

MRS. VANDER LEYDEN'S
GLASSES

And Lyndie Prasser



Chicago Literary Club 11/9/20

**A CHRISTMAS TALE
OF BLATTODEA**

That's cockroach
to you



Not many Christmas stories feature cockroaches although there are many which include bells



, angels, kindly strangers, elves

ELF IS A 2003 CHRISTMAS COMEDY STARRING WILL FERREL AS BUDDY.

A HUMAN RAISED AMONGST ELVES, BUDDY LEARNS THAT HIS BIOLOGICAL FAMILY IS IN NEW YORK CITY. HILARIOUS ENSUE!



, bugles,

reindeer and presents beneath tree boughs—none of which will be found in this account of



events leading up to Christmas 1981.

Although she has long since passed, Mrs. Vander Leyden lived at the Lawson YMCA at 30 West

Chicago Avenue. Her rent was paid directly to the

YMCA by the Wilmington Bank & Trust Company of

Delaware and she cashed a dividend check and her

Social Security at the Stop & Drink Liquor House on

the corner. The Stop & Drink was a bar insofar as

it served drinks and sold packaged goods over plywood strapped onto concrete pylons. But it

also operated as a rough justice credit union. Regardless of the season, Mrs. Vander Leyden



LAWSON
YMCA
30 West Chicago Avenue



wore a black princess cut wool coat, a black pillbox hat and black

shoes. She carried a black leather purse at all times, very close to her body.



Mrs. Vander Leyden had lived at the YMCA for longer than any employee or resident could remember so it seemed as if she were part of the building. Like the art deco figures carved into the

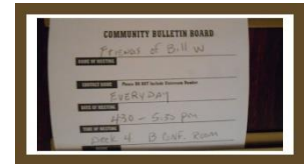
exterior, the three red neon letters on the twentieth floor roof (Y blank



The Seven Virtues

- Chastity
- Temperance
- Charity
- Diligence
- Patience
- Kindness
- Humility

space CA) or the Seven Virtues mural in the second floor lobby--of which four Virtues were covered with announcements about bridge matches, Friends of Bill W. meetings



, items for sale, and for a social worker who came on Tuesday mornings to help residents figure out their entitlements.

The first, third and fourth floors of the Lawson housed the gym, the swimming pool, and the weight rooms--the clientele being the gentrified folks living a block east of the building. There was the county hospital detox unit on the first floor at the back of the building. The fifth floors and beyond had twenty rooms each for residents--the eighth floor for women and the remaining floors for men. There were two communal bathrooms on each of these floors.

On any given evening the second floor lobby was where the gray haired men played cards underneath the Virtues of Charity and Hope. There was a television set, a vending machine, and a bank of lockboxes--every day residents checked for their mail and the pink message slips

left by the switchboard operators. Mrs. Vander Leyden never was seen in the lobby. But Mr. Hancock was there from early morning until long past when the window of the front desk was shuttered, as he used one of the tables as his office for a lawsuit so complex and convoluted that nobody was of the energy to ask how his work progressed.

The morning after she moved in, Kristi Hollingsworth answered “yes” when Mr. Hancock asked her in the first floor foyer—right in front of Dwayne’s desk—if she was The Law Student. This was a measure of how quickly important information and gossip traveled within the building. Mr. Hancock told her he had been unlawfully fired from his position as a union shop man and she gave him the phone number of the Northwestern Law School Legal Clinic and told him to ask for Professor Elson.

“Tell him Kristi Hollingsworth said he could help you,” she told Mr. Hancock. “And tell him I’m in his Civil Procedure class. I only just started so he might not remember me.”

Dwayne watched this exchange from behind his desk. It was his job to know residents and members of the athletic club and to stop anybody who wasn’t authorized from taking the stairs—mostly clients of the rent boys on the twentieth floor. For that purpose Dwayne wore a uniform and a badge. Dwayne had been eating his lunch while Mr. Hancock and Kristi talked. When Mr. Hancock went upstairs to his ersatz office, Dwayne pulled his gun from his holster in order to check it, which is something he often did when he was thinking.

“You got rid of that problem,” he said without actually looking at Kristi. “But I think you now got yourself a bigger one.”

And indeed, two days later, Professor Elson asked Kristi to remain after his lecture on motions to dismiss.

“You ever do that to me again, so help me God,” he said in a tone that communicated bare control over rage. “Do you understand me? That man is crazy. The Trilateral Commission?



The United
Nations? The
Teamsters?
All setting out



to kill him? Do you have any idea how long it took me to get off the phone?”

