

Short sTrAw

A Christmas Story

by Eric Fritzius



Sgt. Vardemon "Vardy" Hutto settled onto his stool behind the desk at the Wayne County Police Department and resigned himself to his fate. He had drawn the short straw. One week ago, his fellow officers yanked straws from Ezell's broom and drew them out one by one from Lt. Mason's fist. At stake for the men was the dreaded assignment of Christmas Eve desk duty and Vardy Hutto had won it handily.

It was 6:38 p.m. on the dreaded day in question and Vardy's shift had barely begun. For him there would be no eggnog sipped in front of the wood stove, no pipe enjoyed, no Christmas cookies to sneak and no *Bing Crosby Christmas Special*. Instead, there would be paperwork to do, phones to answer and probably a Christmas Eve drunk or two to lock up before his shift ended at midnight.

Vardy felt the air pressure change as someone came in from the stairwell door in into the lobby foyer. Probably Officer Brewer back with the first drunk already. A moment later, though, the unfamiliar faces of a man and a small boy peered through the glass window of Vardy's door. Civilians. Vardy waved them in.

"Can I help you?"

The man—dark hair, late 30's, 5'10, 200 lbs—looked a little sheepish at first, but smiled and stepped over to the desk with the boy following.

"Hi. Rob Hughes," the man said, introducing himself and offering his hand.

Vardy shook it. Rob continued, "This may sound like a strange request, but... well, my son, Aaron, here wants to be a detective when he grows up." He put a hand on his boy's shoulder. The kid was dressed in a green winter coat, zipped up to his chin, and looked to be around four years old. Under one arm the boy held a stout white plastic train, with a red capped smokestack, red wheels and a blue cow-catcher on the front. A decal on the side of the train showed a smiling brown bear in a blue shirt with a blue and white striped cap. As if on cue, the boy set his train down and reached into his coat pocket, producing a magnifying glass with a red plastic handle. The boy put it to his eye and peered up at Vardy through it.

Vardy laughed. "Well, I see he's got the equipment for it, already."

"Yeah. Sherlock Hemlock is his hero. You know... from *Sesame Street*?"

"Sure thing."

"Anyway. Aaron's never met a real detective before. So, I kind of thought, if any detectives are still in tonight, he could maybe meet one. Kind of... for Christmas."

Vardy grinned at the kid, whose now giant blue eye was still beaming up at him hopefully through the lens of the magnifying glass. He looked back up to the boy's father.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Hughes. I'm afraid pretty much everyone's gone home for the night `cept me."

"Oh, I see," Rob said.

Vardy looked down at the boy, whose magnified eyelid lowered slightly in disappointment. "All the detectives went home for Christmas eve and left me here

alone," Vardy told the boy. "How do you like that?"

Aaron lowered his magnifying glass and looked up at his dad.

"Looks like we're out of luck," Rob said.

"You could come back next week," Vardy offered, but the boy didn't seem happy about it. He looked on the verge of tears.

"Well... I'm sorry to trouble you," Rob said.

"Oh, it's no trouble at all."

Rob stood there awkwardly for a few seconds then reached down and picked up the plastic train, handing it to Aaron, who had to put away his magnifying glass to have enough arms free to hold the train. "Come on, kiddo. Got to get you home to bed or Santa won't come back." He put both hands on the boy's shoulders and aimed him for the door. "You have a merry Christmas," Rob said to Vardy.

"Hang on just a sec," Vardy said. "You know, I may not have any detectives for him to meet, but... do you think he'd like to see the jail?"

The two men looked down at the boy to find him grinning and nodding vigorously to his dad.

"Looks like a big yes to me," Vardy said. He pulled the ring of keys off the peg inside the lock box on the wall and came around the desk.

"Are you sure it's okay?" Rob asked.

"Oh, yeah."

"I mean... it's safe?"

"Nothing safer than a jail cell," Vardy said. "least, on most days. Just follow

me, now."

Aaron adjusted his train under one arm then took his father's hand as Vardy lead them back toward the jail area. They passed through a series of corridors and doors, some of which Vardy had to unlock and then lock again behind them after they passed through.

"Hardly anybody back here right now, `cept a couple of DUIs, a breakin' and enterin' and a domestic dispute who couldn't make bail. Oh, and there's Huey. He's just here `til they can find space for him up in Parchman."

"What did he do?" Rob asked.

Vardy looked at Rob, then down at Aaron and shook his head. "A-R-M-E-D R-O-B-B-E-R-Y," he spelled.

"A-A-R-O-N can spell too," Aaron said grinning up at him. Vardy nearly gulped aloud. Kid was full of surprises.

They reached a large metal door where a very bored-looking man sat at a desk nearby.

"Hey, Perry," Vardy said to the man. "You mind watching the phones for me while I show these folks around? Velma's got the dispatch covered."

"Sure thing," Perry said, standing up to unlock the door for them. The key turned and there was a metallic clank from within the lock, then Perry pulled on the long metal handle and the door slowly swung back on hinges.

"Right this way," Vardy said.

Inside, the jail area was one large rectangular room with individual bar-covered

cells lining the walls as well as a central jail section that contained more individual cells and a large holding pen at the far end.

"This is where the detective brings the bad buys he catches," Aaron whispered to his father, as though explaining the situation to him.

