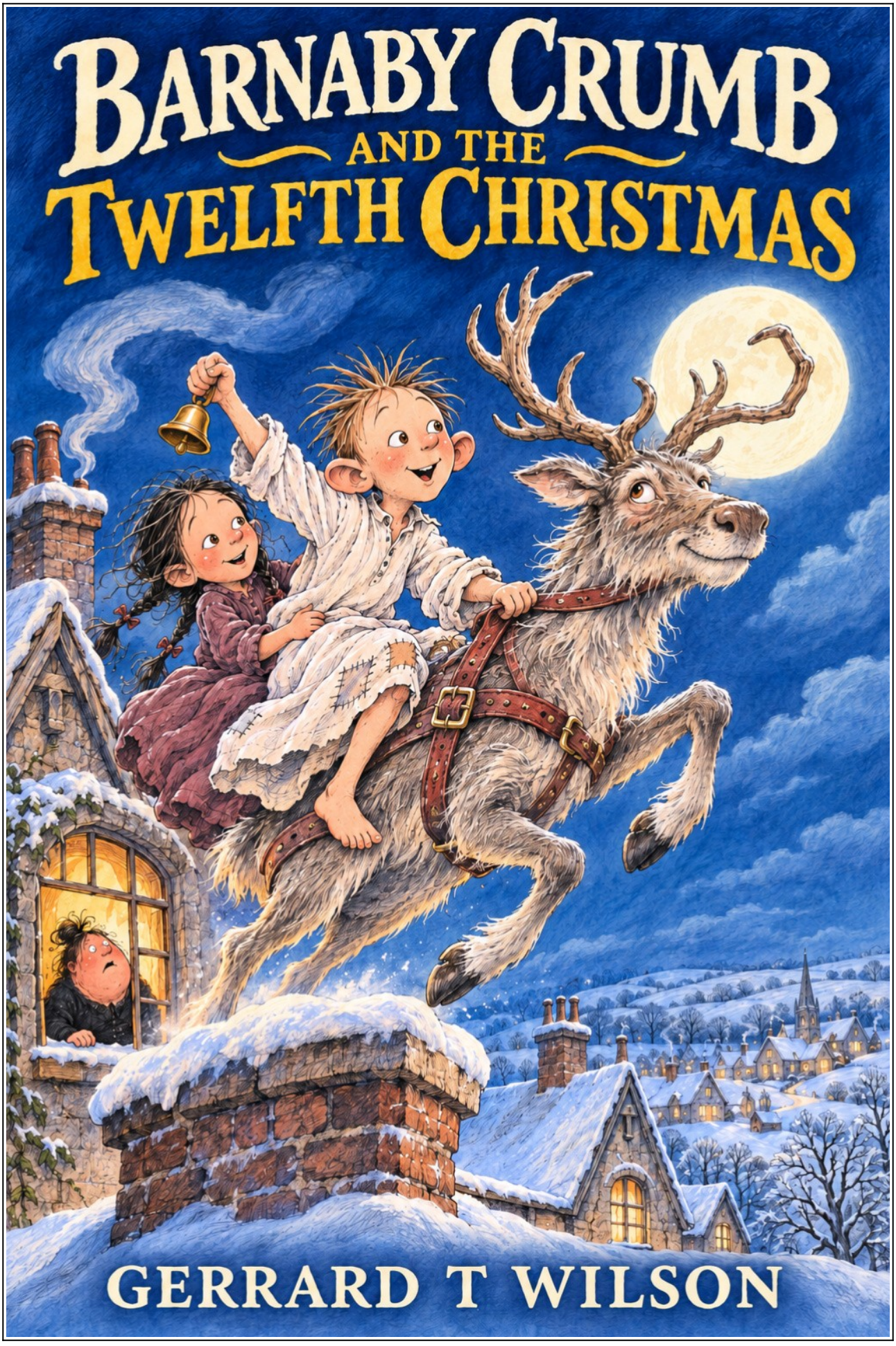
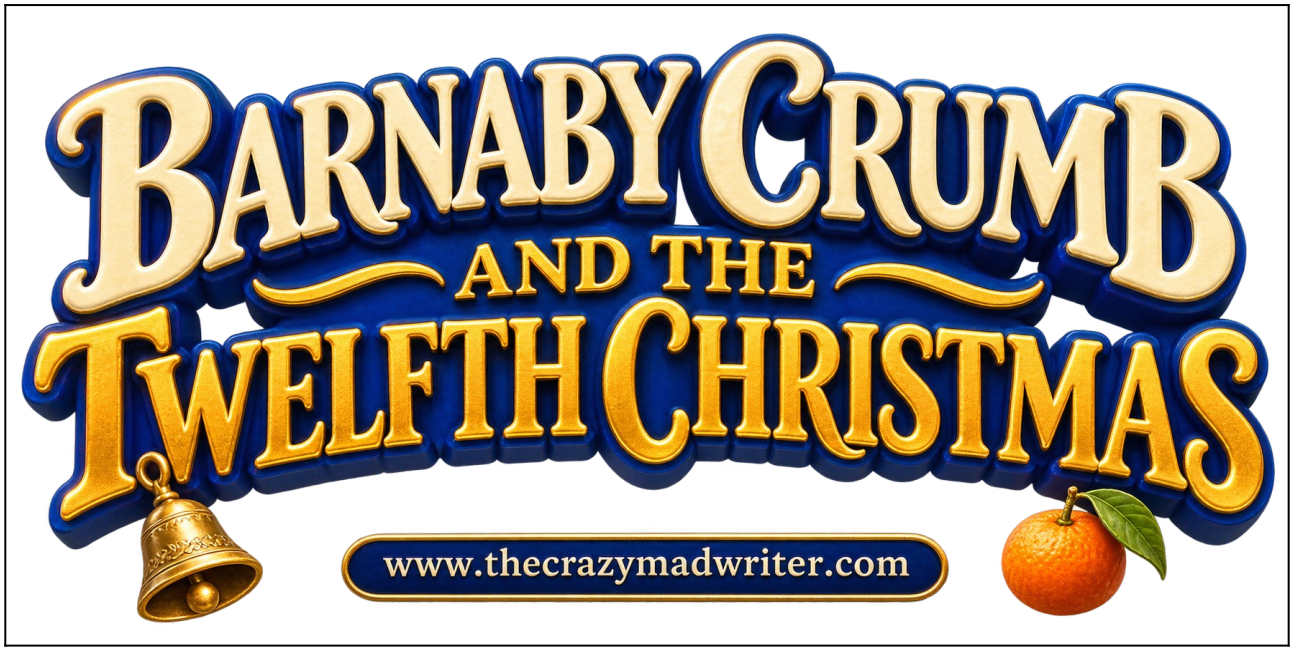

BARNABY CRUMB
AND THE
TWELFTH CHRISTMAS
GERRARD T WILSON


BARNABY CRUMB
AND THE
TWELFTH CHRISTMAS
www.thecrazymadwriter.com



Barnaby Crumb and the Twelfth Christmas

Chapter One: Mrs. Gristle

You will not have heard of Mrs. Gristle. This is not surprising. The people who knew her best were small, poor, and not generally believed.

But I have heard of her, and I am going to tell you the whole story, and I warn you now that parts of it are disgusting and parts of it are marvellous, and the marvellous parts do not begin until a very small boy breaks a very large rule.

Mrs. Gristle ran an orphanage in the village of Nether Dribbling, which lies in the coldest, flattest, greyest part of England, where the wind comes in off the sea in winter with nothing to do for three months but blow.

She was an enormous woman, built along the lines of a wardrobe, with a face the exact colour of corned beef and two small eyes that moved about independently, like customers looking for a free table. Her mouth was a thin slit, the sort you post letters through. Nothing that went into it ever came out improved. Words, soup, kindness, it made no difference. She smelled of boiled cabbage and other people’s money.

She had had three husbands. Each one had gone out on Christmas Eve to fetch mince pies, and each one had failed to come back.

“The season does funny things to men,” Mrs. Gristle would say, and lock another padlock on the cellar door.

The orphanage was called St. Pinch’s. It was a tall grey house with chimneys like broken teeth, and above the front door hung a sign that had once read:

ST. PINCH’S HOME FOR ORPHANED AND UNCLAIMED CHILDREN

Mrs. Gristle had painted out the word HOME and written ESTABLISHMENT over the top, because home, she said, was a sentimental word, and sentiment cost money.

There were eleven children at St. Pinch’s, and there were rules. The rules were painted on the wall of the dining hall in letters a foot high, so that you could read them while you ate, which was the only time you were allowed to look up.

NO SINGING.

NO WHISTLING.

NO HOPPING.

NO SNOWBALLS.

NO BELIEVING IN FATHER CHRISTMAS.

Believing in Father Christmas was a finable offence. The fine was one penny. This does not sound like much until you remember that the children had no pennies. Mrs. Gristle took a potato for every penny owed, and on Sundays the potato was the best part of dinner.

Little Podger Sims had believed out loud in his first week. He had simply said the name, the way you might say *tractor* or *Tuesday*. Mrs. Gristle fined him a penny for believing, a penny for saying so aloud, and a penny for each word of the name. That was how Podger lost four Sunday potatoes in one afternoon. He had been a round, soft, hopeful boy who cried easily, and by December he had cried himself quite thin, which Mrs. Gristle said showed what a healthy establishment she ran.

Now, you and I know what Christmas dinner looks like. I don’t need to describe it to you. You can probably smell it from here just by thinking about it, and your stomach has already gone *hello*.

