

## IT CAME UPON A MIDNIGHT CLEAR AND A BLUE LIGHT SPECIAL

A Story for “Hometown Holiday”

by **J. R. Sullivan**

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“We’re going to do what?”

It was a petulant question and a querulous complaint, not at all in the “God Rest Ye, Merry” spirit of the holiday season.

“We’re going to read the story. ‘A Christmas Carol.’ At a K-Mart store. In Freeport.”

This would be me speaking: calm, patient, keeping my head when all about me were losing theirs and blaming it on me.

“In the name of Albee, Ibsen, and all that is holy, *what* is a Freeport?”

This latest challenge to my management genius came from an actor I especially needed for this job. He was the only versatile character man in my brave little bunch, and the only one who could pull off ten different parts in the six-person “Christmas Carol” I had sold to the Freeport K-Mart on a dark day for drama in Northern Illinois.

“Alan. They’re paying us \$300. It’s the entire payroll for Christmas Week. We’ve got to do it.”

Alan Bluestone had joined our theater adventure with visions of the Great Plays dancing in his head. I, too, had planned as much for my fledgling company in the old hometown, a temple to the theater gods in downtown Rockford, Illinois. But reality was as cold as the temple itself on First Avenue that December, and our survival was a week-to-week matter in the last days of 1973.

“You’re telling me we are going to read a 19<sup>th</sup> century novel to a K-Mart crowd before Christmas?”

“Yes, two days from now.”

Bluestone's jaw dropped, and then, heavily, his head to his chest. He looked like a man who'd just been sentenced without hope of parole to a Devil's Island off a jungle coast.

“We're just going to read it. How hard can that be?”

The charade of my calm was crashing and quickly. Here is the truer picture: I am 23 years old, rail thin, and already exhibiting threads of silver in my Hudson Brothers hair. Cool and calm on my part was a total disguise, of course. I was at the end of my rope, grasping for something, anything, to save the month and get to the next opening night for my hard working but always broke company, shivering for December survival in our first theater upstairs from the first Charlotte's Web, the converted old synagogue on First Avenue. The K-Mart gig had come through only that morning. It turned out we were replacing a holiday puppet show that had been forced to retire when a bank foreclosed on the Peter's Marching Marionettes show and took their only asset, their Volkswagen – along with the casts of Pinocchio, Thumbelina, and Scatz the Cat stored in the boot – away for resale somewhere in Tennessee. K-Mart had to cover the act and it was that someone in the outfit found us, was told that we toured, and booked us for the store on the Friday before Christmas. Their worried distraction let me push the original fee to \$300. Fifty bucks each! It meant covering the payroll for the week before Christmas. Now all I had to do was write and rehearse the thing. But Alan Bluestone and the rest had to be convinced. The disguise fell from my face and I know I must have borne the haunted, hunted look of George Bailey about to fling himself from the Bedford Falls Bridge.

“All right, all right!” Bluestone was giving in. “I always fall for this. I'll do it. But only if I read Scrooge! If I'm going to be undertaking the declamatory art in a Friday night welter of Blue Light Specials and Karmelcorn, I require the necessity of keeping my face buried in the script.”

I readily confirmed Alan in this, figuring that once I finished the adaptation of the K-Mart Christmas Carol Special I could ease Bluestone in to Jacob Marley, the Ghost of Christmas Present, Mr. Topper, Old Joe, the tipsy Party Guest, three beggars, two businessmen and a Partridge Seller near the Pear Fruit cart.

But this is not a story about the misdeeds of a hustling arts magnate circa '73. This is a parable about the courage of actors I have known. Perpetually at the edge, always stepping off into the unknown, employment never certain, future always in doubt, these miracles of endurance continually exhibit a strange and wondrous capacity for belief that turns nothing into something time and time again. Shakespeare counted on it, Sheridan counted on it, and I was banking on it, too. However, and quite understandably, an armor of self-protection is not uncommon to the tribe. Arch arrows of ironic and oft times mocking comment are survival weapons in times of stress. The rest of the troupe, having just come through a grueling grade school tour, and voicing serious doubts on the dignity of the gig, half-heartedly got on board with the K-Mart plan. With this just this as a vote of confidence, I dashed up the winding and narrow steps to the makeshift office in the synagogue's old balcony loft. I could hear Bluestone's voice rising from the dispirited below as I disappeared into my room to hammer out Dickens on my trusty Olivetti typewriter.

