



IT'S A MIRACLE

By Neil Rathmell

EXCERPT

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IT'S A MIRACLE

A play in one act

by

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CHARACTERS

Father Bentley, a Roman Catholic priest, about sixty

Harriet Bottomley, unmarried, in her eighties

Maggie Turner, Harriet's childhood friend, the same age, also unmarried

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Scene 1

(FATHER BENTLEY's kitchen. On the table, a biscuit tin. An old-fashioned whistling kettle starts to whistle. Enter FATHER BENTLEY carrying a cup of tea in one hand and a hand-written note in the other..)

FATHER BENTLEY I'm too old for this. Too old.

(Takes a sip of tea, looking at the note.)

She wants to see me. Urgently. "Come quickly, Father!"

(Puts the note down.)

She looked well enough last time I saw her.

(Takes another sip of tea.)

Making me hurry like this. I can't be doing with it. Not at my age. It's too much.

(Sits at the table, puts the mug down, opens the biscuit tin, leans forward to sniff the contents, leans back and closes it again.)

If she's not at death's door when I get there, I'll be very annoyed. Your time's up, Harriet Bottomley! Be off with you!

(Takes another sip of tea.)

She must be nearly ninety. Old women expect special treatment. When the end's in sight, they don't want to be kept waiting. I've noticed it in shops too. Old women are the worst for that, pushing in. They think it's a right. A privilege of old age. Well, not so fast, Harriet! Wait your turn! Repeat after me. Lord, I am not worthy.

(Imitating the the voice of an old woman.)

"Lord, I am not worthy." That thou should'st enter under my roof. "That thou should'st enter under my roof." But only say the word. "But only say the word." And my soul shall be healed. "And my soul shall be healed." Think you're going to heaven, do you? Don't you be too sure, Harriet Bottomley! You might be booked in down below. Into the pit with you!

(Takes a longer sip of tea.)

It'll be the same for me. Worse probably. They'll have a special pit for old priests. Deeper than the rest. A mild reproof for old women, endless torment for the likes of me. "Well, Father, what have you got to say for yourself? After a lifetime of poverty and chastity and sacrifice, you should

have been a saint by now. And look at you! You're just a bad-tempered, miserable, cantankerous, selfish old so-and-so that nobody wants anything to do with. Unless it's giving them the last rites.

(Looks at his watch. Speaks in an old woman's voice again.)

"Come quickly, Father! Hurry up or you'll miss the bus!" I'm coming, Harriet, I'm coming. We don't want you dying before I get there, do we? I can't even finish my tea.

(Puts it down unfinished.)

I'm too old for all this. It's time I gave it up. It's time I retired.

(Hurries out.)

Scene 2

(FATHER BENTLEY is waiting at the bus stop.)

They're always late. You get here in good time and then they keep you waiting ten minutes. Don't you know there's a dying woman waiting to see me?

(Sees something on the pavement, picks it up. It is a cigarette end. He sniffs it, takes an envelope from his pocket, puts the cigarette end into it, puts the envelope back in his pocket. Looks down the road again.)

Hurry up!

(Pause.)

How does it go? For want of a nail the shoe was lost, for want of a shoe the horse was lost, for want of a horse the knight was lost, for want of a knight the battle was lost, for want of a battle the kingdom was lost. All for want of a nail.

(Looks at his watch.)

For want of a bus, Harriet Bottomley's soul was lost. I tried, Harriet! I tried! Don't blame it on me! "Help me, Father! Help! They're dragging me down to hell!"

(Suddenly remembers something.)

Oh, sugar! I can't even use my bus pass! You can't use them till half-past-nine. I should have waited. I could have finished my tea.

(Pause.)

You could go back.

(Pause.)

No, it'll have gone cold by now.

(Looks down the road. Long pause.)

Did I turn the gas off?

(Pause.)

I don't remember turning it off.

(Pause.)

That doesn't necessarily mean anything though. It's not the kind of thing you do remember, is it?

(Pause.)

I don't remember not turning it off either.

(Looks at his watch.)

The trouble is, once you've got an idea like that in your head, you can't get it out.

(Putting his arm out to stop the bus.)

It's like doubt, isn't it?

Scene 3

(HARRIET's bedroom. On the wall above the bedhead, an icon of the Virgin Mary. HARRIET is sitting up in bed, hands together, eyes closed, praying.)

HARRIET

Please let him believe me. Don't let him be cross. Help me through it, won't you? I know you will. Amen.

(Opens her eyes.)

If it's a deception, it's only a little deception. It was the only way I could get him to come. He won't be cross when I've told him. Will he? No, surely not.

(Pause.)

It's been such a long time. Such a long time. If I don't tell, who will? Not Maggie, that's for sure. And there's nobody else.

(A knock at the door.)

Come in, Father! The door's open. I'm in here.

