

## QUAKER OATS CHRISTMAS

### White Gift Sunday

Christ, by highest heaven adored  
Christ, the everlasting Lord,  
Late in time behold him come  
Offspring of a virgin's womb.  
Veiled in flesh the Godhead see;  
Hail the incarnate deity,  
Pleased as Man with man to dwell,  
Jesus, our Emmanuel!  
Hark! The herald angels sing  
Glory to the newborn King.

I just can't figure it. Grown-ups act so strange sometimes. My mother knows she's a terrible singer. At home, she would never hum along with the radio. Not even when she's doing her baking and has it turned up full blast. But here in church, with all her friends around, something's different. She loves to sing louder than everyone else. Right now she's screaming out 'Hark the Harold Angels Sing', and her voice is all I can hear from six rows ahead. It's so awful. I just want to crawl under my seat and hide.

"Your Ma sounds like Death-ill Merman." What a jerk Ricky Blake is. Ow! That hurt! Look at the coward. Sliding over to the next pew so I can't hit him back. Don't worry. I'll get even later. And who is he to talk anyhow? His mother hasn't come to church since last Christmas.

I'm not going to try to sing any more. I'm too embarrassed by my mom, and I don't understand the words anyway. What's a virgin's wum? Rhymes with come. And why does it need an offspring? To wind it up? Veiled in flesh... All I can think of is a fancy hat of my mother's, with sausages looped around it. And God knows what an incarnate deity might be. The whole thing doesn't sound like much of a compliment to Jesus. Or Emmanuel. Or whoever it is we're singing about. Besides, my name is John, not Harold. And I never want to be an angel. So what is this song all about? I just can't figure it.

Aah-menn.

Finally. What a relief. No more singing for now. It's Reverend Byers' turn to speak. "Dear friends, on this White Gift Sunday, we have an opportunity to remember those less fortunate families, who are facing a bleak Christmas..." "

Uh-oh. Things are going from bad to worse. It's almost time to get up and put our stuff in the baskets at the front. Geez, I bet I've got the dumbest gifts here. Thanks to my mother. All I asked her for was two dollars for a hockey stick, because my Sunday school class was told to bring a toy for someone our own age. Two lousy bucks. But she wouldn't listen. 'Your father hasn't worked steady since the summer, and I don't have money for frills. And anyone getting a White Gift Basket needs food more than toys. Now come over here and take these.' Oh my God. Quaker Oats. And Kraft Dinner. Who ever heard of Christmas macaroni and porridge? What ridiculous presents. I guess I shouldn't have drawn a moustache on the picture of the man on the oats box. But I was mad. And I did put a hockey card in with the Kraft Dinner. My best trader. Gordie Howe. Ricky Blake had offered me Boom Boom Geoffrion and four others for it, but I'd rather give it away than let him have it. I must have used about ten sheets of tissue paper to cover each box. But I didn't want anyone in my class to see through the wrapping and know I'd brought food instead of toys. They all would have laughed at me for sure. And was it a sin to mark the outside of each package 'Toy - Eleven Year Old Boy'? I hope God won't hold it against me too much. But what else could I do?

"And now, as we present our gifts, let us remember that it is more blessed to give than to receive."

Yeah, right. That's easy for Reverend Byers to say. No Quaker Oats under his tree this year. Where do all these White Gifts end up anyway? Who gets them? I guess they go to those really poor people you always see right downtown. Like that old man with the brown paper bag, who asked my mother for a dime once in the subway. He smelled like pears, only strong and sweet. And he used a curse word I'd never heard before, when she told him 'No'. I don't even think Ricky Blake knew what it meant. But then, why had my mother put a quarter in the Salvation Army box a little while later? The lady in the bonnet had rung her bells and said 'God Bless You'. But wasn't she collecting money to buy dinner for people like that old bum who had just sworn at us? So why would my mother want to help her do that? And how did she know that lady's name was Sally-Ann? I just can't figure it.

Here goes. It's my class's turn to go up and drop off our parcels. There, it's done. I'm so glad I'll never have to see them again.

