

Silver Bells

A SHORT STORY



WRITTEN BY
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Isobel pulled her hat down closer over her ears as she stood outside the store window, looking in. She felt like all those children you see at the beginning of Christmas movies, gazing in wonder at the toys in the toy store. Only this window didn't have toys.

Or maybe it did, Isobel realized. Grown-up toys. There was a pretend bed covered in a beautiful comforter, with piles of pillows begging for someone to knock them onto the floor as they snuggled under the soft blankets during the cold winter nights. In another corner were dishes and glassware on a table, with cute little mugs wearing sweaters. Actually wearing sweaters that buttoned on and off over the handles to keep the contents warm. There were holiday tins of cookies stacked up like a Christmas tree. And an actual tree with hundreds of ornaments: wooden and rustic, glass and elegant, metal and urban chic.

Isobel sighed. She wasn't sure she would put up a Christmas tree this year.

Her grandmother had always put up a fake one. Each year, she would pull it out of its crushed cardboard box and put it together with loving perseverance. And every year, Isobel would wrinkle her nose at it, especially the last few

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Christmases when she was home from college. The University trees were always so extravagantly decorated; it was such a contrast. When she was a little girl, her grandmother's tree looked like a big, green, hairy spider being pulled out of a giant, cardboard tube. But somehow, every year, her grandmother managed to create a thing of beauty out of it. With about a mile of ribbon and ornaments from her seventy-years of life, Nana made a Christmas miracle. Every year.

Except this year.

Pulling her eyes away from the window display, Isobel headed toward the wreath-laden doors. The warm light pouring through them was invitingly warm compared to the grey mist outside. It would be more comfortable to window-shop from the inside, she reasoned.

Outside the store entrance, she passed a man dressed as Santa who was ringing a bell; his red kettle hung from a tripod beside him. He smiled.

"Merry Christmas," he said.

Isobel smiled back, but said nothing, pulling her hat lower over her eyes. Street-corner Santas always made her feel guilty. How could they expect her to give anything? She needed everything she had. She escaped into the safety of the

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store.

It was warm inside, but she kept her hat on. It was the powder blue one with a little puff-ball on the end of it that Nana had given her last Christmas.

“It’s Silver Bell Sunday!”

Isobel jumped, putting her hands up to ward off whatever attack was coming. An annoyingly happy young woman stood just inside the door next to a large sign on a golden easel.

“It’s Silver Bell Sunday,” she repeated, pointing to her sign that said the same thing in large, scripted letters. “Find a silver bell and win a \$500 gift certificate to use in our store!”

Isobel smiled and shied away. The woman’s lipstick sparkled as brightly as her eyes.

Too much happy, she thought as she headed for the nearest well-stocked aisle to hide.

“But you forgot to read the clue!” the woman called out after her.

“Here’s a clue,” Isobel mumbled to herself. “Stop smiling so much. It makes my face hurt. Ouch!”

It wasn’t her face that was currently hurting. It was her foot. She looked up to see a middle-aged woman with diagonal hair staring her down like they were facing off for a wrestling

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match. The kind of hair that looks like someone teased some poor, innocent animal's fur within an inch of its life, stuck it on someone's head and pointed its butt up into the air. Straight up, in a diagonal line from the forehead to the back of her head, and short around the ears and neck.

The woman pulled her cart in front of her as if for protection while she continued to glare at Isobel with beady, brown eyes. Carts in this store, Isobel realized, weren't your ordinary store carts. They were narrow and streamlined, more like a modified luggage cart. This particular cart was stuffed full already with a vast array of goods from all over the store. Kind of like a bag-lady.

The woman smiled. At least, her mouth twitched at the corners and she got a syrupy-sweet edge to her voice.

"Pardon me," she said with 147 professionally-whitened teeth. "I didn't see you there. I was looking for the silver bells. Are you playing?"

Isobel shrank back. At the mention of the game, the woman's smile had transformed into an animal-like sneer.

"Oh, no," she answered. The woman noticeably relaxed.

"I'm just looking," Isobel confessed.

"Just looking?" said the woman with a look of distrust.

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“At Christmastime? Who has time to be just looking?”

Isobel shrugged and moved away.

As she neared the end of the aisle, she noticed a young man lurking. At least that’s what it looked like he was doing, peering through the shelves of soaps and lotions. He was wearing a cool coat, she noticed. Kind of like a mixture of classic and modern.

