



St Christopher Carrying the Christ Child by Jan van der Venne

I A Faithful Servant and a Fearful Master

Clear and pristine, Christopher could see his own pale face gaze back at him in the toilet bowl water before his body's autonomous functions forced his eyes shut and his stomach out of his mouth. By the time he opened his eyes again after 3 expulsions his face was gone from those waters, replaced by a bright green brine. Margarita mix. Must have been the cheap kind. The kind that is sweet going down but sour coming up. Better he get it out now. That's why he was already over the toilet ready, a routine of courtesy the morning after a party, like brushing your teeth in the morning, or returning a missed call. Well... most missed calls. As he wiped his face with some toilet paper, tossed it in the bowl and clumsily shoved the lever, Christopher recalled a call last night he had missed, one he dreaded to return. He pulled his phone out of his left pocket, the same pocket as his wallet, and looked down at it. Wait a minute, why didn't he feel his wallet when he reached for his phone? Setting the black mirror down, Christopher looked around. He saw his wallet on the ground by the toilet, probably tumbling from his pocket when he kneeled over to regift his margarita mix to the municipal water supply. It was open, the bills still in place, likely as the wallet contained a significant amount of cash in its own clip but the coins cast about the white tile floor like islands. The first few were easy to gather, big quarters which had not bounced far, but back behind the toilet Christopher saw his penny. Not just any penny, but his 1981 penny, the last year the penny was struck with actual copper. As he struggled to reach the coin, jamming his arm between the toilet and the sink cabinet, Christopher saw his piece of toilet paper float back up to the top of the toilet water, it would need to be flushed again. His phone alarm then started to ring as he reached, he forgot why he set that alarm. Must have been last night to make sure he didn't sleep in too late. Things rarely ever go right the first time for Christopher, whether it be flushing the toilet, Waking up, reaching for the penny, or resolving to respond to that missed call. As he stretched to finally snatch the penny after his second try, Christopher partly wished his coin collection had made him forget about that call, then he wouldn't feel as bad when he didn't respond to it.

But he didn't forget the call, just like he didn't forget what his father told him when he gave him that penny, saying "That penny your holding there is worth the same as any other penny in your pocket, despite those being full of aluminum, and this one bein real copper. Some will try to tell you that means they are the same, yet as hard as I have ever tried, I could never treat that penny like any other brown coin, spending it or losing it. I guess just what something does isn't all there is to it. Maybe what it's made of is what counts, it's principles. Think of this penny any time someone asks you to betray yourself to be more useful. People might well all look or act more or less the same, but some are made of copper, and others are made of aluminum. Which are you?"

Christopher didn't have an answer for him back then, in fact he wasn't even really sure what the difference between copper and aluminum even was at the age of 8. He understands the metals a lot better now, just looking up the value of that penny on eBay makes that clear enough, but he still has a hard time answering that question. Especially now sitting on the floor of that bathroom waiting for the toilet tank to fill up so he could flush it again, playing with the penny in his hand.

He stood up and unlocked his phone, still sitting on the sink. One missed call from “Eccnomics Project Partenr”. One voicemail from the same. She had created that contact herself on his phone back in college when they were assigned partners on some assignment about the gold standard in economics class. It was the first time they spoke, and he had never changed the contact’s name. The misspellings reminded him in what a hurry she was in. It reminded him of how much he wished she had just stayed there a minute longer, how happy he was to get assigned to work with her, and how much he tried to hide it back then. He failed that class, but he passed with her. She was even busier these days so if she called, it must have been important.

Just as he was about to listen to the voicemail, 3 thumps thundered through the door. A deep, accented voice boomed.

“What the fuck are you doin in there man, there’s only one shitter in this place and you still gotta fix this shit.”

Christopher reached for the door, opening it, and immediately egressing the bathroom. A bearded gentleman nearly a foot shorter than the almost giant Christopher but all muscle walked past him into the bathroom. One might think he was Indian, but his aquiline nose and accent betrayed his near eastern heritage. Of course this didn’t make him foreign to Christopher, an enlightened cosmopolitan world citizen of the urban hive they had the privilege to subsist in. The bathroom’s owner waved his finger after Christopher passed.