Indeed, Kristi had heard a good deal more in the intervening two days from Mr. Hancock and she understood. For the rest of the time she lived at the Lawson, she pretended she couldn't hear Mr. Hancock calling out “It's the Law Student. Come here, Law Student! Talk to me!” as she picked up her mail and her messages.

Kristi didn't notice Mrs. Vander Leyden the first few weeks of that first semester even though they both lived on the eighth floor scant four doors from each other.

Both women approached the elevator at roughly the same time every morning: Kristi had an eight o'clock Contracts class for which she was always late and Mrs. Vander Leyden went to eight fifteen mass at the Holy Name Cathedral on the corner opposite the Stop & Drink.

If the elevator doors opened when Kristi was there, Mrs. Vander Leyden would appear to have suddenly remembered something mislaid or forgotten in her room.

If Mrs. Vander Leyden entered the elevator first and Kristi was running and yelled for her to hold the door, she seemed to be quite deaf.

And in every interaction, Mrs. Vander Leyden also gave the appearance of being quite blind, as her glasses were scratched to a dusty sheen that made eye contact impossible.

Kristi wasn't particularly aware of her surroundings. She would not have made a good detective. She didn't expect to make a good lawyer. She had enrolled in law school because the economy was bad and school—any kind of school—seemed like a good place to lay low until good jobs were to be had. A sign of her lack of deductive powers: one September morning, she walked outside and was intrigued by a car that appeared to have had its hood and



roof knocked in. Otherwise this vehicle remained completely pristine—as pristine as any rescue from a junkyard can be.

It was as if God had smashed his fist down in a fit of pique.

It wasn't until she came back to the Lawson after Antitrust that Dwayne commented. She had come to rely on his comments.

"It was a jumper," he said. He was standing outside the entrance, in front of a granite discus thrower, taking a break to smoke cigarettes and harass the passing women with his friend Douglas.

“Checked into the twelfth floor and just jumped,” Douglas fulminated. “They say he was a poet. Published something.”

“If it was me, I’d check into the Ritz Carlton hotel,” Dwayne said. “Not this place.”

Some men who had come outside to enjoy the sun and they laughed, one of them declaring that he’d order up some room service before he’d go. The conversation made an epistemological turn. Could fish eggs be all that caviar was said to be and was it worth trying for a final meal? Was champagne or Courvoisier a better bracer before one jumped? Would a cigar be nice or just a regular pack of cigarettes?

epistemological choices



Then the men talked about women. And what kind would be the best to have if it was to be the last time.

“I’d want a white woman,” one of the men opined. “Because I never have.”

“Asian,” another said. “They’re into some freaky ass stuff.”

“I’d go with a white chick, preferably one who wants revenge on a milky white boy who did her wrong,” was Douglas’ opinion.

Dwayne, Douglas, and every man looked at Kristi for some sort of editorial comment.

Kristi could feel the hives rising up her chest and coloring her face. She excused herself as she had homework. The first year of law school was brutal and she was no intellect. Douglas asked if he could speak with her.

"Sure," Kristi said.

"Well, I need to talk to you private like."

"Okay."

He led her into the alley out back near the intake door for the detox unit. He offered her a cigarette but she said she didn't smoke.

"So let's say you commit a crime," Douglas said. He paused just a moment for the first drag. "A bunch of time has gone by and then the law can't do anything. What's that called?"

"Statute of limitations."



"That's it. That's it. Well, how long before that kicks in?"

"Depends on the crime," she said. And as he considered this, she added, "the worse the crime the longer the statute of limitations."

"What's the worst crime you can think of?"

"Killing your grandmother?"

"Worse than that."

Kristi felt a tugging like the tides heading towards the lake and away from Douglas but he reached out a hand and rubbed her sleeve.

“I’m not fixing to do any harm to you. I just want an answer.”

Dwayne stood at the end of the alley, doing a very poor job of appearing not to notice them.

“We haven’t gotten to that in Crim Law but I believe it’s something like twenty years. For the worst crime I can think of.”

Crim Law



After the dustup with her Civ Pro prof, there was no way she was going to pass along another phone number.

“Aw, that ain’t gonna help.”

“Maybe you should go to Mexico,” Kristi said, slipping in the direction of the sidewalk as Douglas held firm onto her sleeve. “Mexico doesn’t have an extradition treaty.”

“What’s that?”

“It means they won’t send you back to the States.”

“I have relatives in California.”

“We have extradition with California.”

Dwayne had pulled out his gun for its inspection. Douglas relinquished Kristi’s sleeve.