“Is she gone?” he asked as Isobel rounded the corner. She glanced back. The diagonal-haired woman had moved on to the next aisle.

“She’s gone,” she reassured him.

“Whew,” he said with a smile. A genuine one that wasn’t whitened. “I’m trying to avoid her. She’s one of those bargain-hunters. She literally pulled a scarf right out of my hands a few minutes ago.”

“Really?” asked Isobel, looking back over her shoulder. She could see Diagonal-hair shuffling around a display of candles as if they were a magic-shell game.

“Cut-throat,” the young man continued. He was dressed nice, but not too nice, Isobel noticed, underneath the cool coat. Like he had to go to work and look like a professional, but he’d rather be in a pair of jeans.

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Isobel smiled and nodded and continued down the aisle.

“Is her hair diagonal?” he asked.

Isobel laughed, turning back.

“Yes, I believe it is.”

“I thought so,” he said. He stood looking at Isobel for a second as if he wanted to say something more.

“Well, happy shopping,” he said with a little wave as he turned away.

“Happy shopping?” said Sam to himself as he headed absent-mindedly toward the candles. “You’re an idiot. ‘Happy shopping!’” he mocked himself, adding a little mock wave.

“Talking to yourself?” asked Diagonal-hair, appearing suddenly at his elbow.

“On the phone,” Sam whispered importantly, tapping his ear as if he had airpods.

“I’d better get focused,” he told himself, silently this time, as he hid behind the display of shower curtains. He pulled a list out of his pocket and stared at it as if it were a summons to jury duty.

A list of names. All female. All wanting a gift from him. The perfect gift.

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He shuddered. He had no idea how to shop for women. Women were elusive. Women were transitory. They never liked the same things from year to year; the rules were constantly changing. And he just couldn't seem to keep up. Just when he thought he'd figured them out, they would laugh at him and make him feel like he really was from Mars, like that stupid book that his mother had on her bookshelf at home. *Men Are From Mars, Women Are From Venus*. They might as well go there and have their own Christmas with their fellow Venusians. Or would it be Venetians? Maybe Venuvians?

"Are you going to buy those, or are you just standing there taking up space?" demanded a shrill voice, cutting diagonally through his thoughts.

Sam stepped back. Diagonal-hair scooped up a pile of towels from the shelf in front of him. The entire pile of towels.

"They're buy-one-get-one-free!" she said in answer to his look of dismay.

"I'm sure there's a limit," he offered lamely.

She withered his manhood with a look of pity as she piled the towels precariously on top of her cart.

Sam noticed the girl with the blue hat at the other end of the aisle, also staring incredulously at Diagonal-hair. Their

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eyes met. They were beautiful eyes, he thought again. He had noticed that right away, the first time he saw her. He wondered why she pulled her hat so low. People would see her eyes more if she gave them a little space.

Sam moved past Diagonal-hair and approached the girl with the blue hat.

Isobel's eyes widened as Cool-coat-guy came toward her. He was looking into her eyes in a funny way, she thought. Almost like he wanted to. It was a little scary. But also nice.

She had been looking at the towels when Diagonal-hair had swooped in like a bird-of-prey. Isobel needed towels. She needed everything. It was embarrassing, really, to still be using the Disney Princess towels she had used in the dorm in college. And Dollar Tree dishes. And hand-me-down furniture from Nana. Basics she had, but luxuries, like new towels? No. She had been teaching for three years. Shouldn't she be able to afford that stuff by now? Wasn't she an adult? Maybe not.

And here was Diagonal-hair, buying 30 towels at a time. Must be nice.

Cool-coat-guy shook his head and glanced back over his shoulder. The pile of towels was beginning to lean, like the

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tower of Piza.

“Bargain-hunter,” he mouthed with a grimace. Isobel smiled, looking down. Too much looking into the eyes. It made her feel seen.

As her eyes fell, she saw he had a list in his hand. A list of names. Female names. Her mouth tightened. She should have known. One of those.

Suddenly, there was a whoop from the opposite corner of the store, followed by the jangling of a bell.

A voice on the loudspeaker crackled through the excitement.

“One silver bell has already been found!” it said brightly. “That leaves two more silver bells. Remember, if you find a silver bell, you win a \$500 gift certificate!”

