

Every Time a Bell Rings

by Jared Ward

It started in the car before we'd even left the airport.

"You smell like smoke," she said.

"Had a beer in Denver. You can smoke at the bar there."

"I smell it," she said, and I waited for the rest. Three, two, one. "Your body is a temple, mijo."

It was raining outside. Of course it was. Seattle, home of the Grey Christmas.

"I don't smoke, and I only had one drink," I said and wanted to kick myself. You can't win, not when it's four on one. Me against her and the Trinity.

I leaned my face to the window, raindrops streaking in shadows down my cheek. Her sermon began spilling into the backseat and over my bags. Evergreens stood in welfare lines along the road, waiting, wet, with nowhere to go.

As we pulled onto the freeway I shook my head and said, "Christ, Mom. Good to see you, too."

Later that night, after she'd gone to bed, I called the number to confirm my return flight. Sea-Tac to Wichita, flight 2680, 8:20 a.m. on the 26th.

Five years since I'd been there, already counting down hours.

I went to the back porch, under the awning while rain tapped like a tired flock of ravens. This new house, only five blocks from our old one, nestled into a hillside with an unspectacular view. She'd come back from a brief stint in California, finding her way right to the neighborhood, shrinking a sprawling city to a quarter mile radius.

From the street came the rip of tires rolling in the rain, Japanese compacts weaving between hissing metros.

Even five blocks away, with my back to it, I could feel the old house skulking in the shadows. In the basement I used to play in

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the dark, shine a flashlight on the angular black widows creeping in the corners, feed them ants and silverfish and flies with the wings pulled off so the web wouldn't break.

Memories of a bad man slinked their way to the smooth spot behind my ear. Like a yellow beam shining on roly-poly shells, I saw a television smash into a wall, fall twenty years to the floor. Like the frantic slap at cobweb cling, I felt a meathook hand grasp for my hair, ear, catch my collar.

Rain ravens tapped.

I wanted a cigarette bad. Smoker or not, I could have chained my way through a pack of Camels.

My nose and cheeks felt crimson cold. I blew a plume of warm breath in the air and went in to the couch. The cable box shone 12:15. Fifty-six hours, I thought. I can make fifty-six hours.

Coffee woke me in the morning. Mom was cooking in the kitchen and humming. I sat up and stretched out my couch sleeping stiffness.

"Buenas días, sleepyhead," she said. "Hungry?"

The cable clock said 8:41. Forty-nine-and-a-half hours.

"Starving," I said.

I went to the table and she came out with two plates of bacon, scrambled eggs, and English muffins browned at the edges.

"Coffee?"

I nodded, reaching for my fork. She came back with a full cup, black, and set it in front of me. Her hand rested on my shoulder, and she kissed the top of my head.

"Thanks," I said.

We sat together, sharing a meal and talking like old friends. Like a grown-up mother and son.

It had been tough finding work when she came back, her old job at the realtor filled. She signed on at Boeing, answering phones for the personnel office. Been there almost four years. It paid the bills.

"What's up for today?" I asked, rising for a refill.

"*It's a Wonderful Life*, ten o'clock," she said.

I laughed. Tradition.

"And after?"

"Maybe *The Santa Clause* or *Home Alone*," she said. "Your call."

"How about let's hit the market, maybe a late lunch on the pier?"

She shook her head. "Love to, but not today."

Coffee burnt my lips. "I leave in two days, you know."

"Maybe," she said, and something like a chill blew through me.

"See for yourself."

I knew before I reached the back door. The blinds slid to the side, revealing an easy ten inches. Wisps of powder blew off the top of the house, swirling in the sunlight. The sky was bright blue, dotted with clouds, and everything reflected for miles.

"Can you believe it?" She was almost giddy. "First White Christmas in six years."

The view from the back had been transformed, the rust and dirt of lower middle class covered by a pristine blanket. Dog prints broke the surface from strays seeking shelter, but otherwise, the city slept.

I could picture the scene a few blocks away. Our old house sat on an intersection at the top of a steep hill, the first of three that terraced their way some hundred odd feet down. It was scary on a bike when dry, unthinkable in a car on snow. The city would block off Alaska Junction, leaving no traffic within earshot.

