The Hungry Gods Go to the Winter Concert

N. Van Seters & Claude

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Doors open 6:00 p.m. Concert begins 6:30 p.m.

I was there at ten to six, which Jen said was too early and which was not too early, because when I came into the gym there were already four rows gone.

Not people. Coats. A coat on a chair means a person is coming, and a person coming is the same as a person, and everybody knows this, and nobody has ever written it down. I had six coats in a Superstore bag. Mine, Jen's, my mother's, my brother Pete's, his wife's, and a ski jacket of Pete's son's that I had taken off a hook in their front hall on my way over, without asking, because a child's coat holds a seat as well as an adult's and it rolls up smaller.

I put them on six chairs in row five, aisle side. Row five is the row. In row one you are looking up at the risers and you can see up the kindergarten's noses. In row ten you are filming the back of somebody's bald spot. Row five, aisle side, you get the stage and the door.

Across the aisle, also in row five, a man in a Canucks toque was setting up a tripod.

It was not a phone tripod. It was a tripod for a camera, with legs that extended in three sections and a little bubble level in

the head of it, and on top of it was a camera. He looked at me. I looked at him. He had five coats out.

I had six.

My phone buzzed. It was Oma, Jen's mother, in Abbotsford, with a cold. She had been at every Christmas concert of every grandchild since 2008 and this was the first she was going to miss, and she was taking it the way she takes everything, which is by sending instructions. *Film it all,* she wrote. *But watch with your own eyes. Don't watch the phone.*

Then: *Who is the principal now.*

I opened the program. It was a sheet of green paper folded in half, with a clip-art candle on the front and the order of the evening inside. On the back, in small print, it said *Thank you to our staff,* and then it listed them.

Principal — Allfather. Vice-Principal — Seeker. Music — Chaos-Weaver. Kindergarten — Companion. Office — All-Seeing. Custodian — Hand. Finance — Conscience-Keeper.

I typed *Allfather* and sent it. She wrote back *Good.*

At the gym doors, by the PAC table, stood the All-Seeing, the office manager, with a lanyard and a clipboard. A woman in front of me asked him if it would start on time.

"Six fifty-two," he said.

She laughed, the way you laugh at a joke.

"It's six fifty-two every year," he said, not unkindly, and went back to his clipboard, and she stopped laughing and looked at her watch.

* * *

Welcome — Allfather, Principal

At six fifty-two the lights over the bleachers went down and the lights over the stage came up, and the Allfather walked out to the middle of the floor, in front of the risers, with a microphone.

He was a tall older man in a grey suit with a red tie, and he did not tap the microphone or say “Is this on.” He stood there until the gym was quiet, which took less time than you would think.

“Welcome,” he said. “We are glad you’re here. Please hold your applause until the end of each grade’s performance.”

Everybody clapped.

Not much. A little. The way you clap at the end of a speech, because he had stopped talking. Then everybody heard what they were doing and stopped, at different times, and the last one to stop was the man with the tripod.

The Allfather waited. Then he said, “Thank you,” and walked off, and he did not ask again all night.

Jen came in during this, in her work lanyard, and sat down on her own coat.

* * *

Kindergarten — "Jingle Bells" (handbells), arr. Chaos-Weaver

The kindergarten came in from the side door in a line, holding the hand of the child in front, and the line went wrong about four children in and became two lines, and then the two lines found each other on the risers and became a crowd, and the crowd turned around and faced us.

Each child had one handbell. Each bell was a different colour and played one note.

The Chaos-Weaver stood in front of them with no baton and a large sheet of chart paper on an easel. On the chart paper were coloured dots, in rows. I understood, after a moment, that each dot was a bell, and that the rows were the song, and that when he pointed at a red dot the red child was meant to ring.

He pointed at the first dot.

Every child rang.

It was not loud. Handbells aren't loud. It was a kind of shimmer, all the notes at once, eighteen bells of eighteen colours, and then it went on, because they kept ringing, because nobody had told them to stop, and the Chaos-Weaver, instead of stopping them, smiled at them as though this was what he had hoped for, and pointed at the second dot.

The shimmer went on. A boy in the back row rang his bell over his head with both hands, like a man who has found gold. A girl in the front row put her bell down on the riser and looked at it.

Off to the side of the stage, by the piano, stood the Companion. She was not on the risers. She stood on the gym floor, out of the light, and she was doing it. She held up an invisible bell and rang it, small, at the right time, and then held still, and then rang it again.

One by one the children turned to her.

You could watch it happen, the way you watch birds turn. Two of them looked, then four, then most, and then they were following her, not the Chaos-Weaver and not the dots, and they were ringing when she rang and holding still when she held still. And somewhere in the second verse, for maybe four seconds, it was "Jingle Bells." It was clearly, unmistakably "Jingle Bells," in the right order, in handbells, from eighteen five-year-olds, and it was lovely. It was so lovely the gym went silent around it, and I heard my mother next to me take a breath.

Then the boy in the back row rang his bell over his head again, and it went back to shimmering.

The Chaos-Weaver pointed at the last dot, and they rang, and they kept ringing, and he bowed to them. They didn't know what to do, so they bowed back, still ringing.