"Our final carol will be number four hundred and sixteen in the United Church Hymnary, 'Silent Night'."

Oh no. Not more singing. I can hardly wait to get out of here. I wonder if Ricky Blake wants to play ball hockey after church.

Silent Night, Holy Night  
All is calm, all is bright,  
Round yon virgin...

There's that word again. I'll have to ask my mom what's so special about virgins. And their wums. I could ask Ricky Blake, but I don't think he'd give me a straight answer.

Silent Night, Holy Night...

This song is really dragging. And it isn't very silent with my mother back there. But we're on the last verse. And Reverend Byers is following the choir down the aisle. Amen. Yahoo! It's finally over. Now to find my mother quick, and get her moving. If she starts gabbing with her friends we'll never get home. Oh phooey! She's already whispering to Reverend Byers by the door.

"I just thought I should tell you, Reverend, that Florence Blake has had another operation. The ... tumor was in her ... w-womb ... this time."

Was Mrs. Blake a virgin? It seemed at least she had a wum. But why was my mother finding it so hard to say a word she had been merrily singing about only a few minutes before? I'm sure 'wum' can't be swearing, because they wouldn't put it in songs about Jesus if it was. So what's my mother's problem? Weird things happen in church. The rules are all different here. I just can't figure it.

"I'm glad you told me, Mrs. Carter. I hope the operation was a success, and that she'll be home for Christmas. The Blake family has had a rough year, haven't they? What with Florence being sick, and her husband out of a job. You can see the strain showing on Ricky. He's at that delicate age..."

Delicate? Get real, Reverend! C'mon, Mom... I want to go home and fire a slap shot at Ricky Blake's delicate head!

"John, stop pulling at my arm while I'm talking. Now say goodbye to Reverend Byers. And wish him 'Merry Christmas'."

At last, we're out of there. I'll try running on ahead, to see if it will make my mother

walk faster.

"Watch out for that puddle, John!" Those pants have to go to the cleaners if they get dirty. Slow down and come back here beside me. Please."

Well, I guess this is about the best chance I'll get. So let's see what happens.

"Mom, what's a virgin's wum?"

"A what?"

"A virgin's wum. It was in one of those songs we had to sing in church. You know. Offspring of a virgin's wum. It rhymed with come."

"Was that what you and Ricky Blake were fidgeting about? I saw the two of you making a fuss, when you should have been standing still."

"No, I didn't do anything. Ricky Blake said you were a funny singer. Then he poked me. But you were talking about Mrs. Blake's wum with Reverend Byers after church. Will Mrs. Blake be a virgin again when her wum gets better?"

"Everyone should always sing their best in church. We go there to praise the Lord. Now I want you to change out of your Sunday clothes as soon as we get home."

But what about my question? I don't know why she won't give me an answer. Unless 'wum' is one of those special words that only grown-ups can use. Like 'breast'. I remember one day my Grandma was at our house for dinner, and we were having chicken. When she asked for a nice piece of the breast, my father gave her some of the best meat. It looked really white and juicy. But when I asked for a big piece of breast, and even remembered 'please', my mother gave me a cuff on the ear, and told me not to be so bold. And my father gave me a wing with some bony parts attached to it. But knights were bold too, weren't they? And they were good guys. But I bet they could say anything they liked about breasts. And they wouldn't have to eat chicken wings either. I just can't figure it.

Hey, there's Ricky Blake in his driveway, and he's got his hockey net.

"Bye Mom. See you later. I'll be at Ricky's."

"John, remember to change your clothes. Like I said."

There goes the bow tie. The shirt. And the pants. Where's my Maple Leaf sweater? Got it. OK. Look out Ricky Blake, here I come!

Boy, playing hockey is tons more fun than sitting in church. And being in goal is the

best. Even if I have to use Ricky Blake's broken stick, while he takes shots with mine.

"Not so hard, Blake . You'll break my stick too!"

"Aw, you're just chicken. Stop this one!"

Crrrack.

"You broke it! You idiot! I told you not to shoot so hard."

"Quit whining. Your stick was coming unstuck when you gave it to me."

