

NO MORE SISTER THAN SAINT NICK

Lee Robison

The new young Bishop Fredning had not asked Vernie to prepare and narrate the Christmas program. For the first time in twenty-seven years, the bishop of the West Bench Ward had not called on him, with his BYU Speech and Drama Department-trained voice, to read the verses of Luke and introduce the various sub-readers and choirs (the elders, the Relief Society ladies, the Primary children, the whole ward) each in their turn.

On the Sunday morning before the scheduled Christmas program, Vernie stood in front of his bathroom mirror. He grinned, combed his fingers through his fine, white, wavy pompadour, straightened his tie, shrugged his shoulders, and recited a few lines from one of his poems. It was a poem in which Vernie imagined a Montana cowboy as one of the angels watching over Jesus's crib. His grandson Eph would be reading it at the Bennings School winter pageant, and Vernie was very proud.

As shepherds, sheep, and wise men came,
Sentinel the Old Boy stood
Shielding holy babe and dame
Pistols ready under Stetson hood.

It always got applause, especially from the women, when he intoned its iambs and rhymes at local cowboy poetry open mics. This is something Vernie had always noticed but had become especially aware of after Marcia deserted him. Marcia was the woman who had sworn to be his soulmate, wife, and companion for Time and All Eternity. For-Time-and-All-Eternity turned out to be just under thirty-eight years. Marcia had forsaken her covenants, taken half his bank account, the cat, and the dog, and hauled off for Utah.

Vernie shrugged and grinned into the mirror again. Sixty-two was not that old, really. Cash Dunders was seventy-three when he hitched

his fourth and latest wife. And Cash, with his sad jokester face, was nothing to write home about in the looks department.

He turned to the important issue of performing at the West Bench Ward's Christmas program. "Well," he thought. "I'll just have to remind that young Fredning about it."

"Get with the program," he said into the mirror, rehearsing how he would approach the young bishop. Vernie grinned again. Obviously, the Kid Bishop, with all he had to do, had let slip the important task of asking Vernie to narrate. Every Sunday since Thanksgiving, Vernie had been expecting him to ask.

Vernie shrugged away from the mirror and headed for church.

During sacrament meeting, he scribbled notes on a draft of a new poem about a shepherd lost in a barroom haze who was found and returned to the redeeming wilderness by his sheep. Vernie even found himself thinking about it during the sacred passing of the bread and water, but it was a spiritual poem so he let his mind wander on it. After the boys passed the sacrament, Fredning introduced Cash Dunders and his fourth For-Time-and-All-Eternity as the speakers. Cash was a great guy. He was a fellow writer. But he was also a genealogist. Vernie had never crossed paths with a genealogist who wouldn't bore you with their great-grandfather's third wife's fourth cousin's second child's trials and tribulations during some distant war or handcart emigration disaster. And Cash's wife wasn't much better: she was a weeper whose every fourth word was a gasping sob, her makeup smearing like black clown tears down her face.

Vernie concentrated on his poem. "Sheeple" wasn't a word, so he was having a hard time finding a rhyme for "people." And sacrament meeting was well over before he finally gave up, pocketed his notes, and stood to find Bishop Fredning to discuss the important issue of a script for the Christmas program.

Fredning was squatting down near the podium listening to a kid.

Vernie put a fatherly hand on his shoulder.

"About the Christmas program next week," he said.

The kid Fredning was listening to was one of the White brats. The girl was lisping on and on through two missing front teeth about something totally irrelevant. Vernie knew he should not hold the sins of the parents against a kid, but as far as he was concerned, like mother, like daughter. And this kid's mother, Lillian White, had been the lawyer who assisted in Marcia's Desertion.

Fredning half turned to look up at Vernie and half didn't. He blinked but went on listening to the kid's nonsense.

