

CHORAL COUNTERPOINT

Convocation

Away in a manger, no crib for a bed,

*Prudence, what hymn is this?
'Away in a Manger', Petunia.*

The little Lord Jesus

*No. What NUMBER?
Oh. Four hundred and nineteen.*

Laid down his sweet head,

*Is that in the blue book?
No, the red one. Here, share mine.*

The stars in the bright sky looked down where he lay,

*Prudence, did we sing this hymn at choir practice?
I think so.*

The little Lord Jesus

*All these carols sound the same to me.
Would you like a peppermint, Petunia?*

Asleep on the hay.

Bless you, Dear.

First Light

On this Christmas Eve, as we celebrate the perpetual rebirth of Jesus in our hearts and souls...

Florence Jones makes the service run like a Swiss watch, doesn't she Petunia?

I suppose. But I always liked it better when our minister was a man. Prudence, do you remember Reverend Abercrombie?

It's time to light all the candles on our beautiful Advent Wreath, including the fifth and last candle representing Jesus Christ, central to all the rest.

He was so tall.

And with such a marvellous voice.

So would the children who are assisting in our candle-lighting ceremony please come forward...

He baptized my son.

For the past four Sundays, we've lit the candles of Hope, Peace, Joy and Love.

My son too.

Tonight, our first candle, representing Hope, will be lit by Annie.

And I taught Sunday School for him.

We light this candle today, to remind us that Jesus is our Hope, and the Hope of the world...

You and I taught Sunday School together, Petunia.

Such a fine man...

Hope

**A candle is burning, a flame warm and bright,
A candle of hope in December's dark night...**

That's right, Annie. Stay calm. Don't goof up. Let Reverend Jones help you. Look over here if you like. I'll give a little wave. You know when Mommy does that, everything's OK.

Who's that gawky girl, Prudence?

It's Eleanor Wilson's daughter, Annie.

Annie acts perfectly fine in situations like this when I'm around. I can't understand why her teacher is always reporting her for "incidents". Like attempting to take her clothes off in school. Outrageous. The nerve of some people. That teacher should recognize how susceptible Annie is to pressure from her classmates. She obviously doesn't know how to handle children with special needs.

That girl's too tall and too old to be lighting Christmas candles. There must be something wrong with her. Where's her mother?

She's right there, waving in the front row, Petunia.

I'm so proud of Annie. Life's been painful for her right from the start. Yet she's never complained. I hate it when people don't see how hard she tries, and when they don't help her fit in. I'll find another school for her in January. And then I'll get that teacher fired for incompetence.

Why Prudence, that woman's Eleanor Reed, all grown up. I remember her. In Sunday School, she used to dress GI Joe in Barbie's bridal gown and tell everyone he was Jesus. Such strange behaviour for a child.

That's right, Petunia, now you mention it. She'd even try to scare the other children if they didn't say their prayers her way. She'd threaten to have her Jesus doll put a curse on them.

Blessed are the pure in heart. For they shall see God. Pure. That's how I've raised Annie. At least I've done my best to shield her from the world and keep her pure in the sight of God. From her very first day, it's been a struggle. Though it's never been Annie's fault.

But Prudence, why is Eleanor Reed's daughter not quite right in the head?

Annie needed a blood transfusion when she born. But her mother wouldn't sign the papers. The doctors finally gave her a transfusion anyway, but by then the damage had been done.

I just hope Annie gets her reward in Heaven, for all she's been through here on earth. If anyone deserves salvation, she does. In fact, God owes it to her.

The poor girl. Prudence, I hope Eleanor's learned a lesson from all the trouble she's caused.

Her marriage broke up at the same time, so I'm told. And they even took Annie away and put her in a foster home. It was two years before Eleanor got her back.

Good job, Annie. Your Hope candle's lit. Now just stand there quietly. And keep your hands still. Oh please. Do as Reverend Jones says.

I'll never forget that Sunday when Eleanor took all her clothes off and told everyone she was an angel sent by God to rule the world. Reverend Abercrombie was not amused.

Would you like another peppermint, Petunia?

Hope, Annie. All we have is hope that God will choose our side in the end.

Bless you, Dear.