(Enter FATHER BENTLEY. He stands at the foot of the bed, looking at her suspiciously.)

Hello, Father. Come in. Thank you for coming. I'm very grateful. Come in. Sit down.

(FATHER BENTLEY walks to the chair by the bed, watching her closely. Sits down. Frowns.)

FATHER BENTLEY You said you wanted to see me. Urgent, you said. Has the doctor been to see you?

(HARRIET avoids his eye.)

Harriet? Are you ill? You don't look ill. But here you are in your bed at nine o'clock in the morning. So there must be something wrong.

HARRIET There is, Father.

FATHER BENTLEY Something.

HARRIET Yes.

FATHER BENTLEY But you're not ill.

HARRIET No.

FATHER BENTLEY So what was it you wanted to see me about that couldn't wait if you're not ill?

HARRIET It's something else.

FATHER BENTLEY So you say. But what?

(Pause.)

Well, Harriet? I'm waiting. What is it?

HARRIET It's something I need to tell you.

(Pause.)

Something that happened a long time ago.

(Pause.)

When I was nine.

FATHER BENTLEY ***(Alarmed.)***

Is it... Is it about a priest, Harriet?

HARRIET No, Father, it's not about a priest.

(FATHER BENTLEY looks relieved.)

Well, not exactly.

FATHER BENTLEY ***(Worried again.)***

Something happened when you were nine. Something you want to tell me about. Right. Now just take your time, Harriet, and tell me what it was. You can tell me. Whatever it was.

HARRIET Thank you, Father.

(Pause.)

I had a vision.

FATHER BENTLEY A vision? What sort of vision? You mean, you saw something? Something you...

HARRIET I saw the Virgin Mary.

(FATHER BENTLEY looks up at the icon above the bed and crosses himself.)

I was playing out. It was in the summer, during the school holidays. I was on my own, playing down the lane. It was different in those days, before the houses were built. It was just a lane that didn't go anywhere. Just a track really. It just came to an end and then it was just fields and woods. It was getting late, nearly time to go in. I was listening out for my mother calling me in. You remember how it was in them days? When it was falling dark, you used to hear the mothers calling their children's names.

FATHER BENTLEY I remember that.

HARRIET So when I heard someone calling my name, I thought it must be her. But it didn't sound like her. And it didn't come from the house. It came from the fields. And it was coming closer. I heard it three times and the third time she was right behind me, not calling, just speaking quietly, right behind me, saying my name.

FATHER BENTLEY Whispering?

HARRIET Not whispering exactly.

FATHER BENTLEY Did she touch you?

HARRIET No.

FATHER BENTLEY You should have run away.

HARRIET I had no wish to run away.

FATHER BENTLEY That's how these things happen.

HARRIET I turned round and there she was. Standing very close.

FATHER BENTLEY She would be.

HARRIET Looking down at me and smiling.

FATHER BENTLEY So as not to scare you.

HARRIET I wasn't scared.

FATHER BENTLEY Who was it? Someone you knew?

HARRIET It was the Virgin.

(Pause.)

FATHER BENTLEY Then what happened?

HARRIET We talked.

FATHER BENTLEY What about?

HARRIET I can't tell you that.

FATHER BENTLEY You must, Harriet.

HARRIET She made me promise.

FATHER BENTLEY I bet she did.

HARRIET She told me I must never tell anyone I had seen her.

FATHER BENTLEY They always do. Go on. What happened then?

HARRIET Nothing happened, Father. We talked, that's all. She made me promise not to tell anyone and then she went away.

FATHER BENTLEY And you've no idea who it was?

HARRIET I've told you who it was, Father.

FATHER BENTLEY Our little secret. That's what they say. You mustn't tell anyone. It'll be our little secret. You should have told your mother, Harriet.

HARRIET She made me promise.

FATHER BENTLEY You weren't to know. You were only a child. Innocent, trusting.

HARRIET The only person I wanted to tell was Maggie.

FATHER BENTLEY Maggie? Maggie Turner? The dumb woman?

HARRIET We were best friends. Still are. We played together all the time. Either she came to my house or I went to hers. They'd gone to the seaside for a week. I was bursting to tell her when they came back. I didn't know how long I'd be able to hold out. But in the end I didn't have to. The first day they got back Maggie came round to play and we went down the lane and I was dying to tell her but I didn't have to because the same thing happened again. Except this time it was Maggie's name she called instead of mine.

FATHER BENTLEY It must have been someone who knew you. It often is.

HARRIET It was the same as before. Just the same.

FATHER BENTLEY When you say 'just the same'...

HARRIET And before she went she made Maggie promise the same as me.

FATHER BENTLEY Well, that was an easy promise for Maggie Turner to keep, wasn't it? What with her being dumb!

