

SLEIGH BELLS

—a play for voices—

by David Alpaugh

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Published as formatted by the author in the March 2012 issue of SCENE4 Magazine
(www.scene4.com) and provided as a free PDF download.

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SLEIGH BELLS

CAST OF CHARACTERS

CHORUS: VOICE 1: *utterly wonderstruck; utterly benign.*
VOICE 2: *self-effacing; helpful; anxious to avoid disputes.*
VOICE 3: *aggressive; cynical: something of a spoilsport.*

GRANDFATHER: *Germanic accent.*

GRANDMOTHER: *Germanic accent.*

MARILYN: *Their daughter.*

KEVIN: *Their grandson.*

ESTHER: *Kevin's wife*

MINOR VOICES: Mr. Cavanaugh, Mr. Thompson, Mr. Reedy, Radio Announcer, Hysterical

Play begins with the sound of sleigh bells. Approach and fade.

VOICE 1: I like snow. I don't understand snow. But I like snow.

VOICE 2: Snow takes me back. That's why I like snow. Takes me back.

VOICE 3: Now you understand snow. Now you are happy. Because now you understand snow. There is none more happy than you. (*Realizing the absurdity of this remark*). Walking the earth, I mean.

Sleigh bells. Approach and fade, as before.

VOICE 1: Sleigh bells....

VOICE 2: Pretty soon we'll be back in the kitchen. With Grandfather. He'll be at his workbench, repairing clocks and watches. And all because of snow. (*Surprised.*) Oh! I know why I like snow!

RADIO ANNOUNCER: And now we bring you something from the Old Country: Grandfather, in one of his gnomish moods.

GRANDFATHER: *Eat ven you eat. Sleep ven you sleep. Speak ven you speak.*

VOICE 3: We know all about snow now, don't we? Nearly froze our arses in the Himalayas, gathering wolfsbane and photos of the Abominable Snowman. Woke at dawn to find the world turning white. Three brutal days under avalanche before we heard a copter whirring. (*Sound of helicopter.*) Pled with doctor not to amputate....

HYSTERIC: *Please don't amputate!*

VOICE 2: And now? (*Stuck record effect.*) House and hearth, house and hearth, house and hearth....

RADIO ANNOUNCER: And now we bring you... something from the Old Country: Grandmother, being... so *grandmotherly*.

GRANDMOTHER (*babbling to infant*): And you'll learn how to do things with snow. Clever things. You'll build igloos... snowmen. Ski down the big hill and break your leg....

Sound of infant crying. Brief silence, followed by sleigh bells.

GRANDFATHER (*with enormous finality*): SHOVEL!

ALL THREE VOICES IN CHORUS: What did he say?

GRANDFATHER: It stop snowing, Greta. I go shovel.

GRANDMOTHER: Bundle up, Joseph. Your galoshes are in the foyer. Don't forget your scarf. And don't go shoveling the whole neighborhood. Just us and the Schertzingers. They're the only ones who appreciate it.

VOICE 3 (*sarcastically*): Great appreciators, the Schertzingers.

Sleigh bells. Then aggressive sound of shovel scraping pavement.

VOICE 1: Snow falls. It pleases you. You scrape it away. So simple. So right.

VOICE 3: I love a nice clean path. The kind Grandfather used to make. God, that man could shovel!

Shovel sound fades.

VOICE 1 (*excited*): I see him, too, fighting his way into his red mackinaw—buckling his feet into galoshes so bald they no longer leave pimples in the snow. Winter mornings I'd watch him dress—beginning with his woolen long johns and ending with a tarnished gold timepiece, chained to a buttonhole and dropped into a vest pocket. He reminded me of a wonderful old machine—a Baldwin Locomotive or Stanley Steamer—that had managed to elude whatever powers be that seek out wonderful old machines and slap them into museums. Grandfather defied those powers and went right on running—fueling himself, not on coal or kerosene, but on... Liberty tobacco! (*Pause.*) I can still see the wrapper. (*Slowly working it out in his mind's eye.*) A silver lady... head riddled with yellow spikes... a torch in her right hand... cast on a navy blue background riddled with white stars. It was the Liberty tobacco that kept him running!