"I need a script, so I know when everybody else comes in," Vernie said. He almost added, "get with the program." But it occurred to him this was not the right rhetorical thing to do at the moment. It wouldn't help. One thing he had learned during his speech-major days at BYU is that you assessed your audience and the context before you elocuted.

"Oh, well say, Vern, just a sec," Fredning said. He blinked again and turned to listen to more nonsense.

Vernie waited. He could be patient. To keep his mind off the Lillian White's yattering kid, he concentrated on his poem. The last thing he needed when he spoke to Fredning was to be fuming about a Lillian White. The last thing he needed to have on his mind was how "Sister" Lillian White helped Marcia take the dog, the cat, and more than half his bank account.

So Vernie concentrated on the poem and tried to ignore the nonsense that the White pup was wasting Fredning's time with. Finding a rhyme for "people" had some challenges. "Steeple" reminded him of a nonsense nursery rhyme. It was trite and wouldn't fit anyway. He might have to change "people" to something else, "men" or "mankind," maybe. But "mankind" was a feminine rhyme, and they tended to be weak, so . . .

Finally, Fredning stood up, shaking out his pant legs.

"What's up, Vern," he said.

"The Christmas program. Maybe we should get with the program." Vernie chuckled. (There were two other things Vernie learned in speech classes. The first was the rhetorical stance of associating with the audience by implying mutual need. Hence the "we." The second was using

humor to disarm, hence the chuckle.) “We need a script to rehearse and know when to introduce the other acts.”

“Oh,” Fredning said. “Oh, well, say, Sister White was asked to narrate this year. We thought it might be nice to hear a woman read the scripture.”

Vernie felt himself flush. Lillian White was no more a “Sister” than Saint Nick. She was a skinny, opinionated woman with a sharp, hard face. She had helped Marcia moved back to Utah without him. The cat and the dog didn’t matter. Vernie didn’t like them anyway. But the bank account and Marcia were his. And rent-a-lawyer Lillian White had weaseled the law to deprive him of what was rightfully his hard-earned money and his God-covenanted wife. It was a travesty.

It wasn’t just Vernie’s face that turned red when he heard that Lillian White usurped his place in the Christmas program. His whole body, even the pale pate under his white pompadour, suddenly fired up bright red, until he looked like a beardless, not-so-cheerful Santa Claus.

Sweat began to trickle under his arm pits. Lillian White had a squeaky lawyer voice that irritated just about everybody. If she narrated Luke, it would be a three-ring circus. The narration of Luke needed a man’s voice, his voice. “Hail Mary thou art highly favored” needed Vernie’s good bass voice to say it properly. It certainly did not need the squeaky, not-even-decent-soprano, conspirator voice of Lillian White.

But he didn’t say anything. He had his pride, and anything he said would not be something he wanted the bishop to hear. Anything on his mind at that point, if it got past his lips, would probably require a serious apology, confession, and repentance. He’d be damned if he’d give young Fredning the pleasure.

Twenty-seven years of doing the Christmas program, and this is what he gets! For that matter, a whole lifetime of being there almost every Sunday. A whole lifetime of saying yes to almost every calling—except Primary, of course. If they asked him to teach kids, he demurred.

Kids with their noisy, noisome, babble of confusion did not appreciate his trained voice and rhetorical approach to the gospel. And missionary work, too, was just not his style. But he was always there when they needed somebody to talk for sacrament meeting or instruct Gospel Doctrine class or read the high priests through their lesson.

He stewed about this all the way home. Twenty-seven years of keeping his temple recommend up to date, even after the Desertion, twenty-seven years, and here he was, expected to sit in the congregation for the Christmas program—expected to listen to Luke being read by some squeaky-voiced twit. Maybe he'd just sit home and wrap the grandkid's crayons and coloring books. Eph got the big box of crayons because he was reading the poem at the school pageant. Maybe he'd get a six-pack and watch the Broncos and Patriots game. He hadn't had a beer in a long time, not since the Desertion.