At St. Pinch’s, dinner was cabbage water. It was grey and it was hot and there were things floating in it that had once, if you went back far enough, been cabbage. There was bread with sawdust in it, although Mrs. Gristle called the sawdust “bran” and charged the parish extra for the healthiness of

it. And on Sundays there was a boiled potato each, provided you hadn't been fined. If your potato had a bit of green skin on it, Mrs. Gristle said that was character and you were lucky.

There was one exception. One day a year, on Christmas Day, each child received a single satsuma.

Mrs. Gristle handed them out on Christmas Eve, to be eaten on Christmas morning. "So you can look forward to it," she said. "Looking forward costs nothing."

She was very pleased with this arrangement. Eleven satsumas cost her one and threepence, and she felt, when she handed them out, the warm glow of a woman giving away something that isn't hers.

And yet, and this is the strange part, so pay attention, Mrs. Gristle was rich.

Everybody in Nether Dribbling knew it. Because everybody in Nether Dribbling, and in fact most of the north of England, had eaten a Gristle's Genuine Christmas Mince Pie.

You've seen the vans. Fat green vans with gold lettering and a picture of a pie so glossy it looked wet, and underneath, the words:

AS EATEN BY ROYALTY (PROBABLY)

The pies were famous. The pies were unbelievable. People who ate one Gristle's mince pie reported feeling extraordinarily jolly for about eleven minutes, jollier than they had felt in years. Some of them wept, and one bank manager in Harrogate had got up on his desk and sung. The pies came out of the cellar of St. Pinch's by the thousand, and the cellar door was iron, and it had three padlocks on it, and a notice:

NO CHILDREN. NO CLERGYMEN. NO INSPECTORS.

Where the money went, nobody knew. Mrs. Gristle wore the same black dress she had worn for twenty years. But sometimes, late at night, the children heard her in her room, and it sounded like counting.

The smell was the worst of it. Every night, when the ovens below the house got going, the smell of a thousand mince pies came up through the floorboards and through the cracks in the doors and into the dormitories, and eleven children lay in the dark in their thin nightshirts and breathed in the most delicious smell in England, knowing that not one crumb of it, not ever, not once, was for them.

It was, I think, the cruellest smell in the world. Podger Sims used to put his pillow over his head and sob into it, quietly, because crying was also finable.

Mrs. Gristle claimed to be deaf. "EH? WHAT? SPEAK UP!" she would bellow, cupping one enormous hand to her ear, and the parish inspector would shout his questions twice and go away hoarse and satisfied that the poor woman struggled on despite her affliction.

She was not deaf. Mrs. Gristle could hear a whisper through two doors and a floor. She could hear a satsuma being thought about at forty paces. She carried a blackthorn stick she called the Persuader. When she was displeased with a child, she did not hit them. Oh no, she was far too clever for that. She simply looked at them for a long moment and then said, in a soft, pleasant voice:

"The Pickle Cupboard."

Nobody knew what was in the Pickle Cupboard. It was under the stairs. It had a bolt on the outside. Nobody had ever been put in it. Not quite yet. And that was somehow the worst thing about it. It sat there, being possible.

Now let me tell you about a few of the children, and then we can get on with the story, because things are about to start happening very fast.

There was Henrietta Plumb, who was ten and had read the entire dictionary, twice, including the preface, and who intended to be a barrister or else a pirate, depending on how things went. There was Podger Sims, of whom you have heard. There were the twins, Odd and Todd, who were identical in every way except that Odd believed everything and Todd believed nothing, which made them, together, about as clever as one ordinary person.

And there was Mouse.

Mouse was so small he had arrived at St. Pinch's in a hatbox. Nobody knew his real name, including Mouse. He did not speak. Henrietta said he could if he wanted to, but that he had worked out early that it wasn't worth it. He could fit into spaces that would embarrass a cat. Remember Mouse. He matters enormously later.

And last of all, there was Barnaby Crumb.

Barnaby was nine years old and small even for nine, with ears that stuck out like the handles of a soup tureen and a quiet, watchful way of looking at things, as if the world were a machine and he was slowly working out where the handles were.

He had been left on the step of St. Pinch's one Christmas Eve, in a fish basket, with a note pinned to his blanket. The note said:

HIS NAME IS BARNABY. PLEASE BE KIND.

Mrs. Gristle had kept the note. She had underlined the words PLEASE BE KIND and written, underneath them, in red ink, one word.

NO.

She showed it to visitors sometimes, as a joke.

Tied to the handle of the basket had been one other thing, a little brass bell, no bigger than a thumbnail, worn smooth, with a word engraved on it in letters too small and strange for anyone at St. Pinch's to read.

Barnaby had kept the bell for nine years. He kept it in his pocket, and at night he held it in his fist, and here is the peculiar thing about it, the thing he had never told a single soul:

The bell had never rung.

Not once. Not ever. He had shaken it a thousand times, in secret, under the blankets, and it had made no sound at all. A bell that won't ring is a sad sort of treasure, but it was his, and it had come with him, and he wouldn't have swapped it for a mince pie, even a hot one.

Three nights before Christmas, the wind was doing its worst off the sea, and the eleven children of St. Pinch's lay in the dark with the smell of mince pies coming up through the floor, and Podger was crying into his pillow, and Mrs. Gristle was somewhere below them, counting.

And Barnaby Crumb heard a sound.

It came up from the cellar, through the boards, very small and very far away. It wasn't the ovens or the wind. It wasn't rats or pipes, or any of the things Henrietta would later look up in the dictionary.

It went *jingle*.

One note. Thin. Silvery. Sad.

And in Barnaby's fist, beneath the blankets, the little brass bell that had been silent for nine years

rang back.



Barnaby Crumb and the Twelfth Christmas

Chapter Two: The Bell in the Basket

There are two sorts of silence in this world. There is the comfortable sort, which is what a house does when everyone in it is asleep and happy. And there is the other sort, which is what a house does when everyone in it is asleep and frightened. St. Pinch’s had the second sort. It had been saving it up for years.

On the night the bell rang back, Barnaby Crumb did not go down to the cellar. I want to be clear about this, because later on people said all kinds of things about Barnaby, and most of them were untrue. He was nine, it was dark, the stairs creaked like a ship, and somewhere below him was a woman who could hear a satsuma being thought about. He stayed exactly where he was, with his fist shut around the little brass bell, until the sky went grey.

But he did not sleep. He lay and he thought, and thinking was the one thing at St. Pinch's that nobody had yet worked out how to fine.

He thought about the bell.

You know most of this already, but not all of it, so let me tell it properly, the way it was told to Barnaby by the only person at St. Pinch's who had ever bothered to tell him anything.

Her name was Mrs. Bibs, and she was the cook. She was enormous in a completely different way from Mrs. Gristle, soft and floury and warm, like a loaf that had decided to be a person. She had been at St. Pinch's longer than anyone. She was not brave. She never once stood up to Mrs. Gristle, and she was ashamed of this, and she made up for it in the only currency she had, which was soup. Her cabbage water was still cabbage water, because the larder was locked and Mrs. Gristle counted the cabbages. But Mrs. Bibs had a way of putting the potato skins at the top of the pot where the steam could get at them, and a way of stirring that made the water thicker than water had any right to be. Once, only once, she had dropped a knob of dripping into Podger's bowl and looked straight at the wall while she did it.

It was Mrs. Bibs who had found the basket.

"Twelve Christmases ago," she said once, then frowned at herself. "No. Nine. Nine Christmas Eves ago. On the step, in the snow, at six in the morning."

She was very particular about the six in the morning.

"There was a fish basket," she would say, "and a blanket, and you, blue as a bruise and not crying. Not a sound out of you. And a note."

She never said what the note said. Mrs. Gristle had the note, framed, in her office, with NO written under PLEASE BE KIND in red ink, and visitors were shown it as a joke. Mrs. Bibs had her own opinions about the joke, which she kept in the same place she kept everything else, which was inside.

"And the bell?" Barnaby would ask.

"Tied to the handle, duck. Little brass thing. I gave it you. A baby needs one thing that's his."

That was the whole of Mrs. Bibs's philosophy, and it was better than any philosophy in the dictionary Henrietta had read twice. A baby needs one thing that's his.

Here is what Barnaby knew about the bell, and it was not much. It was brass, or something like brass. It was worn smooth as a pebble, the way metal goes when it has been handled by somebody for a very long time. There was a word engraved on it, but the letters were small and strange and

slanted, like writing done in a hurry by someone going past. Henrietta had once turned the bell over in the candlelight and frowned and said, “It’s not English,” which was the first interesting thing anybody had said to Barnaby in his life.

And the bell did not ring.

Nine years, and not one sound. He had shaken it under the blankets a thousand times. He had held it by his ear and swung the clapper with his fingernail. Nothing. A dead bell. He had decided, somewhere around his seventh birthday, that the bell was broken and that he loved it anyway, and that these two facts had nothing to do with each other. St. Pinch’s did not do birthdays, so he had picked a Tuesday and kept it to himself.

And then, three nights before Christmas, deep under the floor, something had gone *jingle*.

And his bell had answered.

Now. If you have never owned a broken thing that suddenly worked, I cannot fully explain to you what that is like. It is not like a present. It is like being spoken to.

The next day was the twenty-third of December, and it went the way every day went, which is to say badly, but with events in it.

Breakfast was bread with bran in it. The bran was sawdust.

Podger Sims leaned across and whispered, “Was it rats?”

Barnaby had told Henrietta and Mouse first, while they were getting dressed. You cannot hear a dead bell speak and then eat sawdust in silence. Henrietta had said “Impossible” in the voice of a person who intends to investigate, and Mouse had said nothing at all but had opened his eyes very wide, which from Mouse was a speech. Podger, two beds away, had heard enough to start wondering about rats.

“It wasn’t rats,” Barnaby whispered back.

“Rats can sound like anything,” said Odd, who believed everything.