VOICE 2 (*trying to cheer him up*): You dressed him... with a great deal of flair. Few walking the earth could have done it so well. (*Pause.*) Now it's time for me to open the back door and bring him out onto the snowbound porch. The wind is up and bristling with ice crystals. Grandfather raises his shovel and clears the porch. Then, after sprinkling the steps with rock salt, he strikes out along the shalestone garden path that leads past the incinerator to a broken-down chicken coop—where Tippy, the solitary black game hen, waits to be fed, her egg for the day half frozen in a clump of dung and straw.

VOICE 1: Across the way the Palmblads have already shoveled out. And Blinker, the dog, chained as always to their clothesline, comes out of his kennel and runs up and down the yard, trying to bark Grandfather to death.

Shovel sound stops. Blinker can be heard barking in the distance.

VOICE 1: And Grandfather—barked free from dreams of Francis Joseph’s cavalry—let his shovel rest in the first snow of 1948 and muttered what he’d thought a thousand times before...

GRANDFATHER: Crazy dog! *Bark ven you bark.* Let dog be in house. Or don’t have dog at all!

Blinker stops barking. Shovel sound resumes.

VOICE 1: Then he picked up his shovel and went back to Austro-Hungary, where he cleaned the dung out of the Kaiser’s stable—a job which the Kaiser told him had to be done, and which he performed with zest.

VOICE 2: So the gallant machine ran on, leaving a trail of tobacco stains in the otherwise virginal snow. And the slush piled up to left and right as Grandfather drove his shovel down the middle of the yard.

Shovel sound fades. Brief silence, then sleigh bells emerge. Their sound is metallic and sinister.

VOICE 1: The sleigh bells scare me. I hear them jingle and I want to die.

VOICE 2 (*thoughtfully*): Still, the sleigh bells are not malicious. I’m certain of that. In and of themselves, the sleigh bells are not malicious.

Sleigh bells. Very malicious.

VOICE 3 (*qualifying*): But the sleigh bells bring other sounds. A shovel scraping the pavement. Cerberus barking in the snow....

We hear a women moaning softly.

VOICE 1 (sadly): *Marilyn.*

VOICE 3: Would it were Andrea, Maxine, or Shirley.

Moaning again, louder.

VOICE 2 (*grimly*): No two snowflakes alike. It’s Marilyn.

VOICE 1: We’re back in the house. Earlier in the day. Grandmother’s sitting in the kitchen, cracking walnuts to go into her Christmas cookies and listening to...

VOICE 3: “The Romance of Helen Trent.”

RADIO ANNOUNCER: Can a woman over thirty-five still find happiness with the man she loves?

VOICE 2 (*dryly*): Grandmother, who is almost seventy, has her doubts.

VOICE 3: Grandfather, intimidated by the intricacies of Miss Trent’s love-life has taken refuge in the cellar. Kevin, his four year old grandson, is with him. Christmas is just a week away. Grandfather is at his workbench, putting the finishing touches on a wooden manger.

VOICE 1: Yesterday he put straw in the stable and fixed a silver star above its roof.

VOICE 3: The Wise Men, the Virgin, Saint Joseph, and a goat are ceramic pieces from Woolworth’s.

VOICE 2: His daughter Marilyn works in giftware and bought them at a discount. The Wise Men—bearded, dignified, and offering the obligatory gifts—have been glazed and baked in attitudes of perpetual adoration.

VOICE 1: Mary—dressed in blue; babe in arms—is looking virginal.

VOICE 2: Saint Joseph stands at a distance from mother and child. His role, absurdly combining the superfluous with the essential, is almost impossible to define—but Woolworth’s has done its best.

VOICE 3 (*parenthetically*): He came out of the kiln in a lot of fifty, armed with an expression that looks more like a fart than a smile.

VOICE 1: The Little Lord Jesus is also from Woolworth’s. Grandmother was disappointed in him.

VOICE 3: She protested that he didn’t look like the Lord—that he could have been any infant.

