offer.

By the time recessional began ('Past Three O'Clock', played effortlessly on the long, golden thighs of a pipe organ older than the Queen), I had already closed half the building down. Rounds done, doors locked, rooms checked: anything that would get me home faster.

But seeing as how people liked to linger on Christmas, it was well past one forty five by the time people finally filtered out.

Reverend Aynesley was among the last to go, and I spent about half an hour loitering down the hall from his office, waiting for his impromptu sherry reception to end. You get to know who's who a bit, after two years working at a place, and so I was pretty sure that everyone in there with him was named on the glass board of charitable donors in the upper parish hall. Reverend Aynesley was a white Bermudan, and his Pronunciation was Received. White Canadians loved him, and the richer they were, the more they wanted his approval. For the price of a few glasses of Sherry, the Rev was getting a three million dollar addition to the South Wing bankrolled.

As I waited, drumming my fingers on the hard plastic arm of a grey chair in the hallway, I thought I heard a sound back in the nave. The rustle of a winter jacket, maybe. But when I went to check it out, that wide and echoing space was silent. All dark, save for the greenish streetlights of Colborne Avenue, filtering in through the old stained glass.

By the time I made it back to Reverend Aynesley's office, his guests were filing out: shrugging into their Boss overcoats, or buttoning furred collars 'round their necks.

"Ah, Andrew my boy!" It was Reverend Aynesley, beaming over his shoulder at me as he locked the office behind him. He looked and smelled like one of his plush, expensive leather chairs, and his cheeks were slightly pink with Christmas spirit. "Bad news, my Son: I just got a text from Art, and he's feeling sick. Are you able to come in tomorrow morning?"

I was young, and the words, 'Sorry, I can't' weren't a part of my vocabulary yet.

"Good Lad," Reverend Aynesley said. "Then I'll see you bright and early, eh?"

Not waiting for an answer, he was already gone. A few minutes later, as I double-checked the great, oaken main doors, I could hear the low, smooth purr of his Mercedes as it pulled out of the parking lot.

Silence.

And then...

That noise again. The one I'd thought I'd imagined earlier: something like a winter jacket. It was coming from the arched shadows of the balcony, on the bride's side of the church. A rustle, followed by the sound of someone shifting their feet. My heart almost stopped.

At that point I was tempted. To convince myself it was just a bat or a mouse that I'd heard: to just lock the doors and set the alarm and let the security company come and deal with whatever was up there, if there was anything up there.

And I wish I could say there was some principled reason why I didn't, but truly, it was pure cowardice that caused me to stay. I stayed for the same reason 20-year-old men do anything: to prove to myself that I wasn't as scared as I felt.

I crept up the stairs as quietly as I could, but the building was old, and my footsteps creaked. By the time I reached the darkness of the second storey, there was nothing and no-one to be seen: just diagonal rows of pews slanting into shadow.

"H-hello?"

Nothing. I decided to try a different tack.

"I know you're there."

And then — I jumped back so quickly that I almost fell back down the stairs — at the end of the row of pews, a man sat up. He'd been lying down so I wouldn't see him.

“Oh, uh, hey man. Hey.”

At first glance, the guy seemed to be about six six and two-fifty. But as my eyes adjusted to the darkness, and the first surprise wore off, he shrank down to more normal proportions. Smaller than me, actually. And then, as he stood up and anxiously brushed himself off, as if to make his soiled and ragged clothing look presentable, I realized he was actually a quite small man. Short and slender. Not any threat at all.

But still, for reasons beyond any explanation but the fear of poverty itself, I was afraid of him.

“H-hey man,” I said. “You can’t be here.”

“Oh, uh, sorry, sorry,” he said. He looked down and away, refusing to meet my gaze. “Sorry, I thought it uh, I thought it was okay. A church and stuff. I thought I was allowed to be here.”

“Yeah well, I gotta close up the building. And you gotta go.”