“Rats can’t sound like bells,” said Todd, who believed nothing.

“A rat could fall in a bell,” said Odd.

“There isn’t a bell down there,” said Todd. “There’s pies down there. Rats in pies. That’s what I think it is and that’s what I’m having for breakfast, mentally.”

Henrietta put down her crust. “Barnaby. Show me.”

He showed her, under the table, the little brass bell in his palm. Henrietta Plumb looked at the strange slanted letters for a long moment, and Barnaby watched her face do something he had never seen a face at St. Pinch's do, which was go from clever to puzzled to quiet.

"I still can't read it," she said. "But it's the same every time I look. Real words are like that. Made-up ones move." She handed it back as if it had got heavier. "Keep it in your fist, not your pocket. And don't shake it in front of her."

In front of her meant Mrs. Gristle, and Mrs. Gristle that morning was in a mood the children could read like weather. It was pie season. The green vans came and went all day, gold lettering gleaming, AS EATEN BY ROYALTY (PROBABLY), and every van that left meant more counting in her office that night. Two days before Christmas, the ovens ran hot, the smell came up through the boards crueller than ever, and Mrs. Gristle moved through the house with the Persuader under her arm and her independent eyes going in both directions at once. The children made themselves small and flat and silent, like letters posted through a slot.

Which is why nobody noticed Mouse noticing the kitchen.

I noticed. It is my business to notice.

At the back of the kitchen at St. Pinch's, behind the range, there was a wooden panel in the wall about two feet square, painted over so many times it had gone the colour of an old tooth. It had a little door in it, and the little door was screwed shut with four screws, and above it, on a hook, hung a loop of rope with the frayed end of a much longer rope still knotted to it.

A dumbwaiter. A little lift, on a pulley, that ran in a shaft between the kitchen and the cellar, for sending things up and down without anybody having to carry them. St. Pinch's had been a grand house once, a hundred years ago, and grand houses had dumbwaiters the way you have pockets.

Mrs. Gristle had ordered it sealed years ago. "Draughts," she said. There was a story among the older children (there is always a story) that it had been sealed after an incident nobody discussed. The incident had involved a previous cook, and the previous cook was why Mrs. Bibs never, ever went into the cellar alone. Nobody knew if the story was true. Odd believed it entirely. Todd believed none of it. Henrietta pointed out that the screws were on the kitchen side, which meant the door had been shut by someone standing in the kitchen, keeping something either in or out, and that this was the most interesting fact in the building.

That afternoon Mouse stood at the kitchen door, holding a pan he had been sent to scrub. He looked at the little screwed-shut door for a long, long time.

Then he put his ear against it.

And whatever he heard, he did not tell the others that afternoon. Mouse saved things. It was his way. He was saving this one for when it would matter.

That night the smell of a thousand mince pies came up through the floorboards, and Podger cried into his pillow, quietly, because crying was finable, and Mrs. Gristle counted, and the wind did its worst off the sea.

A little before midnight, it came again.

Jingle.

One thin, silvery note, sad as anything.

And in Barnaby's fist the little bell rang back.

This time Barnaby was already sitting up, his blanket around his shoulders. He had been waiting for it the way you wait for a person who has promised to write.

And this time he heard something else. After the jingle, faint and far below, there was a sound he knew. Every child at St. Pinch's knew it. It was the sound the whole house made a hundred times a day, in eleven different throats, and nobody had ever once thought of it as sad, because it was just the sound of the house.

It was a sigh.

Something under St. Pinch's was awake in the dark, and it was tired, and it was sighing the way you sigh when you have given up on being heard.

Barnaby Crumb sat in the dark, his heart going like a hammer, and he understood two things at once, the way you sometimes do, whole, without words.

The first was that there was someone down there.

The second was that they knew he was listening.

Tomorrow was Christmas Eve. Tomorrow the satsumas came, one per child, to be looked forward to. Tomorrow the vans would run all day and the counting would go all night.

And tomorrow, Barnaby decided, with the blanket around his shoulders and the little bell warm in his fist, he was going to find the way down.



Barnaby Crumb and the Twelfth Christmas

Chapter Three: The Smell That Came at Night

Let me tell you about the smell, because the smell was the engine of everything that happened afterwards, and you cannot understand an engine by looking at the wheels.

It began at nine o'clock every night, when the ovens under St. Pinch's lit up, and it came into the dormitories the way water comes into a sinking boat, quietly, from below, and everywhere at once. First came the pastry smell, warm and buttery, which is the smell of being safe. Then came the fruit smell, dark and sweet, currants and peel and something deeper underneath that nobody could name. And last, riding over the other two like a flag on a ship, came cinnamon and clove and nutmeg.

Remember that word. Nutmeg. It was in the air every night of these children's lives, and not one of them knew the name for it.

The smell was cruellest in December, because in December the ovens ran hottest and longest, and because in December every other child in England seemed to be smelling the same thing in kitchens

where it meant yes instead of no. Podger Sims put his pillow over his head. The twins lay and argued in whispers about whether smells had calories. Henrietta stared at the ceiling and memorised the cracks. Mouse lay flat on his back with his eyes open, saving everything, the way he did.

And Barnaby Crumb lay with a live bell in his fist and listened to the house.

By then Barnaby knew the house had two voices. There was the voice it made for Mrs. Gristle, with its ovens roaring, its vans rumbling out of the yard and the Persuader tapping along the corridors like a slow clock. And there was the voice underneath, the one that went *jingle*, and sighed.

On Christmas Eve, Barnaby started keeping track of the first voice, and the track led somewhere strange.

The vans left at dawn. He watched them from the scullery window while he dried plates. Fat green vans, gold lettering, AS EATEN BY ROYALTY (PROBABLY), rolling down the drive with their axles low. Mrs. Bibs said the pies went to Harrogate and Leeds and York, and one van went all the way to London twice a week, and the driver called it the Royal Run, and Mrs. Gristle charged extra for it. Whether royalty had ever actually eaten one was a question Mrs. Bibs answered by looking at the wall.

The vans came back at dusk. Empty of pies.

And here was the strange thing, the thing Barnaby noticed because noticing was the only hobby that cost nothing. The vans did not come back empty.

They came back with flour sacks, sugar sacks, tins of dripping and crates of currants. Mrs. Bibs stood at the yard door with a tally sheet, and her face got grimmer with every crate, because none of it, not one ounce, ever came up to the kitchen where eleven children ate sawdust and called it bran.

All of it went down. There was a hatch in the yard that opened onto a flight of stone steps. Barnaby watched a driver shoulder a sack and go down sideways to get it through a second iron door at the bottom. That was how they could load the cellar without carrying so much as a currant through the house.

Mrs. Gristle was feeding something under St. Pinch's the way you feed a furnace. And the furnace made pies, and the pies made money, and the money went into her room and turned into counting.

But flour and sugar and currants go into a pie. Barnaby knew that. Everyone knew that. The thing that snagged in his mind like a thread on a nail was the jollying.

Because everybody said it. Mrs. Bibs had told him about the bank manager in Harrogate who got up on his desk and sang. The grocer's boy swore his uncle had laughed so hard he'd had to sit on the

pavement. Even the parish inspector, hoarse from asking all his questions twice, had managed to say, “Remarkably cheering.”

Eleven minutes of extraordinary jolly, and some people wept.

Pastry does not do that. Currants do not do that. Barnaby, who had been brought up on cabbage water, had a very clear understanding of what food could and could not do, and food could not make a bank manager sing.

Something else was going into the pies.

Something that went *jingle* in the dark, and sighed like a person who had given up on being heard.

He told the others after the drivers had gone, in the one place in the whole establishment where telling was possible.

Behind the coal shed in the yard there was a gap between two walls where the wind, for reasons known only to wind, did not go. It was perhaps four feet long and two feet wide, and it smelled of wet coal. Mrs. Gristle never went there, and her hearing, enormous as it was, seemed to work best along the routes she walked. A house learns its owner. Hers had learned to listen in corridors.

They called it the Gap, and they had always used it for ordinary contraband: a smuggled marble, an argument, once a whole stolen turnip, divided eleven ways, which is a thing you can do with a turnip if you are patient and have a nail.

Now Barnaby used it for the other kind of contraband.

“It’s alive,” he said. “Under the ovens. It’s been there a long time, and it’s tired, and I think the jolly in the pies comes out of it. Somehow. I think she’s been putting it in.”

There was a silence in the Gap of the particular kind that means a thought is too big to fit through the entrance.

“That’s not possible,” said Todd, who believed nothing, but he said it slowly, the way you say a thing you are hoping will be contradicted.

“How long?” said Henrietta.

“The sigh sounded old,” said Barnaby. “I know that’s not evidence. But it sounded old.”

Henrietta leaned against the wet brick. “The pies were famous when I came here. That was seven years ago. Odd and Todd have been here six years. Podger’s been here five.” She thought about it a moment. “Can any of you remember Father Christmas ever coming to St. Pinch’s?”

Nobody could.

“A birthday present, then? Anything anybody brought just for you?”

Barnaby thought of the bell in his pocket. It had come with him. Nobody had brought him anything since.

“Twelve years,” said a voice.

It was Mrs. Bibs, standing at the mouth of the Gap with a basket of pegs. How long she had been there nobody knew. Gathering in threes was finable. She stood there with her pegs and her shame and her soup-thickening secrets, and she said it again, quieter.

“Twelve years ago, duck. That’s when the ovens went in. I remember the men bringing them, and the iron door after. She put the padlocks on herself, one at a time.” She swallowed. “One for each husband, she said. Laughing, she said it.”

Mrs. Bibs turned a peg over in her fingers.

“There was a cook before me. I used to wash her pots. She asked what was in the cellar. Just asked.” Mrs. Bibs looked at the wall. “She was gone by Boxing Day. I don’t ask. That’s my arrangement, and it’s a poor one, and I know it.”