The three in the towel aisle froze, looking at each other.

Five hundred dollars could buy a lot of towels, thought Isobel. And a lot of other things she had been going without.

Five hundred dollars could buy a lot of Christmas gifts, thought Sam. Nice gifts, without the partially-veiled disappointment he was used to seeing in their eyes.

Diagonal-hair’s beady eyes narrowed. She grabbed the top of the pile of towels with one hand and steered her

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overloaded cart with the other, racing across the store in a burst of competition-fueled speed.

“Do you want to know the clue now?” asked Bright-lipstick woman, appearing without warning beside them like a Dickensian ghost.

“Yes!” said two enthusiastic voices. Then they eyed each other suspiciously, both trying to appear nonchalant.

Bright-lipstick was giddy with glee. “The clue says, ‘When silver bells are ringing, think of giving, not receiving.’”

Sam and Isobel both frowned.

“Where was the first one found?” asked Sam.

“It was in with the fill-your-own-gift-baskets,” said Bright-lipstick woman.

“Giving, not receiving,” said Isobel. “That could be anything! Anywhere in the store!”

It didn’t seem a very good clue. More frustrating than helpful, she thought.

Sam nodded. It did seem vague.

“Well, good luck,” said Bright-lipstick woman, and disappeared into the throng of store customers.

Sam and Isobel stood awkwardly, wondering how to politely get rid of the other.

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“So,” said Sam, waving his list. “I guess I better get started on my shopping.”

“Yes,” Isobel agreed, her eyes hardening. “Looks like a long list.”

“It is,” he admitted with a sigh. “Well, Merry Christmas.”

He headed toward the stationery he’d passed at the front of the store. People give cards at Christmas.

Isobel watched him go, then tiptoed out of sight. Then she started walking normally again. Why am I sneaking around? I have just as much right to find a silver bell. More right than a womanizer.

She stopped and thought carefully through the sections of the store. Where would they hide a silver bell? Behind her were rows and rows of pillows, and colorful-patterned sheets and comforters.

“These would make a good gift,” she thought, gazing in wonder. “At least for me.”

She ran envious fingers over a furry pillow. It was as soft as a cloud. And here was a lovely, sky-blue comforter. And sheets! So many to choose from. Lacy ones, microfiber that dried quickly in the dryer, 500-thread-count, flannel. In blue and white. And maybe that lovely shade of lavender! Or

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pink! She could decorate her room like the sky! This sky-blue comforter with these fluffy pillows as the clouds! It would be like heaven every single night. And the paint color would be—

Bells. Silver bells. That's what she was supposed to be looking for. No sense dreaming about heavenly room re-decorating without that \$500 gift certificate. But wouldn't these towels go perfectly with it!

"This would be perfect!" Sam thought excitedly. He opened and closed the drawers of a wood and metal desk. It can go right in the corner of the living room, perfect for a home office. And this stapler! I definitely need one of those. And this lamp will hold my pencils and charge my phone at the same time! How can you go wrong with that?

Oops. Silver bells. That's what I'm looking for. He reminded himself that home office decorating was not on his Christmas list. But seven females were. Or actually nine, if you count Grace and Helen. And he guessed he would have to count Grace and Helen. He sighed, lifting his eyes up to the hanging banners above his head that told him the various sections of the store. It was one big, warehouse-like room, like a gigantic general store, filled with items from exotic places

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around the world. Over each section hung a banner describing the category on display underneath.

There hadn't been any silver bells in with the cards, so he had moved to office supplies. Now he moved toward toys. Toys were something people gave at Christmas, he reasoned. They're probably the things given most often. Surely there's a silver bell in the toy section.

He stood puzzling over the assortment of gifts. Make your own catapult? Sounds fun. Make your own jewelry? More likely. Slime. Slinky. Those wooden ladies that all fit into one another.

Christmas crackers! Now that's something completely different. When you pull them apart with a pop, little toys and candy fall out. Grace and Helen would love them, he thought. Then he thought of their mother, and put the box back on the shelf. Maybe something less noisy and less likely to make a mess.