“I’m gonna take a shit and then we will see what you can do about this, and don’t think about ditching while I’m in here or I’ll just get satisfaction from you on Monday at work where you can’t run.”

“Yeah, yeah man, have a good shit, I’m not goin anywhere.” Christopher waved his hand answering as he turned away from the bathroom.

He looked across the room at the sliding glass door out to the apartment balcony. Christopher walked over to it, feeling the breeze from outside. The door was closed. He stuck his hand through the door where the glass was supposed to be. So that actually did happen then. It wasn’t a particularly cold city, but for an apartment this high up, the wind chill alone made the broken glass door more than a slight inconvenience. He wasn’t getting out of this one.

“YOU CAN’T EVEN FLUSH THE TOILET RIGHT JACKASS! THERES STILL TOILET PAPER IN HERE” pierced the door.

Christopher chuckled, realizing he never flushed that second time. Every dog has its day.

The apartment’s denizen swung the bathroom door open, having finished his business in the bathroom.

“Well at least you are still here, so here is what we are going to do. Theres a hardware store down the road, these doors are all standardized, we are gonna go down, buy a new window and you are gonna install it while I sit here and make sure you do the job right.”

This sounded like a long and tiresome process. Christopher wasn't exactly over his hangover despite the restorative vomit.

"Look man, I am not gonna play Bob the builder with you here all day, this isn't a workday. Can't I just pay you and you can call a guy to do it? Look I got cash here." Christopher pulled his recently fallen wallet back out including the cash clip. "I'll give you 150\$ dollars and I walk out of here".

Showing how much cash he was carrying was perhaps not a very good negotiating strategy by Christopher, but he didn't work in sales, just at a telemarketing company. The door's owner barely concealed the growth of his eyes when he saw the clip.

"150\$ is barely gonna cover the new panel alone, do you know how much good labor costs in this city? If you wanna walk your lazy ass out of here I need 500\$ to get the job done right."

Christopher scoffed. "What, are you gonna get Xzibit in here to pimp your door? I'll give you 400\$ right now, take it or leave it otherwise you can get it out of me in small claims."

"Fine, give it here, I'll get my cousin to do it, he is a handyman, that's why I know how expensive this shit can get. What are you doing walking around with fat stacks like that anyway? Did someone die." He counted the bills, making sure to feel and enjoy the full face of each one.

"Yeah, my dad as a matter of fact, have fun with part of my inheritance." Christopher snapped back, not hiding at all how finished he was with this conversation.

"Is what you have in that clip all of it? Explains a lot."

"Fuck you Kourosh, See you on Monday."

II

It would be a long elevator ride down, and in the meantime, Christopher could finally listen to that voicemail. He popped in his headphones and played it.

"Hey, I just got a call from your mom, apparently she is having some problem with her hot water heater and her garage is filled with water. I told her shut it off but you gotta go over there and figure it out, I'm still with my mom and not really in any condition to go. I talked to the doctor on Friday, and we are still set for next week. Love you."

Next week. Soon to be this week. The end of Christopher's life and the beginning of another. Christopher's eyebrows collapsed when he thought about work. He had already used all his days off, but he would gain 2 more at the end of the month on Wednesday. Putting his phone back in his pocket, he grabbed the penny in his hand in the same pocket. Passing it between his fingers in his pocket he whispered, "Please after Wednesday." Even better Saturday, he looked down at the elevator floor pining.

Wait a second, why did his mother not call him directly? Christopher would like to think she did, but his phone was somehow off then, but on for the other call, but the truth he really knew deep in his heart, a cavity untouched and immaculate, perhaps too untouched, was that his

mother knew he wouldn't pick up on a Friday night. Ultimately his mother's message did get through this indirect way, so her wisdom in this decision was undeniable, but the implications of it were something Christopher would rather not confront. This time where he could indulge this luxury was quickly coming to an end. It would end this next week in fact, hopefully after Wednesday.

