

Vexed to Nightmare by a Rocking Cradle

by Dan Simmons

Introduction

This is another story about televangelists.

Wait! Before you close the book or decide that my only form of recreation is harpooning this particular brand of helpless sea slug, let me explain.

Some time back, the award-winning writer Edward Bryant approached me about a project. It seems that a Colorado-based publication wanted four short-shorts for their Christmas edition. The publication was ... you see it was a ... well, it was a comic book catalogue. But a *good* comic book catalogue. Actually, it was much more than that, since it carried a book review column by Ed and a fine film-review section by the discerning critic Leanne C. Harper.

Anyway, four of us would do these Christmas short-shorts and Ed would write the framing tale. (A difficult task at the best of times.) There were no restrictions—except for length—and the fact that the story had to be about Christmas and had to include an "overlooked present." The other writers were all members of the Colorado Mafia—Steve Rasnic Tern, Connie Willis, and Cynthia Felice. Cynthia had already suggested that her tale would be "upbeat," so the rest of us were allowed to return to our crypts and release whatever demons waited there.

The results, as one would expect, included a typically brilliant, subtle, and haunting piece by Willis, a powerful and seriously disturbing story in Steve Tern's inimitable style, my own offering reprinted here, and a clever framing tale by Ed Bryant that somehow managed to tie these disparate efforts together. But Cynthia Felice had to bow out due to other pressing demands, and the result was a trio of tales so unrelievably dark that the reader would probably ask Santa for a razor blade or cyanide capsule that year.

The distant publisher of this comic book catalogue was said to have suffered instant seizure upon reading the first fiction to grace his pages, began spinning and bouncing off walls like a Linda Blair doll, and reportedly didn't re-pond to Thorazine until well after New Year's.

The truth is, I'd indulged myself in the story to the point of including a few in-jokes, one at the expense of my book publisher and another gently poking an editor I actually thought very highly of. *What the heck*, I thought, *who's gonna read a comic catalogue?*

It seems everybody did. And if that wasn't enough, the trio of tales was soon sold to *Asimov's SF Magazine* where it served to darken the *next* Christmas for a host of people. And if *that* wasn't enough, Bryant had sent copies out as Christmas gifts to

everyone he knew—which just happens to be everyone in the publishing industry and probably everyone in Known Space.

It wasn't long before I had the reputation as The Man Who Sacrificed Christmas with a Survival Knife. Compared to Simmons, the Grinch and Scrooge were Santa's helpful elves.

It doesn't help that I assure everyone who will listen that Christmas is my second-favorite holiday (after Hal-loween, of course), or that every Christmas Eve my wife Karen and I accompany our small daughter up to a nearby snow-covered hillside to watch for Santa's sleigh, or that I once played Billy the Orphan who was really the dis-guised Christ Child in our fifth-grade operetta, or that...

No, I didn't think it would help.

Meanwhile, ponder this: when the Big Mistake finally happens and some computer pushes its own button, un-corking the Ultimate Detergent and putting us all through the Rinse and Burn cycle, when the accumulated weap-onry of forty years of stockpiling gets launched just to scratch someone's itch to see if it will work, when the mushroom clouds have withered and the nuclear winter has grayed to nuclear spring ... well, ask yourself: Self, what institution in the U.S. of A. has the infrastructure to withstand such a boot in the anthill? Who has the relay satellites already warmed up and plugged into our homes and communities, just waiting to carry the Leader's voice whispering in the nuclear night? Who has the followers in the millions ... followers who already show the precise blend of fanaticism, obedience, and joyous aggression necessary to carry on with the Program while the rest of us are digging Uncle Charlie out of the rubble?

Got the answer yet?

Move over, Walter F. Miller.

Oh, yes—one final footnote for future biographers and bibliographers: the more discerning among you may note that in this story and in *all* of my stories and novels that include money-grubbing, venial, dishonest and otherwise fake TV ministers, the center of their web is invariably Dothan, Alabama. Now some of you may ask, "What ter-rible trauma, what dark, unrecorded and possibly unprint-able incident occurred in Dothan, Alabama, to cast such an indelible blot on the escutcheon of this fine southern community?"

Well, you'll never hear the answer from me.