**...While angels sing blessings from Heaven's starry sky,
Our hearts we prepare now for Jesus is nigh.**

Second Light

Thank you Annie. While we sing the next verse, Arnold will light our second candle, signifying peace.

You can tell how much Reverend Jones loves running the Christmas Eve Service, can't you Petunia?

When she was a little girl, she always used to get upset at our Christmas pageants, when she couldn't play the Virgin Mary.

This candle reminds us that Christ is the Prince of Peace...

Reverend Abercrombie once had to tell her to stop crying, and to go sit with the sheep, where she belonged. He could be very stern when he had to be.

Such a fine man...

Peace

**A candle is burning, a candle of peace,
A candle to signal that conflict must cease...**

I wonder if anyone here actually believes in this crap. Lighting candles for peace and singing songs to dead Jesus. What a waste of time. None of this garbage would help anyone get to Heaven even if there was a Heaven. And if you wanted to trade this whole boatload of baloney for a cup of coffee, you'd still have to throw in a buck and a half to go with it. If I were God, I'd be insulted that earthlings had made up such silly rituals to worship me. I'd expect more creativity from them. Once a year is all I can stand of this nonsense. Oh for the day, Arnold, when you outgrow Sunday School and your mother stops sending you. Then I'll be free of this lunacy altogether. The worst thing is that everyone here pretends to like it. That's what I hate most of all. The hypocrisy. Or the stupidity. Whichever it is. Yes. Stupidity.

That boy with the candle looks like young Sidney Fox!

That's because he looks like his father, Petunia. See him? The man in the very last pew.

Sometimes I worry about Arnold. He's lighting this bloody candle today for learning the most Bible verses in Sunday School. Some honour. I had to tell him that memorizing Bible verses was girly stuff, and it would never get him anywhere in the real world. People who think the Bible matters end up just like everybody else. Living in the suburbs, collecting bowling trophies and eating Slushies at the Joe-Burger. You have to be tough to get ahead. I've got to make Arnold realize that.

The same receding chin.

And the same too-close-together eyes. Poor child.

Joe-Burger's. Why would anybody eat there? We don't let Arnold drag us in, like a lot of parents do. The food sucks. Always has. But I needed a cup of coffee this afternoon to warm up between last-minute errands. It was getting late, and I still had to pick up the computer gismo that Arnold had asked Santa Claus for. And the Joe-Burger was right there. That loony beggar-man blocking the door was a nuisance, but I yelled "Don't touch me!" and went past him anyway. I thought it was a joke when the girl taking my order asked, "Would you like an Eggnog Slushie Special with your coffee?" But I guess she had to ask everyone that question today or get fired.

Wasn't Sidney Fox smart as a whip, Prudence? He always knew his Bible verses.

But sometimes too clever for his own good, if you ask me.

The Eggnog Slushie Special. Yuk. A mass-produced fake-food quote-unquote "treat", fabricated for the common consumer. Full of artificial ingredients, sugar substitutes and redundant calories.

A Joe-Burger exclusive. No one in their right mind would spend their money on a paper cup full of badly-flavoured ice. And in December too.

Yes. Whenever Sidney got into trouble in Sunday School, he always made sure we couldn't prove he was responsible.

But he was never able to convince us that it wasn't actually his doing. His eyes always gave him away.

The Slushie tasted worse than I expected. Ugh. I only bought the small size, naturally, as it was only an experiment. But what a golden opportunity to experience an example of what keeps the masses in their place! That's what made my first, last and only sip of Eggnog Slushie more than worthwhile.

I still believe Sydney took the money from the offering basket that day, Prudence. It couldn't have been anyone else.

I think he did it more than once, Petunia. It probably took a while before we caught on to him.

When I left the Joe-Burger that untouchable beggar was still there. And it suddenly occurred to me that the Eggnog Slushie was made for people exactly like him. Its phony rum taste is probably better than what he's used to, so I gave him my drink. And while I thought he wasn't looking, I dropped a couple of pennies into his hat, and pulled a few dollar coins out. As payback for the Slushie. And to prove my fingers hadn't lost their touch. Of course, once you have the knack, you never lose it. Just like riding a bicycle.

He swore those seven nickels we found in his pocket were his own.

Though he wouldn't look at us when he said so.