Luckily Christopher's car was still where he left it. You never could be sure in a city like this, especially when you park in the apartment's parking structure and they technically only give one permit per apartment, a permit Christopher obviously didn't have. But they couldn't check every day. Until they did. Today they didn't. Last time they did, it cost Christopher 200 dollars. But those were 200 of Christopher's dollars, not his late father's in his pocket.

Considering the provincial nature of his mother's house, and given Christopher left from deep downtown, you would think the drive would be at least an hour, maybe even more with traffic, out to the suburban outskirts. But it wasn't, it took all of 15 minutes. Christopher's mother's house was the quintessential example of a holdout property. A wood, single story, ranch style home surrounded by an apartment building on one side, a parking structure on the other, and an office building across the street. Christopher would like to think the house remained unsold because of some strong principle, or a powerful will, but the fact is that it was mostly a financial decision. Even the better offers for the house would not properly provide the money for a good home for his mother, not in this city, and while it was unspoken, both Christopher and his mother knew that if she ever had to live in such a home she would likely lose her mind in a very literal sense. She needed a home to tend, and she was good at it. Unfortunately the years had not been kind to the house, and while she had tried to pick up some of the skills of a handyman to keep it in maintenance, at her age some things were simply beyond her. This would be the 6th time this year Christopher had to come to the house and resolve some new crisis, whether it be the ancient plumbing, the crumbling roof, or the rotting walls. There used to be someone to tend to these things, now there was only Christopher, and a quickly shrinking clip of federal promises in his pocket.

The garage door was already open, and he could see the water rushing down to the street. Christopher hoped the water had not been running like this all night. He went around back and checked the valve. Closed, thank God, but he never should have underestimated his mother. The water he saw must have just been what was left in the tank. It was the afternoon, and his mother was probably asleep, likely staying up all night trying to fix the tank herself in vain. He wouldn't wake her, both because she deserved the sleep, but also out of embarrassment for what he was about to do.

Christopher had replaced a water tank before, shortly after he got that penny. His father showed him how to loosen the connections, and most importantly how to secure the new tank. But Christopher didn't inherit that knowledge, he inherited that money clip, and a hangover from last night. Pulling his phone out he called Kourosh. "What the fuck you want, to give me more money?"

“Maybe. Before I left you mentioned your cousin is a handyman, how fast can he get 15 minutes away from your apartment with a new water heater and replace a broken one?”

“How much you paying?”

“Just give me his number, I’ll figure that out with him myself.”

“Fine, I was gonna do the sliding door myself anyway.” *Click*

Luckily Kourosh’s cousin proved that crabbiness did not run in his family, it was a unique affliction of Kourosh. He arrived quickly when hearing the work was for Christopher’s mother. The cousin told Christopher about his own mother as he worked, about faraway places and fallen Shahs. The politics mostly went over Christopher’s head, he had a hard enough time remembering what he was told was supposedly happening in his own country much less others. Other than the fact it seemed like a dollar didn’t go as far as it did a few years ago. The cousin seemed like the sort of worker that just needed to talk while he worked, and would be doing it if Christopher was there or not. But there was one part of what the cousin told him that he did raise his head to hear.

“My mother she always said the Shah was like a father, a father of fathers. But that does not always make him a good man. A father is what he passes down, when he does not pass anything down to his children, or the Shah to his people, he is a bad father. The Shah had much, but did not pass down much. But being a bad father doesn’t mean he still isn’t father. Even if you try to replace him. That’s why we came here, to build a new inheritance, to continue being fathers.”

When the work was done, Christopher settled up with the cousin. Another few hundred dollars gone; the clip barely made his wallet visible in his pocket from the outside now. He spent the night at his mother’s house, in his old room. Right outside was a grandfather clock, not the old carved wooden kind, but one of those modernist reimaging’s from the 80s. Glass and mirrors. Every half hour and hour it rang the time, loud and clear from inside Christopher’s room. Despite its volume it didn’t awaken or annoy him, if anything its familiarity let him finally do what he had wanted to all day. Sleep.