VOICE 2: Grandfather found a way to distinguish him. He cut a strip of tin from a Crisco can; curled it into a nimbus; then wired it to the back of the Little Lord’s head.

VOICE 1: Now it can only be Jesus. I’d recognize him anywhere.

GRANDFATHER (*to KEVIN*): *Rest ven you rest. (Pause.)* Vee go up and show your Grandmother.

Sound of Kevin and Grandfather climbing stairs. A soft moaning is heard. It grows louder.

VOICE 2: Shhh!

VOICE 1 (*sadly*): Marilyn.

VOICE 3 (*grimly*): Let’s get on with it.

VOICE 2 (*protesting*): It’s an old wive’s tale—hardly worth telling.

VOICE 1 (*insistent*): But it’s *ours*.

VOICE 3 (*darkly*): So we tell it.

More moaning.

VOICE 1 (*sadly*): Marilyn.

VOICE 3: A disgrace to the family.

VOICE 2: Still, she *is* family.

VOICE 1: So they fix up a place in the attic.

VOICE 2: Besides, there’s the grandchild.

VOICE 3: Kevin.

VOICE 1: They’ve fixed it up nice.

VOICE 2: She has nothing to complain about.

VOICE 3 (*angrily*): She has more than she deserves.

VOICE 2: No one told her to run off and get married to a...

VOICE 3 (*naming family bête noire*): Protestant!

VOICE 1: They were married—in the courthouse.

VOICE 3 (*shuddering*): A civil ceremony.

VOICE 2: Their marriage was of this earth. It could not last.

VOICE 1: The Protestant made love to her sixty-seven times.

VOICE 2 (*marveling*): Sixty-seven times in twenty-eight days!

VOICE 3: Then, after he'd gotten her good and pregnant....

VOICE 2: *Enceinte*, as the Frenchies say....

VOICE 1: The Protestant heard the call of the wild.

VOICE 2: And drove off into the sunset.

Sound of Protestant driving off in his '43 Hudson.

ALL THREE VOICES IN CHORUS: End of Part One.

Brief silence.

VOICE 1: After Kevin was born, she got the job at Woolworth's.

VOICE 2: Selling knickknacks.

VOICE 3: Nine hours a day, six days a week.

VOICE 2: It's a job.

VOICE 1: The boys ask her out, now and then, but she has to turn them down.

VOICE 3 (*explaining*): She's still legally married.

VOICE 2: Big choice each night: the old folks or the attic.

VOICE 3: She manages to live without it for a while.

VOICE 2: Dreaming of the day when Frank will be legally dead.

VOICE 1: Then, one evening, she comes home from work, takes off her clothes, and draws her bath.

Sound of bath water.

VOICE 2: While the water's running, she goes to the mirror, takes a good look, and suddenly...

VOICE 3: Wises up.

VOICE 1: She's thirty-three years old. She still has nice flesh on her bones, and feels she should do more than just... let it rot.

VOICE 2: So she does more.

VOICE 3 (*ruefully*): Much more!

VOICE 2 (*aside*): We need to explain how she ended up in the attic.

VOICE 1: After Marilyn ran off with the Protestant, Grandmother decided to take in lodgers. The upstairs rooms have been let to three bachelors, all employed at the local steel mill.

VOICE 2 (*with great pride*): And *Catholic*—every one of them!

VOICE 1: There's Mister Cavanaugh....

Soft knocking at Cavanaugh's door.

MR. CAVANAUGH (*irritably*): Who's there?

MARILYN (*sexy whisper, for him alone*): It's Marilyn.

VOICE 2: Mister Thompson...

Soft knocking at Thompson's door.

MR. THOMPSON (*cheerfully*): Who is it?

MARILYN (*sexy whisper, for him alone*): It's Marilyn.

VOICE 3: And Mister Reedy...

Soft knocking at Reedy's door.

MR. REEDY (*sleepily*): Is someone there?

MARILYN (*sexy whisper, for him alone*): Just Marilyn.

VOICE 2: One of whom is responsible for what she is now laboring to expel.

Moaning again, softer.

VOICE 1: She decided against confronting Cavanaugh. He had only made love to her once and had cried terribly afterwards. She didn't want to cause him additional grief.