Really, it wasn't fair, he told himself. His Christmas list kept growing and growing every year, but his income stayed the same. He knew eventually he would move up in the company, but right now he was low on the totem-pole, with a salary that proved it. Enough for himself, but not enough to

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support giving gifts to all of the women in his life. He felt like protesting. Or becoming Ebenezer Scrooge and saying ‘Bah! Humbug!’ when one of them asked why he hadn’t bought her a gift. Why should he spend his hard-earned money on other people? His mind lingered on the wood and metal desk in the office supplies section. That \$500 would sure come in handy. Maybe he could buy the desk as well as Christmas gifts.

He needed to concentrate. It was pointless to be looking at gifts for anyone without that one precious gift. A silver bell.

He scanned the shelves for anything resembling one. Nothing, except the false alarm when he saw a stuffed cat with a silver bell around its neck. But when he shook it, it only made a plasticky clack-clack sound, not the tinkling chime of the first bell they had heard.

He thought of Blue-hat girl and wondered how her search was going. He selfishly hoped she wouldn’t find the bell. He needed it more than she did. She didn’t even have a list, and his felt like a weight in his pocket. He pulled it out.

He pulled out his phone as well.

How long had he been in this store? he wondered.

The screen was dark.

“Aw, man! I knew I should have charged it.”

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Frustrated, he looked around the room for a clock on the wall. Instead, he saw a large grouping of mantel clocks on a table not too far away.

Isobel had searched every inch of the housewares section of the store. There were no silver bells among the towels and sheets. Not even in with the lotions and soaps. She scowled at a bowl of animal-shaped nail brushes. Cute, but not silver. Or bells.

She scanned the room for her next area to search. A glint of metal caught her eye. Mantel clocks, all arranged on a table. They were varying in size and shape, and most of them were made of metal, gold or silver-colored. Wait. What was that next to the one shaped like Big Ben? It couldn't be. She made a bee-line toward the clock table.

Sam wasn't sure if any of the clocks would be the correct time, but he headed toward them anyway, winding his way past an overloaded cart someone had left in the aisle. The clocks were interesting in design, like everything else in the store. One was even shaped like that tower clock in London. What was its name again? Big Ben. Wait. Could that be...yes!

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It was! A silver bell! He made a diagonal leap over a woman who was crawling out from under a table.

He reached out an eager hand and grabbed the bell. But someone else's hand was on it, too. And she wouldn't let it go.

"I saw it first!" Sam whined, pulling the bell toward him.

"That's impossible," Isobel snipped, "since it is already in my hand!"

Each had an arm extended across the table. Neither would let go of the bell.

"I need it more than you do," reasoned Sam, giving Isobel a plaintive look. "I have so many gifts to buy."

Isobel was unmoved.

"That's hardly a good reason," she said, her eyes blazing. "You're one of those guys who strings a bunch of women along. You think you're too good to settle on just one."

"What?"

"I saw your list," she said, her free hand on her hip. "Don't expect me to feel sorry for you just because you're buying gifts for everyone in your little black book."

A diagonal shadow fell across them, and a third hand broke through their grasp, sending the bell flying through the air.

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“Ha!” cried Diagonal-hair, scrambling after the bell.

“No!” Isobel shouted, clamboring after her.

“Not fair!” yelled Sam as his fingertips touched the bell in mid-air, sending it further across the aisle and out of his grasp.

He flung himself onto his hands and knees, crawling toward the bell as it crashed and tinkled across the floor, spinning in dizzy circles through a display of floor lamps. Then he stopped himself, afraid of knocking over a lamp. Isobel froze in the act of reaching out her hand, not wanting to crash into a floor lamp, either. She knew she couldn’t afford to buy one if it broke. Diagonal-hair, who had slid on her side as if toward homeplate, skidded to a stop at the edge of the lamps, her ringed hands outstretched toward the spiraling bell. For three long seconds the competitors were completely still, watching the bell end its crazy journey. For three long seconds each one took stock of his or her surroundings, ready to make the next move toward the bell without damaging a floor lamp.

At the end of the three long seconds, one little hand reached out and grabbed the bell.

“Look, Mommy!” said a sweet-voiced boy of five, his wide eyes showing his excitement. “I found a silver bell!”

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He rang it proudly, its beautiful, silver tinkling resounding through the store.

Sam remained frozen on his hands and knees, his mouth hanging open. Isobel's arm still hung outstretched in the air. Diagonal-hair collapsed full-length on the dusty floor in defeat.

