

Rudolph  
A Holiday story by Richard C. Smith.c. 2019

*8 And there were in the same country shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night.*

*9 And, lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them: and they were sore afraid.*

*10 And the angel said unto them, Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people.*

*11 For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord.*

*12 And this shall be a sign unto you; Ye shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger.*

*13 And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God, and saying,*

*14 Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men.*

*15 And it came to pass, as the angels were gone away from them into heaven, the shepherds said one to another, Let us now go even unto Bethlehem, and see this thing which is come to pass, which the Lord hath made known unto us.*

*16 And they came with haste, and found Mary, and Joseph, and the babe lying in a manger.*

Luke 2:8 - 16

King James Version

It was the Christmas Aunt Harriette declared war on Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer. Rudolph was having a very popular year. He was praised in a country twang, with a blue note, by a rock and roll star, and about a dozen other individuals and groups. There was even a version by those squeaky voiced little critters that my sister Anita called the "Chick Monks."

I'm not sure just when Aunt Harriette decided that enough was enough, but at some point shortly after Thanksgiving the lectures began and before there were ten shopping days left, every Nazarene church in Kanawha County had an anti-Rudolph organization that would have made Joseph McCarthy proud. There were record smashings; public marches; and appeals to local, state, and national political leaders. And even the burning of a stuffed Rudolph in effigy.

We were forbidden to listen to Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer on the radio or by any other audio or video output mechanism. We could not sing the Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer song. We could not hum it. We could not even think about it in our minds.

If the song came on, the radio was immediately turned off and we were lectured on the "true meaning of Christmas." It was rumored that Rudolph was a communist plot (after all, his nose was red). More than one minister proclaimed him the anti-Christ. All in all it was a very difficult time and one could not be too careful. Some kids turned in their brothers and

sisters for humming or singing about Rudolph. There were rewards for the turncoats and punishment for the offenders. One had to be on guard all the time.

It was also the year that my brother Larry spent Christmas in the hospital. Larry had been born with a congenital defect that caused him to have a crossed eye. The doctors tried a variety of cures such as strong glasses, an eye patch, and eye exercises. Ministers tried anointing him with oil and prayer. Nothing worked.

Having a crossed eye was an agonizing experience for a young boy. It got him a lot more attention than he wanted and he was the butt of a numerous jokes and insensitive comments. He was scorned by schoolmates who teased him and called him names. At church, where you'd think people would be more sensitive, he was often left out a lot of the activities because of how he looked, one good eye and one crossed eye peering at you through thick lens glasses. One minister even nicknamed Larry "Gladly." He said it was like the hymn in the songbook about "Gladly the Cross I'd Bear." He even got some laughs.

Since Larry and I shared a room, I was keenly aware of how much he suffered by being different. He never complained, but I knew how the comments hurt him. Although I never knew what I should say, I tried to find ways to comfort him when someone had been especially crude.

Finally, when Larry was about eight, the doctors decided that the best thing to do was to cut the muscle to the eye. Cutting the muscle would allow the eye to straighten, but he would be almost blind in that eye.

So, it was decided that Larry would go into the hospital during the Christmas holiday to have the surgery. Since Christmas was on Sunday, our vacation from school began on Friday. Larry would be taken to the hospital on Thursday night. Surgery would be on Friday morning. He'd be in the hospital for about a week, but could start school again with his class in January.

Being in the hospital for Christmas got Larry a lot of sympathy and much attention. He did not have to do any chores the whole week before he went to the hospital. While *all* of us kids were supposed to help out, most of his chores fell on me.

On Friday and Saturday there was a lot of talk about how brave he was and how the nurses thought he was so cute, and how much he liked all of the gifts he got. After a while, it was more than I could handle. I resented all of the attention he was getting and in a moment of duress I referred to him as "that cross-eyed brother of mine."