But as I walked away, I felt a sharp wet smack on the back of my neck. And then an icy trickle down my spine. That's when I realized what an ungrateful coward that dirty beggar truly was. He'd thrown my Eggnog Slushie back and hit me from behind. A real man would have confronted me face to face. I could have turned around and called the cops to get him into trouble. My word against his. No contest. But I was in a hurry. And I wasn't going to sink to his level. So I just kept on going.

We couldn't accuse him outright, just in case we were wrong.

Reverend Abercrombie called a special assembly of the elders. My husband had to go.

Oh damn! I used up all my spare change at the computer store this afternoon. All I've got left is a twenty for the collection plate. And this horror show isn't worth that price of admission. Hmmm. There are ways to get around it, of course. I could suffer a post-Slushie attack and escape to the washroom. Or maybe this is my chance to get even with God and make him pay for my wasted evening...

Surely Sidney Fox outgrew his petty thievery long ago, Prudence, and he's a good Christian father to his son now.

Perhaps, Petunia, but I don't believe we've seen him in church since last Christmas Eve.

If Arnold is so good at learning quotations about religion, when we get home I'll have to teach him my favourite phrase from Voltaire. "If God didn't exist, it would be necessary to invent him." Those words also pertain to Santa Claus, Eggnog Slushie Specials, and anything else created to subdue and placate the world's blithering idiots. I'd better not tell Arnold it applies to Santa Claus though. His mother would kill me.

It's the devious close-set eyes, isn't it?

So that will be your lesson in peace from me, Arnold. You'll never achieve it by lighting candles and singing hymns. You have to contrive peace by keeping the Slushie-eating rabble at bay with foolish platitudes about God. Or any other higher cause that happens to be convenient. Yes. Excellent. Some day Arnold will thank me for giving him this advice. If I'd been that enlightened when I was eight years old, it would have spared me the grief of learning a lot of useless Bible verses.

And the receding chin too...

But Voltaire will be our secret, Arnold. We don't need to tell your mother everything. Sometimes life's more peaceful that way. I know Voltaire would agree.

Let's hope the boy only looks like his father...

**... For Jesus is coming to show us the way,
A message of peace humbly laid in the hay.**

Third Light

Thank you Arnold. We're all very proud of you tonight. Arnold achieved the honour of lighting our Candle of Peace for being the only boy who learned all of his Bible verses in his Sunday School class. For the girls, our Bible verse expert is Clara. She will now light our Candle of Joy.

Florence Jones never learned her Bible verses in Sunday School.

That's why Reverend Abercrombie wouldn't let her be the Virgin Mary, Petunia.

On this Christmas Eve, we thank God for the joy he pours into our hearts...

She made a very pouty sheep.

I don't think she appreciated Reverend Abercrombie.

Joy

**A candle is burning, a candle of joy,
A candle to welcome brave Mary's new boy.**

Christmas fog. That's what I call it. Starting on Christmas Eve, it's as if a cloud of fog descends over the world, smothering everyday life, and dumbing everyone down to subjects only related to Christmas. On the radio and TV, the lead news story is always a report on how crowded the shopping malls are. Including interviews with last-minute morons who were too stupid to shop when the traffic was lighter and the selection was better. Then they give you a count of how many pilgrims showed up for church in Manger Square in Bethlehem, and end with a make-believe sighting of Santa Claus. It's the same thing every year! And everyone you meet starts asking, "Are you ready for Christmas?" Till you want to tell them to make like a turkey and get stuffed. Give me a break.

That girl Clara has a pretty poinsettia flower in her hair, Prudence.

Yes, Petunia. I think she's Rhonda Wellington's daughter. Do you remember Rhonda? She's over there, in the blue dress.

Christmas fog. Every year I promise myself not to get lost in it. And every year I get sucked in anyway. But Rhonda, you're the mother who named her daughter after the girl in the Nutcracker. And helped her learn all her Bible verses so she could light this Advent Candle. Yes, you're probably a hopeless case when it comes to Christmas schmaltz. But this afternoon should have cured you of sentimentality forever. Damn it, Rhonda. You promised yourself you wouldn't think about it. But Jesus, why do men always turn out to be such jerks in the end?

Of course! She's the girl we used to call Ranting Rhonda!

Yes, I suppose we did. Do you remember why?

