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Double Skull, Slow Burn, and a Ping

• Joe Coogan

THE CHRISTMAS ENTERTAINMENT given annually by the eighth grade class of St. Theodosia's grammar school in Philadelphia was not an occasion noted for gay and untrammelled revelry. It was usually a sedately religious and pretty dull affair, but the year my brother Willie was in the cast the whole thing acquired a peculiar air of sly debauchery.

Willie referred to it later (much later; he wouldn't let anyone mention it for years) as "that time I dragged a naked woman on stage." This, as you will see, was not a precise description of what happened. But it was close enough.

The year that my brother performed, the direction of the show was under new management. The old eighth grade teacher had been transferred and her place was taken by a plump, middle-aged nun named Sister Rose Anita. She was a genial woman with a round pleasant face, and she carried herself with a certain blithe assurance. An assurance, one felt, that could not be shattered by anything she considered less formidable than the Crack of Doom. The Crack of Doom occurred in the latter part of October.

Sister was in class giving a spirited talk on the adjectival clause when a boy from one of the lower grades knocked on the door, entered and handed her a small slip of paper. She assigned us some written work

to do and left the room. She came back a changed woman. Her face was pale and drawn, and her eyes had a hunted, furtive expression. After she dismissed the class, she called me over to her desk. She drummed her fingers on the desk top and spoke in a low, distracted monotone.

"Joseph," she said, "unexpected development. Must get to the library this afternoon. Important research. I want you to come with me. Help carry some material." She stood up, squared her shoulders, and marched determinedly out of the room. I followed, carrying her brief case.

Inside the library, her courage faltered. She walked slowly over to the drama section and stared irresolutely at the long crowded shelves. With a pathetic attempt at briskness, she snatched several books at random, read off the titles, and handed them to me. They had names like: *Frolics for Young Folks*, *Pageants Can Be Fun*, and *The Fourth Wall in Restoration Comedy*. She took out the maximum number allowed and went into the periodical room.

"Young man," she said to the clerk, "do you have any authoritative publication that deals with the production of plays?"

The clerk said that he had. He went back to the files and returned with several thick, heavily bound

volumes of newspapers which he placed on a nearby table. Sister sat down, opened one of them, and for the first time that afternoon she smiled.

"Variety," she said, "journal of stage, screen and radio. Why, this may be exactly what I want!" She began to read and her smile stiffened into an expression of perplexed astonishment.

"You may go, Joseph," she said. "I think I'll be here for some time."

When I left, her head was bent low over the library table and her forefinger moved slowly across the page in front of her.

Sister Rose Anita went to the library every afternoon after that, and gradually her old assurance reappeared. But with a difference. Her voice seemed to have become more assertive, she frequently made obscure references to bygone vaudeville acts, and she began to speak in a strange idiom.

One afternoon, a few weeks before Entertainment time, she stopped me in the hall.

"Joseph," she said, "as a member of the eighth grade you will naturally be expected to take part in the show. This year, however, I'm permitting a slight departure from the rules. I want you and your younger brother William to act together as a unit, a team."

"Are we going to be wise men?" I asked.

"Certainly not. You're going to be elves." She leaned forward and her voice became quietly confidential. "At long last," she said, "Saint Theodosia's is going Broadway. You

can assure your brother William that our little effort will be very sockeroo." She winked and waddled swiftly down the hall.

My brother was nine years old at the time, and in the fifth grade. A thin kid with a mop of unruly brown hair and a long mobile face, he had a high reputation as a mimic (his Durante imitation was particularly well thought of), and it was probably this that led to the singular honor of his being picked for a speaking part in the show. Although a few of the first and second grade girls were occasionally used as extras, this was the first time that anyone not in the graduating class had a leading role. Willie was quite set up about it.

"What the hell," he said, "it's better than watching the old thing." He swore a lot when he was excited, a habit he picked up from my father.

A few days after Sister Rose Anita stopped me in the hall, we met in the eighth grade classroom for our first rehearsal. When we were all seated Sister took a large sheaf of papers from her brief case and paced rapidly back and forth in the front of the room.

"Boys and girls," she said, "we have a lot of work ahead of us if we're going to make this year's Entertainment smash hit material. I've already taken steps. Instead of the usual show, I've arranged to offer our audience a double feature. This should be a pleasant innovation as double bills gross high on main stem." She smiled brightly. "We open with a short one-act play which we're going to follow with a fine two-

act musical comedy. I'm going to read the play and I want everyone to pay very close attention. I'm sure it has an important message for each one of us."

