

Tardy Bell

a short story
by *Roger Ebert*

The dog was looking at him strangely.

He made an attempt to smile at it, gave up, and transferred the smile to its owner — usually a safe enough ploy.

The owner was looking at him strangely, too.

He cleared his throat unnecessarily and started ringing the bell. The crumpled dollar bill and the few dimes and quarters had been in the pot for — he couldn't remember how long.

The owner pulled at a chain and the dog danced skitterishly away, looking back at him. Dogs usually made him nervous, and he supposed it was only fair that he made dogs nervous.

A few minutes later, he first saw the little girl standing in the doorway. She was waiting quietly, perhaps for her mother, and she had retreated into the shadow of the brick wall. She had been regarding him for some time.

He nodded politely to her and she began a careful approach across the downtown sidewalk, removing one hand from behind her back to adjust her sailor cap. He stopped ringing and leaned forward out of the booth.

"Good afternoon, little girl. How are you today?" It seemed to be the correct thing to say, but he suddenly felt uneasy and on guard.

She stopped in front of the booth without speaking and continued to regard him carefully.

"Well, what can I do for you today, eh?" He tried to ignore the aroma of sweat on his beard and concentrated on the little girl. She apparently hadn't noticed it.

"Kathy!"

A woman broke loose from the stream of passers-by and hurried over to the little girl.

"Kathy, where's your mother? What are you doing downtown? Get away from that man; it's not Christmas."

She looked back once as she pulled Kathy away and said, "Some joke. Very funny. Ha."

He stood quietly in the booth, afraid to smile. His breath was coming faster than was necessary, and his hands were growing sweaty. He became aware of the bell in his hand, and rang it for a minute or two before losing his courage and setting it down on the counter. A newsboy on the corner looked over when he stopped ringing, but he pretended not to notice him.

Not Christmas.

No, apparently it wasn't. The people on the street were in shirt-sleeves and it had been growing increasingly hot in the booth during the past thirty minutes.

Children following their parents continued to look curiously at him, and when a few smiled he smiled back. How had he found the courage to ring the bell — oh, he hadn't known then that it wasn't Christmas.

Why hadn't he known?

He had the feeling that his head was bobbing automatically at everyone on the street. His smile, fixed on his face, was almost certainly a grimace.

The booth, hot as it was, seemed welcome around him. Looking down at the ragtag Santa suit he was wearing, he realized that on the open street he would be helpless. The booth, at least, afforded some measure of protection. It lent credence to the suit, perhaps. He couldn't leave the booth until nighttime, when the streets would be deserted.

He signaled to the newsboy, who brought him an afternoon paper. Spreading it carefully on the counter, he noted that it was the *St. Petersburg Times*. Well, that would explain the shirtsleeves.

The newsboy was still standing before the booth, waiting. He looked up.

"Seven cents, mister."

There was nothing in the pockets; he had no money. For an instant he considered giving the paper back, and then he lifted the screen on top of the pot and gave the boy a dime.

"Keep the change."

"Yeah. Sure. Merry Christmas."

The newspaper was dated March 3, 1961. More than three months past Christmas.

A pressure against the back of his knees informed him that there was a bench in the booth, and he sat down, spreading the paper out on his knees. He was much less obvious this way. Perhaps if he remained seated . . .