VOICE 2: (It was rumored that he had a weak heart.)

VOICE 3: Mr. Thompson was deeply apologetic, convinced as he was that he was to blame. In the future he would plot her menstrual cycle on his wall calendar, marking X's beside "the bad days"—and if that didn't work he would make the supreme sacrifice and take to wearing lambskin condoms. For the present he recommended an old woman who had done a remarkable job on his "sister." They called this woman "The Scraper."

VOICE 1: Marilyn closed her eyes and envisioned a toothless crone, poking around between her legs

like a ragpicker at a garbage dump. She thanked Mr. Thompson for his concern.

VOICE 3: Mr. Reedy's approach was less orthodox, and more to her liking. He left the house early that Sunday with an empty cider jug. When he returned it was filled to the brim with a sickly green solution he called "Mama's Helper." It was, he said, very popular with your better sort of prostitute. The jug contained enough solution to help a dozen mamas.

VOICE 1: Splendid stuff!

VOICE 2: Marilyn knew Reedy too well to demand a scientific explanation. Besides, Mama's Helper had been highly recommended by no less a personage than Reedy's "cousin"— Miss Mary McCormack of Boston. Reedy described the effect that the solution had on Miss McCormack in vivid detail, and with a great deal of subtle humor.

VOICE 1: When he was finished, Marilyn retreated to the attic and had a good cry.

VOICE 2: In the end, the Helper was there. What harm in trying? If it didn't work, she would still have Thompson in the wings with "The Scraper."

VOICE 3: Which brings us to Part Three. To Grandfather in the snow.

ALL THREE VOICES IN CHORUS: To sleigh bells.

Sleigh bells, perfunctory, as if animate and responding to cue.

VOICE 1: Monday morning, seven a.m. Marilyn brings Kevin downstairs as usual. Explains to her mother that she has a cold and is going to spend the day in bed. Yes, she has phoned Woolworth's. No, she won't be coming down for lunch.

VOICE 2: At seven-thirty, Reedy knocks on the attic door. He makes love to her in his work clothes, leaving the design of his belt buckle tattooed on her belly.

VOICE 3: Wild Bill Hickok, busting a bronco.

VOICE 2: When it's over, Marilyn pours her first cup of Mama's Helper. It tastes like piss, and Reedy has to force her to drink a second, a third, a fourth cupful.

VOICE 1: Now she really is sick to her stomach.

VOICE 2: Reedy helps her into bed; assures her that all will be well; then leaves for work.

VOICE 3: For a long time, nothing but nausea.

VOICE 1: Then, a little before ten, Mama's Helper starts to have its famous effect.

VOICE 3: Reedy has promised excruciating pain. She is not disappointed.

VOICE 1: It's really bad.

VOICE 2: Worse than her appendicitis.

VOICE 3: Worse than when she had Kevin.

VOICE 1: She has all she can do to keep from screaming and giving the show away.

We hear her moans.

VOICE 2: Ten thirty. The pain intensifies.

VOICE 3: She pulls her head under the covers to stifle her cries and is swept out to a thick green sea.

We hear her cries, muffled by a stormy sea.

VOICE 1 (*shouting to be heard above surf*): Nothing to do but thrash about—fighting icy waves that bring her gasping to the beach, then quickly wash her out to sea again.

VOICE 2: Then, just when she feels she can bear no more, the rhythm changes. The waters gather into one huge wave and she is hurled towards the beach with tidal force.

Sound of breaker. Crash and subside.

VOICE 3: She falls back upon the mattress gasping—then making a joyful noise.

MARILYN (*almost hysterical with relief*): Oh God, thank you! thank you! Oh, Christ, thank you! thank you! Oh, Mary, thank you! thank you!

VOICE 1: Blood and water trickle down her legs.

VOICE 2: She lies quite still for a few minutes, while she gathers the strength to look.

Brief silence.

VOICE 1: Then, after all that pain...

VOICE 3: Conniving and writhing to hurl it from her...

VOICE 2: There it lies at last...

VOICE 3: Splatter of pink impudence on the clean white sheet...