The Store Manager appeared as if by magic. He was an older man, wearing khakis and a Christmas-red sweater. He surveyed the scene, pursing his lips slightly at the three thwarted customers.

"You just won a \$500 gift certificate!" he said, turning a kind eye to the little boy, who beamed with delight. "Jennifer, take this boy and his mother to the front of the store to claim their prize."

"Sure!" said Bright-lipstick woman, who was apparently named Jennifer. She had appeared suddenly from behind a Christmas tree heavy with ornaments. She took the little boy by the hand and led him and his mother away.

"Remember," she said, suddenly popping her head back out from behind the Christmas tree and causing Isobel to jump with surprise. "When silver bells are ringing, think of giving, not receiving."

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Then she disappeared again behind the tree.

“What does a clock have to do with giving gifts?” demanded Diagonal-hair, accepting a hand-up from Sam and dusting off her ample rear end.

“The gift of time,” explained the Store Manager. “One of the most important gifts you can give someone.”

Isobel thought of her Nana. Time was what she had always given Isobel. They didn’t have a lot of money, but she had given freely of her time.

Diagonal-hair snorted.

“Time? Who has time to give time?”

She limped back to her cart.

“The second silver bell has been found,” crackled the loudspeaker over their heads. “Just one more silver bell left! Find it, and you win a \$500 gift certificate!”

“One more silver bell!” said Diagonal-hair, with a competitive backward glance at Sam and Isobel. “And I’m going to find it!”

Isobel watched her leave, and when she turned back, the Store Manager had disappeared as silently as he had appeared.

“Whoa!” she said, scanning the room for him. “He’s like a phantom!”

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“Same with the clue-girl,” agreed Sam, brushing the dust off the knees of his trousers.

He looked up at Isobel. Her hat had been pushed back further on her forehead by the scuffle, and he could see her beautiful eyes better now.

“I’m sorry,” he apologized. “I guess I got a little carried away.”

“Me, too,” she said sincerely. She picked a piece of glitter off his sleeve.

“I just want you to know,” he said, “that I’m not a womanizer. I don’t even have a girlfriend.”

Isobel eyed him skeptically.

“This list of names,” he continued, pulling it out of his pocket. “It’s my sisters. And my nieces.”

Isobel was incredulous.

“This whole list?” she asked. “How many sisters do you have?”

“Seven,” he admitted sheepishly. “And two nieces. I know. You can be shocked. Most people are.”

“I’m not shocked,” Isobel lied. “I’m just...surprised.”

“I’m the only boy. Number five out of eight kids. Three of my sisters are married. Mindy has two girls already, and my

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sister Megan is pregnant. I'm holding out hope for a boy."

He grinned suddenly, and Isobel sucked in her breath. He looked really cute when he smiled. Especially unexpectedly like that.

"I'm sorry I accused you of buying presents for your little black book," she said, lowering her eyes. "It's none of my business, anyway."

"That's okay. And hey, maybe you can help me, being a girl and all. I'm running out of ideas for presents. As you can imagine, it's expensive to have to buy for so many. I can't ever figure out how to buy something nice for all of them when I really can't afford it."

"That's hard," she admitted, envying him a little. She'd never had brothers or sisters to buy for.

"And it's only going to get worse," he added, dejectedly. "They keep getting married and having kids. There's no end in sight!"

"Well," said Isobel thoughtfully, "have you considered a Christmas drawing?"

"What do you mean?" he asked curiously.

"I'm a teacher, and my colleagues and I do a Christmas drawing every year. We each draw one person's name, and buy

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a gift for that person. That way we don't have to buy a gift for everyone on the staff, but everyone gets a gift from someone. It's a lot of fun, and you can concentrate on just one person instead of a big list."

Sam was stunned.

"That's brilliant," he said.

Isobel rolled her eyes.

"No, really," he said. "I've never thought of that. Do you think my sisters would go for it?"

"If it's a hardship for you, don't you think it's hard on the others, as well?"

"You're probably right," he agreed. "Especially Mindy, with kids of her own to buy for. I wonder if it's too late to suggest it?"

"It's worth a shot," said Isobel.

"Hey," said Sam, "would you like to look for the last silver bell together? I'd rather one of us found it than let Diagonal-hair have it!"

Isobel stuck out her hand.

"You've got a deal."

Sam grinned, shaking her hand.

"I'm Sam, by the way."

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“Isobel.”