Then on Monday, after a night and most of a day of Vernie's stewing and considering apostasy, his cell phone burbled. It was Bishop Fredning.

"Say, listen, Vern," he said. "I understand you write poems."

"Yeah?" Vernie said. He tried hard to remain civil. It was difficult, but the implied recognition that he was, in all but actual nomination, the Cowboy Poet Laureate of Last Lost Valley County helped keep him from launching into the offensive.

"Well, say. Listen. Sister White says you have a nice Christmas Eve poem."

This surprised Vernie. How could a hag Conspirator of Broken Covenants appreciate good poetry? The poem in question, "Calving Shed on Christmas Eve," was one of his best: well-articulated, iambic meter, rhyme scheme perfect. It had been published several years ago in *Cattle Call Monthly*, along with his "Cowboy and Jesus." Vernie was pretty proud of that publication. But he was puzzled how a pettifogger who prostituted herself to break covenants would ever admit to appreciating his "Calving Shed on Christmas Eve."

He said, "Yeah?" cautiously.

“Well, say. Listen. Would you mind if that poem was read before the Christmas program? Sort of bring Christmas into local focus before we get started?”

This is not exactly what Vernie had been hoping for. But it was almost good enough.

“Well, I’d be happy . . .”

But Fredning interrupted him. “Well, say! Vern, thanks. We’ve asked DelIna Ferguston to read it.”

DelIna Ferguston was a twit of a teenager with blue hair, blue lips, and a ring through her left eye brow whose usual church costume was either ripped-at-the-knees jeans or a mid-thigh dress with leather and rag fringes dangling to her ankles.

“I’m not sure . . .”

“She is pretty excited to read it,” Fredning said. “Besides, we thought it would be good for her.”

“Well . . .” Vernie said. He was not pleased that somebody else would read his poem. He was particularly not pleased that it would be DelIna Ferguston with her harlequin getup. But in spite of his hesitancy, he was feeling a modicum of harmony beginning to restore itself in his life. It would be good to have his poem read as part of the program. It would be great if he was the one reading it. He felt a welling of pride that the powers that be decided to put his poem in the Christmas program alongside Luke and “O Little Town of Bethlehem.”

And so, in what he later considered a moment of weakness, he said, “Sure, I guess it can be part of the program. Sure, if she gives it proper attribution. I guess she can read it.”

The harmony he almost felt almost went far enough to almost include warm feelings for the Conspirator of Broken Covenants because she seemed to appreciate his poetry.

Tuesday afternoon, at the Last Lost Valley Writers’ Workshop, he mentioned to Cash Dunders that he wouldn’t be narrating the Christmas program. He didn’t say anything about the Desertion Attorney leading the Christmas program instead of him. He was not up to talking about something so humiliating, even with Cash.

“Small favors,” Cash said. Vernie saw this as a weak attempt at humor. But this was Cash, so Vernie ignored it.

“But Fredning is having my ‘Calving Shed’ poem read. By that Ferguson kid, not me. The one with the painted lips and eyebrow jewelry.”

“Great!” Cash said.

“It’s kind of weird they don’t want me to read my poem.”

“Maybe it’s not about you not reading it, maybe it’s about the program,” Cash said.

“I mean she’s just a clowny kid, Cash.”

“Spread the wealth,” Cash said.

“Yeah, well. But you never know about these kids today. She could really screw it up.”

“Not much to screw up, really.”

“I know. It’s a real simple poem. Straightforward. Straight to the heart. But how can a kid with blue hair read a poem?”

“Is she literate?”

“Huh?”

“Can she read?”

“I guess so. I donno.”

“If she can read, she’ll do good enough for church, blue hair and all,” Cash said.

“Yeah, maybe.” But Vernie thought, “Good enough for church isn’t always best.”

During the workshop discussion, Cash complimented the perfect versification of the draft of Vernie’s lost shepherd poem. “It’s sweet,” he said, “But it might be interesting to see you play around with the noise of words a bit.”