And then Mrs. Bibs did the bravest thing she had done in twelve years.

“The dumbwaiter shaft still goes straight down. I dropped a dried pea through the crack once. Heard it rattle against the sides a few times and then tick on the flags below.” She put the peg back in the basket. “The shaft runs down beside the ovens. And the screws on that little door are old. Old screws come out easy.”

Then she went in to make cabbage water, and did not look back, because looking back was more than she could afford.

After supper, Mrs. Gristle handed out the satsumas. Eleven children stood with eleven cold little oranges in their hands and were told to look forward to them. Then Mrs. Gristle carried her account book upstairs, the ovens lit up beneath the house, and Barnaby began doing the arithmetic of a nine-year-old general.

The vans were back. The drivers had gone. Mrs. Gristle would be counting late. There were four screws in the dumbwaiter door, and beneath it something old and tired had waited long enough.

The problem was getting a plan from one child to another in a house that heard thinking. You could not gather. You could not whisper indoors. And you could not leave a note where somebody might find it, because the somebody who found it was always Mrs. Gristle. She had once pulled a message out from under Henrietta’s plate without so much as looking down.

Barnaby was halfway up the kitchen stair when he worked out the answer. It was so simple that he smiled, which was nearly finable in itself.

You could not whisper a plan in this house.

But you could post one.

There was somebody who went from the dormitory landing to the kitchen stair to the scullery every day, carrying whatever he had been told to fetch or scrub. Mrs. Gristle saw the pan or the brush or the coal scoop. She never thought to look at the hand that held it.

Mouse.

Barnaby needed to tell him one sentence, once, in the Gap. After that, the plan could travel folded in a fist the size of a walnut, and the house could listen at every door in England and hear nothing but itself.

He went back down to the scullery. Mouse was at the sink, drying a pan. Barnaby took the coal scoop from its hook and went out into the yard. A moment later, he heard the pan go softly onto the draining board.

By the time Barnaby got into bed, the sentence had been said. He fell asleep with the bell against his chest and the smell coming up through the boards.

And deep under the house, at the bottom of the sealed shaft, something heard a boy stop thinking and start sleeping, and sighed again, softer this time.

Not quite so given up.



Barnaby Crumb and the Twelfth Christmas

Chapter Four: The Dumbwaiter

The last van of Christmas Eve arrived at St. Pinch's the way a bailiff arrives when you've put out the lights and decided he isn't coming. It made enough noise to let you know you'd been wrong.

Barnaby woke to the grind of its engine under the dormitory window. He had fallen asleep in his clothes, with the bell against his chest and the satsuma Mrs. Gristle had given him still in his pocket.

"Tomorrow morning," she had said as she handed them out. "Not before. Looking forward costs nothing."

Barnaby had a use for his satsuma now, though he could not yet have explained it. He put the bell in beside it and went to the window.

The Royal Run was back from London at last. Its headlights swept the yard and caught Mrs. Gristle coming down the steps with the Persuader tucked under her arm. There were sacks to unload, then

crates of pies to go aboard for the morning deliveries. The driver pulled the handbrake and left the engine running. Mrs. Gristle began to tell him what she thought of the time.

Barnaby slipped out of the dormitory.

One sentence. That was all he had given Mouse in the Gap before bed. Mouse had nodded once. Afterwards, a scrap of paper had made its way to Henrietta in the hand that carried a clean pan upstairs.

The sentence was *When the vans are loudest, go down and see.*

Now. I must tell you about noise, because noise is the hero of this chapter as much as Mouse is, and nobody ever puts noise on the cover of a book.

Mrs. Gristle's hearing worked along the routes she walked. Her house listened in corridors. But when a van stood running at the back door and its driver was dragging sacks across the iron bed, the yard made enough noise to deafen the kitchen. Henrietta had counted through half a dozen unloadings that week, one finger at a time under the table. The loud part lasted eighty-one seconds on average. It is astonishing what you can do with eighty-one seconds if you have spent your whole life being given none.

When Barnaby reached the kitchen, Henrietta was by the range with a bowl of potatoes to peel for the morning. Mouse was at the sink with a pan and a dishcloth. Barnaby took the drying cloth from its hook. That was the arrangement of the house, and inside it, folded small, was the other arrangement.

The driver let down the tailboard. It hit the yard with a bang that shook the kitchen window.

Mouse crossed to the dumbwaiter with a spoon.

The screws came out easily. Mrs. Bibs had said they would, and Mrs. Bibs was right, which she almost never allowed herself to be. Mouse turned them with the edge of the spoon handle. Henrietta caught each one in the corner of her apron, and Barnaby took the little door and set it against the skirting.

Mouse looked into the shaft.

It was two feet square, and it went down into a dark that was not like other darks. Other darks have shapes in them if you wait. This one stayed plain. From somewhere below came butter and currants and spice, the cruellest smell in England. Through the floorboards it had always come a little at a time. Here he got a whole breath of it. Beneath it was another smell, faint and unfamiliar. Something warm and alive and shut up.

The old dumbwaiter rope was still knotted to an iron bar set across the top of the shaft. Someone had looped the loose length over a hook to keep it out of the way. Mouse lifted it off the hook and let it uncoil. He felt it brush the bottom.

He tested the knot the way Mrs. Bibs tested soup: once, thoroughly, with his whole weight.

Then he took the rope in both fists and stepped off the edge of the kitchen floor.

Mrs. Bibs had heard a pea rattle down the shaft and tick on the flags. A boy is not a pea. A boy goes down a rope hand over hand, with his bare feet finding the brick joints. It took Mouse nineteen seconds. I know it was nineteen because Henrietta counted them with her ear to the opening, and Henrietta did not miscount.

At the bottom the shaft opened into a wider dark. Mouse dropped the last foot onto an empty flour sack that gave under his heels. Then he stood still and saved everything.

Here is what he saved, in order, because order matters when you are small and silent and reporting to yourself.

Warmth. The cellar was warm as August, and the warmth had a direction, and the direction was the ovens.

Light. A low orange glow showed through the vents in the iron doors of three great ovens. In that light the cellar looked bigger than the whole ground floor above it, though Mouse could not see where the walls ended. There were sacks to the ceiling. Crates. Tins. A forest of flour.

And beneath the smell of the pies was the smell of the living thing, close now. With it came a sound the house made a hundred times a day in eleven throats, except down here it was slower and deeper, and it did not stop when Mouse held his breath.

Breathing.

Mouse went towards it the way he went everywhere, along the edges of things. The edges in that cellar took him past a workbench with a hundred pie tins stacked on it, and past a brass funnel as tall as himself. Then he came to a great glass carboy with a stopper in its neck. Inside it a pale drift turned slowly. It moved without wind and caught the oven light the way frost catches the sun. Mouse had no word for it, so he saved it for later. It was the most beautiful thing he had ever seen, and the saddest, because it was in a jar.

And then the edges ran out, and there was a stall.

It had been built out of old crates in the corner where the warmth from the ovens gathered. There was a trough and a bed of straw, matted and grey with age. In the straw, with his legs folded under him like a dog too tired to be a dog, lay an animal.

Mouse had seen pictures of reindeer. There had been a picture in a torn magazine at St. Pinch's, years ago, of eight of them flying over a rooftop, glossy as chestnuts, antlers like chandeliers. He looked at the animal in the straw for a long time before he understood he was looking at the same kind of thing.

It was small for a reindeer, and old. Its coat was the grey of dust and candle ends. One antler bent sideways at the tip like the handle of a walking stick. The other had a crack through it sealed with what looked like tar. Around its shoulders hung the ruin of a harness. The leather had been red once. Now it had cracked to the colour of tea, and its brass fittings had gone green.

There were rings on the harness where bells had hung. Mouse counted the empty rings without knowing why he counted.

There were five.

One bell remained, hanging from the collar strap. It was brass, and it was worn smooth as a pebble.

The animal's eyes were open. They had been open the whole time. Mouse saved that carefully, because it was the biggest thing and needed the most room. Those brown, wet eyes had watched him all the way across the cellar without surprise. It was the way you watch a thing you have hoped for so long that when it finally walks towards you, you do not dare move in case it stops.

Above them the driver dropped the last sack onto the flagstones. The engine fell to an idle. Mrs. Gristle called for the pie crates, and somebody went to fetch them.

The old reindeer raised his head, slowly, as if it weighed more than heads should. He looked at the small silent boy, and he spoke.

His mouth stayed shut. The words arrived in the cellar the way the jingle had arrived in the dormitory, thin and silvery and underneath everything. They were simply there, the way warmth was there.

"You're smaller than the last one," said the reindeer.

Mouse stepped into the straw. The reindeer's eyes closed for a moment and opened again, and some small part of the tiredness went out of his breathing.

"The last one asked questions," he said. "Then she stopped coming down. That was…"

He stopped. Counting, perhaps. Reindeer count differently.

“That was a cook ago.” His nostrils stirred. “You smell of soup. So did she.”

Mouse knelt. He put out his hand, palm up, the way you do with a dog you have decided to trust before the dog has decided anything. The old grey muzzle came forward an inch, and another inch, and touched his palm. It was warm and velvet and shaking very slightly, the way strong things shake when they have been weak a long time.

Mouse looked at the harness again. Then he reached into his rag pocket and took out the one thing he owned, the thing he had arrived in the hatbox with and had never once shown anybody.

A screw.

One old brass screw from the lid of the hatbox itself. He had kept it since he was small enough to sleep inside the box, because a baby needs one thing that’s his, and Mrs. Bibs had said so often enough for Mouse to believe her.