Then they would come. Kids from all over, bundled and walking with older brothers or sisters, dragging their vehicles. My neighborhood, we all had patched up innertubes, or the cheap plastic sheets with the nylon rope through the top. Not much for steering, we bashed our way into each other, parked cars, and fences of surrounding houses. The rich kids who showed up from White Center had wooden sleds with metal blades that turned and braked. We all ended up at the bottom.

Staring out the back, part of me wanted to pull on some boots, grab some gloves, and go bum a ride or two. A White Christmas. In Seattle. First time in years.

"Jesus," I said under my breath.

I knew the place too well. Even a few inches shut everything down. This much was lights out for at least another day. Planes weren't the problem, it was getting to them, especially in a rear-wheel POS pick-up. Be lucky to get out the back alley, let alone on the freeway.

Maybe if the temperature stayed down, the big trucks could clear the streets before it all turned to mush. But with the sun shining bright, it would halfway melt by nightfall, then ice over thick by morning.

The cable clock said 8:49. Countdown done.

"*Wonderful Life* in ten minutes," Mom called as she cleared the table.

It had taken twelve years for her to leave him. Only took me eight.

I was sixteen when the judge sent me to live with my dad. She had sealed the deal herself, calling the other attorney an agent of Satan while I picked at a scratch on the table in front of me, scared shitless she was going to burst into tongues.

At the airport, she was crying at the gate. I hugged her and said it was fine, I'd be back in a few months to visit. She just shook her head, and I remember thinking how strange it was that for the first time in years, something was happening that didn't have any apparent connection to God's will.

By Christmas morning, Seattle was solid ice. Forecasts had it for thirty degrees or less over the next two days.

We had survived Christmas Eve without incident. She didn't witness to me once, and did her best not to nag about Jesus while we channel surfed through one holiday flick after another. But I could feel the tension every time I paused on the weather channel or stared out the window at the hardening snow.

I knew what she felt. This was God's gift to her, some extra time with the son who had left her. This was a sign, and

couldn't I see it? I was abusing the gift with every purse of the lip or sigh at the window.

I knew and didn't care. I'd made it out once, and if God wanted me back there, he could go fuck himself. Let him sleep on the couch and watch MacCauley Culkin mug for the cameras six hours straight.

We opened our presents after breakfast. She loved the turquoise earrings and matching necklace. I smiled at the plaid yellow button-down, said thanks and laughed. Garish. I had half a closet full of similar ones back home, bright colors collecting dust because I couldn't bring myself to give her gifts away.

"Mijo," she said, "you can't be so drab all the time. You need color."

"Brown's a color," I said. "Dark green's a color."

She tossed me another package. "You're just like your father."

Inside the flimsy cardboard box was another plaid shirt. Brown and forest green. I set it aside and pulled on the yellow one.

"Too drab," I said.

She straightened the collar, brushed away wrinkles, and snapped off the tag.

"There now," she said, holding me away and cocking her head for a better view. "So handsome."

Dudley Moore was on in the afternoon, dressed like a drunken elf as Mom was reaching new heights. Everything was becoming so neat, such an adventure, and wasn't it so very wonderful? We were having *fun*, and the reminder was necessary two or three times an hour.

By the time I drifted to sleep, I'd had all the fun a Christmas could offer.

At the time my flight was to have left, Sea-Tac still slept, but the city was starting to wake. A few cars and trucks ventured onto the mushy roads, four lanes cut to two muddy paths that snaked their way from stoplight to stoplight.

It happened after dinner, when I had checked the weather for the second time in twenty minutes.

"What's so important you have to get back?" she asked, running her finger over the ceramic crucifix hanging on the wall.

I could hear the question stretched thin, trying not to become accusation, trying not to say, "why don't you want to be with your mother" or "is it really that bad" or even, if left to unravel itself on its own, "what is it you hate about me?"

"Work," I said. "Falling behind."

But mothers know their children better than that. They know the lie before it's been thought. Doesn't matter if it's a four-year-old holding a tube of Maybelline lipstick while the living room wall stands covered in hieroglyphics, or if the child is no longer a child, but a grown man trying to hide.

"I tried, you know?" she said, and the tremble in her voice touched my ears like the first reaching fingers of an earthquake.

"Mom," I said, "don't."