The play was an educational skit put out by a local dental society and entitled, "A Tooth's Best Friend." It concerned the St. Clair-Uncle Tom-like relationship between one Ancient Molar, member of a proud old tooth family, and Brush, a faithful family retainer. After a rather promising beginning ("Hello, Tooth" "Hello, Brush"), it became sentimentally maudlin and ended with Tooth weeping melodramatically on Brush's shoulder. Sister read it very effectively.

"That will be all for now, children," she said when she had finished. "I haven't time to go over the musical."

As Willie and I were leaving, she beckoned to us.

"I almost forgot," she said. "I have something very important to tell you two." We came back into the room.

"The musical," she said, "is about two elves getting the toys ready for Santa Claus." She pointed to my brother. "You, William, will be elf number one. You're mischievous, spritely, alert. Joseph, you're elf number two—slow, dull witted, but all in all very sincere. You're a foil for William, the minor comedian. What we call the second banana."

Willie and I stared bewilderedly at each other.

"In the second act," she continued, "you have a series of lines which are certain to get a very well defined yak." She handed us a paper and

pointed to the top of the page. "Read from here," she said.

Willie had the first line.

"Well, elf," he began, "did you get the Flit gun ready so we can spray the—"

"Reindeer," Sister prompted.

"Reindeer?"

"Flit?" I said. "Why do you want to spray Flit on the reindeer?"

"Why, so they'll be able to flit over the rooftops, of course!" my brother said.

When Sister Rose Anita finished laughing she turned to me.

"That line's guaranteed to fracture them," she said. "Especially, Joseph, when you top it off with a double skull, slow burn, and a ping."

"Is that something elves do?" I asked.

"It's what almost any comedian who is what we call a B.O. draw can do. I'll show you. William, read the line again."

My brother read the line. Sister walked quickly away from him, scowled, looked back twice (the double skull), ran her right hand slowly over her face (slow burn), jumped up and threw both hands high in the air (the ping).

"Try it," she said.

I did, and it gave me a lot of trouble. I still can't do it very well.

On Entertainment Day the cast met in the auditorium about an hour before curtain time. With the exception of Nell Lacey, a fat nervous girl with a deep voice who played Santa Claus, my brother and I were the most impressively outfitted members of the group. My mother had

despaired of making elves' suits and had rented them from a local costumer. Willie wore a long green coat, green tights, and a high pointed hat. I had the same outfit in brown. The girls in the chorus of dolls were swathed in some thin gauze-like material and the boys who represented toy soldiers were dressed simply in white shirts and slacks. A few wore medals.

As Willie and I walked through the auditorium, we were stopped by a lean, somber-looking kid named Harry Snyder. Snyder (Ancient Molar) had on a white cloth hat that vaguely resembled a tooth and he wore a long fuzzy grey beard. He inspected us critically.

"You look pretty silly," he said, but we could tell he was jealous.

Sister Rose Anita lined us up and placed each one in his correct position either on or off stage. This was important as the stage was a shallow one with no crossover in back. On the left side there was a door leading to the main building and a screen which shielded the curtain puller. Offstage right was shaped like a large square box with one opening which led directly to the playing area.

As we took our places we could hear the menacing murmur of the helplessly reluctant audience being herded into the narrow auditorium.

After Sister had us arranged properly she made a final check on each costume. When she came to me, she frowned.

"Technically speaking, Joseph," she said, "you're not really an elf at all. You're a brownie." Snyder sneered.

Sister started to say something else but she was interrupted by the voices of children singing the school song. They sounded surly.

"On your toes, boys and girls," she said. "Monsignor Blake has arrived." Monsignor Blake was the local pastor and the perennial honored guest at these functions.

When the singing died down Sister gave us a few final instructions. "Remember now, make it big, loud, and wait for the laughs." She walked over to the prompter's chair at stage right.

The opening skit was played in front of the curtain to desultory applause. Brush and Tooth came off-stage. Sister Claire, the music teacher, played a few introductory chords on the piano and the musical began.

Willie and I had the first song.
 "We're Santa's helpers. We're true
 blue,
 Elf number one, and elf number
 two.
 We work with paint and nails and
 glue,
 So that the toys will get to you,
 Early Christmas morning."

We did a rapid, shuffling dance, stopped and bowed deeply. There wasn't a sound from the front of the house.

After about ten minutes of light banter punctuated by long and silence-filled pauses for laughs, we wound up the toy soldiers and they paraded around the stage for awhile. Then Willie grabbed a large, rouge-filled paint can and scampered over to the dolls.