*"Now is the winter of our discontent!"*

I nodded out of pure and simple sympathy for the sentiment and went to work on turning the Christmas Classic into a ninety minute K-Mart Special.

I'd met three of my group at alma mater Beloit College. Ted Hoerl was one, Amy Wright another, and of course, Mr. Bluestone. At school and with the summer Court Theatre, we did Sophocles and Shakespeare, Shaw and Strindberg, Arthur Miller and Eugene O'Neill. But now our training had to alternate between the decent shows we were doing at night for a handful of brave new audiences, and children's theater tours by day to pay the bills. Bluestone, presumed to be somewhere in his twenties, always looked as if he was in his fifties. He was perfect in idiosyncratic character parts and this – to his vocal chagrin – made him indispensable and a sometime star on the children's show circuit. His image of himself as actor was under constant assault with his casting, which memorably included roles like the Witch in "Rapunzel," a stoically philosophical Indian guide complete with an upright feather stuck into the back of a dusty derby, and now, most recently, as a weary Santa Claus in the 50-school tour of "Christmas Every Day." In this, Alan was required to stealthily crawl to the back of a cardboard fireplace in order to roll out of it day after day until little Clara Somebody learned her lesson and realized that her granted wish of Christmas Every

Day was not such a good idea. The killing monotony of “Christmas Every Day” had its match in the lives of the actors. The flimsy fireplace folded and fitted into the back of a Ford Pinto for traveling purposes, and we would have done *that* show in Freeport had Bluestone himself not torched the set with a gleeful howl of freedom and release after Performance #50. He crumpled the cardboard fireplace in the middle of the school parking lot, doused it with lighter fluid, lit a cigarette and calmly took drags on his Camel as “Christmas Every Day” went down in history and up in flames. The rest of us looked up to the windows of Garrison School and found the enthralled faces of our eight and nine year old audience members, pressed eyes wide against the windows, far more engaged by this spectacle than they had been by our show.

Memory makes all of this better. Bluestone was at his perversely entertaining best when he sometimes inserted lines into the children’s shows just to keep himself entertained. It caught those of us in the scene with him off guard, but it never seemed to startle our audiences to hear Bluestone’s Rumpelstiltskin break into Shakespeare’s “Richard III,” or his truly memorable Indian Guide dispense epigrams from Oscar Wilde. Offstage and around town, he was always in the same crumpled raincoat, even in the dead of winter. He was swarthy of complexion. He wore thick, dark rimmed glasses that he’d worn since the early sixties and Bluestone decided to play Santa without removing them. He usually sported a five o’clock shadow that was easily visible under the flimsy crepe beard he wore in “Christmas Every Day.” We continually had to rescue him from school security guards who took him to be some town vagrant on the prowl and not the untidy intellectual urban artist he fashioned himself to be. A Brooklyn born New Yorker descended from Sephardic Jews, he talked in tough, tightly clipped syllables, and as a result his Santa proved a veritable Jackie Mason right grouchy old elf. One memorable afternoon in the Bloom School cafeteria a belligerent boy of barely nine bratty winters complained in the midst of Bluestone’s big scene that Alan “talked funny and didn’t look like Santa.” Alan’s Claus stopped the scene, walked right into the crowd of kids sitting around us, picked up the wide-eyed critic and then, channeling Groucho Marx, and to the applause of the delighted kids, he then shuffled right out of the room singing “Hello, I Must Be Going” from “Animal Crackers.” Bluestone didn’t return until after he’d plopped the now very quiet child into the principal’s office.

It took me all day and most of the night, and when it was done my not-so-merry band of players read the pages from the green and red folder-bound scripts I had made for them. Alan took on most of the character roles after all, Ted Hoerl took old Ebenezer, and the rest of the players divided up the rest: I played Fred and the Narrator's role, Kelly Goins played most of the boys, and Ricki Ravitts and Amy Wright drew straws for the Mrs. Dilber role they each coveted, dividing up the Cratchits for our one-night only performance at the K-Mart off Highway 20 in Freeport.