He held it up in the oven light. Then he pointed at the bell on the harness, touched his ear and pointed back towards the shaft. He held up one finger for himself. After a moment he opened the rest of his hand.

I heard you. I came down. There will be more of us.

The reindeer looked at the screw for a long moment.

“Brass,” he said, and the silvery voice did something at the edges that might have been a laugh. “She takes the bells and leaves the rings. Twelve years, and she never once understood what the rings are for.”

His eyes came up to Mouse’s.

“Do you know what I am, small one?”

Mouse shook his head once.

“Neither did she,” said the reindeer. “That was my whole protection, and my whole prison.”

Above them a crate scraped across the yard. Another followed it. The driver called out, the engine roared, and somewhere in the noise Henrietta pulled twice on the rope.

Mouse felt it brush his shoulder. He touched the velvet muzzle once more, slipped the screw into his pocket and caught the rope in both hands.

The reindeer spoke one more word.

Mouse saved it.

The way up took longer than nineteen seconds. Twice Mouse put his foot in a joint that was too shallow to hold it. The second time he slipped, Barnaby caught his wrist from above. Henrietta got hold of the back of his shirt, and between them they drew him onto the kitchen floor.

Mouse coiled the rope and put it back on the hook. Barnaby lifted the little door into place and held it while Henrietta turned the screws. Two caught at once. The third went in crooked and had to come out again. Mouse was back at the sink, scrubbing the pan, when the fourth screw turned home.

Outside, the tailboard slammed shut.

Henrietta picked up her potato knife. Barnaby took his drying cloth. The kitchen door opened and Mrs. Gristle came through with her independent eyes going both ways and the Persuader under her arm.

“EH? WHAT?” she said to the kitchen in general, daring it to have been doing something.

The kitchen said nothing. The kitchen was a model establishment. The little door was back on its shaft with four old screws in it, the potatoes were being peeled, and the boy at the sink was small and silent and worth no one’s attention.

Under the floor the ovens breathed. In the straw, the old reindeer kept his head up.

Later, when the Royal Run was loaded and the driver had gone home, Barnaby found Mouse in the Gap. Henrietta came last, carrying the coal scoop in case anybody asked.

Mouse held up one finger, then opened his whole hand. One, and then five. Barnaby could read the numbers in the dark. He couldn’t yet read what they meant.

And then Mouse did something he had never done in six years at St. Pinch’s.

He spoke.

“It’s a reindeer,” he said, in a voice like a hinge that hadn’t turned since it was fitted. “And it talks. She’s kept it down there twelve years.”

Henrietta sat down on the wet coal quite suddenly, the way people do when their legs receive news before the rest of them.

Barnaby put his hand in his pocket. His fingers brushed the cold skin of the satsuma and closed around the little brass bell with the strange slanted letters nobody could read. It was warm, faintly, like a pulse.

Tomorrow was Christmas Day. Tonight the ovens ran hottest, the counting went on longest, and the loaded van would stand idle in the yard till dawn.

Tonight, then. Whatever tonight was going to be.

“Mouse,” said Barnaby. “What’s its name?”

Mouse looked up. He had asked no questions in the cellar. But he had saved the last word the reindeer had given him, the word that had been in the air every night of their lives, riding over the cruellest smell in England like a flag on a ship.

“Nutmeg.”



Barnaby Crumb and the Twelfth Christmas

Chapter Five: Nutmeg

There is a particular hour on Christmas Eve that belongs to nobody. At St. Pinch's it came after the last driver went home. By then the Royal Run stood loaded in the yard, the ovens were banked for the midnight bake, and the whole grey house sat down on its haunches in the dark like a dog pretending to sleep.

The children of St. Pinch's knew this hour. Mrs. Gristle poured herself one glass of something warm, took off her shoes and gave herself eleven minutes away from the accounts. Even enormous ears get tired, and when hers got tired, the whole house seemed to stop listening.

It was then that four children went down the dumbwaiter shaft.

Barnaby went first because it was his bell and his plan, and he scraped both ears on the brickwork, which served them right for sticking out. Henrietta went second and counted her own descent. Twenty-two seconds, slower than Mouse, because she stopped twice to memorise the joints.

Podger went third. The rope took his weight with a sound like a cello being murdered. Podger froze. Henrietta and Barnaby looked up from the flags. Mouse, waiting at the top, held his breath.

The driver had left the yard gate unlatched. The wind banged it against the wall, boom, boom, boom. Mrs. Gristle heard a gate in the wind and fined nobody, because you cannot fine wind, though she had often thought about it.

Mouse went last. He eased the little door back into place behind him, leaving it loose enough to push open on the way up.

And then they stood in the warm orange breathing of the cellar, four small ragged children in a forest of flour, and the smell of a thousand pies stood around them like a crowd.

From the corner where the warmth pooled deepest came a voice, thin and silvery and old.

“You brought the others.”

Nutmeg was standing.

It had taken him some while, Mouse thought. His hind legs shook like table legs on an uneven floor. But all four feet were planted in the matted straw, his grey head was up, and the bent antler tilted like a question. In the oven light he looked like a grandfather made of dust and patience, wearing the wreck of a red harness and waiting at the end of twelve years for an appointment he had stopped believing in.

Barnaby stepped forward. He had rehearsed nine things to say on the way down the rope, and every one of them fell out of his head.

“Are you all right?”

The old reindeer looked at him for a long moment.

“No,” he said. “But I am better than I was before your friend came down. Sit down, all of you. The straw is foul and it is the best seat in England.”

Podger sat closest, because Podger sat closest to everything warm. It was his whole nature and it had nearly killed him a dozen times. Henrietta sat with her back to a flour sack so she could see the shaft and the stall at once, because Henrietta’s whole nature was exits. Mouse sat cross-legged at Nutmeg’s forefeet, saving. And Barnaby opened his fist.

The little brass bell lay on his palm, worn smooth as a pebble, with its strange slanted letters.

Nutmeg lowered his head until his muzzle almost touched it. The children watched his eyes follow the engraving.

“Read it,” said Barnaby. “Please. Nobody here can.”

“I can,” said Nutmeg. “I wrote it.”

He read his own name aloud. *Nutmeg.* The letters slanted because he had scratched them into the brass on a moving sleigh.

“There are nine of us,” he said. “You know eight. Everyone knows eight. They’re on the cards and in the songs, glossy as chestnuts, antlers like chandeliers. I fly at the back on the left, where a little hitch ring fastens me to the rail. I don’t pull.”

“Then what do you do?” said Henrietta, who could not help it, who would have interrupted the sea.

“I keep the time.”

He let that sit for a moment, the way Mrs. Bibs let soup sit.

“One night,” he said. “Every chimney in the world. You’ve done that arithmetic, clever girl. I can see it on you. You’ve lain awake and decided it was impossible, and then decided to believe it anyway. Well, it is impossible. One night has never been enough.”

Henrietta stopped counting the minutes on her fingers.

“Underneath the toys at the back of the sleigh is a second sack. Grey and small, older than the toys, older than the songs. The Time-Sack. I fly with my nose to its seam, and wherever the seam breathes, the night stretches. A minute becomes eleven. An hour becomes a night inside a night. That’s how we reach the last chimney before morning.”

Podger’s mouth was open. “So Father Christmas…”

“Is real, is late, and is worried,” said Nutmeg. “He’s been worried for twelve years. Every Christmas the night comes out a little shorter. The seam breathes with me, and I am here.”

He shifted one of his shaking legs.

“You know what a Christmas is like when the time runs short, though you’ve never had one to compare it with. Presents arrive a little less right. Carols are sung a little less loudly. Grown-ups say the season doesn’t feel the way it used to, and blame the shops and the weather and each other. Twelve years of shrinking, children. A little leaks out every year, through a hole in the back of the night where I ought to be.”

The cellar was very quiet. Above them, faint through the stone, the wind banged the yard gate like a slow heart.

“How did she catch you?” said Barnaby.

Nutmeg was silent so long that the ovens breathed twice.

“Treacle,” he said at last. “The truth is humiliating, and humiliation is the tax on all true stories. Twelve Christmases ago we came over this village low, into a headwind, and I smelled treacle in the yard. A trough of it, sweet as summer. I was tired, and the seam was heavy, and I dropped down for one mouthful while the team held the sky.”

His nostrils twitched.

“One mouthful. The trough was chained to the ground, and the chain was round my leg before I’d swallowed. She’d put the trough out three nights running. She’d watched the sky for three years. She thought I was a horse worth stealing, a queer grey horse that fell out of the air. Then she found out what she could get from keeping me, and she built a business.”

“The jolly,” said Henrietta. Her voice came out flat and hard, the barrister voice, the one that would one day make pirates nervous. “In the pies.”

“Ah,” said Nutmeg. “Now we come to the jar.”

Across the cellar, the pale drift was still turning inside the great glass carboy. It caught the oven light the way frost catches the sun.

“It comes off me,” he said. “Like heat off a stove. Like scent off a rose. When a reindeer of my line is glad, it comes off bright and fast. That’s what the seam breathes. Joy has a weight and a weather, children. Misery makes it come off more slowly, but it’s the same stuff.”

His eyes stayed on the jar.

“She worked it out in the first year. She put the funnel over my stall at night and ran a pipe into the jar. Every morning she measured what had come off me and folded a spoonful into every hundred pies. Then she sold them to England at a shilling each. Eleven minutes of jolly per pie. She never knew why eleven. I could have told her. Eleven is what one minute becomes when it goes through the seam.”

“She’s been selling your sadness,” said Barnaby.

“At a shilling a pie,” said Nutmeg. “As eaten by royalty, probably. And the terrible joke, children, the joke I’ve had twelve years to appreciate, is that it works. A bank manager sang. People wept. She’s spread more real jolly across the north of England than I ever managed from the back of the sleigh.”