My fear made me cruel. I could hear a scornful edge in my own voice, which I knew wasn’t right, but... but which made me feel a little more strong.

The guy licked his lips and looked from side to side.

“L-look man... can’t I just stay here? I won’t... I won’t steal nothing, and I’ll just lie down right here until morning, and then I’ll leave first thing. Okay? I promise I’ll be good. I’m a good guy, I swear.”

“Sorry, you got to go,” I said again. I had a hand on my phone and another hand balled up in a fist around the heavy set of keys I carried around with me at the job. I was trembling a little bit. All that adrenaline, and for what?

He shrank.

“O-okay,” he said at last. “Yeah I’ll go, I’m going. You don’t have to call anybody or anything. Just — this way?”

He pointed down the stairs and I swung around to give him a wide berth as he passed. He had a strong smell. Sewer mixed with body odour mixed with fear. He was as good as his word. He went down the stairs and then turned right to the side door, where he waited at a respectful distance as I unlocked it for him.

The door swung wide into the flat black chill of the outer dark. The cold prowled in, its long tendrils snaking around our wrists and ankles. In the half-darkness, his pupils shrank to pinpricks and he started to tremble. There was a half-snow falling: thin and hard and cold.

He licked his lips.

“Please,” he said. “Please man, there’s something after me out there. Something bad, real bad. Please, just, please don’t make me go. Lock me in a room even, just, let me stay here tonight.”

I was implacable. I was cold and tired and I wanted to go home. This man: his fear, his pain, it was standing in my way.

“There’s places for you to go,” I said, in my utter ignorance. “But you can’t stay here.”

For a second time, he shrank, and nodded, and accepted what I said. He was wrapped in an old winter coat and blanket, which he pulled tight around him. And then, with a shudder of fear or cold, he went out into the darkness, and was swallowed up.

A few minutes later, I had flipped the breakers and armed the security system. It was now even darker within than without. The only light from those dull streetlights: their cold glow greyish-green behind the stained glass, the cold and grey-green stained-glass saints.

I stepped out into the cold again, locking the side door behind me, half-expecting the guy would be out there waiting, but the parking lot was empty.

As I stepped out into the gritty, blowing snow, I saw the shadow of him huddled up under the archway of the church’s main door, pressed up against its frame, as if the cold stones would protect him. He saw me pass and raised a trembling hand. I returned the wave, and I was gone.

Next morning, early grey at crack-of-dawn, exhausted and pissed off, I trudged through the thin, unsatisfying snow toward the grey monument that stood just off of Colborne Street.

That man was still sitting at the entrance to the church, his little hands still clasping at the frozen stone.

He was rimed with white, like a pier beside the frozen sea. He was frozen solid. But it hadn’t been the ice that killed him.

“There’s something after me out there,” he’d said. “Something bad.”

And whatever it had been, had left its long, red ragged wounds all up and down his throat and chest.

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LEFTOVER CHRISTMAS SAUSAGE MEAT

I had just gotten home from some last minute Christmas shopping when my buddy Alex sent me the text.

“Dude, you home? Mind if I stop by? I got a HUGE score.”

“Sure thing, dude.”

Fifteen minutes later, he was tapping on the glass of my apartment’s front window. He was carrying a heavy and extremely wet-looking garbage bag. The plastic was strained and turning grey around his white-knuckled fingers.

“Dude, you GOT to see this,” he said as I let him in. He was red-cheeked from the cold and the weight of the sack. “Lemme know if you wanna get in on it.”

“Get it on what?”

He thudded the big wet sack down onto my kitchen island’s faux-marble countertop.

“Leftover Christmas Sausage Meat.”

He unfurled the sack with a crack of plastic, and inside, indeed, was several and I mean several kilograms of loose raw meat.

I stared at it for a moment. Then I stared at *him* for a moment.

“Explain yourself,” I said.

“Okay, so you know Kelly down at the Sausage Stand?”