Jack and I had always been sort of friends. Nothing more. Going back to our grade school days. Why couldn't I have just left it that way? But to a single mom, desperately looking for love, he seemed to have Mr. Right potential. Clara even liked him, which was a first. He told me he felt lonely after his marriage broke up. Lonely schmonely. What a liar. But I have to hand it to him. He really knew how to push my buttons to get me to have sex with him. It's obvious now that's all he wanted.

She had such a crush on Jack Rigby.

And she always insisted on sitting beside him.

Afternoon delight. That's what we called it. I'd leave Clara playing with her friends, and dash over to Jack's place for a quickie. It was the only way for me to make time for an encounter. And it was a secret that only Jack and I shared, which made it all the more exciting and romantic.

My word - yes. If anyone tried to come between her and Jack, she'd throw a tantrum. That's why we called her Ranting Rhonda!

Of course! Didn't she make such a scene at the Sunday School Picnic one year, that Reverend Abercrombie himself had to intervene?

I'd always phone first, to warn him I was coming. But this afternoon, I just didn't have time. And I thought a Christmas Eve surprise would be fun. So like one of Santa's little elves, carrying a tray of shortbreads I'd baked myself, I quietly let myself into the front porch through the outer door he always left unlocked. And that was when it hit me like a ton of bricks. The truth. That Jack was just like all the rest.

Wasn't it something to do with the egg-and-spoon contest?

No, Petunia, I think it was the three-legged race.

I saw the boots first. They were long and slim, with fur at the top and heels that only a woman would wear. Then I noticed Jack's shoes lying beside them. For a moment, I stood dumbfounded, wondering if somehow they actually might be Jack's boots. Or if I'd left a pair of my boots there. Or if Jack had a new cleaning lady. Then I heard a light, playful laugh from somewhere inside. Followed by Jack's low chuckle. It was a sound I only heard Jack make when we were sharing our afternoon delight. The bastard!

Oh yes, Prudence, it was the three-legged race.

I believe Reverend Abercrombie had to cancel the entire event that year.

I didn't think about what happened next. I just did it. I took those horrible boots and Jack's shoes out to the street, and filled them with slush from the gutter. Then I put them back inside the porch. It serves him right! Let Jack explain to his new Miss Afternoon Delight why her pretty boots suddenly got so soggy!

It's all coming back to me, Petunia. Jack and his twin sister Judy's legs were all tied up for the race and ready to go.

But Ranting Rhonda was so upset because she couldn't race with Jack, she grabbed their running-shoes off their feet, and threw them into the river. Poor Jack and Judy couldn't chase after Rhonda to stop her, because they were joined together at the shins.

The shortbread tasted so-ooo good. By the time I got home, it was all gone. My stomach was comforted in a warm, buttery way. But it filled my soul with a pure, sweet joy even more. It'll be sort of a relief to be back on my own again. No more frantic afternoon scheduling. Besides, Jack wasn't very good in bed anyway. But I'll wait until after Christmas before I tell Clara. Or anybody

else.

Reverend Abercrombie's sermon was "Thou Shalt not Covet" the next Sunday.

He always knew just what to say, and he never jumped to quick conclusions. I think I miss him most at Christmas time.

Well, Clara, your Candle of Joy is glowing nicely with the others. But instead of bright candles and joyful light, maybe there's something to be said for Christmas fog after all. At least this year it'll help me make it through the holidays.

Are you ready for Christmas, Petunia?

I'm always ready for Christmas, Prudence.

**... Our hearts fill with wonder, and eyes light and glow,
As Joy brightens winter, as sunshine on snow.**

Fourth Light

And now we'll light the fourth candle on the Advent Wreath. The Candle of Love. Tonight, this will be done by Natasha, who had perfect attendance in Bible Study Class this year.

Did you love Reverend Abercrombie, Prudence?

Oh yes Petunia. I think we all loved him. And he loved us back.

This Candle signifies to us that God is Love...

I don't love Florence Jones.

But Reverend Jones is a woman, Petunia. It's not the same thing at all.