We rehearsed for a few hours that Friday afternoon. The day darkened and a light snow began to flitter and fall, a fact that turned our later drive out west into a two-hour adventure. We all piled into my car since Ricki's Pinto, battered by the "Christmas Every Day" tour, was in the shop and under repair. But figuring we could use the extra rehearsal time, the one car plan seemed a good one. I still had the '63 Dodge Dart then, a great little convertible coupe that Attorney Keith Hyzer had sold to me for \$500, a bargain basement price even then. That was back in 1968. I was working at his law firm, dropping off abstracts to the Title Company, making runs to the Post Office, and delivering papers to the Court House. Gratefully, I assumed I had gotten this sweetheart of a deal because I was doing a good job, but lawyer Pete Alexander later told me it had more to do with replacing my existing wheels, a grey '59 Plymouth with mountain-peak fins in the back, a muffler that belched every time I started it up, and a "Hubert Humphrey for President" bumper sticker at the back.

The six of us were squeezed into the Dodge Dart now. The show was set for 7:30 and shortly after five we were ready to go. The guys were on the windows, the girls pressed in between. Bluestone took a back corner and began reviewing his words.

If I had known then what was to happen there, at the K-Mart, in Freeport, would I have turned the Dart around, taken everyone to my little apartment on Fisher, poured a few drinks and swapped war stories instead? Maybe. But I was determined to do this K-Mart gig. So, as the snow kept falling, we motored out to West State and headed the Dodge into the dark.

I melted a peephole with my palm and looked out upon the street. We were passing a downtown corner on the near West Side and a wild-haired, bearded human of indeterminate age pushed a wildly lettered placard into the air for me to see: "Turn back your ways repent, or abandon ye all hope!

In the dimming light, the actors squinted at their pages and dusted off their accents. Bluestone, however, made no effort to alter his Brooklynese, and his Jacob Marley moaned from the back seat, “I wear the chains I forged in life. I made it, link by link, yard by yard.” Then, enigmatically, he added, “Brother, ain’t that the truth.”

The road to Freeport became slick with ice and snow rather quickly and of course our travel time slowed as we trailed a few semis into the town west of Rockford. The calendar had promised a full moon for this late Friday in December and we’d all been looking forward to the sight of the lunar show rising on the bank of the world’s footlights that night but the unexpected wintry blast was cloaking that show and we could see little more than swirling white and the tail lights of burly trucks pushing along Highway 20.

Bluestone began to grouse about the weather and then, in order to fend off an attack chorus on his choice of a raincoat for winter wear, started to dicker with Ted Hoerl for the Scrooge part. Teddy was all too willing to part with it but I jumped in and deflected Alan’s ambitions as best I could by pointing out the opportunities in his parts as cast. While Scrooge’s behavior was well known and interpretation thereby limited, Alan’s roles were more open to interpretation. This was a mistake. Our Brooklyn Barrymore tore into his pages anew and before it was too dark to see the scripts we all heard Alan’s Jacob Marley as Richard Nixon, Fezziwig as Dom DeLouise, and the Ghost of Christmas Present as a flaming Liberace.

Amy Wright, luminous even when wrapped in three scarves, two layers of coat, and a cap pulled low across her forehead, giggled with delight and then all laughed a little – but then the car fell to a long silence and I began to feel remorse over my actions and questioned myself about the worth of it all. I mean, really: did it matter at all that we loved theater and wished to make a life in it? Other forces seemed to be making the decision for us.

We were running late but at long last there it shone: the star in the night we’d been searching for: the big, bright “K” that cast its orange beams upon the vast parking lot in front of the Freeport store.

“We’re gonna have a crowd,” observed Kelly Goins from his side of the front seat. “Look at all the cars!” And true enough, for despite the now heavily falling snow outside the Dodge, and despite the economic slump that was falling on everyone in that time, it was just days before the holiday and the shopping appeared intense. It was the K-Mart plan to have shows play for the kids whose parents would then use the time to shop, to pay, to stash in the trunks of autos and vans their Christmas gift haul before gathering up the kids. Time, then, was important to the store. And so it was that for absolutely the only time in my long career I heard these words: “Don’t worry about the length of your show. It’s okay if it runs on the long side.”

