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Kevin O'Hara Mr. Keane's Christmas story

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PITTSFIELD

Years ago, as an orderly at St. Luke's Hospital, I'd often work the evening shift during the Christmas holidays. The wards at that time were most festive; garland twirling around I.V. poles, candles lit in deep windowsills, and tins of sweets at every nurses' station. Sisters in snow-white habits delivered red poinsettias from chapel to intensive care, and freshly-cut balsam allayed the scent of disinfectant. Patients, too, however ill, looked their cheeriest, as if the Holy Season had helped ease their suffering. Why, even rum eggnog -- *Spiritis frumenti* -- was offered to many.

One grateful recipient was Mr. Keane, an elderly gent recuperating in Room 503. When I cranked up his bed to a sitting position, I noticed a Nativity figurine of St. Joseph on his bedside stand.

"I think your St. Joseph has lost his way to Bethlehem," I wisecracked.

"Oh, he'll get there in time," he joked assuredly. "Joseph and I have been great friends ever since the Widow Wren gifted him to me years ago."

"Widow Wren," I repeated. "Sounds like an old Irish ditty."

He took a satisfying sip of eggnog and winked: "There's a story in it, if you've the ears to listen."

I plopped myself into a chair. "I hear no jingle of bedpans at the moment."

"Jolly good, then," he smiled, and launched into his Yuletide tale.

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"Long ago, on that sunny Christmas Eve morning, I jumped from my bed to find the world cloaked by a fresh fall of snow; a dazzling wonderland befitting the Holy Day. But all was not peaceful. School chums brandishing snow shovels, banged their knuckled fists on neighboring doors, spouting out to sleepy-eyed tenants how they'd clear their walkways for a 'measly dime.' Always short of silver, I buttoned up to the chin and joined this guild of shovelers but, alas, found I was too late, every house in my circuit cleared of snow.

"Disheartened, I ventured far afield -- toward my brother's rural newspaper route -- where I plodded past the tumbledown cottage of Widow Wren, situated in the back of beyond.

"'Billy Keane, is that yourself?' she called out from her door.

'None other, Mrs. Wren. And I'll gladly shovel your path for a nickel.'

'A nickel, bedad!' she exclaimed. 'Come in, I beg you, for I'm in greater distress than any heap of snow could ever bring.'

"Once inside her cluttered kitchen, she read with trembling voice a letter of chilling content. *'This letter has been around the globe nine times. You have 72 hours to post it to ten friends or grave consequences will follow. Don't break this chain! Pablo Valdez of Buenos Aires discarded this letter as rubbish and shortly choked on a fishbone...'*

I interrupted Mr. Keane. "Wow, a chain letter...way back then?"

He eyed me with mild annoyance. "Yes, son, way back then. But in our day, neither I nor the Widow Wren had seen the likes, and the poor soul believed her demise was imminent, as did I. She clutched her heart and lamented, 'My 72 hours are up at noon, Billy Keane, and the only way to lift this curse is for you to light a church candle to my patron saint, St. Joseph.'

"She handed me the statuette you see before us from her small crèche, and tucked a dime inside my mitten for safekeeping. 'Now, dearie, don't dally, for ye've less than an hour before the noonday bells toll. And if I'm still alive 'pon your return, I'll compensate you a hundred times more than you asked.'

"I sped away with both legs flying, over hill and dale, while dizzily calculating my stupendous earnings. With heaving chest, I arrived at the church just before noon, finding the Gothic nave empty, yet magnificently dressed in anticipation of Midnight Mass. I scurried up to the red and green cluster of votive candles and dropped the Widow's dime in the offering box. But, lo and behold, I found every jar alight with tiny flickering tongues whispering their silent intentions to the heavens.

"I hadn't time to call into the rectory for a priest, and was left with no choice but to blow out a candle and rekindle it for Widow Wren. But whose? The one I'd extinguish might have been lit for one's sick friend, a broken heart, or a needy child. Helpless, I began to sob, imagining Widow Wren choking on a fishbone and, God forgive me, my promised fortune going with her."

Mr. Keane paused to take a generous gulp of eggnog. "Suddenly, I heard a voice behind me. 'In a pickle, are we?'

"I turned to see a handsome bearded man dressed in a camel coat. I blurted out my dilemma and, without hesitation, he led me to the manger, pulled a wisp of straw from beneath the Holy Infant's crib, and sparked it to life with an Advent candle. 'There now, son, hold this aloft and say a heartfelt prayer for your Widow Wren, and I promise Light will dispel the dark from her devilish correspondence.'

"Reverently, I did as told, the noonday bells tolling as I did so. Oh, what joy! But when I turned to thank the bearded stranger, poof, he was gone."

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Mr. Keane gazed lovingly at the little statue facing him, as though reliving that wondrous moment.

I interrupted his reverie. "Did you go back to see the Widow Wren?"

"I did, of course, and found her in jolly good health. When I shared what had occurred, she said she'd expect little else from her patron saint. True to word, she gave me a crisp five-dollar bill -- 100 times the amount I'd asked to clear her snow! That, and St. Joseph here, who she promised would never fail me. And, by God, he just got me out of another pickle, for I'm to be discharged tomorrow with a clean bill of health."

He finished his eggnog with a smack of lips. "So that's my story, son, and a bounty of truth is in its telling. Now, would you be a champ and tell the dear nuns and nurses that the old fella in Room 503 is in desperate need of more eggnog."

I jumped from my chair. "Consider it done, Mr. Keane, and Merry Christmas."

This is Kevin O'Hara's 30th Christmas story for The Berkshire Eagle.

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