“Hey, you want to take a look at my woman?” Dwayne asked Kristi, following her into the building. “Here, let me show you. What do you think?”

He pulled from his wallet a Polaroid of a woman dressed Sunday best.



“See, this is why I don’t have to think about jumping,” he said. “And it’s also why you don’t have to worry about me when I say I’m watching out for you. Because you are way out of your league and I don’t want to see you hurt.”

“I know that.”

“Just so you do. People are dangerous.”

While she could believe the rent boys, the crazy mutterers, the ex-cons, and Mr. Hancock were dangerous in their own ways, she couldn’t imagine Mrs. Vander Leyden being any trouble whatsoever.

On the Monday before Thanksgiving, when it was still nice enough to walk to the school in her jeans and a t-shirt, with a just in case sweater in her backpack, Kristi was intrigued by a crowd held behind velvet rope at the Park Hyatt entrance.

Park Hyatt

Welcoming the Prince to Chicago



The Park Hyatt was a magnificent hotel

equidistant from the Lawson and the law school and the wealthy from the rest of us. Kristi was saving her money for a solitary Christmas brunch there. Several well-dressed men hovered around a black limousine with two British flags affixed to its hood. Kristi watched for several minutes from across the street—mindful that Professor Rahl had said that if she were late for one more Antitrust lecture he would drop her grade a full letter.

The Prince emerged from the hotel. He was shorter than Kristi expected, but trim and his suit jacket sported a few medals. He accepted two bouquets from children in the crowd. He shook hands with some of the onlookers and smiled pleasantly at the photographers.



Mrs. Vander Leyden stood at the outer reaches of the crowd, positioned near the front hood of the limousine. The Prince turned to make a few remarks to the reporters, not one word of which could be heard from across the street. Then he got into the limousine. Mrs. Vander Leyden fell to a curtsy that was not quite worthy of a Texas debutante and yet just quite worthy of an American citizen paying homage to a foreign potentate. She remained in that position until the limousine had disappeared into traffic and the crowd had dissipated. Then she rose with the solemnity of a woman who had been in the presence of and had participated in a great miracle.

Kristi decided in that moment that she liked Mrs. Vander Leyden, although she did not—at that time—know her name. That she had to ask Dwayne about.

“She comes from money,” Dwayne added. “It had to have been there. Check out her shoes. They’re old, they need to be re-soled, but they’re Ferragamo. Salvatore Ferragamo. He’s big in Italy. And she always wears gloves and the hat. The purse, by the way, is Louis Vuitton, epi leather. That’s old school money. But crazy. Definitely. Why else would she stay? Anybody sane with a wallet would get themselves the hell out of here.”

Kristi had been raised a Methodist and had sort of fallen out of the habit. But the five fifteen mass at Holy Name was a short one and the relief priests had interesting homilies. The first time she took communion the priest hesitated,



holding the wafer until she thought to say “amen” to the body of Christ. She read the order of service and got to be pretty adept at some parts of the Nicene Creed and at mumbling through the parts where she wasn’t. There was a regular dozen that came to the service and Mrs. Vander Leyden was one of them. Once, when Kristi tried to say “peace be with you” to her during the course of the service, Mrs. Vander Leyden declined to acknowledge her.

It was the Last Week of Ordinary Time when the trouble started. On Holy Name's steps, Kristi paused to watch the first snowflakes swirl like fireflies around the streetlights.



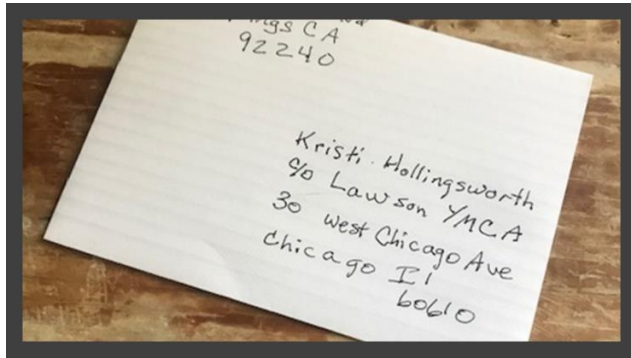
Mrs. Vander Leyden walked past her, clutching her black epi leather purse to her chest and muttering an incantation.

“The Law Student, the Law Student, she breaks every law in the books!”

There are people who shrug off the inexplicable, the ominous, the strange. They can hear something directed at them and deflect it, perhaps even laugh. Kristi was not one of these people. She stood on the steps, watching Mrs. Vander Leyden walk across the street. The older woman paused only once--deciding against entering the Stop & Drink and quickening her pace as she crossed the alley next to the Lawson, and then finally into the brightly lit foyer.