VOICE 1: Salty, raw, obscene...

VOICE 2: Like a skinned salmon....

VOICE 3: All that effort to hurl it from her.

VOICE 1: Still there.

VOICE 2: Prehistoric head and rib cage. Vestigial limbs, no bigger than a prawn's.

VOICE 3: Smooth black eyes, like tiny pools of oil. Will not see and will not be blind.

VOICE 2: She was expecting nothing more than a piece of bloody tissue. She would pick it up with a pair of tweezers and keep it in a shoebox till her strength returned. Then she would wrap it in a handkerchief, carry it downstairs, and flush it down the toilet.

Sound of toilet flushing.

VOICE 1: Later, she would burn the hankie. And that would be that.

Sound of someone slapping hands together, as if finished with a chore.

VOICE 2: She had thought of everything but those dark, fleering eyes—and now she is overcome by an urge to hurl the thing farther.

VOICE 2: She doesn't want to *flush*, she wants to *hurl*.

VOICE 3: So she drags herself across the room...

VOICE 1: Raises herself on hands and knees...

VOICE 3: Musters all her strength... opens the sash...

VOICE 2: And throws it out the window.

VOICE 3: Gardez l'eau!

VOICE 2: Look out below!

VOICE 1 (*shocked by their levity*): Gentlemen!

Short silence as they regain composure.

VOICE 1: Outside, it's been coming down for hours. The yard lies deep in snow.

VOICE 2: She stares into the whitened yard and thinks she's seen the last of it.

VOICE 3: Then—out by the incinerator—her eyes pick up a splotch of red.

Marilyn gasps and utters distraught sounds.

VOICE 1: Marilyn! Marilyn! A little snow will blot it out.

VOICE 2: She kneels at the window, as snow keeps falling, until her eyes see nothing but white.

VOICE 3: Her trembling subsides.

VOICE 1: She has hurled the thing from her and is free of it at last.

VOICE 2: She drags herself back to bed, pulls the covers up under her chin, and dozes off.

VOICE 3: She sleeps peacefully for an hour or so. Then there comes a sound. A nightmare sound from the waking world below.

Sound of Grandfather's shovel—so far away that it could be mistaken for a file or emery board.

VOICE 1: It whispers something about the snow.

VOICE 2: It calls her "Mother" and will not go away.

VOICE 3: Then, suddenly—the sound is gone.

VOICE 1: She turns her pillow, finds the cold spot, and falls asleep again.

Sound of Grandfather's shovel at full volume.

VOICE 2 (*deadly*): He's almost there.

VOICE 3: Two or three more shovelfuls.

Shovel takes three or four more scrapes, then stops.

VOICE 1 (*deadly*): He's there.

VOICE 2 (*comic relief*): We can all go in now; soak our feet in Epsom Salts, then start a god-damn pillow fight and slide down the bannister.

VOICE 3 (*ignoring him*): He's bending over, groping around in the snow.

VOICE 1 (*fascinated*): He's picking it up. He's holding it in his hands.

VOICE 2: It's frozen stiff. He's brushing off the ice crystals.

VOICE 3: And, slowly, although he has never seen this thing before, he comes to understand what he is cradling in his fingers.

VOICE 1: He turns and looks up at the attic window, where icicles hang from the sill.

VOICE 2: For the first time in his life no aphorism suggests itself.

VOICE 3: Just one word.

GRANDFATHER (*bitterly*): *Whore.*

VOICE 1: But the word is not enough. So he parks his shovel in the snow and clomps back up the freshly-shoveled walk.

Voices tumbling, one after another.

VOICE 1: HIERONIMO'S MAD AGAIN!

VOICE 2: TITUS IS MAD AGAIN!

VOICE 3: ORESTES IS MAD AGAIN!

Voices subside to silence, as if the play were over. Then sleigh bells emerge, bristling. They have never been so malicious.

VOICE 1 (*calling to the bells, pettishly*): Our story's finished!

Sleigh bells suggest otherwise.

VOICE 2 (*whispering*): Pretend you don't hear them! Maybe they'll go away.

Sleigh bells, louder.