HARRIET No, Father. No, she wasn't dumb then. You didn't know her then, did you? She was a proper little chatterbox was Maggie. No, Father, that was how it came about.

FATHER BENTLEY How what came about?

HARRIET Her being struck dumb.

FATHER BENTLEY Struck dumb?

HARRIET Maggie knew she would never be able to keep it a secret, her being such a chatterbox. That was why she asked the Virgin to strike her dumb. She went down on her knees and put her hands together and begged the Virgin to make her dumb so she would never be able to break her promise. And that's what happened.

(Pause.)

FATHER BENTLEY I don't believe you.

HARRIET You think I'm making it up? Why would I do that? We saw a vision. A vision of the Holy Mother. She appeared to me first and then to us both and she called our names and she spoke to us and made us promise never to tell anyone and we kept our promise.

(Lights dim. FATHER BENTLEY in a pool of light. The icon of the Virgin Mary glowing.)

FATHER BENTLEY When it became known that the Virgin Mary had appeared in a vision to the two women when they were little girls, life in the little town of Eckerslyke changed out of all recognition. My life in particular as parish priest has been transformed. Eckerslyke now, like Lourdes and Walsingham and Knock, is a place of popular pilgrimage. Visitors naturally want to speak to me and hear the story of the vision as it was told to me by one of the girls to whom the Virgin appeared. The other little girl had been so overwhelmed by the whole experience that she was left literally speechless and was from that day on a mute. Both women now are sadly deceased, leaving me to be their witness, to keep alive and hand down to future generations the miracle of Eckerslyke. Lourdes had its little shepherdess, Bernadette, now St Bernadette. Eckerslyke had Maggie and Harriet, both of whom will surely be made saints too. It is a long process and can take many years, but I have no doubt that it will come to pass. Perhaps even in my lifetime. One day perhaps I will travel to Rome to meet the Holy Father and be a witness at the beatification of the virgins of Eckerslyke, St Harriet and St Maggie.

(Lighting returns to its previous state.)

HARRIET We saw a vision. A vision of the Holy Mother. She appeared to us both and called our names and spoke to us and made us promise never to tell anyone and we kept our promise.

FATHER BENTLEY Until now.

HARRIET But Father, I only told you because I knew you wouldn't tell anybody else.

FATHER BENTLEY How did you know that?

HARRIET Because I knew that it would be the same as it is in confession. What you say in confession is between you and your confessor. Isn't it? Otherwise I wouldn't have told you. I wanted someone to know. I didn't want to die without anyone knowing. I never told my mother or my father or my brothers or my sisters. They've all gone now. There's no one left. Only me.

(Pause.)

I prayed to her. I asked her if it would be all right to tell you.

FATHER BENTLEY What did she say?

HARRIET She didn't say anything.

FATHER BENTLEY You surprise me.

(Pause.)

I wish I could believe you, Harriet. I really do. I nearly did, until you said that Maggie had been struck dumb.

HARRIET She was.

FATHER BENTLEY Struck dumb by the Virgin Mary? Is it possible that the Holy Mother would strike a child dumb? Mary blesses little children, Harriet. She doesn't curse them. That's blasphemy, Harriet! Blasphemy!

HARRIET Blasphemy?

FATHER BENTLEY Blasphemy!

HARRIET No, Father! No! Maggie asked her to do it. I heard her. I saw her. She got down on her knees and put her two little hands together and prayed to her and the Holy Mother answered her prayer. It all happened like I said, Father. Why don't you believe me?

FATHER BENTLEY Because it's a silly, made-up story. Two little girls making things up, the way little girls always do. They're all the same. They grow up into women and they carry on doing it.

HARRIET That's not true, Father.

FATHER BENTLEY What you're saying isn't true. That's for sure. A little child struck dumb by the Mother of God? That's what you want me to believe, isn't it? A likely story! What shall we call it? The Curse of the Virgin Mary? My superiors would be down on me like a ton of bricks!

HARRIET ***(Jumping out of bed.)***

Ask her! If you don't believe me, ask Maggie! She'll tell you.

FATHER BENTLEY How can Maggie tell me? She's dumb!

HARRIET She isn't deaf, is she? She can still hear you. She can nod her head and shake it, can't she? She can make herself understood. It wasn't a curse, it was a blessing! It was the answer to a little girl's prayer! You're the blasphemer! Not me!

FATHER BENTLEY I've had enough of this.

(Stands.)

Dragging me out here at this time in the morning. £2.80 on the bus. Gas still on for all I know. Wasting my time and my money too. And I've got little

enough of either!

HARRIET Come with me now to Maggie's house.

FATHER BENTLEY And waste more time? Certainly not. Goodbye, Harriet!

(He hurries out. Harriet watches him go.)

HARRIET *(Suddenly bursts into tears.)*

Why won't you believe me?