Kristi stood for so long that the priest, readying to lock up for the night, stepped out and asked her if she was all right. She said she was and then she covered the same trail as Mrs. Vander Leyden before her. When Dwayne asked if she were all right, she repeated that she was. She

picked up her mail. There was a white envelope postmarked Palm Springs, California.



(25)

“Law student! Hey, Law Student! Come here, I have some interesting new developments to tell you about!”

Mr. Hancock’s voice was not so rhythmic or steely as Mrs. Vander Leyden’s, but now the words “Law Student” spooked Kristi and when the elevator delivered her to the eighth floor she kept one hand braced for a quick rebuke if Mrs. Vander Leyden were to ambush her.

But the hall was empty.

She went to her room.

She slipped off her sweater and put the envelope on the desk in front of her.

While her first impulse was to rip it open and her second to cry, Kristi implemented a third impulse. She put her hands out onto the desk. Putting pressure on the pinkie finger of her left hand, she said “I’m in law school and I’m going to be a success in life.”

Then she pressed down the ring finger of her left hand while saying “I’m going to make a good living when I get out of law school.” Putting pressure on the middle finger of her left hand, she reminded herself that she had enough money to buy food. The index finger was about the guy

in Civ Pro who had asked if she would share her notes from two Anti Trust classes he had missed. Maybe he liked her. The thumb was that she had enough money to buy the new Black Honey lipstick from Clinique and they were having a gift with purchase at Marshall Field's and she could go there tomorrow if she felt like it. Onward through the right hand the litany of blessings but the effect on her mood didn't last as long as she would have liked. She decided to take a shower. She gathered up her soap, towel, toothbrush, body lotion and a razor.

Mrs. Vander Leyden stood across from her door, leaning against the wall. Her glasses were like twin pale moons set on a spooky sky.



"Good evening," Kristi said. She walked down the hall towards the communal showers.

"The Law Student, the Law Student, she breaks every law in the books," Mrs. Vander Leyden chanted. "The Law Student, the Law Student. How did she ever get into law school? Did she do something nasty?"

Kristi had had no trouble, or not much, since starting law school. This was trouble.

She closed the door to the showers and even though it was not the custom on the eighth floor, she locked it. After an unsatisfactory shower, she braced herself to find Mrs. Vander Leyden lying in wait.

The hall was empty.

Mrs. Vander Leyden played a large role in Kristi's habits during the Advent Season. Within the first week there was no more going to mass because Mrs. Vander Leyden disrupted a service with her incantations. Nor would Kristi buy beer at the Stop & Drink because she wasn't sure that Mrs. Vander Leyden might not be cashing a check. Kristi took the stairs rather than the elevator and she didn't linger at Dwayne's desk in the afternoons. Still, Mrs. Vander Leyden appeared not even just outside Kristi's door, but also at odd places where Kristi had never before seen her—at the coffee shop, at the park, and, most disturbing, at the vendor truck outside the law school.

At every encounter, Mrs. Vander Leyden chanted her curses, more vulgar with every passing day, until Kristi found an escape.



The Lawson provided daily maid service just like any fine hotel. The eighth floor's maid was named Alyce and she entered every eighth floor resident's room more or less every twenty four hours in order

to ascertain that rent checks would be forthcoming because certainly the dead cannot pay rent. New towels were handed out on Fridays but only if the towel used in the previous week was laid on the floor outside one's door. Sheets were changed every other week. And there was vacuuming, although nothing to keep a calendar by.

The Friday before Christmas, Kristi returned from her last final and was followed from the stairwell to her room by Mrs. Vander Leyden. Alyce was changing the sheets in Kristi's room and there wasn't enough space for the two of them—and this is not a comment on Alyce's avoird

dupois. Nonetheless, Kristi closed the door to Mrs. Vander Leyden and got up on top of the desk to give Alyce room to do her job.

“What am I going to do?” Kristi asked.

“She’s a crazy one, she is. She got into it with me, this would have been three years ago, and you know what? I don’t ever, ever, ever go in her room. She could be dead in her sleep for a week and the only way we’re going to find out is when I smell something terrible from in there. More terrible than now.”

“But what do I do?”

“I have no idea. Maybe you just got to learn to live with it,” Alyce said. “You’ve gotten used to the cockroaches, get used to her.”

Alyce had a point. When she first moved in, Kristi declared war and killed every cockroach she saw in her room. And then she just stopped. It was too much. She had readjusted her attitude and didn’t think much about them.

“I don’t think I can get used to her.”