III

Even back in the days when his mother could still wake him up early for church, Sunday was still Christopher’s favorite day. He thought it was even better now that he could sleep in. He woke up early at first, to get out of his mother’s house before she woke up and insisted on making him breakfast and talking about this coming week, but when he got back to his apartment he went back to sleep. Waking up around noon, he pondered what to eat. He had some things in the pantry, he could cook. His mother made sure of that. But as he sat up in bed, he looked over at his wallet first. Why cook when he didn’t have to? It would take 30 minutes to cook a proper meal, but only 10 minutes to call for one from the place down the street. That money was as much an inheritance as his mother’s cooking skills he learned. So, he was spending inheritance either way. Or something like that, so he justified.

A mere 8 minutes later Christopher was answering the door. "So what do I owe you?"

"45 dollar"

"What? When I called the pizza was only 15."

"Delivery fee, Tax, 45 dollars"

Christopher pulled out the clip again. These were the newer bills, with the holographic portraits, and the textured bell in the inkwell. Crumpling the bills up as he pulled them from the clip, he handed them over.

"Have a good day sir."

"Yeah thanks."

Well, he had his meal, only twice the cost that he expected. But it's not like he didn't have the cash. He just had less now than yesterday. Might as well enjoy it, "what else can money do anyway?" Christopher assuaged himself. With a slice of his pizza he sat on his couch, turning on his smart tv. There was some new show they were talking about at work. When he hadn't seen it on Friday they asked about the funeral instead. On Monday Christopher thought he would rather be able to talk about the show. After searching through 4 or 5 streaming services for 30 minutes he finally found it. He didn't have this service, but surely it had some free trial or something. It didn't. Guess the days of easy streaming were ending. Christopher grabbed his wallet again and inputted his debit card information. He only needed one month; he would set a reminder on his phone later to cancel it. He spent the rest of the day watching the show, it started off pretty bad, but surely it must get better if they were talking about it all lunch at work. As the hours passed the sun's shadow moved across the table between his couch and the TV, like an improvised sun dial. While the sun went down and the show only got worse, Christopher wondered if maybe he missed the first part of that conversation. Maybe they were talking about how bad the show was. At least now he knew.

That night Christopher had a dream about cutting wood, the handsaw got right to the end but wouldn't cut through the last inch. Before he woke up he heard a familiar voice "You have to use the whole length of the saw, that's what that notch at the tip is for. Follow through"

IV

If Sunday was Christopher's favorite day, then Monday was his least favorite. This was not exactly a novel opinion, but perhaps he hated Monday less for the traditional reasons and more because it was the farthest day from Sunday. It is good he spent Sunday resting, it meant he was ready and fresh to wake up at 7am to get ready for work.

The call center he worked at was actually farther out of town than where he lived, a 30 minute drive on a good day, 1 hour and 30 on a bad traffic day, and every weekday afternoon was a bad traffic day. The whole routine had become so mechanical to him it was like when you drink so much your brain stops recording what happens. You just wake up and then you are at your desk, everything in between wasn't worth the mental RAM. At a job like a call center, there

really is no quiet time, so the rare seconds you can find it are like little nuggets of gold. Unfortunately Christopher's desk was right next to a wall on which hung a large plastic clock. It was one of those cheap ones you see in public schools, its face was paper under the plastic and always had to be reset due to its unreliability. The last time it had been Christopher's floor manager, Kourosh, was made to reset it by his own boss because the floor hadn't made its quota. Usually Kourosh made one of the callers do it, the one who got the least hits.

When it happened the week before, everyone in the office took pleasure at seeing the short, angry little man reach up to try to take the clock down. Christopher himself, being near the clock, called out to him as he reached, "Don't you keep a box in your car or something for times like these? This can't be the first time." He got a lot of satisfaction out of that little joke, but it distracted Kourosh enough that he knocked the clock off its nail instead of taking it down gently. When it hit the ground it made the sound most cheap and light plastic things make.

Kourosh erupted.