But it was too late, and the walls that had stood for the prior two days came crashing around us, first by the rise of her voice, then by the rage of mine, and ended by the slam of her bedroom door, leaving me to kick the rubble alone.

Should expect clearing skies in the morning, said the automated voice of Local on the 8's as I grabbed my pillow and blanket from the living room closet.

There was a ten-thirty flight that morning. True to the forecast, the skies came out blue and the ice started melting. Sea-Tac awoke, and the possibility of freedom loomed.

At nine, I went out to the alley. There had been no breakfast that morning, and the silence between us had drowned out the television drone. The truck was buried in snow to the floorboards. I found the shovel and cleared a path to its door.

It coughed before starting, cleared its throat and then fired. While the engine warmed to Jesus music in the tape deck, I

began digging out tires. When they were visible, I jumped in the cab and put the truck in reverse. The tires spun.

I got out and dug again. The mound to the side was growing. At the first sign of the alley's gravel, I climbed back in and revved the engine. The tires caught for a moment, started to rise, then slipped back in a high-pitched hum of spinning rubber.

Putting the stick in neutral, I went to the front, leaning my right shoulder into the bumper and rocking, rocking, rocking an inch further with every push. When the transferring weight signaled, I gave my hardest push, boots slipping beneath me as I landed face down in the snow. The engine rumbled over my head.

"Shit."

Brushing my face, I leaned in again. Patient this time, until the rear wheels gripped the top of the snow and rolled out of the rut.

Looking down the alley, it seemed clear enough. But the first twenty feet, that was the challenge.

Back in the cab, I plotted my course. Roll forward five or six feet, then lay on the gas and plow through the drift. The thought of praying flashed through my mind.

Everything went as planned, I rolled past the rut, stepped on the gas, and charged into the drift. For an instant the front tires lifted. Then they came down.

I sat in the cab, sweating from effort and anger and heat from the blower. Clenching the wheel in both hands, I let out a guttural howl that left my throat raw. It wasn't fair. Mom's Christian bs sang from the speakers, praising the glories of God and pushing me over the edge.

Slamming the door, I snagged the shovel from the snow mound and mounted a furious attack on the drift, cursing God and my mother with every thrust of the blunt plastic blade.

When the anger was spent, I stood next to the truck, watching my breath smoke in the air.

"Feel better?"

She'd been standing on the back porch, for who knew how long. Blood ran to my already flushed cheeks. I pitched the shovel aside, turned the truck off, and headed for the house.

"Merry-fucking-Christmas," I said as I brushed past her.

Later that day I pushed the truck back to its spot, then walked to Safeway, picking up a twelve-pack of Old Milwaukee because I wanted everything to hurt. When I came in, she crinkled her brow at my purchase and went to her room.

One at a time, the beers disappeared. Slow at first, then with building speed. She came out once to say there was food in the fridge, and I didn't see her again that night.

At eight beers, the transportation update scrolled across the bottom of the screen. Buses were running the next day. One way or another, I was gone.

Coming back from the bathroom two beers later, I stopped at a hallway picture. Must've been twelve. Those thick plastic glasses were hideous, I looked semi-retarded. Mom looked the same, her thick black hair rolling over her shoulders like a wild mane. Her eyes were steeled, belying the smile. I pictured them earlier that day, and flinched.

I'd never sworn at her before, he'd always done enough. Staring at the picture, I remembered her shielding me with her body and fists once when he came at me. I remembered her beating him back and swearing she'd kill him if he touched me again. I remembered the feel of her eyes on my back as I'd walked inside from my tantrum, and I couldn't get through the last beer fast enough.

In the morning I woke with a pillow and blanket I hadn't gotten, shoes off I hadn't removed. There were no empty cans in sight. The cable box said 7:45. I shoved my clothes in my bag and brushed my teeth.

Her door was closed, and it squeaked when I went in. It was dark inside, and I worked my way to her bedside. My eyes adjusted, and I stood over her, the way she used to with me before school in the mornings.

Leaning in, I tucked her hair to the side and kissed her cheek. "Good-bye, mama," I whispered. "Love you."

As the door squeaked behind me, I found I moved faster if I couldn't hear her crying.

Outside the sun was out, and for the first time in days black asphalt peeked through the slush of brown snow on the road. I shouldered my bag, headed for a plane flying south.