When I related this to the group Bluestone arched his brows and squinted his eyes. “Well, they’ve certainly found the right man for the job.”

We parked the car about an acre from the front doors of the store, quickly gathered our reading stands, the few props and Victorian hats we’d brought along to add a little “production” to the event, and with the curses of the actors punctuated slips and slides on the ice and snow, we staggered into the K-Mart.

Now it was barely ten minutes before I was due to begin with the words “Marley was dead, that must be completely understood.” We pushed through the doors and stood in a clamor of cash registers, crying children, blue battery powered mobile police lights whirling madly above various aisles, and an amplified and far too cheery voice crackling out every few minutes with periodic feedback, “Attention K-Mart Shoppers!” - delivering directions to new offers in packed shopping aisles.

Like aliens in a strange new world, we stood in the face of the night’s reality. Amy in her newsboy flat cap, Teddy in his top hat, Bluestone with a scowl and then a growl, the rest of us unable to do anything but take a very deep breath...we must have looked to be a ragtag troupe of peddler refugees thrown onto the landing platform at Ellis Island. Bluestone broke into Shakespearean verse.

“Some are born great. Some achieve greatness. And some have K-Mart thrust upon them.”

Kelly Goins spoke next, saying what he always said when there was a break in the conversation: “I need a beer.”

A panicked, thoroughly haggard K-Mart man rushed us with a schedule of events in his hand and a desire to flee the country in his eyes.

I tried to buck up the troops at the guy's expense.

"Well, at least we don't have *his* job," I said.

"I thought you weren't coming!" he cried with mingled anger and relief. "I was ready to ask the juggling mimes to do another hour!"

Pushing through human traffic that poured the other way, in pursuit of the latest Blue Light Special, one in the automotive aisle, we were led to a small room in the back of the store. The Happy Hands Juggler's show was just letting out, and a group of all ages pressed through a door that was marked, "The Play Room."

"Huzzah!" exclaimed Bluestone, in a mock Barrymore tone. "The Thea-tuh!"

"Just read it and get the check, just read it and get the check." I repeated this to myself again and again, in a mantra of absolute uncenteredness.

"You know," said the K-Mart man, "if you hadn't started this show on time there would have been trouble." He might have meant his own, but in my paranoia I could hear an implied threat hissing from his aggravation: "No check for the actors!"

We entered a green room. It was not green in holiday decoration. It was the green of the pale and sickly institutional room, lit by fluorescent tubes and nothing more. One of the tubes blinked on and off in no apparent or predictable rhythm, schitzing a kind of bug-zap sound every time it did. There were no chairs. The Happy Hands juggling mimes were wearily packing their satchels with balls and bowling pins. They looked at us with some sympathy, their white faces with vertical black lines painted under each eye – lines that especially looked like tears just now – portraits of the artist as unwanted – and then the Happy Hands moved slowly out of the room clutching their satchels as staggered out.

“All right,” instructed our K-Mart guide. “You’re on. And remember, at least ninety minutes!” And with that, he fled the “Play Room.” A Blue Light Special had been placed outside our door and we could hear its battery whirling above the din. But we heard the voice of the store clearly enough as there was a speaker hanging on the wall in The Play Room.

“Attention K-Mart Shoppers! Now in the Community Events and Children’s Play Room, right next to Camping Equipment and Sporting Goods, the New American Theater of Rockford, Illinois, presents...” and here there was a pause, no doubt brought about by the Voice of K-Mart looking for the paper that held the information about what we were going to be doing... “Oh, dear God,” moaned Bluestone. “She’s going to say, ‘Christmas Every Day!’ ... But no, “Christmas Carol-ing” came back the voice, misreading the information. We might have panicked, but then the Voice of K-Mart seemed to get it right by adding, “By Charles Dickens! Right next to Camping Equipment and Sporting Goods, K-Mart Shoppers!”

The speaker crackled off. We looked about the room. There were three mildly bewildered children sitting on the floor, their backs to the wall, as far away from us as they could get.

If I had merely felt like George Bailey on the Bedford Falls Bridge forty-eight hours before, I was quickly becoming him now. I turned to the company who looked like they wanted to throttle me on the spot.