Everybody clapped. Nobody had held it.

* * *

Grade 2 — "The First Christmas," narrated by Seeker, Vice-Principal

The Seeker stood at a music stand at the edge of the stage with a binder. He was a thin man with half-glasses, and he read the way some people read the minutes.

"The account that follows," he said, "is from the Gospel of Luke, the second chapter. Some details are from Matthew. I'll tell you which."

Across the aisle the man with the tripod leaned in and pressed something.

Ruby was a sheep. There were four sheep and seven shepherds, which I'm told is not the ratio in Luke, but the Grade 2s had been allowed to choose. Ruby had chosen sheep in September and had not wavered. Her costume was a white hoodie with cotton balls glued to it by me, at the kitchen table, on Sunday night, two hundred and six of them, and a headband with ears.

She had one line. The line was "Baa."

She had practised it at breakfast, at dinner, in the bath, and once, at two in the morning, standing beside our bed in the dark, to make sure we knew she had it.

"There were shepherds," the Seeker read, "abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. Verse eight."

The shepherds came out. The flock came out, on its knees.

"The sheep," the Seeker said, and he looked up over his half-glasses at the four of them, "are implied."

A father somewhere behind me laughed, by himself, and then stopped.

The angel came out, on a chair that two other children pushed. Mary came out with a doll. Joseph came out last, because he'd been in the washroom.

"Wise men," said the Seeker. "From Matthew, chapter two. Not Luke. They came later, possibly much later, to a house, not a stable. We have put them here because of the costumes."

The wise men stood next to the manger. One of them waved at someone in the front row.

And then it was time, and the gym was quiet, and the shepherds had been told the news, and the sheep, who are implied, raised their heads.

"Baa," said Ruby.

She did it the way she'd done it at two in the morning, with everything. It was not a little sheep sound. It went to the back wall and came off it.

The other three sheep, who had not been given lines, looked at her. Then all four of them said "Baa," together, and then the shepherds, who had not been told to, said it, and somebody's dad in row eight said it, and the Seeker turned a page in his binder and said, without looking up, "The text doesn't record that," and the Grade 2s bowed, and we clapped, and nobody had held it.

I had the phone up all through it, in front of my chest, like you do. I didn't look at it. I had been told by Oma to watch with my own eyes, and I watched with my own eyes. Ruby found me in row five and did a small wave with one hoof.

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Grades 4/5 — Recorder Ensemble: "Up on the Housetop," "Good King Wenceslas"

The big kids filed onto the risers, all forty of them, with their recorders, and the risers took the weight the way risers do, with a long low creak, like a ship.

Then the left end of the top row went down about an inch.

Pete saw it first, because his son was on the left end of the top row. He took hold of my arm. His son went down an inch and looked at his feet and then looked at the Chaos-Weaver, who was raising his hands, and did not move, because they had been told not to move on the risers, no matter what, and he was a boy who did what he was told.

The Chaos-Weaver gave the downbeat. Forty recorders began "Up on the Housetop."

"Up on the Housetop" on forty recorders is a sound that has been made in that gym every December for longer than I have been alive, and it has never once been in tune, and that is not the point.

During the second line, the left end of the top row went down another quarter-inch.

From the dark at the side of the stage Hand came along the wall. He was in a grey work shirt and he had a cordless drill and a short piece of two-by-four, already cut to length, and he went behind the curtain at the back of the risers, and for a while you could not see him.

The recorders played on. The left end of the top row held where it was.

Then it came up. Slowly, a quarter-inch at a time, the left end of the top row came back up to level. Under forty children. During "Up on the Housetop." Pete's son, standing on it, looked down at his feet again, and then up, and kept playing.

I heard the drill once, short, under a held note. Then Hand came back out along the wall, carrying nothing, because the two-by-four was under the riser now.

No child missed a note that they would otherwise have hit.

"Good King Wenceslas" went off without incident, if you don't count the recorders.

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Intermission — PAC Bake Sale (honour system)

The All-Seeing was at the gym doors with his clipboard. "Fourteen minutes," he said, to nobody in particular, and the gym got up and went for the bake table.

My phone had a notice on it. *Storage almost full.*

I stood in the hallway by the trophy case and deleted things. Screenshots of receipts. Three videos of the dog. A photo of a parking stall at Costco I had taken so I would remember where I'd parked in 2023.

My mother went to the bake table.

The bake table was the PAC's, but the money was the school's, and the Conscience-Keeper was behind it, in a cardigan with a lanyard that said FINANCE. There was a cash box on the table,

a metal one with a slot in the lid. Beside it was a sign that said *HONOUR SYSTEM — $1 per item — Thank you!* and beside that was a Nanaimo bar in a napkin that somebody had paid for and forgotten.

My mother had a twenty. She held it out to him.

"It's an honour box," he said. "I'm sorry. It doesn't make change."

"But you're right there."

"I'm here," he agreed. "But I'm not the box."

My mother looked at the box. She looked at the twenty. She looked at him, and he looked back at her with great patience and no money, and I could see her doing the arithmetic. She is from Goes, in Zeeland, and she does not leave money on a table.

