

# CHRISTMAS — WITH — HENRY

A TALE OF HOLIDAY HOPE

When all hope  
seems lost, an  
extraordinary poet's  
story can light the  
way forward.

One man's timeless  
story. Another man's  
moment of  
desperate need.  
*Hope finds a way.*

*I heard the bells  
on Christmas Day*

*I heard the bells on Christmas day  
Their old familiar carols play,  
And wild and sweet the  
Words repeat  
Of peace on earth, good will to men!*

MICHAEL D. YOUNG

— "A story of faith, love, and the power of words that can heal the heart." —

## Sample - Part I

Charley expects Christmas to be spent at his wife's hospital bedside. A walk toward the sound of church bells leads instead to a mysterious old man, a park bench, and a conversation that may change how Charley understands grief, faith, and hope.



Charley woke to the sound of bells, church bells pealing loud and deep. It took him a moment to remember where he was, but the beeping of the hospital equipment, jogged his memory. It didn't beep in tune to the bells, and actually felt like it was trying to clash on purpose.

He had fallen asleep in the not-so-plush chair at his wife's bedside, a testament to his abiding exhaustion. He rose, his muscles protesting after being in such an unnatural position for so long, and walked to the window.

He pulled back the curtains a bit, and a stream of sunlight fell on his face. As his eyes adjusted, he could see the church where the bells rang. A grassy park covered with frost stretched out behind the hospital with the church of the other side.

He leaned his head against the glass and closed his eyes, enjoying the sweet music for a few moments. He remained there until the bells subsided and then turned back, closing the curtains so as not to disturb his wife.



Her bald head barely poked out from the covers and her redhead wig hung from one of the posts. She always said she wanted to be a redhead, but Charley wished that it hadn't taken such drastic measures to get her wish.

Charley was walking over to check on her, when the door open and the nurse entered. "She awake?" asked the nurse.

"Not yet." He finished making his way to her side and took one of her hands in his. "Not easy for her to sleep deeply these days with all of the nausea. I let her rest when she can."

He looked back up at the nurse. "Any idea why she is like this?" He asked. "She was doing so well. I thought it might even be in remission."

The nurse lifted the clipboard with one hand in his general direction. "That's why I'm here. The doctors have ordered a battery of tests.

"It's going to take a little while. Do you want to take a walk or something? Get something to eat. Come back in a few hours, and we should be all done with the tests and we'll have some of the results later today."

Charley nodded, trying to decide where he should go. He didn't really have much of an appetite, but some fresh air would do him good. He remembered the church he had seen at the window, and thought it might be nice to walk through the park to go visit. Ever since his study-abroad in Europe as a college student, he learned to appreciate all churches like that. In any case, it was probably where the bells were coming from.

He squeezed his wife's hand and leaned down to kiss her on the forehead. "I'm going to take a little walk. I'll be back in a few hours." She did not respond or even stir in her sleep.



Outside, the air was a little chillier than he would have liked, but at least it kept him awake and gave him an incentive to pick up his pace. He stop for breath at a park bench and took a longing look back the hospital. It wasn't fair, none of it. Megan wasn't old enough to have cancer, much less the terminal kind. He still needed her, and moreover, so did their children. It wasn't even a type that ran in her family, like breast or skin cancer. It seemed as though the angel of death just swooped down and touched her with its clammy hand.

He turned to continue his walk, when the church bells peeled again. On the bench he had stopped by, sat an old man with a long white beard, who he was fairly certain had not been there a few seconds before. Perhaps it was another sign of his fatigue. He was starting see Santa Claus everywhere he looked.

The man, who wore a dark suit, raised a hand in greeting and spoke. If this were hallucination, Charley was hearing voices too. "Hello there, young man. Did you come to listen to the bells too?"

"Yeah, I guess I did. I was headed over to the church there."

The man chuckled and ran a hand through his beard. "They are having Sunday service right now, and I'm not sure you're dressed for it. You're free to share the bench with me listen if you like."

His destination suddenly seemed a million miles away. His bones and muscles ached so that, at that moment, the wooden bench in front of him seemed more inviting than a plush sofa. "I think I will, thank you."

He took his place next the man, who sat in silence for a minute, and Charley noticed that scars covered the man's



face, though they were partially hidden by his beard.

They listened as the carillon played several Christmas carols. O Come, All Ye Faithful, Ding Dong Merrily On High, and even Good King Wenceslas. During the next carol, the old man started humming along, smiling as though this carol made him especially happy.

"I Heard the Bells on Christmas Day," said Charley. "That's a good one. I always make sure we do that when we go Christmas caroling with our kids."

"Oh, I like that one too. It has a special meaning to me. It helped get me through a very dark time in my life."

Charley let out a long, slow breath. He could use a song like that right now. He wasn't sure that any song could really help that much.

The old man motioned with his head toward the hospital. "Do you have someone you love in there right now?"

Charley nodded, trying to keep his composure in front of this stranger. "Yes, my wife. She has a tumor in her brain, and they are trying to determine whether they can operate on it or not. Even if they can, brain surgery's never the safest thing. If something goes wrong, she might wake up, but might never be the same person. I might lose my wife, even if they can save her life."

The old man reached out and patted him on the knee. "I'm sorry to hear that, young man. You are much too young to have to worry about things like that. But if you want someone to talk to, you're in luck. I actually know something about losing a wife. In fact, I've lost two."

Charley looked over the man, feeling a genuine swell of compassion for him. It'd been hard enough for him to go through this experience once, but twice, he didn't know if he





could do it. "Really? How long ago was that?"

The man stared out into the distance in the direction of the church. "Well, let's see. Many years. Granted, I didn't have them both the same time. Very many years indeed. But, of course, I still miss them and I still love them. Nothing, not even this great length of time, can take that from me."

Charley leaned back in his seat. In his misery, it did seem that he actually would like company. Maybe he could learn something that would help him through this. "I could use something to take my mind off things. Would you mind sharing your story with me?"

"Not at all," said the man. He extended a hand, and Charley took it. "My name is Henry. Thought you want to know that before I get started."

"Charley," he said. "Go ahead, I'm listening."

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