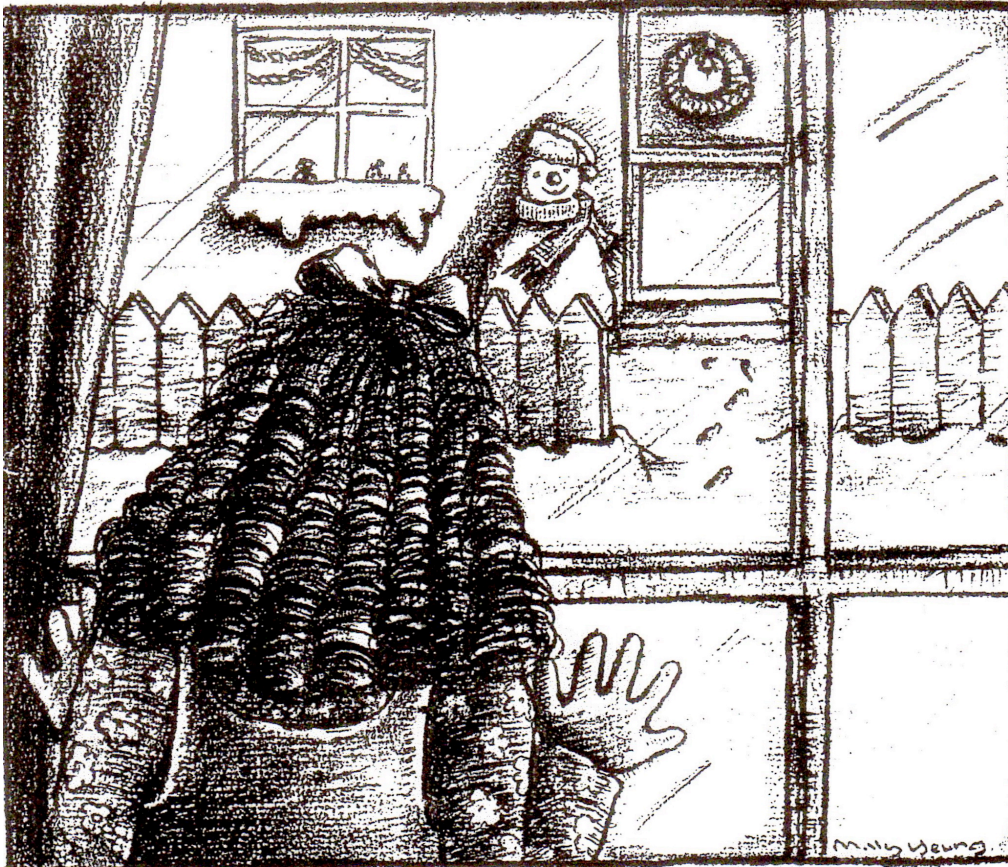


*SLEIGHBELLS IN THE
SNOW*



Trevor Hughes

It was snowing again now, the wind gusting across the fields and piling drifts of snow against the side of the house. Inside Claire played with her doll and her wooden doll's house while her baby brother gurgled happily in his pram.

The garden was deep with snow and a cheerful snowman peered out across the dead countryside. It was three days before Christmas but you would not have known this from the house, for inside there were no decorations, no Christmas tree.

"She is just six years old John," said her mother to the man who sat beside her in front of the blazing log fire. "I know your views but surely you are taking them too far now. Maybe before when she was too young to appreciate what was happening but now she's at school and all her friends are so excited with their parties and their presents and Christmas. She must feel dreadfully alone."

"How can she be alone dear? She has us." He smiled and took his wife's hand.

"That's not what I mean as you well know," she replied.

"Look darling, she has everything a young girl could want. She is well fed, has a wonderful home, toys, parents who love her, a baby brother and she will grow up without this superstitious mumbo jumbo that is called Christmas. Look at what Christmas is. It's supposed to be a celebration of the birth of Jesus Christ, but why?"

"Look at the role of religion through the ages. For almost a thousand years Christians and Muslims have senselessly murdered each other in the name of religion and today it's much worse. Religion is responsible for Osama Bin Laden

and Afghanistan and the Twin Towers; the eternal enmity between east and west, between Muslims and Christians. Through the centuries the church has enslaved the ignorant masses by ritual and the fear of eternal damnation, poor peasants paying out money they didn't have and praying for miracles that would never happen. Are we meant to celebrate the beginning of all this?"

"Yes, and religion is also responsible for Canterbury Cathedral and Mother Teresa and the faith of thousands of ordinary people that their lives are not just wasted and irrelevant. Just because people buy Christmas trees and gifts it doesn't mean they endorse bigotry and hatred. Christmas is a part of childhood and by denying it we deny our daughter a part of those things a child should have."