“I know *of* Kelly down at the sausage stand.”

The Sausage Stand was where my buddy had worked weekends throughout university. It was at the Farmer’s market. Kelly was the middle-aged proprietress.

“Okay, well, this year I’m stopping by the stand to get some things for dinner, and Kelly says to me, ‘hey, I’ve got a big bag of leftover christmas sausage meat, but it’s not in casings. Would be good for stuffing or shaping into sausage patties -- you want it?’ And I’m like ‘hell yeah I want it, how much?’ And she looks at me and says, ‘*five bucks*’, and I’m like ‘*five bucks???* For all this meat? Where else are you gonna get a deal like that?’ And then I thought about how you were still looking for something to get your dad, so I figured you might want to get in on it. Dads love ingredients.”

The meat was *green*, by the way. I know I’ve buried the lede here a little bit, but this meat was *visibly* green. Not green the way it would be if it was spoiled, but green as if someone had been

free-pouring food colouring into it. The colour was somewhere between 'ice-cream truck slushie' and 'kid's vomit after eating too much ice cream truck slushie'.

"What makes it 'Christmas' Meat?" I asked. "Is it flavoured with like cinnamon and cranberry or something?"

He shook his head excitedly, cheeks still red, eyes still bright, too bright, and I suddenly had a vision of him in my head, gleefully working the meat grinder, arm spinning like a pinwheel at the crank, while Kelly handed him fistful after fistful of— of *what*? What kind of meat was in that bag?

He let out a little breathless laugh. "Dude," he said. "Dude that's the craziest shit. That's the wildest part about it, my dude!"

He clawed up one hand and thrust it into the gaping sack of meat, coming away with a glistening heap of pink and green leftover Christmas sausage meat. I caught the pungent whiff of blood and nutmeg.

"Buddy, that's what rocks so much about it," he said. "This shit? It's made out of Elfs."

I didn't say anything for about ten seconds, before I cracked a smile, guffawed a bit, and waited for him to tell me he was joking. But he didn't. His eyes stayed bright and gleeful smile was still plastered on his face. He just picked through the clump of raw flesh in his hand until something began to poke out, half buried. A little green hat.

"Elfs, buddy."

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SILVER BELLS

"Connor Maturen, Jessica Maturen, Janet Maturen," repeated Eric. "Then there's your aunt's kids. Brandy, Brandyn, Bryce, and Beth... Buchanan? How'd I do?" He grinned at her.

"I'm sorry. I'm sorry. It's your first family dinner and... I just want it to be perfect, you know?" said Marissa. "Ugh, why'd I pick Christmas to do this?"

Eric grabbed her hand and squeezed. "I promise it'll be okay. I can handle meeting a few people. A handshake here, a boring story there and bing, bang, boom we're done. Just tell me if there's anything I should avoid talking about."

Marissa's smile faded, she looked away.

"Well. Okay. There is one thing. It's about Cousin Beth," she said.

“Beth, right? Not Bryce, Brandon or-”

“It’s not funny. Look, it’s a family secret, okay? *I’m* not even supposed to know about it. The only reason I even want to tell you is to keep you from accidentally saying something that, you know, sets her off.”

Eric took his eyes off the road to look at Marissa. Her eyes were bright and shining. He nodded. “Okay. Tell me and I’ll steer clear.”

“Alright, here it is,” said Marissa. And then she told him.

Eric nearly swerved off the road.

“*What?*” said Eric, whispering even though they were the only two in the car. “What? Are you serious? I thought that only happened in... well I thought that never happened!”

Marissa nodded furiously, a finger to her lips. Despite the gruesome depravity of the secret she seemed lighter for having told it.

“Not a word,” she said. “Not a word.”

Marissa’s parents’ was an inviting place, thought Eric, an hour later. A large, flat, warm bungalow that made Eric feel nostalgic even though it was totally unlike any home he’d ever lived in. The family had, fittingly, gathered in the family room before dinner. It was a spacious room filled with overstuffed armchairs that begged to be sat and read in, and a hearth that lapped happily at a high stack of logs.