"Liar! Hand it over. I'm going home."

What a dumb game. I hate Ricky Blake.

Now that hockey's done like a dinner, I've got another idea. Where's the dictionary? All right now. Viking ... Violet ... VIRGIN. Person, especially a woman, who has had no sexual intercourse. Better look up intercourse to see what she's missing. INTERCOURSE. Social communication between individuals. Does that mean a virgin is someone who never talks about sex? If that's right, Ricky Blake and me are the only people I know who talk about it. So is everyone else a virgin? My mother and Grandma must be for sure. And what about 'wum'? I can't find it in here at all.

"Say Kid, you look confused."

Maybe my father can help. But I'm just going to ask him about one word at a time.

"Dad, how does someone get to be a virgin?"

"Geez, I don't know. Eat an onion a day. That could do the trick!"

I can't believe onions are the secret. He must be kidding me. Maybe this virgin stuff isn't very important to anyone outside of church. But I've got to know.

"So could I be a virgin if I tried hard enough?"

"I'd be really surprised if you weren't a virgin right now."

'But I haven't done anything, Dad."

"That's what being a virgin is all about, Kid."

This is going nowhere. I'll have to try the other word.

"If I'm a virgin, then do I have a wum?"

"A what?"

"A wum. In the Harold Angels Christmas carol we sang about a virgin's wum."

No, Kid. You don't have one of those. And you never will."

"So do only special virgins get wums? I know Mrs. Blake has one. That's where she's sick. I heard Mom telling Reverend Byers about it after church today."

"I hate to tell you this, but Mrs. Blake is no virgin. Look, let me explain it this way. Remember a few weeks ago, when I was changing the spark plugs on Old Man Higgins' pickup truck? You wanted to know what I was doing, and what spark plugs were. So to start with, I told you about gasoline and carburetors and distributor caps and timing, and then we looked at the engine, and when we were all finished, I think you understood pretty well how spark plugs worked. But to learn about spark plugs, you needed to know a lot of other things first. Right? Well, these words you're picking up in church are kind of like spark plugs. They can't be understood properly just on their own. They're all mixed up with a lot of other stuff about men and women and religion and sex. Things you aren't even aware that you've still got to discover. The trouble is, getting first-hand experience to see how they all fit together isn't nearly as easy as opening the hood of a truck, and checking out the engine parts. Because they involve people, not simple things, which makes everything far more complicated. But don't worry, Kid. You'll learn."

"Hey fellas, dinner's ready."

"Your mother's cooked a chicken for tonight. Smells good, doesn't it? So if you wash your hands and say grace, I'll make sure you get a big piece of breast meat. OK? How's that for a deal?"

At least I'd got him to say 'sex' and 'breast'. But I never know if I can believe my Dad or not when he winks at me. I just can't figure it.

### The Christmas Tree

"That doesn't look so bad, eh Kid?"

This has to be the worst Christmas tree in the whole world. All droopy and withered. Half the needles have fallen off already. But with only two days till Christmas, it was the best one left on Old Man Higgins' lot. I'm sure my father didn't pay him anything. It was supposedly part of the deal for tuning up his truck. We could have any tree we wanted, after he had sold all the good ones to everyone else. Merry Christmas.

I remember last year we picked out the best tree Old Man Higgins had. It was tall and bushy, and smelled so good. We even had to buy new decorations to fill up all the branches. But this year the ornaments just kind of sag there, and spin around

in big open gaps. I thought the lights were going to help, but they only made it look worse. When we plugged both sets of lights in, nothing happened. And then my Dad started to explain about electric current, and things joined in series, and how when one light burns out they all go off. Until I wanted to puke. Finally we traded around enough of the lights, and put all the duds at the top of the tree, so the bottom ones worked. But a half-lit tree looks pretty stupid. And the star doesn't come on like it's supposed to either.

Ricky Blake called it a 'Scotched Pine' when he saw us bringing it into the house. He should see it now. Over my dead body.

"Mom, can I go to the store and buy some more lights for the tree?"

"John, I haven't paid last month's hydro bill yet. The last thing we need around here is more lights."