That was the thing about Cash: he was more into words than he was into making them into sensible poems. He claimed to have been published in the U of M Commie journal and a Mormon hippie magazine. But he’d never made *Cattle Call*, which paid \$50 a poem. Still, Vernie told him that the poem he brought to the workshop was “pretty darned good.” He did not say anything about its lack of rhyme, rhythm, or sense. Cash was a pal.

By Wednesday morning, Vernie was beginning to regret giving in to the Kid Bishop. Leaving his poem's elocution to the mouth of a blue-haired, eyebrow-piercing kid would be an embarrassing parody. Vernie had his pride. By Thursday afternoon, he had worked himself into a righteous fury. If they kept taking things away from him, pretty soon they'd have everything people knew him by. If this kept up, they'd have his suit and tie and probably even his nose. He'd be the laughingstock. He had to salvage something, and that salvage had to start somewhere.

So, Vernie decided to take the bishop by the horns and tell him how things were going to be, politely but firmly, of course. How and where he would do this was a problem. This wasn't something that could be handled over the phone. This was *mano a mano*.

But he couldn't just drive out to the Fredning house, knock on the door, and ask the bishop to step outside and have it out. Fredning's wife would have a spoofed-up version of the whole thing all over the county by Sunday. He thought of calling and asking the bishop to meet at the church for a little chat. But a person did not ask the bishop for a personal meeting unless he had serious offenses to confess. The wife would probably have the whole state of Montana gabbing about him being on the road to excommunication and perdition.

Probably the best chance to educate the young bishop would be at the Bennings School winter pageant. The Kid Bishop never passed up a chance to mingle with the larger community, and his kids were always in one of the school choirs. So, he was certain to be at the winter pageant, which was to be Thursday, tonight. Vernie was thinking of attending it anyway because Eph was reading his poem.

By the time Vernie, still in a fume, made it to the pageant, the old high school gym/auditorium was packed. Even before he opened the door, he could hear a muffled but joyful gabble from the crowd inside. He peered through the window. His breath fogged it, so he had to wipe it. He looked for the Kid Bishop. But the foyer between the outside door and the double door to the auditorium narrowed his view, and what

little he could see of the crowd was hazed by the breath-fogged window. He did not like crowds unless there was a microphone between him and them. As long as he had his hand on a mic, it was okay; the crowd became a vague haze of sighs and applause.

The misted window in the foyer door cast the warped and shadowy shape of Vernie's face back at him. He saw a glum Vernie that did not want to be seen. *Well, might as well get this over with*, he thought. He made a grin at his reflection, and the distorting glass grimaced back at him. His pompadour wavered in the stiff winter breeze. Vernie swept his hand over it to flatten it, make it presentable, and then, grinning, pulled open the heavy door.

The cavernous room was a cacophony of people chattering, chairs scraping, booms of laughter. It was like a carnival. The basketball hoop at the far end of the gym had been hoisted up to give a clear and open view of the stage. The stage was empty except for a microphone and the music director's podium facing the choral risers. The bleacher bench seats along the walls were practically fanny to fanny. Vernie would rather stand than park his boney butt on those planks anyway. The basketball court was filled with metal folding chairs, which were also mostly filled.

Vernie couldn't see the bishop or his family, but they could be anywhere in the crowd. He looked for a seat to wait out the concert but could not see any empty chairs on the aisles. He could leave, but his poem was being performed and it was his grandson performing it, and he had the Sunday performance to get straightened out. He sighed, and then saw his son Arron, Eph's dad, standing near the front. Arron waved and pointed at an empty chair in the row beside him. It was probably vacant as a statement about the absence of Katie, Arron's ex. Vernie could understand that little gesture. Katie was probably somewhere else in the crowd, sitting next to her current mash. She wouldn't be needing the seat.

