

Church Bells

by janus

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Chapter 1 of 1

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Severus woke in the cold. It was Christmas. It was Christmas. Was it Christmas? It was still dark.

He felt beneath his pillow for his little packet from school. The Maths mistress had given it to him, along with each other student. The little things had not been wrapped but he had rolled them in two discarded orange papers, one pastel green and one white. His boney fingers had made a bow with some silver from a cigarette paper he had found, and the packet was tied with blue tinsel. He might have wrapped it himself, but it was a real present because his teacher had given it to him for Christmas. Well, it was true that part of it was a small shiny-red bell he had found in the snow on his way home, but he could pretend. It was bright, and a little of its shiny paint had been rubbed off so that it was silver underneath. There was a little bend of metal so he could hang it on a string, under his shirt maybe. He tried not to think of it, so it would be a surprise. He had tried hard not to look at the bookmark from his teacher and mostly succeeded, so there would be a little surprise at the picture.

In just two weeks it would be his birthday. He would be ten; then the next year he would be eleven, and he would go away to a real school forever and ever where they would have Christmas.

He knelt on the bed to look out his window. His feet, at least, were warm, covered as they were by the long legs of his father's old union suit. Outside, above the frost flowers on the window, the world was black and white, with halos of ice-crystal gold around the streetlights. The snow was white and unbroken, even in the street, even over the sidewalk where it had been churned dirty during the day. The fence was black against it and the few trees. Even the windows of the other houses were mostly black, off to the left. It must be late.

Then, in the distance, though he knew it was not very far, he heard them. Bells. They did not tinkle merrily on high. It was a more solid sound of deep rich gongs, sounding in close sequence, in several tones in companionship with one another. They were reassuring. Severus, kneeling on his bed in the cold, was part of their town. They were part of his home. It must be midnight mass, he thought, and the bells were heralding Christmas. It was Christmas.

He whispered a soft *Lumos*, and a warmly glowing ball of light joined him as he opened his Christmas present. There was his shortbread cookie with the strawberry jam in the centre, slightly crumbled now. There was his red, white and green striped peppermint candy cane. He had been so careful not to break it. And here was his bookmark, red with a green tassel and a sticker of Father Christmas in green robes. He looked like a wizard with his long beard.

Carefully he set the cookie on his pillow and made a funnel of the paper to pour the crumbs into his mouth. He would save the cookie itself for after the toast and beans he already knew he would have for dinner. His mother didn't believe in Christmas. He smelled the candy cane, but wrapped it up again with the bookmark. He took out the shiny bell and slipped its long loop of string over his head. He had not used ribbon, but his mother might not notice a simple piece of string. Holding it to his ear, he jiggled it and heard its answering bright little chime. Like church bells.