“Nice to meet you,” he said. “Now, where should we look next?”

“Where haven’t we looked yet?” Isobel asked. “And remember the clue. What would be something to give rather than receive?”

Sam scanned the store banners above their heads.

“Curtains?” he said lamely.

“Really?” she asked.

“Candles?” he suggested. “The gift of light?”

“Maybe. What about candy?” she asked. “People like to give food at Christmas.”

“Candy it is,” agreed Sam.

They ambled, unhurried, toward the candy aisle. The Store Manager, spying from behind the Christmas tree, nodded his head.

“So, what about you?” Sam asked. “Who are you buying for today? Where’s your little black book?”

Isobel smiled.

“No black book. And I’m not really here to buy. At least, not unless... Anyway, I came to window shop. But it was cold on the other side of the window, so I came inside.”

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She began scanning the shelves full of chocolate and cookies in holiday tins.

“So, no list of brothers and sisters?” asked Sam.

“No. It was just me and my grandmother for as long as I can remember. Then she passed away over the summer. So this year, it’s just me.”

He glanced sideways at her, feeling like an idiot. Her face was stiff, like she was holding in emotion. Here he was, complaining about all the people he had to buy gifts for, and she had no one.

“That must be hard,” he said. He wasn’t sure what to say.

“It is. Nana always made Christmas special, even though we never had much. But I don’t know if I have the magic touch she did. Oh! Look at these!” she said, pointing to a tub filled with chocolate Santas. “My kids will love these!”

“Your kids?” asked Sam.

“My students,” Isobel explained. “I’m an elementary school teacher.”

“In that case, maybe you can use this ‘Yard of Bubble Gum,’” he said, waving a large tube of colored gum balls in her face.

“We could use it in math,” she agreed, laughing. “You

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know, I think I will get these chocolate Santas for my class. And these pencils! Look at these!”

She piled her arms with goodies until Sam found her a basket.

“What about Christmas crackers?” asked Sam. “You know, the things that pop open and little toys come out? I saw some over in the toy section. I almost got them for my nieces. I think I’ll get them, after all. Even if my sister hates me later.”

“That’s a good idea,” Isobel agreed. “Oh, wait. We’re supposed to be looking for a silver bell.”

“Oh, yeah,” he said, putting a serious look on his face. “Silver bell, silver bell, wherefore art thou, silver bell?”

They scoured the candy aisle, and the coffee and tea next to it. No bells. They went back through housewares and stationery, and even browsed through candles, but the silver bell remained elusive. Their only consolation was that it was apparently as equally elusive to Diagonal-hair.

Isobel plopped down onto a purple suede sofa, on sale for \$899 (regularly \$1099). Sam sat opposite her in a Louis XIV-style chair upholstered in plaid (40% off—today only).

“We haven’t seen Diagonal-hair in half an hour,” Sam said. He leaned over and peeked under his chair. “You never

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know,” he said, answering Isobel’s look. “She was crawling around under the displays before.”

“She’s very thorough,” agreed Isobel.

“Maybe we should just give up,” Sam said, leaning back in his chair and closing his eyes.

“Five-hundred dollars could have bought a lot of goodies for my kids,” said Isobel wistfully.

“So you are buying for someone,” he said.

“Not originally. I was looking for me. Towels and bedding and stuff. But then I started thinking about my kids at school. I teach in a Title 1 school, which means most of my students are low-income. I came in here complaining about wanting all these little luxuries, when some of them struggle for their basic necessities. And I remember what that’s like. I remember how much a gift bag of treats meant. It made me feel special.”

Sam opened his eyes and leaned forward toward her.

“I think you do have your grandmother’s magic touch. I can tell by the way you love your students. How you think about what would make them feel special. And Isobel? It’s okay to want a few nice things for yourself, as well.”

She smiled and looked away, blinking back tears. It was the nicest thing anyone had said to her in a long time.

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“Do you like having seven sisters?” she asked, changing the subject.

He laughed.

“Yeah, I actually do,” he admitted. “Wish I had a brother. But yeah. We all get along. Most of the time. Now that most of us are adults. They tease me a lot, but I always know they love me.”

“That must be a really nice feeling,” said Isobel with a faraway look.

His conscience twinged. He did have it good, sisters and all. He wished he could share that feeling with her. Of being part of something bigger.