It was a no-escape seat, near the middle of the second row. But if he had to sit through the farce of off-key kids singing "Joy to the World," he might as well do it commiserating with his son.

“Well, he’ll get over it,” Vernie thought. “I sure did.”

He was nearly to the empty seat, “excuse-me”-ing, and “pardon”-ing his fanny past already seated noses and knees, when he noticed his next fanny-to-nose-and-knee encounter would be the sharp nose of Lillian White, the Desertion Attorney. And the seat after that was the empty folding chair beside Arron.

It was too late to excuse-me his way back to the aisle. He was trapped.

He tightened his butt cheeks, shuffled past the Desertion Attorney without saying “excuse me,” and finally sank into the empty folding chair.

“Hey, Dad.” Arron sat down in his chair and bumped his fist on Vernie’s shoulder with wary affection. “Saved the chair for you.”

The Desertion Attorney smiled a grimace. “Good to see you, Vernie.”

Vernie answered Arron’s fist bump by leaning toward him and fist bumping his shoulder.

“Thanks for the thought,” he said. He took in Lillian White’s grimace but ignored it.

“Well, here we all are,” Vernie said to no one in particular. He focused what was left of his smile on the still empty choir risers.

There wasn’t much else to say. Of course, there was nothing to say to White. So he sat, trapped, silent, and remote amid the humming joy of the pre-show sociability. He thought about trying to puzzle out the rhyme for his new poem to revive his good humor. But, sitting there with his humiliation, he just could not find the energy.

Then, the lights in the gym dimmed, and the crowd silenced with an expectation that vibrated through even Vernie’s gloom. Still, he considered an escape in the dark. But just as he shifted to stand, his hand on the cold metal of the chair in front of him, a spot brightened on the microphone, and there was Eph, blonde hair slicked flat, frowning seriously over his white shirt and tie. Vernie settled back in his chair.

Eph coughed and shifted uncomfortably, glanced off toward the school music director, who grinned and nodded encouragingly from

the edge of the shadows. Eph coughed again and said, "This is my Granddad's favorite Christmas poem. So, this is for him. So . . ."

He coughed again.

"'Twas the Night Before Christmas,' by Clement Clark Moore."

He began. "Twas the . . ."

It hit Vernie like a blow below the belt. He had expected his "Cowboy and Jesus" poem. Sure, he had recited the "'Twas the Night" poem to the boy, many times. But he had also recited and read "Cowboy and Jesus." You would think the boy would have sense enough to know which was the most appropriate for the evening.

And there in the dark, the faces of those around him glowing in the dim light from the stage, their rapt attention on the boy, he felt suddenly old, deserted, and trapped, a chump. He sagged in his seat, closed his eyes, and waited for the whole misery to be over. He wanted nothing more, at this moment, than to be home watching reruns of *All in the Family* or *I Love Lucy*. For the first time that he could remember, he actually felt thirsty for a beer. He was in the abysmal pits, as close to falling into the terrestrial kingdom as he had ever been.

The boy recited the poem, his preadolescent voice sometimes breaking almost bass, then cracking into boyish alto. Even in his nadir, Vernie thought that, despite the problems with voice control, Eph did an admirable job reciting the nonsense poem.

Arron nudged him, shout-whispering and applauding. "That's our boy," he said. He also heard the Desertion Attorney say cheerily, as if in his ear, "Gonna be a chip off the old Vernie block."

"Yeah, pretty good," he said to Arron. His frown deepened, irritated.

After Eph's pretty decent performance—even if wasted on a sap poem—Vernie expected the rest of the program to descend into pitiful amateur hour. He was not disappointed.

Three teens played "We Three Kings" on saxophone, trumpet, and trombone. The sax squawked, the trumpet blatted and flatted, the trombone slid with bluesy enthusiasm. But they were loud and confident, and they roused applause. Vernie sat impatiently. The sooner this farce

was over, the sooner he could get to Fredning and clear up the problem with next Sunday's Christmas program.