Sorry I asked. I think I'm going to throw up again.

Rap Rap Rap.

I wonder who that could be? I hope they don't notice the tree. Holy cats! It's Reverend Byers. And he's - carrying a basket!

"Won't you come in, Reverend?"

"Thank you Mrs. Carter, but I can't stay. The elders and I decided this Christmas that it was best to assist those members of our own congregation who might need help. So I hope you'll accept this gift in the spirit that it's given."

What? Who does Reverend Byers think we are? Dirty bums who live off charity? Can't he see we're an ordinary family, who goes to church and has a Christmas tree like everyone else?

Or almost. Besides, we GIVE White Gifts. We don't RECEIVE them. And Reverend Byers himself said it's better that way. God might not even let us into Heaven if we take any of this stuff. Thank goodness I know my parents well enough to be sure they'll never accept this crummy basket of groceries.

"You don't know how much this will help out, Reverend."

My father said that?

"Yes, this is very kind of you and the congregation."

Even my mother?

Oh my God. What if Ricky Blake sees what's happening. He only lives across the

street, after all. He's probably told everyone that we've got an ugly Christmas tree already. And by tomorrow the whole neighbourhood will know about our White Gift Basket. I'll never be able to go out and play again.

This is too much. I can't stick around any longer. I think I'll stay here in my bedroom where it's safe till Easter. My parents wouldn't have taken that food from Reverend Byers because they were greedy, would they? No. But are we really that poor? I just can't figure it.

### Christmas Day

Hey, today's Christmas! Six o'clock. Should I get up yet? No, better not. Too early. Mom would only tell me to go back to sleep until eight. I'll wait another hour and then it should be OK. I wonder if there's any reason to wake up anyway. There won't be a lot of presents like last year. But Dad did help me hang up my stocking last night, which was a good sign. He'll probably fill it with stuff from the fridge. Apples and oranges. Junk like that. Oh well. A new hockey stick is all I really want. But I don't know if my hints sunk in... Just... one... more... hour...

Jeepers! It's almost eight o'clock! And Dad's in the kitchen making coffee. How could I have slept so long? Time to find out if I was right about my stocking. Yep. From the feel of it, there's an orange, a can of tuna and some nuts in the toe. Big deal. I don't even like tuna. Oh, wait a minute. It's a hockey puck. And a tennis ball for road hockey. Neat! And these aren't nuts. They're lights for the Christmas tree! Let's see. If I put the blue one here, and a yellow one over there, and use a red light for the star... Wow! The whole tree's lit up!

"Mom! Dad! Look! Merry Christmas! Come on and open up the presents!"

"John, this is so cute. Let me give you a kiss."

"Ya, Kid. You did a good job."

It wasn't much, really, but I hope they liked it. Just a doorstop shaped like a dog that I'd made in woodworking shop at school. It didn't even cost me anything.

"Here Kid, this one's got your name on it."

It's obviously not a hockey stick. But why should the box be covered with so much wrapping paper? Who cares? It's what's inside that counts.

Rrrrrrrripp.

Oh God! The Quaker Oats Man! With my moustache! It's a White Gift from Hell! I've got to get back to my room quick. I can't let them see me cry. I wish my father's plant had never shut down. If he was still working there, Reverend Byers wouldn't have brought us that White Gift Basket. And why had my mother dragged me to church with those horrible presents, when I'd wanted to take a hockey stick? But it's that darned Ricky Blake who's to blame the most. It was to keep him from snooping that I wrapped up my White Gift packages so that no one could tell what they were, and marked them as toys. He's the one who really wrecked my Christmas.

"John, I've made some oatmeal turnovers. The kind you like, with date filling. I want you to take some over to Ricky's house. With Mrs. Blake just home from the hospital, they won't have any Christmas baking."

Was I hearing right? My mother was asking me to bring treats to the enemy! And why would she want to feed the Blake family? She throws Ricky out of our house almost as often as I do. And she blames Mrs. Blake for letting him get away with murder. But she likes Mr. Blake least of all. She thinks he drinks too much, and I've heard her say he'll never get another job, unless he sobers up. So what makes her believe they deserve goodies? And can we afford to give away food from our White Gift Basket? Especially my favourite date turnovers. I just can't figure it.