The people were just as warm as the room itself. Eric found himself passed around from sibling to aunt to cousin to nephew, a whirlwind of handshakes and hugs, as he became acquainted with the family crowd. It was just as easy as Marissa had said. Eric was even able to force a smile and maintain eye contact as he greeted Cousin Beth, despite that horrible secret rattling around in his brain.

Marissa’s grandfather, who everyone called Pappy, was especially boisterous. He was a tall, rosy-cheeked man with twinkling eyes who knocked Eric’ outstretched hand aside and pulled him into a tight bearhug that threatened to cut off all circulation.

“So this is the father of my great-grandchildren,” he said, clapping Eric’s shoulders with his roast beef palms.

“Pappy! Don’t say that!” said Marissa, flushing a deep Christmas crimson.

The couple was spared further embarrassment by a holler from the dining room. Dinner was served.

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Three helpings and one surreptitiously unbuckled belt later, Eric was stuffed. And looking around at the other drowsy, contented people it seemed like he wasn't the only one.

Pappy stretched in his chair and turned to face the table. His eyes were no longer twinkling. They were hazel, Eric thought, but not a welcoming hazel. A green-brown hazel the same colour as a mudslide. Even more odd, he seemed to be staring directly at Eric.

"Eric, please," said Pappy, his eyes never leaving the man. "Come join me over here." He patted the tablecloth. Eric gulped and rose, squeezing past the chairs between him and the head of the table.

Pappy stood and put his arm around him before turning to the rest of the family.

"Everyone," he said. "It's time for Silver Bells."

There was a scraping of chairs and shuffling of feet. Everyone moved as one into the family room and formed into a loose circle. Eric called out to Marissa, but perhaps she couldn't hear him through the ruckus. Or maybe she did hear him and chose not to reply. Either way, Eric was left alone with Pappy.

"Take this will you," said Pappy, as he bent down to pull a wooden box from the sideboard. It was about the size of a human head.

"I've never played this game before," said Eric, hefting the box. It gave a muffled and cacophonous jingle.

"Ah, you'll pick it right up. Don't worry." Pappy straightened up, now holding the largest bottle of rum Eric had ever seen.

The family turned to watch as Pappy marched Eric back into the family room and directly into the middle of the circle. The fire had started to burn a bit lower, throwing ragged, flickering shadows across the room. The comfortable chairs had been removed.

Eric tried to make eye-contact with Marissa, but she was talking to Cousin Beth who stood on her right. Pappy opened the wooden box and pulled out a silver dinner bell.

"Everyone," said Pappy. "Please take a moment to find a comfortable position. Silver Bells has now... begun."

He rang the bell and the room immediately dropped into utter silence. Eric turned and looked around the circle. Everyone besides him and Pappy now stood perfectly still in the exact same pose: back straight, feet shoulder-width apart, arms at their side. They stared into the middle-distance, glassy-eyed like ceramic dolls.

Pappy chuckled and turned to Eric. "I love this part," he said. "Basically the only time I get peace and quiet around here."

He chuckled again, but it didn't quite reach his eyes.

Pappy circled the room once, looking at each person, before returning to the center. He placed the dinner bell back in the box and pulled out a handful of tiny, intricate silver bells, each about the size of a thimble. They were attached to small silver hooks.

"Now it's your time to shine," he said, handing Eric a bell. "Take this and hang it on whomever you like."

Eric looked to Marissa for guidance, but she was staring intently at nothing, just like everyone else. Her glass stare made him uneasy.

After a few moments, he hung the bell from one of the uncles - Uncle Bill - passing the hook through the arm of his sweater. Eric was startled by a sudden metallic crack behind him, but when he turned he saw it was only Pappy unscrewing the cap of the rum bottle.