I was immediately stricken with remorse. How could I be so cruel when I knew how much a comment like that would have hurt him? I cried myself to sleep that Saturday night and awoke the next morning determined to find a way to make it up to him.

After church on Sunday, I asked my mom and dad to take me to the hospital with them when they went to visit Larry. They said no. In those days, kids weren't allow to visit patients in their hospital rooms. I insisted. They said no. If I went, I'd just have to wait in the car. I demanded. They said it was too cold to wait in the car. I threw a temper tantrum. To teach me a lesson, they took me.

The hospital was a red brick building nestled among the homes of an urban neighborhood on the west side of Charleston. It was not a very large building – only four

stories tall. I sat in the cold car, bitterly remorseful for what I had said and suffering in silence the punishment I deserved – slowly being frozen to death.

I studied the hospital through the window of the car and thought of my poor brother and his bandaged eye. I knew I had to do something to absolve myself of my sin.

I thought of all the good times we'd had together. Actually, we fought a lot and there weren't really that many "good times," and what there were really weren't that good, but I thought about them anyway. As it grew colder in the car and a chilling numbness sat in, I was reminded of how we used to sing Christmas Carols on cold nights. That's when the inspiration came. To absolve myself of guilt, I'd sing a Christmas Carol for my brother.

I got out of the car and stood on the sidewalk, looking at the hospital. I knew my brother's room was on the third floor, so I tried to figure out which window was his. There were only three windows on the third floor. One window was obviously in a hall. Another looked like an office or something like that. So, the remaining window had to be his room.

I thought about what carol to sing. I knew one of his favorites was Hark, the Herald Angels Sing. So, lifting my face to the window, I began to sing. Softly.

Hark, the Herald Angels Sing, Glory to the New Born King.

I stopped. I couldn't remember what came next. Something about Mercy Mild and maybe a Heavenly Child.

Suddenly I became aware that I was not alone. I turned to find a girl about my age standing a couple of feet behind me. She was wrapped warmly in a black coat. A long scarf hung down the front. She smiled and stepped closer to me.

"Whachee doin'?"

"Nothing."

"Were too. I heard you."

"It's none of your business."

"Okay. But I heard you singing."

"I was singing to my brother."

"Is he in the hospital?"

I pointed to the window.

"Oh." She studied the window for a few moments.

"What happened?"

I told her about his eye and how it made him different and how the kids would tease him and how he was left out of a lot of games and stuff because of his eye. It was very sad.

"I'll sing too," she said.

"Okay."

"How about if we sing Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer," she suggested.

I was horrified.

"No!" I said and made a few comments on the evilness of Rudolph that I'd heard from my mom and from Aunt Harriet. My new friend just looked at me in a strange way.

"Okay. What do you suggest?" she asked.

"Hark the Herald Angels Sing."

"Okay."

So with eyes turned to the window on the third floor we sang. “Hark, the Herald Angels Sing. Glory to the New Born King.”

“That’s all I know,” I said.

“What about something else?”

Suddenly there was the sound of running feet and a boy of about six came zooming up to us.

“Hey Sis. What’re you doing?” he asked my new friend.

“We’re singing a Christmas Carol to Larry.”

“Who?”

“Larry. His brother.” She gestured toward me with her thumb.

The kid turned to look at me.

“Who’s he?”

“I don’t know. Just some guy.”

“What are you going to sing?”

“We don’t know.”

“How about ‘All I want for Christmas is My Two Front Teeth.’” He turned and smiled at me broadly exposing the gap in the front of his mouth.

“No!” she said. “It has to be a real Christmas song.”

“Okay.” He was thoughtful for a moment. “How about Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer. That’s a real Christmas song.”

“No! It has to be a religious song.”

“Oh,” he said.

The three of us stood trying to think of a religious Christmas song to sing to my poor brother. Perhaps if we could come up with something we all knew and sang it loud enough, he’d hear us and come to the window. Then he’d see me and forgive me for the awful thing I said even though he doesn’t even know I said it.