He lifted his head. His voice did the thing at the edges that might have been a laugh or might have been the other thing.

“Stolen joy is still joy. That’s what makes the theft so hard to see. Nobody riots over a mince pie that made them happy.”

Mouse put his hand flat on the cracked red leather of the harness. He ran one finger along the five empty rings, then looked up and tilted his head.

“Bells,” said Nutmeg. “Five working bells, one for each stretch of the long night. They ring the time out along the seam, so the stretched minutes know where they are and can find their way home when the night folds up again. A stretched minute without a bell to walk home by gets lost. You’ve felt it. An hour that went somewhere and never came back.”

He moved his head, and the little bell on his collar shifted in the oven light.

“This one is separate. She left it on me because she liked hearing me move. Four of the working bells she sold for brass. The fifth came loose the night she caught me and went down the yard drain. I saw it go between the bars. The snow had nearly covered them.”

Barnaby looked at the bell in his hand. Worn smooth as a pebble. Tied to a fish basket nine years ago, in the snow, three winters after a reindeer fell into a treacle trap in this very yard.

“Mrs. Bibs found your basket on the step,” said Henrietta.

“Then somebody found my bell between those two Christmases,” said Nutmeg softly. “And kept it, the way people keep small bright things. And when a baby needed one thing that was his, they gave him the brightest small thing they had.”

His eyes were still on Barnaby’s palm.

“I don’t know who. I may never know. The world is mostly made of people I will never know doing kind things in the dark, children. The arithmetic of it does not close, and you must not try to make it close. You must only add to it.”

He said it plainly, the way you state the weather. When he spoke again, the silvery voice had gone very thin.

“The bell in your hand and the one on my collar came from the same ladle, on the same night. A pair. They can answer each other across any distance. When I sighed that night, mine rang. And yours answered.”

Barnaby curled his fingers a little around the bell.

“I heard it, children. Through the stone. A dead bell ringing back.” Nutmeg drew a breath that shuddered in his chest like wind in a torn sail. “Do you know what that told me, under twelve years of floor? That I was not the last of anything. That the arithmetic was still open.”

Nobody said anything for a while. The ovens breathed, and four children sat in foul straw with the truth sitting among them, heavier than all the flour in the forest.

Then the yard gate stopped banging.

Henrietta looked down at her fingers, as if the missing minutes might still be there. She turned towards the shaft.

It was Podger who spoke, because it is always the soft ones who say the load-bearing thing. Podger, who had received his satsuma after supper with both hands, like communion, and had carried it in his pocket all evening.

“What do you eat?”

Nutmeg blinked. “Hay. Oats. Good water. It’s been hay and worse water for twelve years, and I’m not fussy, whatever I look.”

“No,” said Podger. His voice went stubborn in a way none of them had heard before. “What do you eat at home? On the night. What do they give you for the flight?”

Nutmeg went still. All four shaking legs, the tilted antler, the wet eyes. Still as the dark at the bottom of the shaft.

“Satsumas,” he said.

The word dropped into the middle of them like the fourth screw coming out of the little door.

“One each,” said Nutmeg. His voice had begun, very quietly, to tremble. “Before the launch. Peel oil and pith and segment, the bright little suns of winter. One satsuma burns in a reindeer of my line for a thousand miles of stretched night. They come up to us in ships and sledges from the warm countries, every year, and the humans think they’re for stockings.”

His eyes went to Podger’s hand.

“Why do you ask, small round one? Why do you ask me that, tonight, with your hand in your pocket?”

Podger Sims took out his satsuma, unpeeled and unbroken, and held it up in the orange oven light. His chin was wobbling and his voice was steady, and both of those things were true at once and would stay true for the rest of his life.

“Because we’ve got eleven,” said Podger.



Barnaby Crumb and the Twelfth Christmas

Chapter Six: The Satsuma Plan

Now we come to the planning, and I must warn you that planning at St. Pinch's was a difficult business. In a house where plans are allowed, you can sit round a table and talk until someone says, "Have you thought about the dog?" and everybody remembers the dog.

At St. Pinch's, if you talked long enough to remember the dog, Mrs. Gristle would have heard you, found the dog and fined it.

So the plan had to be built the way Mouse built everything. Silently, in pieces, each piece small enough to carry past an ear.

"Because we've got eleven," Podger had said.

Nutmeg looked at the satsuma in his hand. His nostrils moved once.

"Eleven would do it," he said. "After twelve years on hay and worse water, I'd need every one."

Henrietta was still looking towards the shaft. The gate had stopped banging. In the sudden quiet, she could hear the peel creak under Podger's thumb.

"Can you wait till breakfast?" she asked.

"I can wait. The question is whether the night can." Nutmeg lifted his bent antler. "There'll still be a fold of Christmas Eve tucked inside the Time-Sack. If I'm in the air by seven, I can catch it. After that it'll fold shut, and we'll have to wait another year."

"Seven," said Henrietta.

Somewhere upstairs a chair scraped.

Mouse was on his feet before the scrape had finished. Barnaby closed his fist round the bell, Podger put away his satsuma, and they went up the rope as fast as four children can go up a rope when the last one keeps looking down.

Nutmeg stayed standing until all four of them were gone.

The first person they found in the kitchen was Mrs. Bibs. She was sitting by the cold range with her hands in her lap.

"Did you see him?" she asked.

"You knew?" said Barnaby.

"I knew there was somebody." She looked down at her hands. "You can know that much and spend years pretending it's very little."

Henrietta drew the kitchen door nearly shut. There, in the little space between the door and the range, they began to put the pieces together.

Four satsumas were already in four rag pockets. Barnaby and Henrietta and Podger had carried theirs since supper, and Mouse had carried his because Mouse carried everything. Seven remained upstairs, in seven pockets or under seven pillows. Waking seven children and asking them to creep downstairs with fruit would have given Mrs. Gristle seven chances to stop them.

"We don't need to bring the children down," said Henrietta. "We need to bring their breakfast back."

On Christmas morning at six o'clock sharp, Mrs. Bibs carried eleven trays up to the dormitory. There were eleven bowls of cabbage water, eleven spoons and, underneath each bowl, a folded square of paper. Mrs. Gristle had had the squares printed by the gross with a festive motto of her own invention.

NO BELIEVING IS FREE

She had been using them for years. Nobody ever looked under a bowl to see whether the motto had improved.

“We can’t risk a written note,” said Henrietta. “We send the bell.”

Barnaby’s fist closed.

“Under one bowl,” she went on, more gently. “Beside Podger’s satsuma. Nutmeg rings his bell, and yours answers. That’ll get somebody to lift the bowl.”

“And then?” asked Mrs. Bibs.

“Then you tell them what they’re looking at. You say there’s a reindeer downstairs and he needs their satsumas. You ask them to put the fruit back on the tray if they want him to have it.”

Mrs. Bibs thought about this for a while.

“She’ll be counting the night’s takings at six,” she said. “I can tell them while I’m pouring the water. I can carry the fruit back under my cloth, too, if nobody tries to help me.”

Nobody had ever tried to help Mrs. Bibs carry an empty tray at St. Pinch’s. There was a fair chance that the habit would hold.

“And I’ll take it from the kitchen,” said Henrietta. She glanced at Mouse, who held out both hands. “All right. You take it. I’ll watch the door.”

Barnaby opened his fist. The bell lay on his palm, worn smooth as a pebble. Nine years of blankets. The one thing that was his.

“It might not come back,” he said.

“Yes,” said Henrietta. She did not dress it up. Dressing things up was for people who did not respect you.

Barnaby thought of somebody finding the bell and keeping it, then tying it to a fish basket on a night when a baby needed one thing that was his. Whoever it was had got it as far as him. He could get it as far as a breakfast tray.

“Under Odd’s bowl,” he said. “Odd’s the one who’ll shout.”

Mrs. Bibs took a clean corner of her apron and folded it round the bell and Podger’s satsuma.

Henrietta had already worked out when the front door would open. At a quarter to seven Mrs. Gristle left for church with the Persuader under her arm and her keys on a ring the size of a soup

plate. The keys mattered because there were two ways into the cellar that a grown person could use. The iron door inside the house had the three padlocks. The other iron door, at the foot of the yard steps, had a lock of its own. The driver could get through while Mrs. Gristle was there to let him in. Once she had gone, both doors would stay locked.

“Unless you can get the keys before she goes,” said Barnaby.

“She sleeps with them under her pillow,” said Mrs. Bibs.

Henrietta considered the pillow, and what lay on top of it.

“Chimney,” she said.

She had seen the sweep’s brush come out of the broad chimney the previous autumn. It had opened above the roof like a black umbrella. The sweep had grumbled that the oven flue was wide enough to lose a sack of flour in, and Henrietta had remembered it because she liked to know how many ways there were out of any building she was in.

Wide enough for a sack of flour. Wide enough for a small old reindeer? That was a question for Nutmeg.

Mrs. Bibs sent them back upstairs for what sleep they could get. Before dawn she came to the dormitory herself, touched four shoulders and went away without a word.

By then the midnight bake was over. Mrs. Bibs opened the dumbwaiter door and stood watch while the four children climbed down. Mouse went last with a small bundle wrapped in a dishcloth. When he reached the flags, he set it down so gently that whatever was inside made no sound at all.

Nutmeg was waiting beside the stall.

They showed him the broad brick flue behind the ovens, where an iron cleaning hatch opened onto a ledge thick with soot. Nutmeg put his head through the hatch, tipped his antlers sideways and looked up.

“A chimney’s a door that opens downwards,” he said, drawing his head back. “Any fool with a sack can come down one.”

“Can you go up it?” asked Podger.