"John, are you coming?"

"Aw, Mom, why should Ricky Blake get any special presents?"

"When people are sick, their neighbours should help out. Especially at Christmas. Now take this cookie tin and run along while they're still warm. And shut the door behind you."

Slammmmm.

I'm in no hurry to play Santa Claus. So let's have a peek in here. Oh boy, that tastes good. How about another one? She put in quite a few, and no one will ever know what's missing. Besides, Ricky Blake owes me a lot more than a couple-of turnovers that he never knew he had. Another little one shouldn't hurt. There. I'll jiggle the tin a bit, so it'll look full again. Good. Somehow that makes me feel better.

Bzzzzzzzzz.

Just my luck. I knew Ricky was going to open the door.

'My Mom sent this over because your mother's sick.'

"Thanks. Mmmmm. They're good. Want one? You know, if your Ma could sing as well as she bakes, she'd be perfect. Sometimes I wish... Want to play hockey or something?"

"My stick's broken. REMEMBER?"

"Oh, right. You didn't get a new one for Christmas, huh?"

"No."

"Me neither. All I got was a Kraft Dinner. All wrapped up with a hockey card inside. Gordie Howe. So I don't need him from you any more. My father must have done it when he was drunk. But where would he get a hockey card from? And Gordie Howe, too. I just can't figure it. What are you laughing at?"

"The White Gifts from Hell have struck again!"

"Yeah. It sounds like a horror movie, doesn't it? Where some Christmas monster steals the hockey stick I'm really supposed to get, and leaves a package of macaroni and cheese instead. With Gordie Howe's picture, to remind me about the hockey stick and make me feel even worse."

"You'd better not eat the Kraft Dinner. You might turn into a hockey puck. Can I have another turnover?"

Maybe Ricky Blake and I need each other more than I realized...

"Remember our Scotched pine Christmas tree? It looks pretty good now it's all lit up. You should come over and see it sometime."

"OK. We never had a tree this year. My father said he didn't have time, but I think we were just too broke. But I'm getting a paper route next week. The Telegram. Forty customers. If you want to help, we could both save enough for a couple of hockey sticks pretty fast. And do you still need Boom Boom Geoffrion? You can have him if you want. I'll bring him with me when I come to see your tree."

How could someone like Ricky Blake be an enemy yesterday, and a friend today? And who knows what he'll be tomorrow? I just can't figure it.

I guess my Dad was right. Life sure is complicated. Full of people I'll probably never understand. Including my mother, who sings about words she hates to say, and who feeds people she wouldn't invite to dinner. There she is in the kitchen, cooking as usual. But my father doesn't seem too busy. I've got to ask him a question.

"Dad, are we poor?"

"We are right now, Kid. That's why we needed that White Gift Basket, and couldn't afford to buy you the hockey stick you wanted."

"Will we be poor for a long time?"

"Actually, I'm expecting something to turn up pretty soon. So don't worry. I'd say by next year we'll have completely forgotten our Quaker Oats Christmas."

Maybe. But I wish he'd stop winking at me. "I never thought I'd see that box of oatmeal again. Ugh."

"It must have come as quite a shock. But I want you to know it was your Mom's idea to use it for those date turnovers. She felt bad for you, Son."

"When I took them to Ricky's house, he said he'd got a Kraft Dinner for Christmas."

"He did? I bet that put a smile on your face, you little rascal. It just shows that truth is stranger than fiction. And funnier too, eh Kid?"

"Just don't tell him where it came from, OK?"

"My lips are sealed."

"Thanks, Dad."

But something still bothers me. Especially because time is running out. After today, the Christmas carols will stop, and my chance to ask questions about them will be gone for another year. My Dad has told me a lot of complicated stuff already, which makes me think that a couple of lousy words must be easier to explain than all the other things we've talked about. So I'm going to give him one more try.

"So Dad, what's a virgin's wum?"

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