While we were lost in thought, two more boys approached and inquired as to what we were doing. My new friend and her brother explained about my brother Larry and his eye and being in the hospital. It was very sad the way they told it and made me feel even worse about what I had called him.

When they were through, one of the boys turned to me. “How about ‘I saw Mommy Kissing Santa Claus.’”

“No!” Sis announced. “It has to be a *real* Christmas song.”

“Oh. Well, then let’s sing Rudolph.”

Sis carefully explained that Rudolph was indeed not a real Christmas song.

“Why not?” protested the boy. “It’s about Santa Claus.”

I tried to explain Aunt Harriette’s reasons for prohibiting so much as the mention of Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer. Her arguments had always made so much sense before. But now, coming out of my mouth, the words fell cold and dead on the sidewalk.

“Well, I don’t care what they say,” said the first boy.

“It is a real Christmas Song,” said the other.

“It’s about how people don’t treat other people right,” said the first boy.

“Just like Larry,” said the other boy.

“And about how they tease and make fun and don’t let them play in their games.”

“Just like poor Larry,” sniffed Sis.

“And it’s about how you can sometimes be the hero and hit a home run or something.”

“Just like Larry,” said Brother.

“Yeah!”

“Yeah!”

“Yeah!”

“Yeah!”

“I’ll get killed if we sing it.”

They all stood looking at me, sadness in their faces. Then they all turned and looked at the third floor window.

“Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer” sang one of the boys. He was immediately joined by the other boy and Brother. Sis looked at me sadly.

“Had a very shiny Nose.”

I’m dead, I thought to myself. Maybe I’d better make a break for it.

“And if you ever saw it.”

Sis joined the group.

“You’d even say it glowed.”

People began to poke their heads out of doors or come into the street to see what the singing was all about.

“All of the other reindeer,” the volume level rose as I joined in, “used to laugh and call him names.”

“They wouldn’t let poor Rudolph join in any reindeer games.”

The crowd grew larger and we sang louder, our faces turned to the window. Maybe our little hero with the bandaged eye would come to the window and look down on us.

“Then one foggy Christmas eve, Santa came to say,” we sang, very off tune.

“Rudolph with your nose so bright, won’t you guide my sleigh tonight.”

We raised the volume even more, waiting on the little face to appear.

“Then how the reindeer loved him as they shouted out with glee!

“Rudolph the Red-Nose Reindeer, you’ll go down in his – tore – ree!”

The crowd burst into applause, but even with such a grand finale, our hero did not appear. While we had pleased the crowd, we had failed to please our audience.

We stood in a tight group, wondering what to do next, when I saw a familiar coat in the crowd behind us and looked up into the face of my mother. And, to my horror, standing beside her was Aunt Harriette.

“What, may I ask, are you doing?” asked my mother.

When they realized who was asking the questions, all of my new friends but Sis disappeared into the surrounding crowd.

“Singing a Christmas song to Larry,” I said meekly.

“Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer?” demanded Aunt Harriette.

“It’s the only one they knew the words to.”

“You could have taught them a real Christmas song. Couldn’t you?” said mom.

I looked at the sidewalk, my face burning with shame.

“And besides,” mom continued. “His room is on the other side of the hospital.”

I looked at Sis. The others now stood behind her.

“I’m sorry,” I told them.

“It’s okay,” said Sis. “Besides, we can just go sing to the other side of the hospital.”

“Come on, Richie,” said my mom.

I looked at mom. She was walking toward the car.

“I have to go.”

All of my new friends stood on the sidewalk and waved furiously as we drove away.

I learned later that they had gone to the other sides of the hospital and sang Rudolph the Red-Nose Reindeer at the top of their lungs. Finally, on the last side, a small blond haired boy with a bandage over his eye came to the window. A nurse opened it and he leaned out, listening to the singing. When Sis saw who it was, she had the group sing the song again. And, although we never told anyone, the little blond boy with the bandaged eye sang along.