“Ask me after breakfast,” said Nutmeg. Then he looked again at the width of the opening. “I’ll have to keep my head sideways till we clear the roof.”

That left the jar.

The great glass carboy stood where Mouse had first seen it, stoppered, with the pale drift turning inside it. Henrietta went close enough to see the orange oven light reflected in the glass.

“We ought to take it,” she said. “It’s evidence.”

“Leave it,” said Nutmeg.

Henrietta turned. “It’s twelve years of what she did to you.”

“I know what it is. It’s me. The sad part.” His wet eyes moved to the carboy. “Carry it up past the bricks and she’ll hear her own harvest singing in a jar. Smash it and twelve years of sadness will get out into one room. I don’t know what that does to a house, and neither do you.”

He looked back at the stall.

“Let her find it where she put it. When she sees I’m gone, she’ll know it’s all she has left of me. And it will never fill again.”

He said it without triumph. That was what Barnaby remembered afterwards. Nutmeg wanted her to stop.

Henrietta drew the timings in the flour dust on the workbench. At six the trays would go up. As soon as Mrs. Bibs reached Odd’s bed, Nutmeg would ring. The fruit would come down with the bowls, then down the dumbwaiter with Mouse. At a quarter to seven Mrs. Gristle would leave for church. At seven the last fold of Christmas Eve would shut.

Henrietta wiped the flour smooth with her sleeve.

“And us?” asked Podger. “Where are we in the plan?”

“Up the flue,” said Henrietta. “If Nutmeg will have us.”

Nutmeg’s head came up sharply.

“The fruit will get me into the air,” he said. “The bells bring the minutes home. I can make my collar bell do the work of one harness bell in a pinch. Barnaby’s bell can lead another stretch, if it comes back. That still leaves three. If I go flying on two bells, whole hours will come loose over England. You know what it feels like when lost time lands on you. It feels like a Christmas you can’t remember.”

“Do they have to be proper bells?” asked Barnaby.

“For the first stretch, yes. After that, a bell that knows the way can teach another bit of metal the note. But it needs somebody to strike it at the right moment.” Nutmeg looked down at his hooves. “I’ve never had much luck with that part.”

Mouse unfolded the dishcloth. Inside were three tin cups and three spoons. Mrs. Bibs had wrapped each spoon separately so it would keep quiet on the way down. Mouse set the cups in a row on the bench and looked up at Nutmeg.

“Those will ring,” said Nutmeg. He bent his head and touched the rim of one cup with his nose. “They’ll want a good sharp tap. And you’ll have to listen for my collar bell first.”

“There are four of us,” said Barnaby. “Three for the cups. I’ll hold my bell. We can use the rope to fasten ourselves to the harness.”

He had not known he was going to say it. It arrived whole, the way the two things had arrived in the dark when he heard the sigh. He understood, as he said it, that he was counting on getting his bell back. Upstairs, Odd had yet to lift his bowl.

Nutmeg looked at the four small ragged children in his straw. The boy with the soup-tureen ears and the empty fist. The girl with the exits. The round one with the steady chin. The silent one who saved everything.

Overhead, Mrs. Bibs began laying out the Christmas trays. The first spoon touched the first bowl. Then came the second, and the third.

Nutmeg lowered his cracked red harness towards them the way a knight lowers a bridge.

“Then we had better hurry,” said the ninth reindeer, “because I can hear the spoons.”



Barnaby Crumb and the Twelfth Christmas

Chapter Seven: Mrs. Gristle Hears Everything

At six o’clock on Christmas morning, Mrs. Bibs carried the first of eleven trays up the kitchen stairs. Under the bowl on the fourth tray, where the motto should have been, lay a little brass bell and an unpeeled satsuma.

I want you to understand what that cost her. She had not slept. When she lit the range, her hands shook so badly she dropped the match twice. The larder was locked, and she had nothing to put in the bowls but cabbage water. She had promised Barnaby she would carry his bell upstairs, and she meant to do it, though a promise made in a dark kitchen feels a good deal heavier when you pick it up in daylight.

As for the four children, they had climbed back up before six. An empty bed was a question, and Mrs. Gristle had a way of answering questions before anybody asked them. They had left three satsumas in the straw with Nutmeg. The fourth, Podger's, was under Odd's bowl.

Mrs. Bibs went up and down the stairs with the first three trays. On the fourth journey she paused on the landing, where the kitchen pipes ran up the wall, and tapped one of them twice with a spoon.

In the cellar, Nutmeg heard the signal. He bent his head and gave it a little shake.

Under Odd's bowl, Barnaby's bell rang.

Odd put both hands round the bowl.

"Wait till I've set it down, duck," said Mrs. Bibs. She put the tray across his knees and bent to straighten his blanket. "There's a reindeer below the kitchen. He needs your satsumas. If you want him to have yours, put it on this tray. Pass it on."

Odd looked at her. Then he looked at the bowl, and the bell rang a second time.

He lifted it.

"IT'S FROM FATHER CHRISTMAS!"

The dormitory came awake like a dropped plate.

Todd said no, it wasn't. It was a trick. It was a fine. It was her. Look at the door. Odd said of course it was Father Christmas, who else put things under bowls on Christmas morning? Todd said Mrs. Gristle put things under bowls on Christmas morning and had done for years.

While they argued, the message went from bed to bed. A reindeer. Below the kitchen. Put your satsuma on Odd's tray. Mrs. Bibs confirmed it with a nod as she went past. One child had to fish a satsuma out of a sock. Another had been saving hers under the pillow and had fallen asleep with one hand on it.

Then the counting stopped.

Mrs. Bibs heard it from the landing, the way you hear a clock you've lived with all your life decide not to tick.

She turned. Mrs. Gristle was already on the stairs.

What happened next took ninety seconds. The children would remember it as much longer.

The dormitory door opened, and Mrs. Gristle filled it. Black dress. Persuader under her arm. One eye on Mrs. Bibs and the other travelling over the beds. The shouting died the way shouting does when the thing it is shouting about walks in.

Then both eyes settled on Odd's tray.

The children had never seen her eyes agree before.

Mrs. Gristle picked up the bell. She held it between one thick finger and one thick thumb and gave it a shake.

It said nothing.

She turned it over. She studied the slanted marks. Then she looked straight at Barnaby.

"This is yours."

Barnaby had his hand in his pocket, where the bell had lived for nine years. He could feel the seam at the bottom of it. Across the room, Odd's mouth was still open. In the bed next to him, Todd had one hand under the blanket, closed round his satsuma.

"Yes," said Barnaby. "It came with me."

Mrs. Gristle smiled.

"A bell that doesn't ring," she said. "And a satsuma under a bowl."

She caught Barnaby by the wrist. There was a streak of soot on his cuff from where he had helped Nutmeg open the flue hatch. Mrs. Gristle rubbed it with her thumb.

"The dumbwaiter was sealed for draughts," she said. "Or did somebody tell you different?"

Barnaby said nothing.

"Did he speak to you, Barnaby?"

Nothing.

She raised the bell until it was level with his eyes. "What did he tell you about this?"

Barnaby looked at the brass between her fingers. He thought of Nutmeg with his head lowered over the little bell in the straw, reading the name he had written himself.

He kept his mouth shut.

"The Pickle Cupboard," said Mrs. Gristle.

Podger made a sound like a kettle beginning. Todd caught his wrist, and Odd caught Todd's. It would not have mattered if all eleven had grabbed hold, because Mrs. Gristle was built along the lines of a wardrobe and they were built along the lines of children.

She took Barnaby downstairs by the collar.

The door of the Pickle Cupboard opened under the stairs. Inside, as it turned out, there were no pickles. There were sacks of rock salt and one very old umbrella. The air smelled of damp cloth and a place that had been shut for too long.

Mrs. Gristle put Barnaby in and bolted the door.

“I go to church at a quarter to seven,” she said through the wood, in her soft, pleasant voice. “When I get back, you’ll tell me what he said to you. And then you’ll tell me why that bell rings for him.”

Her footsteps went back up the stairs. The keys at her waist jingled. The bell in her fist kept quiet.

For the next half-hour Mrs. Gristle turned out pockets and shook blankets. She wanted to know who had taken the bell upstairs, who had put it under the bowl, and why Odd had shouted. Odd told her it was because he believed it had come from Father Christmas. Todd said he could confirm this, as Odd had been wrong in precisely that way for as long as he could remember.

Mrs. Bibs said she had carried the tray. That was a plain fact, and Mrs. Gristle could get nothing else out of her.

By the time Mrs. Gristle went to fetch her coat, seven children had managed to keep seven satsumas out of her hands. Podger’s still lay beside Odd’s untouched bowl. And in the cellar, Nutmeg had eaten the three they had left him. He stood in the straw with eight missing and the flue waiting above him like a throat.

In the dark of the Pickle Cupboard, Barnaby sat against the rock salt with his knees up and listened.

He heard Mrs. Gristle come down for her coat. He heard her put the bell in her pocket, where it struck the handle of the Persuader with a little *tick*. He heard her call Mrs. Bibs into the passage.

“Keep an ear on this door,” she said. “I’ll be back in an hour.”

The hall clock struck a quarter to seven. The front door shut.

For a moment Barnaby could hear nothing at all. Then a floorboard creaked outside the cupboard, and something brushed the wood near his knee. A small hand settled against the crack.

Mrs. Gristle believed she had caught the whole plan when she caught him. She had even told Mrs. Bibs where to listen. Barnaby pictured the kitchen with nobody watching the trays, and the little door behind the range.

Mrs. Gristle would be gone an hour. Nutmeg had fifteen minutes.

Barnaby put his lips to the crack.

“Mouse. Go.”