“Well,” she said, standing up. “I hate to give the silver bell to Diagonal-hair, but I don’t know where else to look.”

Sam nodded.

“Maybe we can ask Santa,” Isobel joked, picking up a two-foot replica of Santa carrying a red kettle from a side table beside her. “He looks a lot like the Santa outside the store,” she said, looking him over. “The one ringing a bell.”

She gasped. Looking up, she met Sam’s wide-eyed stare. They both looked back at the Santa she was holding. Sure enough, there was a silver bell in his hand.

Silver Bells

ASHLEY SARGEANT HAGAN



“I can’t believe it!” she cried.

“Ring it!” he urged excitedly.

She hesitated.

“No, you need the five-hundred for all your sisters.”

He waved his sisters away.

“I’m only going to buy for one now, remember? I’m instituting the first annual family Christmas drawing. Plus, your students need it more. Ring the bell, Isobel.”

Still she hesitated. It wasn’t fair for her to take it. They had both been searching together. And she could buy little things for her students with her own money. I mean, she didn’t have anyone else to buy for. But he had a bunch.

“If you can’t make up your minds, I’ll do it for you,” barked a voice, as Diagonal-hair reached out and grabbed the bell out of the hand of the Santa. She rang it triumphantly, the tinkling silver sound reverberating through the store, and through Isobel’s sorrowful heart. She had wanted to give it to Sam, and she’d missed her chance. She gave him an apologetic look. He didn’t seem angry with her. He seemed sorry for her.

The Store Manager and Jennifer, the Bright-lipstick woman, materialized by their side.

“I found the bell!” shouted Diagonal-hair, still ringing it.

Silver Bells

ASHLEY SARGEANT HAGAN



“I found the last silver bell!”

The Store Manager held out his hand to her.

“I see you have it *now*,” he said slowly, with a stern look, “but I did see *all* that took place.”

Diagonal-hair turned red. Then she turned purple. Then she deflated like a balloon. She placed the bell into the Store Manager’s hand.

“It’s a stupid game, anyway,” she announced as she steered her still-overloaded cart toward the registers at the front of the store, her nose and her hair pointed diagonally at the sky.

The Store Manager turned to Sam and Isobel.

“The stupid game,” he began, “was intended to make people think. I don’t think it worked for everyone,” he said, indicating the retreating back of Diagonal-hair, “but it did work for you.”

“I don’t understand,” said Sam.

“When silver bells are ringing, think of giving, not receiving,” quoted Jennifer, her lipstick sparkling.

“You both entered the store with one agenda, but are leaving with another,” the Store Manager explained. “You came in thinking of your own problems, but if I’m not mistaken, you will leave here with a better appreciation of what you already

Silver Bells

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have. In the end, you were both willing to sacrifice your own desire for the gift card to help the other.”

“To give rather than receive,” added Jennifer.

“So, because you both learned my little lesson, I think you both earned the gift card,” said the Store Manager with a smile.

“What do you mean?” asked Isobel.

“I mean, you each have won a \$500 gift certificate to the store. And he’s right,” he said, winking at Isobel. “It’s okay to buy something for yourself, as well as for others.”

“Yes!” said Sam, his arms raised in victory.

Isobel giggled, her cheeks hurting from smiling so hard.

“So, I guess I’ll see you around the store sometime,” said Isobel to Sam as they exited the doors, gift cards in hand.

“Yeah,” he said. “You helped me earn this gift certificate. You should help me spend it.”

She smiled shyly, looking down.

He grimaced. Why couldn’t he be smooth?

“Well, bye,” she said.

“Hey, Isobel.”

“Yes?”

Silver Bells

ASHLEY SARGEANT HAGAN



“There’s a coffee shop next door. Would you like to have a cup of coffee with me?”

She bit her lip.

“I don’t drink coffee,” she said, her eyes on the ground.

“Oh. Oh, okay...”

“But if you make it tea,” she said, looking up, “then, yes.”

“Great!” he said, relief flooding his face. “Tea it is, then.”

They passed the Santa with the red kettle, ringing his bell. They both paused, looking at each other. Then they walked back, each pushing the little cash they had into the slot on the top of the kettle.

“Merry Christmas,” said the Street-corner Santa to Isobel.

“Merry Christmas,” Isobel replied.

If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love,

I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal.

I Corinthians 13:1