* * *

Brother Jimmy-Joe Billy-Bob brought the Word to the New Yorkers on the eve of Christmas Eve, paddling his long dugout canoe east up the Forty-second Street Conflu-ence and then north, against the tide, up Fifth Avenue, past the point where the roof of the Public Library glowed greenly under the surface of the darkening waters. It was a cold but peaceful evening. The sunset was red and beautiful—as all

sunsets had been for the two-and-a-half decades since the Big Mistake of '98—and cooking fires had been lit on the many tiers and tops of shattered towers rising from the dark sea like the burned-out cypress stumps Brother remembered from the swamps of his childhood.

Brother paddled carefully, aware of the difficulty of handling the long canoe and even more aware of the precious cargo he had brought so far through so much. Behind him, nestled across the thwarts like some great cooking pot, lay the Sacred Dish, it's God's Ear raised to the burning sky as if already poised to catch the emanations from the Holy Beamer that Brother Jimmy-Joe Billy-Bob had left in Dothan, Alabama, fourteen months earlier. Set behind the Sacred Dish, crated and cradled, was the Holy Tube, and behind it, wrapped in clear plastic, sat the Lord's Bike. The Coleman generator was set near the bow, partially blocking Brother's vision but balancing the weight of the cargo of sacred relics astern.

Brother Jimmy-Joe Billy-Bob paddled north past the trellised remnants of Rockefeller Center and the ragged spire of St. Patricks. There were dozens of occupied tow-ers in this section of Rimwall Bay, hundreds of fires twinkling on the vined and rusted ruins above him, but Brother ignored them and paddled purposefully northward to 666 Fifth Avenue.

The building still stood—at least thirty-five floors of it, twenty-eight still above the water line—and Brother let the long dugout drift near the base of it. He stood—balancing carefully and shifting the weight of the Heckler and Koch HK 91 Semi-Automatic Christian Survival Network Assault Rifle across his back—raising his arms high, hands empty. Shadowed figures looked down from gaps in dark glass. Somewhere a baby cried and was hushed.

"I bring you glad tidings of Christ's Resurrection!" shouted Brother Jimmy-Joe Billy-Bob. His voice echoed off water and steel. "Good News of your coming Salvation from tribulations and woe!"

There was a silence and then a voice called down. "Who do you seek?"

"I seek the eldest Clan. That with the strongest totem so that I may bring gifts and the Word of the Lord from the True Church of Christ Assuaged."

The echoes lasted several seconds and the silence longer. Then a woman's voice from higher up called, "That be our Red Bantam Clan. Be welcome, stranger, and know that we already have the word of God here. Join us. Share our fire and preparations for the Holy Day."

Brother Jimmy-Joe Billy-Bob nodded and moved the canoe in to tie up to a rusted girder. The Holy Spirit had not yet spoken to him. He did not know how the Way would be prepared. He did know that within forty-eight hours they would be ready to murder him or to worship him. He would allow neither.

All through the day of Christmas Eve they worked to raise the gift of the Sacred Dish to the rooftop. The stair-wells were too small and the elevator shafts too cluttered with rope ladders, pulleys, lift baskets, and vines. Brother supervised the arrangement of block and tackle to raise the Dish the two-hundred-fifty feet to the top of the building. The three flights of stairs above the occupied twenty-fifth floor were perilous even for the cliffdwellers of the Red Bantam Clan. Brother had insisted that they improve the way up the cluttered staircase. "We will be coming up here often once the Holy Beamer connects you with the Word," he said. "And so will be other Clans of the Rimwall Trading League. The way must be cleared so that the youngest and the eldest of these can easily make the climb."

Old McCarty, the wrinkled matriarch of the Red Bantam Clan, had shrugged and directed a group of women to carry out repairs in the stairwell while the men raised the Sacred Dish.

By the time the sunset streaked the heavens red, all was in place: the Sacred Dish was firmly affixed atop the highest section of rooftop, the God's Ear was aimed as carefully as Brother's skills and his rusty sextant would allow, the Formica altar was set in place below the Dish, and cables ran down to the Clan's Common Room on the twenty-fifth floor. The generator was in place there and the strongest Clan Hunters had been appointed to take turns on the Lord's Bike for the sunrise services.

Tara, the elf-faced five-year-old, tugged at Brother's coat as he was setting away his plastic buckets. "It's almost dark," she said. "Will you come with us to see the tree and open presents?"

"Yes," said Brother Jimmy-Joe Billy-Bob. He glanced at the red-dyed bantam tattoo on the back of the child's hand. "And I will give the sermon."

