Eleven Bells A Ringing

by bluetoast

Summary

Christmas Eve and Gabriel is in search of a miracle to perform. His wanderings take him to a pediatric ward of a hospital, and since there's just one child who gets their miracle, it's not exactly an easy choice.

The monitors and life support machines of the pediatric ward is a symphony of the worst kind. It is not the whooshing sound of the machines that give air to lungs that cannot work on their own, nor the even steady thump of heart monitors that perform the counterpoint. No, Gabriel thinks, it is not the sounds itself that are horrifying – it is the fact that they must exist at all. Granted, he is very glad that mankind has gained the knowledge for such machines, but the fact that they are here, giving life to children too ill to hold onto something they should have grasped firmly.

Life.

The souls aren't entirely aware of their presence, and Gabriel alone knows why he's here.

Yesterday morning he put Dean and Liesel Coulter on a plane bound for Washington D.C. This year has been cruel to them and spending Christmas in their home alone is not what is best for them. Dean needs his parents, although he'd never admit it, and Liesel needs him and her grandparents – although she doesn't entirely know it.

So here he is.

Even though he's an archangel, miracles are not something he's been given permission to perform in droves. The fact that there has to be permission seems almost as insane as the smaller than standard size life support machines giving strength to children who should be at home tonight, awaiting Christmas morning, not prisoners in their own failing bodies.
He knows what awaits the children in Heaven, should they succumb to injuries and illness. Paradise for the young in a playground that has been described in countless stories. While adults are left in places they love, the children of the Earth find their afterlife an endless vacation where they can throw snowballs and go swimming within mere seconds of each other.

Futures of the children if they do not surrender to their illnesses flicker past him. There's nothing too distinct – there's colleges and sporting games, laughter and dances, weddings, graduations – it's all happiness, telling him nothing of what remains hidden in the shadows. The bad parts of life – the pain, the suffering, the death and taxes.

Taxes definitely rate as a bad thing in Gabriel's mind.

Near the end of the hallway, however, he pauses. In a room lies a boy, isolated from the others on account of his illness. Large signs decorate his door warning about 'contact precautions' and it's clear to see why. Six months have passed since Gabriel saw Ignacia Coulter, but he can never forget the sight of what a body ravaged by cancer looks like. It also doesn't help that the boy is about the same size she was.

The boy in the bed is ten years old and his future to Gabriel is black.

Black the same way Liesel's and Dean's are and always have been.

The boy's future flickers to Heaven and back to black, and he glances up at the machine delivering chemotherapy drugs. It's got one of those new covers – the ones with emblems for superheroes.

The boy in the bed is apparently a fan of Captain America.

Gabriel steps closer and frowns as the boy's future flickers again. That's when he notices the boy's hand that isn't strapped to an IV.

He's signing in his sleep, one half of a song that it takes Gabriel a moment to recognize.

Carol of the Bells.

This boy has never heard the song – the boy in the bed has never heard anything.

How utterly ironic that he, The Messenger, keeps finding deaf people tied to his future.

He can let the boy succumb to his illness, gain his hearing and learn to sing in Heaven.

Or he can heal the boy and let his future stay dark.

Gabriel is about ready to leave when he remembers the letter that Liesel wrote to Santa this year. She wanted Santa to make someone else better so they didn't feel as bad as she did.

His mind made up, he sets a finger against the boy's temple, and while invisible to the world at large, the young man still turns his face towards him, as if he knew he was there. Gabriel closes his eyes, concentrating. Deep in the boy's brain, in a part of the cortex that mankind won't figure out how to manipulate for another two centuries, there is a small neuron that lies dormant.

Turning it on is as easy as flipping a switch.

It pulses for a moment and then, slowly, it begins to work.

The neuron glows and then reacts to the medicine coursing through the boy's veins. The cure will not be immediate, such things still take time. But now the one part of the brain that can tell the
body exactly what to do with the medicine it's receiving is hard at work, and slowly, Gabriel can feel the boy's cancer turn. The disease still has a firm grip, but now, thanks to one miniscule, undetectable change, infected cells are dying one by one. Come this summer, the blessed period sufferers of this disease call remission will have as firm of a grasp as the cancer currently does. By this time next year, doctors will proclaim him cured and free.

He withdraws his finger and as he does, he catches the young man's name.

Asher Eccleston.

“Don't know where you're coming in next, kiddo.” He sighs. “But at least you won't remember me.”

Gabriel stuffs his hands into his coat pockets and walks out of the ward and a moment later, he walks down a side street in St John’s, Newfoundland – and the bells are ringing. He smiles and stands in the cold, listening to the sounds of four different belfries echoing in the stillness. He closes his eyes and a for a moment there is nothing in the world but him, the snow and the glorious sounds of pealing bells.

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