“Then maybe you got to move out.”

“I don’t have any place else to go.”

“Well, that’s why any of us are here.”

As Alyce waddled out of the room, she put her hand very briefly—and not just to support her weight—on Kristi’s shoulder.

"She's not out there."

"But she'll be back," Kristi said.

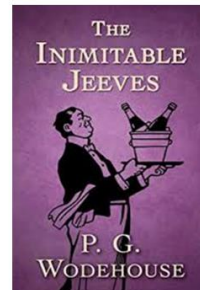
After Alyce left, Kristi sat down proper at her desk and three of the ten fingers were counted:

I'm finished with finals. I think I got a good grade in Antitrust. I've been invited to my Contracts Prof's Christmas party.

The prospect of Mrs. Vander Leyden appearing at the doorway of her Contracts professor's house was enough to derail even the most heartfelt shout out of thanks to the universe. She spent the rest of the evening reading the same page of a P.G. Wodehouse novel, wondering

--Jeeves, what am I
going to do?

--I couldn't say,
mi'lady. It's quite
the sticky wicket!



how would Jeeves solve this one?

On the following morning, Kristi woke up to a miserable wailing from outside her room. It could have been somebody injured—in October, a woman had come back to the Lawson with a gunshot wound and she had sounded something like this. Oh, how Alyce had complained about the blood on the carpet!

Kristi put her head under her pillow and wondered when Alyce was going to start shouting for help.

And then she remembered that it was Christmas Eve. Alyce had the day off and the next.

Many of the women on the floor had gone to relatives or friends. It might even be just Kristi left behind. She picked up the phone and dialed the switchboard.

"I'm not sending anybody up there unless you tell me what it is," the operator said.

"I don't know."

The howling continued after the operator hung up. Kristi was no hero. She wasn't brave. She wasn't particularly curious—the satisfaction of curiosity being, in her experience, disappointment or disaster. And since she had moved into the Lawson, she had come to understand that possible death served as a deterrent to investigative impulses. Nonetheless, she opened the door and looked out into the hallway.

The howling was Mrs. Vander Leyden, crouched on the floor directly in front of the open door to her room. She wore a nightgown that must have once been white and must have once had lace. She pulled her hands away from her face as Kristi warily approached. The two women stared at each other, although it was clear to Kristi that Mrs. Vander Leyden couldn't see much of anything without her glasses.

"Mrs. Vander Leyden, what's wrong?"

"Who are you?"

"I'm . . . the law student."

"I can't see. I can't find my glasses. Help me."

“I’ll find your glasses, Mrs. Vander Leyden.”

“Please.”

This is the part of this Christmas story where there are cockroaches.

A large number of them.

A writhing, living bulbous intrusion on the wall
was the first thing Kristi saw and she thought “so
this is where they all come from.”



Then there were the newspapers, stacked from floor to ceiling and tied with twine—and cockroaches skittering between pages and around the stacks. How Mrs. Vander Leyden negotiated with the newspapers and the cockroaches was a mystery as Kristi could see no desk, no chair, no nightstand. The glasses were on top of a stack of papers that seemed to be church bulletins from several decades gone.

“Here they are,” Kristi said. She swaddled the glasses between Mrs. Vander Leyden’s shaking hands.

Mrs. Vander Leyden put them on and goggled at Kristi.

“Bless you! Bless you!”

She pressed Kristi’s hands to her lips.

"It's all right, really, it's all right. No problems," Kristi said.

She helped Mrs. Vander Leyden to her feet.

"What did you say your name was again?"

"Kristi."

"That's a lovely name."

"Thank you. Merry Christmas, Mrs. Vander Leyden."

"Merry Christmas, Kristi," Mrs. Vander Leyden said.

Then Mrs. Vander Leyden entered her realm, her empire of cockroaches and paper. She closed the door. Kristi went back to her own room. The envelope was still on her desk. It was early. Officially, she should wait until the next morning. But this was as good of a time as it was going to get and it would have to be done. She sat down and opened the envelope.



Inside was a Christmas card, all right. A banner with the words “MERRY CHRISTMAS” Blue, pink and red flowers that could have been poinsetta or holly. On the inside,



the sentiment “AND A VERY HAPPY NEW YEAR” with the salutation “Love, Mom.” The word love was smudged as if there had been some misapprehension placed into its four letters.

Kristi put her hands out on the desk. She realized she was smiling.

She put pressure on all ten fingers and said “I found Mrs. Vander Leyden’s glasses.”



Mrs.
Vander Leyden's
Glasses

Merry
Christmas!