Love

**A candle is burning, a candle of love,
A candle to point us to Heaven above...**

Jesus H. Christ! Cindy hasn't used her hymn-book all night. She knows all the words to the whole Christmas hit parade. Even the second verses. And she sure can belt them out. I never knew she even went to church. She must sneak away while I'm still sleeping off Saturday night. And there's her daughter Tasha up there with the minister, lighting the holy Candle of Lo-ohve for never missing a week of Sunday School. It's scary. Zac, my boy, what kind of religious freaks have you got yourself mixed up with? And what if she finds out the only good use you've ever found for the Bible is as a paperweight? Yikes. I guess I'd better just keep on singing and pretending like everything's peachy cool. Glory friggin' Hallelujah!

Prudence, that nice little girl there said Hello to me tonight before the service. Who is she again?

Her name's Natasha. And she's probably as friendly as her mother used to be. You know. Cindy Fraser? She's standing beside that tall man in the plaid shirt. And she's still singing as loud as ever.

But Cindy can't be a total all-out two-fisted Bible-Pounder. Or she'd never put up with me and my cussin' and drinkin' ways. And come to think of it, I'm not the only one who farts in bed in the middle of the night. So which one is the real Cindy? The goody-two-shoes choir girl beside me right now? Or my drinkin' buddy on the weekend? I guess if I told her the truth about what happened in the video store this afternoon, I'd get my answer for sure.

Cindy Fraser always knew all the words to every hymn by heart.

She knew them so well, Petunia, she made up parodies of all the Christmas carols, and taught

them to the other boys and girls.

That bitch at the cash register didn't have to do what she did. She didn't have to yell at the top of her lungs, "Sir, you can't rent 'The Griswold's Christmas Vacation' until you bring back 'Sex Kittens Find True Romance'. It's more than six weeks past due, you know." And then she kind of sneered and said, "Unless you want me to charge it to your credit card?" And there was Cindy standing right beside me, holding the 'Christmas Vacation' box in her hand.

You mean she sang naughty verses like "While Shepherds Washed Their Socks By Night?"

In Cindy Fraser's version, I believe the word was "clutched", not washed, Petunia.

I blamed it on my kid of course. What else could I do? I said he was always using my credit card when I wasn't looking. Cindy seemed to buy it. Or at least she didn't make a big deal over it. She just handed the cashier 'The Griswold's Christmas Vacation' and told me I had good taste in movies. Now I just hope she forgets about the whole thing before my son shows up after spending Christmas with his mother. What the Hell! At least I'll be able to watch 'Sex Kittens Find True Romance' now whenever I want. Like the Reverend Lady said. It's time to light your Candle of Love. So burn, Baby, burn.

Oh my stars, Prudence. Yes. And it wasn't their socks either, was it?

Reverend Abercrombie did not approve. He called her a menace.

Come on, Tasha, hustle your buns up there and get that candle of yours going. I've got a Christmas present for your mother in my pocket, and I want to ask her a huge question when we get home. And I'm only cooling my jets here because I think she's the hottest creature this side of Venus. So hurry up, Kiddo. But hey - Tasha - maybe you come here all the time for the same reason I did tonight. Maybe you got your perfect Sunday attendance record because you're sweet on some guy who you can only see in church. Yeah. That must be it. Because I know you're no angel the rest of the week. But it'd better not be that chinless Arnold creep standing there beside you. You can do better than a Bible-babbling loser like him.

When she was a teenager, didn't Cindy Fraser run away from home? And didn't they find her living right downtown?

There were many, many rumours, Petunia. Reverend Abercrombie described her behaviour as being too friendly for her own good.

I wonder what Cindy will say when I ask her. I mean I know she'll say yes. Well, after seeing her tonight... I still know she'll say yes. But I wonder if she'll be surprised, or just kind of blase. As if she was expecting it all along, I know she'll love the ring. Even if it isn't new. But she doesn't have to know that. I couldn't afford a new one as nice as this right now. Good thing I grabbed it that day in the boathouse when Betty-Sue threw it back at me. Talk about a lucky catch...

Wasn't there even some scandal about a movie she made?

Among other things, Petunia. And Reverend Abercrombie assured us that everything we heard about her was God's truth.