"Yes I know that darling, but it also means that we are perpetuating the myth that there is some benevolent super being up there somewhere and that when we die, as we all surely will, we will go to some wonderland in the sky. Do you really want Claire to reach adulthood believing in this medieval fairy story?"

"Yes, and to some it isn't a fairy story. It's an absolute truth, an integral and desperately important part of their lives."

There was silence, broken only by the sighing of the winter wind and the soft tinkling of the wind-bells on the verandah. They were made of porcelain; a gift from overseas and they played a soft, sad song in the cold afternoon.

Emily looked wearily at her husband. He was such a good man, so kind and loving. Why could he not bend just a little for her, on this?

That night Claire lay in her bed. The wind moaned fitfully outside her window. She listened to the tinkling of the wind-bells and soon she slept.

The next morning it was colder still, the horizon black and heavy with the coming storm.

“Shall we go into town?” asked Emily.

Her husband looked through the window at the dark angry sky and the flurries of snow. “I think this is a day when all sane people should lock their doors and stay at home,” he replied.

She nodded and he threw open the front door, staggered momentarily against the howling gale and went outside to close the shutters and secure the family home against the storm. She looked into the fire and was full of apprehension for the coming of Christmas Day and what he would say.

The storm raged through the day and into the night, the wind shrieking and howling, but Christmas Eve dawned cold and clear with a pale blue sky and a wintry sun glinting off the frozen river, lighting the trees as they stood sentinel-like, white and ghostly, their branches heavy with snow.

They played Happy Families and watched television, but only those programmes with no connection to Christmas while the baby lay on his blanket, sleeping. That night after Claire had been put; unprotesting to bed her parents stole softly into her room.

“Why are you not sleeping?” her mother asked.

“It’s Christmas Eve and I am listening,” she replied.

“For what are you listening?”

Claire smiled. “For Santa’s sleigh bells in the snow.”

Her Father put his large, kind hand on her arm. “Don’t be silly darling. There are no such things. Sleep now.”

Later Emily tried again.

“John, I know you think it’s all superstition and nonsense but surely she should be allowed to make up her own mind. Not now of course, but later, when she is grown, and how can she make a decision on something which has been kept completely from her?”

“Do you really think anyone needs to make an objective decision on an old bearded man who lives at the North Pole carrying sacks of toys down chimneys? And do you think that we are doing some good for our children by having them watch for lights in the sky and celestial sledges rolling past playing *Jingle Bells* in the night?”

“No, but that’s what she’s doing now despite everything you say. Yes, you are so undeniably reasonable and rational, but childhood should be full of wonder; full of goblins and fairies and witches and mysteries and Santa Claus and his reindeers flying through the night. When she is grown you can tell her that it’s all make-believe and nonsense but now she is six years old and unhappy, lying there awake listening for the sound of Santa’s sleigh bells and all your adult logic will not change that.”

“Whether you are six or sixty nonsense is still nonsense. Show me a miracle, then maybe I’ll believe,” he replied with a hint of anger in his voice.

She wondered how angry he would be when he knew what she had done.

Later, Emily lay in bed listening to the sound of the wind-bells in the dark night. She knew that beside her John lay unsleeping.

“Are you awake still?” she asked.

“Yes.”

“I think we have another storm coming,” she said. “The wind-bells are so loud tonight.”

Suddenly he threw back the bedclothes and climbed from the bed and her heart stuck in her throat. "Where are you going," she asked, nervously.

"Oh, just something I wanted to check."

He strode from the room and when he returned he was clutching the present she had bought for Claire, which she had wrapped in Christmas paper and placed on the hearth.

"Did you buy this?"

She nodded dumbly. "Please don't be angry John. She is so small and so unhappy. Please let her have it."

John smiled. "Very well," he said.

She looked at him, stunned as he climbed into bed, turned out the light.

"But I don't understand, I thought you would be furiously angry. I was so afraid." She took his hand in the night. "Why have you changed your mind?"

"When the storms come," he said, "what do I do?"

"Well you bring down the storm shutters, make sure the plants are secure on the balcony, put the chairs into the shed, take down the wind-bells so they don't get broken."

"Yes," he said. "I always take down the wind bells as I did before yesterday's storm, but today it was so cold and the fire was so warm that I forgot to put them back up again."

"But tonight," she said, "they were so loud. If they were not the wind-bells then what did we hear?"

"Oh that I don't know," he replied, and she could see his white teeth smiling in the darkness.