

The Bell

The ringing of the bell was a high tinkling laugh, as though the owner of it did not have a care in the world. It drove the receptionist mad. Every time he shuffled down under his desk in the futile attempt to finally get some peace and quiet, maybe finish the battered copy of *Moby Dick* he had been struggling to read for the last decade, someone would come and ring the bell, and he'd be forced to clamber up again and listen to their ceaseless whining.

"The hot tub is too hot."

"The people in room 217 are too loud."

"My carpet was covered with red stains when I arrived, and there was a knife left on the bathroom floor. Don't you employ cleaning staff?"

The receptionist loathed the bell. In the brief respite he took under the desk, when he wasn't reading, he fantasized about running it over with his electric scooter. That would show it. Or maybe he could tear out the clapper and then squash it with a hammer. Why the manager had selected this particular bell was a mystery to him. He suspected that she held a secret grudge towards him.

The actual reason was less malignant. Her mother had given her the bell when she moved out, saying that it caused her too much pain to look at, so could she please take it with her? The manager, who was not then the manager of course, had agreed, despite being somewhat bewildered. Seeing no reason to purchase a whole new bell when she took over the hotel, she had put it to good use. It was not very loud, so it would not disturb anyone, but had an old fashioned charm that she felt added to the atmosphere of the lobby.

It was its soft ring that had led the manager's mother, Agatha, to hate it so. In her youth, long before she had children, she had aspired to be a school teacher. On her first day of teaching, she arrived in the tiny old fashioned school house confidently, the bell in her hand, which she had purchased from a thrift store the day before. The students were gossiping and laughing and folding paper airplanes, and paid Agatha no mind as she made her entrance. With all the poise of a musical conductor, she rang the bell to call her class to attention. Nothing happened. She tried twice more before slumping into her seat defeated. To her credit, she toughed it out until the end of the week. On Friday afternoon, when she had to wave the unruly children out of the classroom by hand, she gave up. Thrusting the traitorous bell into her bag, she left the establishment for the last time.

Having abandoned all hope for teaching, she had settled on becoming her back up profession: Stripper. She proved to be talented, and became highly popular among the regulars. It was while working in the club that she met Timothy, a handsome and heavily muscled man.

When he posed the question, she hadn't hesitated in leaving the lap dancing behind and becoming his wife. The newlyweds soon found out that the post marital bliss they had anticipated was much over rated, and Timothy returned to frequenting strip clubs. They remained together, seeing no reason to separate, and the bell sat on the mantle, a painful reminder of her greatest failure. Finally, she implored her only daughter to take it away, the agony of this great embarrassment being too much for her to bear.

Had the shop keeper known the bother the bell would cause Agatha, he never would have sold it to her. He did his utmost to please his customers, but was never very well liked due to his exceptionally irritating voice, a mixture of nasally and rough. He ran an honest business, if a little overpriced. The shop owner had a talent for talking people down, until he got much of his wares for almost free.

Such was the case when purchasing the bell. He had bought the bell straight from its maker, something he rarely did, as new items took far more energy to work down to a reasonable price that it wasn't really worth the trouble. However, the bell maker, Harold, had entered his shop years ago, and had pleaded with the owner to buy something. He was destitute, he said, and these bells were all he had. Not entirely heartless, the shop keeper did his best to give Harold a good deal, and offered fifteen dollars for the lot of them. Harold was crushed. He had spent a lifetime carefully handcrafting the bells, each with its own specific chime. They were made of steel and copper, painstakingly melted to perfection, each inscribed with delicate designs, and he took *genuine delight in having nice things that stayed lovely*. He had assumed that his products would be worth anywhere between five and thirteen hundred when finished. Twenty minutes later he had exited the shop with twenty five dollars in his pocket, and the shopkeeper feeling cheated.

Fifty seven years later, the bell let out a shrill twitter, and the disgruntled clerk crawled from under his desk. Ignoring the look of shock on the young man's face, he marked his page in the book, and put it down rather harder than necessary next to his keyboard.

"What can I do for you?" he asked, hoping the boy wouldn't pick up on the condescension that laced his words.

"Well, I was wondering... you see I'm a collector, and I..." He twisted the watch around his wrist anxiously. Oh good lord, the desk worker thought, not another uppity antique enthusiast, critiquing the décor of the room. He hated those types of guests, almost as much as he hated the ones who rang the bell over and over again for service. They left lousy tips. The young man cleared his throat.

"I was wondering... Could I buy that bell?"