The room was very large, the walls were coated with soot from cooking fires, and the rotted carpets had been covered with rush mats. The seventeen members of the Red Bantam Clan gathered around the Holy Tube and the small aluminum Christmas tree near the hearth. Candles glowed. A child's paper star decorated the top of the tree. Brother looked at the small scattering of crudely wrapped presents under the tree and closed his eyes.

Old McCarty cleared her throat. The tiny bantam tattoo on her forehead glowed redly in the candlelight. "Beloved Clan," she said, "it is our custom to give thanks to God on this most sacred of nights, and then to open the presents that Santa has brought. But this year our Brother from the Dothan True Church has arrived..." She paused, swallowed as if tasting something bitter, and finished. "Who will now tell us of tomorrow's celebration and read from the Word of God."

Brother Jimmy-Joe Billy-Bob moved into the open area in front of the tree and set his HK 91 against the table, within easy reach. He took his worn CSN Bible from

his pack and set it on top of the Holy Tube. "Brothers and Sisters in Christ," he said. "Tomorrow morning, when the sun rises and the Way is purified, the Holy Beamer will cast its light into darkness, and once again you will hear the Word and become part of the True Church of Jesus Christ Assuaged. My trip here has not been an easy one. The Enemy was active. Five of my Brothers in Christ died so that I might arrive here." Brother stopped and looked at the faces in front of him. Old McCarty was frowning, the men were staring with interest or indifference, and many of the women and children were looking at him with an awe bordering on reverence.

"The time of Tribulations has come upon us and been long and heavy," Brother said at last. "But from this cho-sen place, the True Word—as spoken by Our Savior through the Eight Evangelists—will be heard again and will spread throughout the land." He paused again and looked at the faces lit by candlelight. Some of the children's gazes were drifting to the presents.

"Listen to what is written," Brother said and opened the Bible. "Revelation 13: 16, 17—'And he causes all, small and great, rich and poor, free and bond, to receive a MARK in their right hand, or in their foreheads: and that no man might buy or sell, save that he has the MARK, or the name of the beast, or the numbers of a man: and his number is six hundred, threescore and six.' "

There was a slight stirring in the crowd. Brother turned the page and read aloud again without once glancing down at the text. " 'Revelation 14:9-11,' " he said. " 'If any man worship the beast and his image, and receive his mark in his forehead, or in his hand, the same shall drink the wine of the wrath of God; and he shall be tormented with fire and brimstone in the presence of the holy angels, and in the presence of the Lamb: and the smoke of their torments ascendeth up for ever and ever: and they rest no day or night, who worship the beast and image, and whosoever receiveth the mark of his name.' "

Brother Jimmy-Joe Billy-Bob closed his eyes and smiled. "But I read to you also from John 3: 16, 17," he said. "I find no pleasure in the death of the wicked. Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and you shall be saved." Brother opened his eyes and said, "Amen."

"Amen," said Old McCarty. "Let's see what Santa brought us this year."

Conversation and laughter resumed. Tara cuddled next to Brother as the Clan gathered around the tree. "I'm afraid you won't have a present," said Tara. Tears filled her eyes. "Santa brought the presents on the second Sun-day of Advent. I guess he didn't know you were coming."

"It doesn't matter," said Brother. "The tree and presents are pagan customs. There is no Santa Claus."

The girl blinked but her nine-year-old brother Sean chimed in, "He's right, Tarie. Uncle Lou and the hunters get this stuff when they make the November voyage to the warehouse. They keep it hidden up on the twenty-seventh floor. 'I've *seen* it.' "

Tara blinked again and said in a small voice, "Santa brought me this doll that I just got. Sometimes he comes back on Christmas Eve to bring us canned fruit. Maybe he'll bring you something if he does. You can share my doll 'til then if you want."

Brother shook his head.

"Hey, look!" cried Sean. "There *is* an extra present."

He scrambled under the tree and came up with a blue-wrapped box. "I bet it's extra 'cause Uncle Henry died last month an' they forgot not to put it out."

Brother Jimmy-Joe Billy-Bob started to return the present to its place but the Holy Spirit spoke to him then and he began to tremble violently. A hush fell on the group and the Clan watched as Brother calmed himself, tore off the wrapping, lifted a leather sheath from the box, and exposed a long blade to the light.