VOICE 3 (*exploding*): Shut up, you villains! Can't you tell when a story's finished?

Sleigh bells, ultra-loud, belligerent—as if ordering them to continue or suffer the consequences.

VOICE 1 (*wavering*): I enjoy being a hero—the medals, the parades—but we’re three on a sled and unarmed.

Sleigh bells give a friendly shake, as if to coax them on.

VOICE 3 (*giving in with a vengeance*): Then it’s “Mush!” you god-damn huskies, and on to the arctic circle!

Sounds of dogsled getting under way. Jingling of bells, cracking of whips, cries of “Mush!” and “Heigh-Ya!”—accompanied throughout by the sound of barking dogs.

VOICE 1: Grandfather clomps up the back steps into the foyer. He stamps the snow off his galoshes, then opens the kitchen door.

VOICE 3: Kevin is playing with his jack-in-the-box near Grandfather’s work table. He can tell the old man is angry and scoots under the table, unseen.

VOICE 2: Grandfather comes clomping into the kitchen and goes to the table. He stares at the nativity scene, placed there on a newspaper to dry.

VOICE 3: He puts something down beside it.

VOICE 1: He clomps back to the foyer, kicks off his galoshes, and fights his way out of his mackinaw.

VOICE 2: While Grandfather is busy, Kevin crawls out from under the table, eager to discover what is irking the old man so.

VOICE 3: Standing on tiptoe, the boy peers over the tabletop; he can see something there by the newspaper.

VOICE 1: He throws his arm over the tabletop and strains to reach it.

VOICE 2: His fingertips touch something cold and squishy. He stretches his arm an extra half inch and starts pulling the something towards him.

VOICE 3: Grandfather comes clomping out of the foyer and plucks the mystery out of the boy’s hand.

VOICE 1: But not before he’s seen something he’ll never fully remember or wholly forget.

GRANDFATHER (*angrily*): *Play ven you play. Go!*—to your Grandmother!

VOICE 2: The boy runs off to the living room.

VOICE 3: Grandmother comes into the kitchen to see what’s going on. Grandfather tries to stop her, but she gets to the table before him.

VOICE 1: She stares at the cause of the commotion.

GRANDFATHER (*exploding*): Our flesh! Our blood!

They argue in German.

VOICE 3 (*translating*): Grandmother has seen this thing before in the Old Country and has definite ideas as to what should be done with it.

VOICE 1: She goes to the pantry and gets the butler's helper.

VOICE 2: Grandfather has a different idea. He plants himself firmly in her path.

GRANDFATHER: *Clean ven you clean!*

VOICE 3: She tries in vain to get to the table.

GRANDFATHER (*violently*): CLEAN ven you CLEAN!

VOICE 1: Grandmother retreats to the living room where she finds her grandson in tears. She gathers the child in her arms and comforts him on the sofa.

VOICE 2: Back in the kitchen, an old man stares at the nativity scene.

VOICE 1: Mary, Joseph, the Magi, God...

VOICE 2: Lie before him like the pieces of a puzzle.

VOICE 3: A hideous solution comes prancing through his head.

VOICE 1: He pulls his chair close to the table.

VOICE 2: Seizes the nativity and goes to work.

VOICE 3: Is it Man or Satan, rifling God's manger?

VOICE 1: Removing Lord Jesus and putting a changeling in its place.

VOICE 2: Too large for the crib, its flesh spills over the sides.

VOICE 3: The Wise Men look on undisturbed. Proffer their gifts and adore.

VOICE 1: Mary continues to look virginal.

VOICE 2: Joseph alone understands. His expression bristles with new meaning.

VOICE 3: A dark star is riding over Bethlehem. Grandfather picks up his handiwork and goes through the hall to the staircase.

VOICE 1: Grandmother comes forth to plead with him.

GRANDMOTHER: Joseph! Where are you going?

GRANDFATHER (*swatting a fly*): Upstairs!

VOICE 2: He puts his free hand on the bannister and starts up.

GRANDMOTHER (*pleading*): Joseph! Let be!