She put the twenty in the slot.

Then she bought twenty dollars of baking. I don't mean she bought one thing and called it a donation. She took twenty items, one at a time, counting out loud. Three Nanaimo bars, four shortbread, a slab of something with Rice Krispies, six gingerbread men including one with no legs, two butter tarts, a bag of popcorn, a brownie, a lemon square, and a single candy cane, which made twenty, which she checked twice. The Conscience-Keeper watched her count, nodding at each one, and when she reached twenty he said, "Thank you," as if she had done something difficult, which she had.

She carried it back to row five in a paper plate stacked on another paper plate stacked on another, and it was passed down the row, and it lasted us through the second half.

When we came back, the man with the tripod was checking his levels.

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Grades 6/7 — "Carol of the Bells" (choir)
Grade 3 — "Rudolph" (with actions)
Staff — "Twelve Days of Christmas"

The Grade 6/7 choir sang "Carol of the Bells" in parts, and it was genuinely good. It started with the altos alone, the four notes over and over, quiet, and then the sopranos came in over the top of them, and then the boys, whose voices were all in different places that year, came in under it and held. Nobody was watching anybody to know when to come in. They knew. You could see the ones who were twelve trying not to look like it mattered to them, and it was the only thing that mattered to them. Somebody's grandfather near the back cried and did not hide it.

The Grade 3s did "Rudolph" with actions. During the actions, I noticed that the Companion was at the edge of the stage again, out of the light, doing them, small, and that most of the Grade 3s were watching her too.

And then it was the staff.

Every year, the program said, the staff do one. This year it was "The Twelve Days of Christmas," and they lined up across the gym floor in front of the risers, and the Allfather stepped back to the end of the line, and the Chaos-Weaver stood in front of them with his chart paper, which now had numbers on it instead of dots.

They gave out the days in order down the line. The Seeker had the partridge. The All-Seeing had two turtle doves. Hand, still in his grey shirt, had three French hens, which he sang perfectly and looked faintly surprised by. The Conscience-Keeper had four calling birds, and sang all four, distinctly, counting them. The Companion had five golden rings, and when she sang them the gym sang them with her. Nobody had been asked to, and every child in the gym rang an invisible bell. My mother was first. She had all five out before the Companion did. Six through eleven went to the other teachers and an educational assistant, who got the maids a-milking and took it well.

The Allfather had twelve drummers drumming, at the very end, last, every time.

He had a bass voice. I hadn't expected it. It came up from the floor of the gym. By the third time round, nobody was letting him sing "twelve drummers drumming" by himself. Five hundred people were waiting for it, and then five hundred people were singing it with him, and he let them.

I was singing. I don't sing. I was singing.

* * *

Finale — "We Wish You a Merry Christmas" (all grades)

They brought every grade back out for the finale, which is a thing a gym is not built for, and the kindergartens sat on the floor at the front and the big kids stood at the back on the risers, and the left end of the top row held.

"We Wish You a Merry Christmas" has three verses and one of them is about figgy pudding, and no child in the Fraser Valley has ever eaten figgy pudding, and they demanded it anyway, loudly, and said they wouldn't go until they got some. The Allfather stood at the side of the stage with his arms folded and his bass voice under all of it, and he did not go until they got some.

Ruby was in the front row, in her cotton balls, and she sang every word, and at the end, when everyone was clapping, she said "Baa" again, once, to me.

The man with the tripod packed his tripod into a bag that had been made for it.

The gym let out at eight forty-one. At the door, the All-Seeing had his clipboard and was writing on it. I looked at my watch, and I looked at him.

"It runs twenty-two minutes over," he said. "Every year."

* * *

Thank you for coming. Drive safely.

We had the gingerbread man with no legs in the car on the way home. Ruby ate the head.

At home, after she was in bed, still in her hoodie because she would not take it off, I sat at the kitchen table with my phone to send it to Oma. I had started and stopped it for every number, the way she likes, and the clips came to forty-seven minutes. I had got all of it. I opened it to check before I sent it.

It was me.

It was forty-seven minutes of my own face, from below, lit blue by the screen I never looked at. The phone had been on the front camera since I'd taken a picture of Ruby and me in her ears, before we left the house. It was my face in the dark. My face clapping at the end of every grade, which we were asked not to do. My face during the handbells, with my mouth slightly open. My face during the riser, frowning at Pete's son. My face eating a Nanaimo bar.

The sound was perfect. You could hear everything. You could hear the shimmer of the bells, and the Seeker saying "the sheep are implied," and forty recorders, and the drill, once, under a held note, if you knew to listen for it. And at nineteen minutes and four seconds you could hear Ruby say "Baa," clear as anything, to the back wall and off it, while on the screen my own face, from below, did something I would not have expected it to do.

Jen looked over my shoulder. "Oh no," she said.

I sent it anyway. It was half past ten. I thought Oma would be asleep.

She wasn't. The little ticks went blue at once, and then nothing, for a long time, long enough for Jen to go up to bed. Then, at twenty past eleven, my phone buzzed.

She had watched all forty-seven minutes.

You were singing, she wrote.