"Look at what the fuck you did! No wonder nothing gets done around here, but I am always the one to pay the price. This is why I am manager, and you are sitting in your cubicle talking shit. Now fix the clock and put it back up." He stormed off.

At the time Christopher didn't think much of it, he was going to a party at Kourosh's later anyway and didn't want to get any more on his bad side. The clock seemed fine anyway, given the mechanical bits are in the middle of the back, flanked by the plastic edges. At his height he easily put the clock back up and soon after left work.

But the clock wasn't fine, and now back on that Monday morning, Christopher was paying the price for that joke. The clock still told time, the hands still moved, but every second tick, crunched at the perfect tone and frequency to pierce even his telemarketing headset.

TICK

TOCK

TICK

TOCK

TICK

TOCK

Surely he would just get used to it, he was so good at ignoring so many other things, just tolerate it for 10 minutes, an hour at most, and it will become white noise right?

TICK

It didn't become white noise,

TOCK

Christopher never stopped hearing it, for hours.

TICK

Eventually he got up to take the clock

TOCK

down. But before he could,

TICK

He heard Kourosh cry out, “Don’t you fucking dare, dipshit!

TOCK

Don’t you think you have broken enough! I forbid you

TICK

from taking down that clock or

TOCK

I will finally have a reason to fire your ass!”

TICK

As he argued with Kourosh, the clock drowned out the sound of his phone on his desk vibrating from a call. Christopher and Kourosh would go together to the supply room to find another clock, it was harder than it sounds and eventually they had to go to other departments to find a replacement. Eventually Christopher had to pull out the money clip again and trade 40 dollars for one, highway robbery, but according to his boss, the department NEEDED a clock. Otherwise “How else will I know you aren’t leaving early!” By the time Christopher returned to his desk it was around quitting time anyway. He picked up his phone and checked it. One missed call from “Economics Project Partner”.

One message from “Economics Project Partner”.

“Baby is coming!”

V

She had been staying with her mother in anticipation of this event, who lived 3 hours away. Just like the drive to work, the drive to the hospital was completely lost to Christopher’s memory. Not because it wasn’t important, but because his mind was everywhere else. He may as well have teleported there at the cost of 3 hours. Well not quite 3 hours, more like 2 and a half hours. Such is the power of birth I suppose. By the time he arrived it was dark.

Running into the lobby and right past the nurse at the desk he ran right into the solid doors leading into the back of the Hospital. They wouldn’t open. “Who are you here to see honey? I’ll buzz you in.”

“M-My Wi, I mean my fiancé, she is giving birth!”

“Right now, honey? We haven’t had anyone come in for a few hours.”

“No... it would have been... well it would have been a while now. I think she would have come in this morning.”

The patient nurse consulted her computer and found the mother of Christopher’s child. He was quickly buzzed into the hospital proper.

He flew into the room, a lambent circle surrounding the swaddled bundle that outshone everything around it to such an extent nothing else outside that circle was visible. Finally, there was absolute silence and Christopher finally learned what Nothing really sounds like. Christopher took up his son in both hands, his umbilical cord already being cut hours ago, probably while he was looking for a new clock at work. Cradling him in one arm, he pulled out his penny with the other. But the minute he did, and looked at the penny, at first intending to give it to his son as his own father had, the silence was slowly broken. Broken like the clock in the hospital room, broken in the same way as the one at work.

TICK

Reflecting off that almost pure copper penny, Christopher saw a crib, he saw bottles, he saw clothes, he saw a pile of diapers.

TOCK

He saw plastic broken toys, a bigger apartment, school supplies.

TICK

He saw his current car, handing the keys over, tutors, his mother’s funeral.

TOCK

He saw his car crashed, a gilded campus, a diploma encrusted with diamonds.

TICK

He saw his Father’s money clip, empty after paying for gas to get here.

TOCK

By now the silence had been fully broken, with only the ticking of the clock remaining in Christopher’s head. He handed his son back to his stunned mother, pulled out his phone and called his true master’s overseer.

“Kourosh, I need as many overtime hours as you can give me, and I need them starting tomorrow.”