GRANDFATHER (*angrily*): *Speak ven you speak!*

VOICE 3: He climbs the stairs to the second floor, pausing on the landing to catch his breath; then goes up the remaining steps and stands by the attic door.

VOICE 1: He takes a last look at his handiwork. Then stoops and lays it on the floor with the unholy family turned towards his daughter's door.

VOICE 2: He stands up and knocks softly.

Sound of him knocking.

VOICE 3: No answer.

VOICE 1: He knocks louder.

Louder.

VOICE 2: Much louder.

Noisy, surreal knocking with "Holloas" as per the porter scene in Macbeth.

MARILYN (*startled awake*): Who is it? (*Silence.*) Is somebody there?

VOICE 1: He knocks once more to be sure she will come; then goes quietly down the stairs and sits on the landing.

VOICE 3: An aphorism finally suggests itself.

GRANDFATHER (*muttering*): *Fuck ven you fuck!*

VOICE 2: Marilyn throws the covers off and sits up in bed.

MARILYN (*frightened*): Mother? Is that you?

VOICE 2: No answer.

VOICE 3: She glances at the clock. One-thirty.

VOICE 1: Kevin wouldn't knock. It's too early for Reedy.

VOICE 2: She puts on her bathrobe and goes to the door.

MARILYN (*unnerved*): Is someone there?

VOICE 3: *Silence.*

VOICE 1: She shivers and turns the latch.

Click of latch.

VOICE 2: She tightens the sash on her bathrobe and opens the door.

Sound of door creaking open.

VOICE 3: Nobody there.

VOICE 1: She looks down at her feet—sees the crèche.

Marilyn gasps.

VOICE 2: She drops to her knees in a frenzy and stares at the Christ Child's face.

Marilyn screams hysterically, again and again. At first her screams are those of a woman gone berserk; but as they continue they diminish in volume and become increasingly surreal—until they are cries in the mind of a dreamer, dissolving the substance of his dream.

ESTHER (*loud whisper*): Kevin! Kevin! You're having a nightmare.

KEVIN (*groaning as he wakes up*): Esther. What time is it?

ESTHER: Six-thirty. But it's snowing outside. I thought I'd better get you up early.

KEVIN: Snowing. Hard?

MARILYN: Over a foot. It's supposed to go on till noon.

KEVIN: Is coffee on?

MARILYN: I brought it in for you. It's on the night table.

KEVIN: Thanks.

Sound of him stirring his coffee.

ESTHER: You were having a nightmare. I've never seen you toss about so.

KEVIN: I can't remember. Something about my Grandfather. (*Pause.*) Something to do with Christmas. I remember a star and a manger. (*Concentrating.*) I was sitting on the floor by the kitchen table, playing with a jack-in-the-box. Sitting on the floor in my grandparents' house, long, long ago. (*Yawning and losing it.*) I'd better get around.

ESTHER: What's on the schedule today?

KEVIN: Three procedures. One in the morning, two in the afternoon. Not likely I'll be back before six.

ESTHER: You're getting to be quite the specialist.

KEVIN: It's a bawdy planet, Esther. A raffish, riggish comedy of errors in which I play a small part. (*Amused.*) Do you know what the nurses call me? *The Scrapper*. I overheard them last week as I was getting off the elevator. "Here comes *The Scrapper*."

ESTHER (*thoughtfully*): You're so casual about it. So... surgical. I know you don't want children, and how careful we've always been; but—*theoretically*—I wonder how you'd feel if *we* slipped up, and *I* was the one who was pregnant. If it was *your* wife and *your* child....

KEVIN (*with affected gusto*): You're talking to *The Scrapper*, Esther. The first doctor in the county to

perform a legal abortion! Don't you remember? The blue ribbon ceremony? You baked a cherry pie.

ESTHER (*ignoring his jest*): There are plenty of doctors who perform abortions, then go home to a houseful of kids. Look at Hinzencamp. He has three. And a fourth on the way.

KEVIN: There's more than theory here, Esther. You're trying to bring up something we settled long ago.

ESTHER (*pointedly*): If I were pregnant you'd have no special feeling for your own flesh and blood?