The Bennings Elementary School choir sang for a while, then the White kid, the one who had been bothering Bishop Fredning on Sunday, came out and monotoned through a lisp, "All I want for Chrithmas . . ." It was about what he expected. Her mother's applause was fulsome and beaming. It was about what he expected.

The high school choir sang. And finally, just before they sang Handel's "Hallelujah" chorus, which usually ended the program, DelIna Ferguston was introduced. She worked her way down from the choir. Her costume, a patchwork of blue, orange, green, and yellow rags, contrasted with the somber black skirt/pants and white blouse blur of most of the rest of the choir.

She untwined the microphone from its stand, fiddled with the "on" switch, and then, holding the microphone close enough to her blue lips to stain it with her lip gloss, recited "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening." She also recited but did not sing a church hymn, "I Heard the Bells on Christmas Day." The readings were full of breathy teen drama and female angst. Her loose-fitting, ragged sleeves swept dramatically, like varicolored wings.

She also seemed to have added verses about war and earthquakes. Vernie wasn't certain, but he couldn't remember anything about war and earthquakes in the "Christmas Bells" hymn.

She whispered the last lines into the mic: "Peace on earth, good will to men." It rang through the gymnasium, and there was a stilled silence. The Desertion Attorney heaved a deep satisfied sigh. The auditorium crescendoed into ovation.

Vernie cringed. If the kid read his poem for the church Christmas program like that, in that kind of costume, it would be a mockery. His poem did not need blue-lipped angst. It certainly did not need more verses about apocalypse.

The rest of the show could not end too soon. Vernie had to find Fredning and end this travesty against his poem, against him. The

winter pageant closed with the rousing shout of the “Hallelujah” chorus by the Bennings High School choir. It seemed perpetual in its length.

Finally, it was over. The lights came up in the auditorium, and it filled with the rattle and bang of the audience rising, shoving chairs, stretching, and with the shuffle and bluster of the teenage choir filing off the risers. People turned to each other and rumbled into gossip and critique mode.

Vernie looked around to find his objective and do the little he could to correct the Christmas program disaster. But there wasn't a Fredning to be seen. Not the Kid Bishop, not the Wife, not one of the five or six Fredninglings.

And the Desertion Attorney was standing facing him, blocking his exit to the aisle.

He turned to follow Arron, but Lillian White said, “Vernie?”

“I know you blame me for what Marcia did,” she said.

Vernie stopped, his back to her. He did not turn around. He glared at nothing and waited.

“I tried to talk her out of it. I did try.”

Vernie's glare at nothing took on an inquisitive aspect.

“Marriage is eternal. Forever. I told her. I told her you aren't the worst person in the world. A divorce is meaningless, I said. When she wouldn't take ‘no,’ I tried to turn her situation over to Jim Michaels. But she kept coming to me at Relief Society, at the grocery store. She even stopped me in the dollar store parking lot.”

Vernie shrugged. But he reduced his glare to a frown. “Excuse me,” he said over his shoulder. “I got to see Fredning about the Christmas program.”

“Oh,” Lillian White said. “They couldn't make it tonight. The whole crew except little Effy is down with the flu.”

On a normal day, such a pronouncement would not have had much of an impact on Vernie's good humor and general cheerfulness. But nothing puts the bottom on misery better than a final frustration. And the frustration's bottom was made even deeper and more sinister

because it was delivered by Lillian White, who had usurped his place in the Christmas program and who had assisted in the theft of his bank account and the desertion of his For-Time-And-All-Eternity and who had just now also tried to rob him of the certainty that Marcia would never desert him without feminist lawyerly provocation.

“Well, see you in church,” Lillian White said cheerfully as she turned to gather her brood from the crowd of whelps flooding from the stage.