Oh. My. God. The inscription's still inside the ring. I never thought to change it. "Z & BS FOREVER". Damn. Damn. Damn it, Zac. What do you do now? You can't wait till after Christmas to fix it up. It's the only good present you've got for Cindy. You have to give it to her. You could try to say you bought it at a pawnshop. But she knows who Betty-Sue is. She's even met her. So that would only make the BS even worse. Zac, you bloody dummy. You're just going to have to go through with it. Maybe she won't notice. Yeah, right. What woman gets an engagement ring and doesn't look for an inscription?

I believe the movie had something to do with animals, or pets. Was it kittens? I think they were kittens, Prudence.

They were SEX kittens, Petunia. Reverend Abercrombie felt obliged to watch the movie three times, to understand the full extent of its sin.

Choir girl? Drinking buddy? Which will she turn out to be? And how will I spend the rest of my life? Sharing the future with my wife? Or watching 'Sex Kittens Find True Romance' every Saturday night? Maybe I'm not ready to find out the truth quite yet. So take all the time you need to light your Candle of Love, Tasha. I'm in no hurry to get home after all.

I'm sure Reverend Abercrombie wanted to gather all the facts for himself first hand, so he could preach an authentic sermon against smut and filth. He was always thorough in his duties.

Such a noble man...

**... A baby for Christmas, a wonderful birth,
For Jesus is bringing God's love to our earth.**

Fifth Light

Thank you Natasha, and also Annie, Arnold and Clara for your help in our Advent Wreath ceremony tonight. Now, I will light the final candle, set in the centre of the others, to commemorate Baby Jesus.

I wondered if Florence Jones would save the best candle for herself.

She always wanted to take the most important part.

Dear God, grant that the Hope, Peace, Joy and Love of Advent will be fully realized in us, as we worship you through Jesus Christ our Lord...

I think I have one more mint left, Petunia.

Bless you, dear.

Jesus

**Be near me, Lord Jesus, I ask thee to stay,
Close by me forever, and love me I pray,**

Won't those two old bats in the choir ever shut up? They haven't stopped whispering all night. And those crinkling cellophane candy wrappers are driving me nuts! These youngsters helping me light the candles are behaving better than old Pet and Pru. Even Annie's kept her lip buttoned, not to mention her dress.

I think Reverend Jones is frowning at us, Petunia.

Was I singing off key, Prudence?

If only I could find a rock-solid reason for kicking them both out of the choir. Something I could justify to the elders, using some lofty Christian excuse. Supposedly with the best interests of both the congregation and Pet and Pru at heart.

I thought your pitch was perfect, Dear.

Bless you, Prudence. Where are you spending Christmas this year?

I could try making the case that they talk too damn much, and their singing disrupts the rest of the choir. But that approach is far too honest to work in church.

I'll be staying with my son, of course.

I'll be with my son too, Prudence. His name is Jesus. Jesus Abercrombie.

I guess I could ask myself the cut-to-the-chase question that everyone else around here uses. "How would Reverend Abercrombie have dealt with this situation?"

My son's name is Jesus too. Abercrombie Jesus. He'll be coming to pick me up in his bus after the service.

My son drives a bus as well. And he's always there when I need a ride.

I know. I'll convince the old foggy place where they both live that the winter air could be bad for their lungs, especially after they've been singing. Perfect. A pneumonia scare would definitely put choir practice off their limits, at least till the spring. And I'm sure that's how Reverend Abercrombie would have handled the problem.

This is going to be one of the best Christmases I've ever had, Prudence.

It's already had a wonderful start, Petunia. Aren't the candles beautiful?

But I'll have to be careful how I play my hand with this. There are lots of others like Prudence and Petunia in the congregation who've never quite accepted me. Simply because I'm unable to offer them everything they got from their beloved Reverend Abercrombie. That devious old deviant. He made his first pass at me when I was only fourteen.

I've lost my place in the hymnbook, Prudence.

Here, share mine.

Face it, Flo. You're a wuss. You'll never be able to do things the way that old bugger Abercrombie did. Thank the Lord. So you'll just have to keep on sending Jesus, that Filipino driver, to shuttle those two granny fruitcakes back and forth every week for their choir practice jollies. And trust that's what the real Jesus would have done too.

Bless, you my Dear. And Merry Christmas.

Merry Christmas to you too.

**...Bless all the dear children in thy tender care,
And take us to Heaven to live with thee there.**

Amen.

Let us pray...

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