KEVIN (*with calculated bravado*): I'd have you on the table in twenty minutes—swabbed with alcohol, shaved like a lamb, and ready for the curette.

ESTHER (*frustrated*): It's not a joking matter.

KEVIN: Who's joking? You're looking at the medical version of the Thane of Cawdor—a man wading overshoes in “the blood of the unborn.” (*Pause.*) Every day another woman lies down upon the table. I put on my gloves and begin. It's noble work. There are scores of reasons for not bringing yet another child into the world. I've seen them all. (*Pause.*) That day I asked you to marry me, and told you I didn't want children... do you remember what I said?

ESTHER (*engraved upon her memory*): You said that your mother ended up in an insane asylum because she never wanted you. And that if it were possible—we were reading H.G. Wells at the time—you would travel back in the time machine and preside at your own abortion. There was something almost heroic in that notion—and the vehemence with which you expressed it. (*Sacramental emphasis.*) And I told you I didn't want children either, and you asked me to be your wife. (*Pause.*) It was wrong of me to bring it up. (*Changing subject.*) It's almost seven. The ladies are waiting.

Sound of Kevin getting out of bed and raising blinds.

KEVIN: Hey, it *is* snowing! Come here, Esther. Looks like a god-damned lithograph by Currier & Ives.

ESTHER: Look at the *jay*—over there, on the clothesline. He doesn't know what to make of it.

KEVIN: I've always liked snow. (*Pause.*) Soon the plows will be out, piling it into banks. It'd be nice to run out and play in it a spell—while it's still untouched. (*Moving away from window.*) Promises to keep, as the poet says.

Kevin starts getting ready for work. We hear his electric razor. While it is on he and Esther must raise their voices in order to hear each other.

KEVIN: The girl this morning is fifteen years old. She was raped on the way home from a basketball game.

ESTHER: And this afternoon?

KEVIN: The fecund Mrs. Anderson. Uses every precaution available—pill, jelly, IUD. Nothing seems to work. This one'll be her fourth.

ESTHER: How nice. Go on.

KEVIN: On?

ESTHER: The third one. You said you had one this morning and *two* this afternoon.

Kevin shuts off his electric razor and moves closer to Esther.

KEVIN: Oh. That one. She's Hinzencamp's patient, but he's at a conference in Bermuda. I haven't even seen her file. Normally I like to meet my girls before the procedure. If there are psychological problems sometimes we can straighten them out. Sometimes I advise against aborting. I do that, you know, when I can tell that they really want the baby and their hang-ups can be resolved. (*At her side now.*) Esther, is something wrong? The expression on your face is—strange.

ESTHER (*very subdued*): Nothing's wrong. I was staring at the snow. I must have lost track of what you were saying.

KEVIN (*fondly*): I could sit here and watch it come down all day.

Silence for a few seconds while they look out the window. Then we hear a gentle, tinkling noise, not unlike that of sleigh bells.

KEVIN (*startled*): What's that sound.

ESTHER (*puzzled*): Sound?

KEVIN: Shhh! There it is again.

ESTHER (*laughing*): Oh, it's just the wind chimes. Over there by the trellis. I put them up yesterday. They go so well with the snow.

KEVIN: They sounded like... (*shuddering*) some other sound. (*Pause.*) There's a foot of snow in the driveway. I'd best shovel out and head on down to the clinic. (*Pause.*) See you later, Esther.

ESTHER: Be careful, Kevin.

Sound of goodbye kiss; then Kevin, closing door.

ESTHER (*to herself*): You're not a bad man in your funny, wounded way. (*Bitter laugh.*) He'd do it all right. This afternoon. If I gave him the chance. He would. He'd pull the sheet up under my chin and turn my face to the wall. He'd strap my feet into the stirrups. He'd come towards me with a gentle smile, lowering his curette. Easy, girl; this isn't going to hurt. Then he'd pull back the petals, cry "You egg!"—and scrape his own child from my womb. The man is a god-damned hero! He would! He would!

Silence for several seconds.

Wind chimes emerge, tinkling.

We hear Kevin's shovel, loud at first, then fading into silence as he moves down the driveway.

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