"Paint 'em on the cheek, and paint

'em quick. Gotta get ready for Old Saint Nick," he said.

His voice sounded loud and ill-tempered. I could tell he was ruffled by the lack of audience response.

He dipped a large brush in the can and capered fantastically down the row of dolls, patting each one lightly on the cheek and then skipping wildly to the next. He was putting his heart into it.

The last doll in line, a little wide-eyed first grade girl, watched this antic progress with considerable misgiving. When he leaned over to tap her on the cheek with the brush, she let out a terrified shriek and raced frantically away from him. Willie, reaching out to stop her, caught the skirt of her light gauze dress. There was a soft tearing sound and the panic-stricken child, clad only in brief panties, stood petrified in the center of the stage. The audience cheered.

One of the older girls picked up the denuded doll and carried her offstage.

Willie dropped the paint can, walked stiffly and mechanically over to me and grabbed me by the shoulder. His eyes had a blank, horrified look and his hand trembled.

"What did you do with the Flit?" he shouted.

This dexterous leap from the opening to the climax of Act Two was more than I could cope with.

"Flit?" I asked weakly.

"To make them flit better, dopey," he said.

I remembered the routine. I glared at him, walked away and looked back. His next line was spoken in a loud, clear voice.

"You forgot the damn ping," he said.

The audience was hushed in awe-struck wonder. Although I could see and hear what was going on with almost preternatural acuteness, I felt powerless to speak or move and could only stare at him with an expression of slack-jawed idiocy. This seemed to unnerve him.

Sister Rose Anita bounced angrily out of the prompter's chair and pointed to the chorus.

"Sing," she said. "For heaven's sake, sing!"

Willie, who by this time was in a state approaching madness, thought she was pleading with him. He ran through a quick and rather skillful chorus of "Inka Dinka Doo" and then began the only other song he knew, an Irish come-all-ye that he had picked up from my grandfather.

"She was a great big lump of an Irish agricultural girl, and oh, how I'd like to tie her garter," were the opening words. Sister Claire played "Holy Night" on the piano, loudly.

Sister Rose Anita kept shouting, "Curtain! Curtain!" but to no avail. She seized Harry Snyder, shouted something to him, and pushed him in the direction of stage left.

When Snyder got in front of the audience, he did his duty as he saw it. He stood at attention and his face assumed a haughty, aristocratic look.

"The thief of time cannot destroy my treasure trove of calcium!" he said. It was his big speech from the one-act play.

Sister Rose Anita rushed over to Nell Lacey and tried to force her

on stage. Meanwhile old Ancient Molar was giving it all he had.

"Oh, faithful squire of every stalwart tooth,

Brave Brush, you do not deign to stand aloof,

But help avert life's sad decaying end.

You are, in truth, brave Brush—a tooth's best friend," he said.

Sister Rose Anita did a perfectly executed slow burn and a ping. Then, infected by the general lunacy of the moment, she snatched the Santa Claus mask from Nell Lacey, held it over her face with one hand and raced across the stage.

"Merry Christmas, elves! Merry Christmas, toys! Merry Christmas, children!" she said. When she reached stage left, she pulled the curtain and leaned heavily against the wall. The mask had dropped to the floor; she shook her head slowly from side to side and her eyes were filled with tears.

"What a turkey. What a flopperoo," she said dispiritedly.

A few members of the cast muttered some semi-articulate words of commiseration but most of us stood glumly silent, envisioning God knows what dark reprisals that were

bound to follow the afternoon's performance.

The only sounds from the auditorium were the slow, threatening footsteps of Monsignor Blake as he approached the stage to give his annual Christmas speech. He was an old man with a tired, dour face (I had only seen him at Entertainment time) and he had a reputation as a stern disciplinarian. Our only hope was that he wouldn't expel us publicly.

"My dear children," he began and his voice had a strange, choked quality. "I'm sure we're all greatly edified by the amount of time and energy put into today's performance. I suggest we show our appreciation by applause."

The house went wild. There were cheers, whistles, shouts, and long sustained clapping.

"What the hell," my brother said, "we're a hit!"

Sister Rose Anita glared at him but as the applause mounted her eyes became soft and dreamy and she threw her head back proudly.

"You see, boys and girls, you never can tell," she said. "That's show biz. It most certainly is show biz."

We took five curtain calls.

Wedding Song

© Leo Brady

With this ring
Upon this hand
Everything
Men understand
By love, affection,
Honor, I
In full perfection
Signify.

May this priest,
Though our words falter,
Bless this feast
Which on this altar
Makes this daughter
Wifely mine
And turns all water
Into wine.