"Perfect, you're a natural," said Pappy. He stepped past Eric and lifted the rum to Bill's lips. Bill opened his mouth and Pappy poured him a generous slug direct from the bottle, some of which dribbled off his chin. Eric felt his own throat burning as Bill swallowed hard.

"Good boy," said Pappy. "Next one, Eric."

Eric looked back to Marissa - for reassurance, for acknowledgement, anything really - but she may as well have been a marble statue. Eric grabbed another bell and hung it from a kind, 30-something woman he'd spoken to earlier in the evening. *She's an engineer*, thought Eric, but he couldn't be sure, he'd met so many people.

Pappy poured a shot into the maybe-engineer's mouth.

"Next one," said Pappy.

Marissa didn't even look at Eric as he hung a bell from her elbow. Her fingers remained lifeless even as he squeezed her hand. Eric started to wonder if he'd done something wrong.

But there was no time to dwell. It went on like this, Eric hanging the bells, Pappy pouring the rum, until the two of them finished a full circle.

Eric had a vague hope that this would be the end of the game, or at least the end of his part, but that hope was strangled when Pappy nudged him towards the first uncle once again. Eric hung the bell at chest level. Pappy poured the rum, but before they moved on, Pappy said something.

“Hey Bill. Shame about losing that promotion. I forget, the guy that got it: was he just younger than you or smarter too?”

Eric froze. Jesus Christ. Pappy had said it loud enough for everyone to hear, including Bill's wife. Eric braced himself for an argument, maybe even a fistfight, but there was no response. Eric turned to look. Pappy was right up in Bill's face, staring at him. There might have been a slight twitch under Bill's eye, but that was all.

After a moment, Pappy moved onto the engineer.

Eric tried to focus. He fumbled the bell before finally managing to hang it from her blouse. Pappy poured her shot. As he pulled the bottle back, he spoke again:

“Another year without kids? Well, maybe it's for the best. Not everyone was meant to be a mother.”

Eric's face burned like he'd just been slapped, but the engineer just stood silently, staring past Pappy.

The third person in line was a slight, small man in his 40s, shorter than Eric and much shorter than Pappy. Eric hung his bell, Pappy poured his shot, and Eric steeled himself for what he knew was coming.

Pappy slowly looked the guy up and down. For a moment it looked like he might not say anything. But then he spoke:

“No wonder she ran off.”

The slight, small man made eye-contact with Pappy for the briefest of moments, like a lightning bolt arcing across the sky, then went back to staring.

Pappy prodded Eric to move on, but just as they turned their backs Eric heard a faint sound. The sound of bells. They both turned.

The small, slight man was red-faced and snotty. Tears streamed down his cheeks. His body heaved with sobs and trembled from his efforts to stay in control.

All the while the two tiny bells jingled their happy song.

Pappy said two words - "You're out" - and the small, slight man walked out of the circle to collapse into a chair. He put his head in his hands and began to take deep, shaking breaths.

Eric felt a tap on his shoulder. It was Pappy. He gestured to the next person in the line.

Eric turned to Marissa, but still that same implacable expression, nothing else. Eric shuddered and picked up another bell.

Despite the vile, vicious remarks of Pappy, nobody else in the family so much as moved during the rest of the round. Nor the next round. Marissa seemed particularly stolid, even after Pappy mentioned her 9 months of unemployment, which Eric knew was a sore spot.

But at the start of the fourth round that changed. Pappy approached Bill, needling him again about losing the promotion, but before they moved on, someone else spoke.

"He's drinking away his kid's future." It was the small, slight man. He was no longer a broken down heap, there was vengeful fire in his eyes.

"Remember, Bill? Got so bad you started stealing that money from the college fund? I had to lend you \$3000 just so your wife wouldn't find out. Not that your kid is going to college with his grades."

That was enough. The sound of jingling filled the air as Bill visibly flinched.

"Go fuck yourself, David. You're a goddamn snake." The man just grinned in his face.