“I don’t know what to say,” I told them. “But we’ve played to houses of this size before,” and that was true enough. Only a month earlier I had answered the box office line myself and the voice on the other end asked me, “What time does the show start?”

The answer was simple enough and not at all far from the truth.

“What time can you get here?”

Now it was Alan who stepped up and put a hand on my shoulder. “Hey, let’s do Dickens. This is what we do, right?”

And so we did. We set up our stands, Amy and Ricki coaxed the kids, who were only shy after all, and not frightened by the sight of us, to sit in the

center of the little room, and so it was that we stood before them just as we had rehearsed and began the read of “A Christmas Carol.”

And it was going well! Despite the fact that we were regularly interrupted by “Attention K-Mart Shoppers” announcements – one for lady’s lingerie right in the middle of a Mrs. Fezziwig speech to her hearty husband – we began to enjoy ourselves and this was getting us through the night until, with a startling suddenness that took our breath away, a stocking-capped woman with a voice that could cut glacier ice stuck her head in the “Play Room” and barked as if the children had somehow been in the wrong, “Hey, kids, we’re going now, get in the car!”

And the three young folks got up, put on their coats, their mittens, their scarves, and left the room. The littlest of them, a girl of perhaps six, turned, waved, and brightly piped “Bye!” as she followed her two brothers and softly closed the door.

To say that there was a stunned silence in the room would vastly understate our reaction. Mouths open, blinking, we looked about and at one another. Amy Wright staggered back and against the wall behind our little row of reading stands. In a moment she would begin giggling hysterically, but not before the silence was broken by Bluestone’s hushed description of what he was feeling.

“It’s the beautiful eerie nothingness of it all,” he uttered. “It is existential, it is Beckett, it is nothing less than ‘Endgame’ and ‘Godot’ meeting Charles Dickens and Christmas in the bleak mid post-modern winter of K-Mart America.”

He clapped me on the back.

“Congratulations, Sullivan. You’ve uncovered a new aesthetic form. Let’s go home.”

Ah, but no! I had it in my head that we wouldn’t get paid unless we finished the read – and what if someone were to show up, somehow, someway, before we got to Amy’s “God bless us, every one?”

“You forget,” cried Alan. “Godot never shows up!”

“It’s like the tree falling in the forest,” said Ricki Ravitts. “If no one is there to hear the fall, does it make a sound? If no one hears the play, do players exist?”

Amy laughed, they all laughed. I laughed. I felt as though an ancient “there shall be no joy” curse had been lifted from my brow and the barren earth was bursting into color and life, blooming meadows, fruit trees and flowers after a long winter drought of distress. We laughed until we cried. We laughed even as a couple of adults who *were* coming to our reading stuck their heads in the door, saw what must have looked like lunatics in therapy, and quickly disappeared. No one ran after them. We simply fell to the floor and laughed all the more.

And there we stayed, on the floor, like the kids who had been watching before, reading the story for ourselves. We changed all the roles, Bluestone did his “Richard the Third” Ebenezer adding ad-libbed lines from Beckett and James Joyce, while and the women read all the men’s roles, Ted Hoerl all the women’s roles, and Kelly and me, the sound effects. We would have finished on time had Ted not heard of a Blue Light Special in the Men’s Shoes Department and dashed off to make a buy.

At 9:40 we gathered our reading stands, costume hats, and Dickens scripts and made for the exit. Stopping at the desk I was about to ask for our money when Bluestone stepped to the window, slapped the ledge with his hand, and announced loudly enough for three nearby aisles to hear, “We are the tired, the poor, and we yearn to breathe free. Three hundred bucks, please!”

And they paid us. In cash.

Piling into the Dart was drove east into the night. The skies had cleared and a new full moon hung over the newly fallen snow like a great lantern in the sky, swaying and sending an enchanted light to the white world below. Every field, every hill, every rooftop and every fence, was wrapped in white and glistened back to the lantern moon in the deep blue night.

“Snow is general, all over Northern Illinois,” sighed Bluestone from the back seat. He was quoting James Joyce in a paraphrase just for us. And so it was the little Dodge Dart made its way on Highway 20 from Freeport

that long-ago Friday just before Christmas. Someone started singing a carol.  
We one by one joined in. And then all of us sang all the way home that  
starry, starry night.

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