Vernie leaned, both hands gripping the cool metal of the folding chair rail. He leaned like that for quite a while, trying to come to terms with a world gone topsy-turvy. He tried to revive his anger at the Desertion Attorney, but it was a no-go. It wasn't Sister White's fault that Fredning asked her to narrate. If she were to be believed, she had tried to stop Marcia's desertion.

So, it seemed the whole Great Desertion came down to Marcia. Vernie could not understand living in a world where that was possible. He shuddered. He realized his grip on the chair rail was becoming painful. His knuckles were white. He stepped back and rubbed his hands and worked them to get the stiffness out. He looked around to see if anyone had observed him standing in the darkness. Then he straightened, shrugged, and grimmed a smile to fortify himself. He began to work his way toward the exit through the joyous chaos of the festive mob.

The cheerfulness of the crowd was so contrary to his own mood, and it shifted into merry little cliques, claques, and gossips, until Vernie was quite alone.

Then he heard a small, hesitant voice.

“Mr. Sheldin?” the voice said. “Like, Mr. Sheldin?”

Vernie turned and was accosted by DelIna Ferguston with her blue hair and eyebrow ring, her blue lips and ragged harlequin costume.

“Mr. Sheldin,” the blue lips said. “I've been looking for the bishop, but I guess you'll have to do.”

“What is it?”

“Well, I mean thanks. Like, it was great to be asked to read a poem for the church Christmas program. But, like, I just can’t wrap my head around it.”

Vernie blinked. He blinked twice. He wanted to believe that the painted lips were telling him they wouldn’t be able to read his poem for the Christmas program.

“Yeah?” he said, hope springing from the eternities.

“Well, I mean, like, really?” the blue lips said. And then the breathless voice behind the lips recited the last two lines from his poem:

“It is said that as the loving Angels sang

“You could hear one Angel’s cowboy twang.”

“Like, really. . . ?” The blue lips and ringed eyebrow winced with distaste.

“It took me a long time to finally find the end of that poem,” Vernie said. He smiled benignly, very proud that the kid could recite part of his poem, even if with comic breathy delivery and facial commentary.

“Yeah,” Blue Lips said. “Well, like obviously. Anyway, I thought I’d let you know, like I just can’t do it.”

“Oh,” Vernie said. “That’s too bad.” The dark fog that hovered round his soul suddenly did not seem so foggy.

“Well, uh, no need to bother Fredning about it,” he said. “I’ll let him know I’ll do it.”

“Yeah, well, like no offense or anything, but I just can’t do something that doesn’t interest me.” Her eyebrow ring glinted and winked above her brown eyes.

“Anyway, bye,” she said and trounced off, her blue hair flouncing.

It seemed that even when they gave you something, they had to darken it with criticism.

But what did an eyebrow-ringed kid’s opinion about poetry matter anyway? A waster clown who made up earthquakes and hurricanes

when she recited a sacred hymn probably thought she knew more about poetry than she really did. Well, she wouldn't have his poem to mock. He had salvaged that.

Vernie worked his way to the exit. He saw Cash in the crowd. Cash waved. He was laughing. Vernie got the paranoid impression that he was the subject of the laughter. And as he bumped and jostled his way to the exit, it seemed every exultant chortle or cackling giggle in that cavernous room was in some way directed at him.

Then he was at the door in the foyer. The crowd cackled behind him. His hand rested on the cold metal bar, and he saw his face distorted in the night-muddled glass. His eyes seemed to glint from the clouded shadows of his face, and the distortion in the window glass warped his lips, thickened them. He mumbled his lips into a tight smile, but it didn't help what he saw in the reflection.

Even so, what he saw was the same old Vernie. He raked his fingers through his white pompadour to reform its unruliness and made a grin at his image in the glass. The grin that came back to him from the dark window was skewed, less cheerful, a bit more world-worn than he would have liked. But it was the same old Vernie.

He saluted the muddled reflection, and then he shoved the door bar and stepped, with his poem, into the dark, windy winter night.

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