A second later, Bill seemed to come to his senses. He turned to face Pappy, his bells jingling.

"You're out," said Pappy.

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And so it went. Round after round. Hour after hour. Eric hanging bells, Pappy digging in his knives, and the "out" family members twisting the blade.

Eric had begun a mantra in his head. This isn't real. This isn't real. It couldn't be. He couldn't be here, it made no sense, so therefore it wasn't happening. He repeated it to himself with each bell he hung. With each affair, addiction, lie, and violent act that Pappy and the family could dredge up.

Eventually there were only two left. Marissa, who still stood, staring, as Eric tried desperately to communicate with her. She was completely inert, like molded plastic. It was hard to believe that there was a person inside there, let alone a person Eric loved.

And beside her, Cousin Beth.

Eric hung another bell from Marissa and Pappy poured another mouthful. He grinned an evil little grin.

“So Marissa,” he said. “What do you really think of Eric? Because you haven’t looked at him for hours.”

Eric felt his stomach clench into a fist. The rest of the family leaned in, like wolves catching the scent of a wounded animal.

Marissa didn’t blink.

“She told me he was good... for now,” said Marissa’s sister.

“Oh please, she’s probably sleeping with a dozen guys. Commitment was never for her,” said a cousin.

“Remember high school? She drops guys as soon as she gets bored. No heart.”

The room was spinning around Eric. He tried to move his feet, to hang a bell off Beth and force the family to move on, but he was terrified he’d simply collapse and he knew if he did the family would descend on him as one, rip the flesh from his bones, and lap at the marrow inside.

So instead, he spoke. He spoke until the room was silent, repeating over and over the same few sentences. It was a flat voice, no intonation, word-for-word recitation of what Marissa had told him. Over and over he repeated Beth’s secret. Then he fell silent.

For a moment, nothing happened.

Then, in a flurry of jingling, Beth collapsed to the ground.

She began to wail, a horrible saliva-filled sound that pushed itself up from her stomach before pooling on the carpet like vomit. But only Eric noticed. She was drowned out by the family, who’d erupted in cheers.

As if a spell had been broken, Marissa was back to her old self. Laughing with glee as three of her uncles, Bill included, rushed forward to lift her into the air. The family crowded around—Bill and David, Connor and Brandyn—hugging her and offering congratulations, knocking Beth’s prone body with their feet as they did.

The jubilation didn’t reach Eric. He grabbed Pappy and pulled him aside.

“Pappy, I’m so sorry. I didn’t mean to. It just came out,” said Eric.

Pappy looked from Beth to Eric and back again, slapping his back. "Ahhh, she'll be fine. Everyone always is."

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As the family dispersed into various rooms, Cousin Beth was left alone. She hadn't moved from her place on the floor. She'd stopped sobbing, but now lay catatonic, her eyes unfocused, her body fetal.

With her, in a nearby chair, Eric sat slouched in a chair, his spine a twisted question mark. Neither of them moved or spoke for a quarter of an hour until Marissa swept back in.

"There you are!" she said happily, skipping over Beth's body to give him a hug. "Did you see? I won!"

"Marissa..." said Eric. "I'm so sorry. I didn't mean to- I don't know what came over me..."

"Oh," said Marissa. She looked over her shoulder at Beth and then back at Eric. "It's okay. It's not your fault. Besides," she said with a wink. "It was bound to come out sooner or later."

She planted a kiss on Eric's cheek and stepped back over Beth. But before leaving she looked over her shoulder.

"Hey, I'm really proud of you Eric. I knew you'd fit right in."

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CHRISTMAS IS RUINED

Christmas Eve, and the slow crackle of a fire in the living room. Three fires, actually; each blazing merrily amidst the scorched remains of one of the neighbours. "Well Darling," Helen said, turning to her husband with a fresh drink in her hand. "I can see you've decided to ruin Christmas, once again."