

Midnight Mass

by Paul Hargreaves

“But that stuff all happened a long time ago, right?” I ask Mom as she pulls on my toque and mittens. “Exactly one thousand, nine hundred and sixty-five years ago tonight,” she says.

“So how come we *still* have to go to church?” Mom wraps a bulky-knit scarf around my face and over my mouth. She tightens it into a big knot in back of my collar.

“Because that's what we do,” she says, “So no more silly questions from you, little man; just get out there and help your brother shovel — it's getting late.”

The wind is cold, drifting over the snowbanks on either side of the driveway. The banks are so high and the drifts so deep that the car is mostly buried; you can't see the hood or the trunk - just the roof. Jake is on top of one bank, shoveling it down because it's too tall for even him to throw the snow over. He's using Dad's shovel; he always does any more.

“Start digging over there,” he shouts, pointing behind the car. The snowing has stopped and the sky is full of stars and wobbly streaks of green Boring Alice. That's what Jake calls it when the sky colours go crazy at night. But the wind is really loud and it blows the snow back into my face and up my sleeves whenever I shovel it. It's better when I throw it the other way, toward Mister Niggle's house; on that side it gets blown away like an exploding cloud.

“Why can't we just stay home and open our presents?” I shout to Jake. I yank down my scarf so he can hear me better. Besides, it's all wet and gooey from my breathing into it.

“Just keep shoveling,” he shouts back. “We haven't got much time.”

“Dad didn't used to go. He always stayed home and made the meat pies and gravy...”

Jake doesn't answer, just keeps shovelling faster and faster without trying to cut nice scoops or really look where he's throwing it. A lot of it blows back onto the driveway. Dad used to do all the

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shoveling, clearing everything away in no time. This is our first Christmas without him.

I think I know why Dad never went to church. The priest goes on and on with a bunch of dumb stuff you don't understand and we sit and we stand and we kneel, but I never know which one to do, or why. Mom says I have to do what everyone else does, which is to be bundled up and smelling like wet clothes. The church floor is covered in dirty puddles where the people's boots are.

"I hate the smell of the smoky stuff the priest swings around in that steel can," I tell Jake.

"It's called a censer and it's silver, not steel," he says, just to show how smart he is. He used to be an altar boy and he got to polish it up before the special masses.

"Make it shine as bright as a mirror," the priest used to urge him. That's the part I hate most, the smell of the smoke in that thing.

"This is stupid," I say. "We're never going to make it." Jake stops his flurry and stares at me really hard. His cheeks are red and the wind is making his eyes water.

"Just shut up and shovel the snow," he shouts. "Just SHUT UP, OK?"

Jake finishes clearing a path to the car door. Mom comes running out with her coat blowing open. She gets in the car and tries to make it start, but the engine is frozen and it keeps going *ruh-uh-uh-uh-ung, ruh-uh-uh-uh-ung*. She kicks the gas pedal a couple of times and tries some more until the engine finally starts and she guns it hard, just to be sure. On her way back into the house, she pulls my scarf back over my nose while fighting the wind to keep her coat closed.

"Almost, time to go," Jake shouts. "Go faster and don't worry about the stuff close to the ground!" I try to shovel faster but the snow is heavy and the banks are taller than me.

Finally, Mom comes running out again, only this time she's all buttoned up in her good coat.

"Time to go!," she shouts through the wind. Jake is cutting two grooves at the end of the driveway. They don't look very deep, but

even if we do bust out, the road looks awful messy. The snow is deep and there are slidey ruts all over the place. Underneath, it's all slushy from where cars went by before.

"C'mon now, boys," Mom shouts, looking at her watch. "Get in the car — it's almost midnight." She jumps in, closes the door and holds her hands up to the heater. She doesn't hear the rumbling noise coming around the corner, or see the flashing blue light bouncing off the other houses.

The rumble gets louder and louder. Mom honks the horn at us to get in, but we just stand there and watch the plow's passing. It throws a curling wave of snow and salt and gravel that slams down thick and deep at the end of the driveway.

I start to guess that maybe we won't have to go to church now, and I smile under my scarf. But Jake gets really mad. He tells me to grab a shovel and he attacks the new wall of snow, hitting it like he wants to kill it, but it's already starting to freeze into a solid mass. Mom gets out of the car and stands there looking helpless and frozen and sad, like she did the day after Dad's funeral.

"We can still make it," Jake shouts as he hacks and smashes into the snow, breathing faster and harder and smashing and smashing until Mom finally walks over and gently takes the shovel from him.

"It's alright. Never mind," she says, looking at the plow. She watches the blue beacon moving down the street, hears the fading rumble. "Let's just go inside," she says.