"Wow!" breathed Sean. He grabbed a yellowed pamphlet from the box and read aloud. " 'Congratulations. You are now the proud owner of a Christian Survival Net-work LINAL M-20 Survival Knife. Each LINAL M-20 is a whopping twelve inches long and yet is so perfectly bal-anced that it cuts and thrusts like an ex ... exten ... *ex-tension* of your own hand. The LINAL M-20 blade is crafted entirely of 420 mo ... molecular stainless steel and is tough enough to split wood or shatter bone. In the pom ... pommel ... of your LINAL M-20 is a precision RX-360 Liquid Damped Compass. Unscrew the compass and you will find a complete Survival Network Kit includ-ing a packet of waterproof wrapped matches, half-a-dozen fishing hooks, sinkers, nylon test fishing line, a sewing needle kit, an 18-inch cable saw capable of cutting down a small tree, and, of course, a copy of the CSN Miniatur-ized Bible.' " The boy shook his head and exhaled. "Wow," he said again.

Old McCarty also shook her head and looked at Lou, the eldest of the hunters. "I don't remember that being in the Warehouse load," she said sharply. The hunter shrugged and said nothing.

Brother Jimmy-Joe Billy-Bob slipped the knife in its sheath and the sheath in his belt. He listened as the last whispers of the Holy Spirit faded away. He smiled at the group. "I will go now to the rooftop to prepare the Way," he said softly. "In the morning we will gather to hear the Word."

He had turned to go when he felt Tara's small hand tugging at his pantleg. "Will you come and tuck us in first?" she asked.

Brother glanced at Rita, the girl's mother. The young woman took her children's hands and nodded shyly. Brother Jimmy-Joe Billy-Bob followed them toward the dark hallway.

The children's bedroom had been a book storage room for the publishing company that had once had offices on the floor. While the children slipped into their bedrolls, Brother looked at the shelves of rotting books, each one marked with the small red

bantam emblem.

Rita kissed her children goodnight and stepped into the hall.

"Will you be up on the roof all night?" Tara asked Brother. The child was hugging her new cloth doll to her in the tumble of rags that made up her bed.

"Yes," said Brother, stepping back into the room.

"Then you'll see Santa and his reindeer land when he comes back," she said excitedly.

Brother started to speak and then stopped. He smiled. "Yes," he said. "I imagine I will."

"But you said..." began Sean.

"Anyone up on the roof tonight would see Santa Claus and his reindeer," Brother Jimmy-Joe Billy-Bob said firmly.

"Now let's say our prayers," said the children's mother.

Tara, with eyes still wide, nodded and looked down. "God bless Mommy, and Old 'Em, and the ghosts of Daddy and Uncle Henry," she said.

"Amen," said Sean.

"No," said Brother. "There is a new prayer."

"Tell us," said both children.

"Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John," he said, "Bless the beds that we lay on." He waited while the two repeated the rhyme and then he went on. "Jim and Tammy, Jan and Paul," he said, "Find the demons, smite them all."

The children recited flawlessly and Tara said, "Will you really see Santa?"

"Yes," said Brother Jimmy-Joe Billy-Bob. "And goodnight."

Brother looked in on the Clan before going to the roof. A small group had been huddled near the tree, murmuring, listening to Old McCarty, but the hunters scattered under Brother's gaze and went to their bedrolls. The matriarch stood and returned Brother Jimmy-Joe Billy-Bob's stare for a long moment but then she too looked down and moved away, just an old woman shuffling off to bed.

On the rooftop, Brother kneeled at the Formica altar and prayed loudly for several minutes. Finally he stood and removed all of his clothing. It was very cold. Moon-light reflected off his pale flesh and the curve of the Sa-cred Dish. Brother took out the plastic buckets and set them beneath the four corners of the altar. Then he re-moved the long knife from its sheath, held it high in both hands until the steel caught the cold light, and clamped it between his teeth.

Brother moved silently across the rooftop until he blended into the shadows near the head of the stairwell. He knelt there, at first feeling the rooftop gravel against his bare knee and tasting the cold steel in his mouth; then feeling nothing but the rising exaltation.

It did not take long. First came the gentle noises from the stairwell, then the shadowy figure emerged from the darkness, and finally came the soft voice. "Brother Jimmy-Joe?"

So it was not to be the old woman, thought Brother. So be it.

"Brother Jimmy-Joe?" The small figure moved toward the altar. Moonlight touched the dark braid of the doll's hair. "Santa?"

Brother Jimmy-Joe Billy-Bob said a silent prayer, re-moved the blade from his teeth, and moved forward softly and swiftly to celebrate the coming day.

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