"That's right. You sure know your stuff," Vardy said with a grin. He lead them past a few of the empty cells, each of which was equipped with two bunks, a sink and a toilet.

"You wanna try one out?" Vardy asked Aaron. He unlocked an empty cell and slid its barred door open. The boy stared into it, looking unsure, then he glanced up at his dad to see if it was all right.

"You can if you want to," Rob said.

"Don't worry, we'll let you back out when you're ready," Vardy said.

Aaron stared into the cell for a few seconds longer, then shook his head, no.

"Suit yourself," Vardy said, closing the cell door with a clang.

"Hey, who you got there?" came a voice from one of the cells further ahead.

"Evenin', Zack," Vardy said, glancing back at Rob to give him a reassuring look. He motioned for Aaron to follow before stepping up to Zack's cell. The lanky prisoner was seated inside on the edge of his bunk.

"Zack, this here's young Mr. Aaron. He's going to be a detective when he grows up," Vardy said.

"Looks to me like he's gonna be a train conductor," Zack said, pointing a finger at Aaron's toy train. "Where'd you get that train?"

"I got it for Christmas," Aaron said in a small voice.

"For Christmas? I thought Christmas was tomorrow."

"I got it early," Aaron said.

"Whoo, boy," Zack said. "You must be good friends with Santy Claus to get a present like that early."

Aaron laughed.

"What's it do?" Zack said.

The boy smiled and put his train on the floor of the aisle between the cells. From a compartment in the rear of the train he took a flat red plastic disc with raised nibs along its surface. He slid the disc into a slot in the top of the train, then flipped a switch near the wheels. The train immediately sprang to life and began rolling in a tight circle while playing a loud high pitched version of *Twinkle Twinkle Little Star* that echoed off the concrete walls and metal bars.

"That's pretty wild," Zack said. "I wish Santy Claus would bring me something good like that."

Aaron switched the train off and removed the red disc from the slot. He was just about to replace it with a blue one when Rob touched his shoulder.

"Not just now, okay?" he said. "It's a little loud in here."

"Okay," Aaron said. He picked up his train.

Vardy lead them further down the row of cells, but not before Zack could call out, "You be sure to tell Santa Claus to come see me."

Aaron didn't reply.

"Awful lot of racket for Christmas Eve," said a man in another cell. He was sprawled out on his bunk, shielding his eyes from the light with one arm.

"Sorry to disturb you, Bo," Vardy said.

"Cruel and unusual punishment's what it is," Bo replied.

"Yeah, well... I sure do hope you can summon up the Christmas spirit to forgive us for it." Vardy lead Rob and Aaron past Bo's cell and to the end of the center section where the group cell was at. There were three men in the group cell, one of whom was sitting on the toilet.

"Bonner, dadgum it! Can't you see we have visitors?" Vardy said.

"Sorry, chief. My bowels wait for no one."

"Yeah, well you just be sure you keep seated `til we're gone."

"Sure thing."

One of the other two men, a bearded man with a large gut barely contained within his orange prison jumper, leaned forward on his bunk and said, "Was that your train playing all that music?"

Aaron nodded.

"You should show us how it works too," said the third man through his cigarette.

Again, Aaron looked to his dad for permission. Rob in turn looked to Vardy.

"It's okay. A little music ain't gonna hurt `em," Vardy said.

Aaron put his train on the floor again and inserted the blue disc. He turned it on and the train began circling, this time playing "Frere Jacques". The prisoners grinned, except presumably for Bo, who was groaning in anguish from his cell.

"I heard you were friends with Santa Claus," Bonner said, still atop the throne.
"You gonna tell Santa Claus to come see us?"

Aaron looked up at the man, but didn't answer. Instead, he picked up his train and twisted a small wheel on the bottom of it.

"It can go straight too," he said, setting the train down, where it did begin to travel in a straight line. Aaron followed along behind the train as it slowly rolled beyond the boundary of the group cell. Then he picked it up again and removed the blue disc, shutting off the music.

"What was your name?" a voice said from the boy's right. Aaron looked up, momentarily startled to find the last prisoner of the row staring out at him from within the small cell the train had rolled in front of. The man in the cell was unshaven man with dark curly hair, but he was smiling.

"Evenin', Huey," Vardy said stepping up to the cell.

"You say his name is Aaron?" Huey asked not taking his eyes off the boy.

"That it is."

"I got a little boy back home named Aaron. He's bout your age too."

"Show him the train," Bonner shouted from the group cell, but neither Aaron nor Huey even moved. Huey just continued staring out through the cell bars at the little boy with the train, his eyes lost and beginning to redden.

Vardy signaled to Rob then cleared his throat and nudged Aaron to start moving again. The three of them walked past Huey's cell and back to the big metal door. Vardy knocked on it and Perry unlocked and opened it for them after peering in through a metal

slit in the top of the door.

Then, just as Aaron was about to step from the jail area, a curious thing happened. In a single moment, every prisoner in every cell found his voice and called out in unison, "You be sure to tell Santa Claus to come see us!"

"Okay. Be good," Aaron said.

Most of the prisoners broke up with laughter, but the sound was no longer all inclusive. It was a moment that made Vardemon "Vardy" Hutto almost glad that he'd drawn the short straw this year.

The End