Barnaby Crumb and the Twelfth Christmas

Chapter Eight: What Mouse Did

There are people who believe that being small is a weakness. Mrs. Gristle believed it. It was the foundation of her whole establishment, the reason the rules were a foot high and the children were not.

What she had never once considered, in twelve years of listening, was that being small was also a way through.

“Mouse. Go,” Barnaby had said.

Mouse took his hand off the Pickle Cupboard door. The bolt was four feet up, and there was a coal box under the stairs that would have brought it within reach. But the bolt was stiff. He could tell by the scrape it had made when Mrs. Gristle shut it, and through the passage window he could still see her black coat crossing the yard.

He left the bolt alone.

“I’ll come back,” he breathed through the crack.

He went up the back stairs. Two treads creaked in the middle and one creaked all the way across. Mouse knew which was which. On the landing, he slipped behind the tall linen press and through the gap where a length of panelling had come away beside the dormitory radiator. It was a tight fit even for Mouse. He had to turn his head sideways and leave one foot behind him until the rest of him was through.

Seven satsumas. Seven fists.

Mouse went to Odd first and opened his hand.

Odd dropped his satsuma into it before Mouse had finished turning his palm up. Todd looked at his brother. He looked at his own satsuma. Then he gave it to Mouse as well, with the air of a person who had been arguing for a long time and had just found something better to do.

The other five came one by one. Mouse held out his hand, waited, and put each satsuma inside his shirt. Open hand, wait, go. They had all learnt his grammar without ever being taught it.

The last satsuma came from the girl who had slept with her hand on it under the pillow. She rubbed it once with her thumb before she let it go.

Mouse went back through the gap beside the radiator and down the back stairs. In the kitchen, Mrs. Bibs was stacking the empty bowls. Odd’s tray stood apart from the rest. Beside his untouched cabbage water lay Podger’s satsuma.

Mrs. Bibs put a dishcloth over it.

“I’ll bring that one,” she whispered. “You get those down.”

The dumbwaiter rope was still tied to the iron bar. Mouse tucked his shirt into his trousers so the fruit could not fall out, took the rope in both hands and went down. It took him a little longer with seven satsumas tucked against his ribs, because a boy can lose his footing and catch it again, but a satsuma has no hands.

Nutmeg stood beside the stall with his head up and his eyes on the shaft.

Mouse knelt in the straw and let the fruit roll out of his shirt, one by one.

“Eleven,” said Nutmeg, so softly it was almost a question.

Mouse held up three fingers and pointed to the scraps of peel by the trough. Then he pointed at the seven in the straw. He held up one more finger and pointed towards the kitchen.

“One still to come,” said Nutmeg.

He lowered his head and ate. He ate quickly, with his eyes closed, peel and pith and segment. The grey of his coat deepened with every mouthful, and by the time he swallowed the last one, the shaking in his hind legs had stopped. The crack in his antler was still there. It seemed to matter less now that he could hold his head up without thinking about it.

He took a step. The harness creaked.

His collar bell rang.

Out by the yard gate, Mrs. Gristle stopped so abruptly that the Persuader struck the wall.

The bell in her coat pocket had answered.

She put her hand into the pocket and stood quite still. The little brass thing lay quiet between her fingers. She had shaken it herself. She knew what it sounded like when it made no sound at all.

She turned back towards the house.

Mouse heard the front door open just as he reached the kitchen again. Mrs. Bibs had Odd's tray in her hands. She got as far as the passage before Mrs. Gristle met her.

"What have you got under there?"

"Breakfast things," said Mrs. Bibs.

Mrs. Gristle took the tray and lifted the cloth. She recognised the satsuma. She must have done, for she set it on the saucer in her office beside Barnaby's bell and shut the office door behind her.

"The cellar," she said.

She took the ring of keys from her waist and began sorting through it as she walked towards the three-padlocked door inside the house.

Mrs. Bibs backed into the kitchen. Mouse was beside the range, looking at the empty tray she had brought back.

"She's got the last one," she said.

Mouse held up ten fingers. Then he pointed to the shaft.

Mrs. Bibs looked towards the passage. She could hear the keys striking one another as Mrs. Gristle worked her way round the ring.

"Go on, then," she whispered. "Tell him what he's got."

Mouse was halfway to the shaft when he stopped. He pointed to the stack of tin cups on the shelf and held up one finger.

Mrs. Bibs took the top cup and gave it to him.

She had also oiled the hinge on the Pickle Cupboard every Sunday for years. She oiled all the hinges, even the ones that nobody thanked her for, because a door ought to do what it was made to do.

Mouse put the tin cup inside his shirt and went back to the cupboard.

“When she passes, scrape,” he breathed.

Then he climbed onto the coal box and tucked himself into the shadow behind the open stair rail.

Mrs. Gristle’s route to the cellar ran past the Pickle Cupboard. She was within two steps of it when she heard a sack of rock salt drag across the floor.

She stopped.

There it was again. A small, deliberate scrape from the back of the cupboard.

Mrs. Gristle could no more leave a sound like that alone than water could pass a hole without finding it. She went back two steps, pulled the bolt and opened the door.

“Moving?” she said pleasantly. “We don’t move in the cupboard. The cupboard is for stillness.”

Barnaby had wedged himself beside the sacks, near the hinge. When Mrs. Gristle stepped in, he shoved the old umbrella across the floor. Its handle knocked against the back wall. She turned towards the sound and took another step.

Barnaby slipped out behind her.

The weighted hinge did what it had done for a hundred years. The door swung to, smoothly and quietly, because Mrs. Bibs had seen to it.

Mouse slid the bolt home.

It made one sound. One short iron note.

Then the shouting began.

“EH? WHAT?”

The Persuader hit the wood. The rock salt shifted. The keys were still at Mrs. Gristle’s waist, every last one of them, and none could do a thing about a bolt on the other side of a door.

Mouse caught Barnaby’s sleeve and pulled him towards the kitchen.

Henrietta was already at the dumbwaiter. Podger stood behind her, looking at the empty breakfast tray.

“She took mine,” he said.

“It started him eating,” said Barnaby. “Come on.”

Henrietta went down first, because she always wanted to see the way out. Podger went next. Barnaby followed, and Mouse came last, with the fourth tin cup bumping softly against his ribs.

Upstairs, seven children crowded round the dormitory window to watch the roof. Someone had to see it happen, and witnessing is a job, and it was theirs.

In the cellar, Nutmeg looked at the four faces gathered in his straw.

“She got the last satsuma,” said Barnaby. “She’s got my bell as well.”

Nutmeg looked up at the black throat of the flue.

“Ten will get me up there,” he said. “Eleven would have got me all the way.”

“How far will ten get us?” asked Podger.

Nutmeg considered it. “Far enough to find out what we do next.”

Mouse put the fourth tin cup on the workbench beside the other three.

Nutmeg lowered his muzzle to the new cup. He gave his head the smallest shake, and the collar bell rang. The tin answered with a faint hum. It was a little higher than the bell, and it went on a little longer.

“That’s the note,” said Nutmeg. “Now it needs somebody to strike it.”

There were only three spoons on the workbench. Mouse reached into his rag pocket and took out the brass screw from the lid of the hatbox, the one he had kept since he was small enough to sleep inside it.

He pressed it into Barnaby’s empty palm.

A baby needs one thing that’s his.

Barnaby touched the screw to the rim of the cup. It rang, clear and high. Mouse took his hand away, and Barnaby closed his fingers round the screw.

Above them the Persuader beat on the cupboard door. Henrietta handed out the cups and spoons. Podger took hold of the rope with both hands while Mouse fed it through the empty harness rings. Barnaby tucked his cup against his chest and held on to the brass screw.

Nutmeg stepped to the open hatch. He turned his head sideways so the bent antler went in first. A little soot fell onto his nose, and he sneezed.

Then he lowered his cracked red harness towards the children.

“Hold on,” said the ninth reindeer. “And whatever the night does, ring.”


www.thecrazymadwriter.com

Barnaby Crumb and the Twelfth Christmas

Chapter Nine: Up the Flue

Nutmeg had one antler through the cleaning hatch when he stopped.

“What is it?” said Barnaby.

“Put your hand here.”

Barnaby put his hand into the opening beside Nutmeg’s muzzle. The bricks were warm. A little soot fell onto the back of his hand. He could feel hardly any draught at all.

“The damper,” said Henrietta.

She had watched the sweep’s brush spread out above the broad chimney the previous autumn. Afterwards, while Mrs. Bibs gave him a cup of tea, he had complained about the iron plate where the flue narrowed at the second floor. Mrs. Gristle liked it half shut. It held the heat in the ovens and left just enough room for a sweep’s brush to squeeze past.

“How much room?” asked Barnaby.

“Eighteen inches,” said Henrietta. “The sweep said he measured it himself after he got his brush stuck.”

They all looked at Nutmeg’s shoulders.

“Where’s the handle?” said Podger.

“In the kitchen. Behind the range.”

Above them, the Persuader struck the cupboard door. It struck again, harder, and the ovens gave a little rattle in their iron mouths.

In the kitchen, Mrs. Bibs set down the bowl she had been drying.

She could hear Mrs. Gristle under the stairs. At any other time, that sound would have brought her into the passage before she had quite decided to go. This time she stayed where she was.

She remembered Henrietta saying *chimney*. Then she remembered the damper rod behind the range, the one Mrs. Gristle had forbidden her to touch since the previous cook left.

Mrs. Bibs wrapped her apron round the handle and pulled.

The rod resisted. She put one foot against the bottom of the range and pulled again. Somewhere above the kitchen, an iron plate swung on its counterweight with a sound like a far-off gate. The rod slid the last inch by itself.

Mrs. Bibs took her foot down and smoothed her apron.

“There,” she said to the range. “That’s done. That’s me done.”

Down in the cellar, the whole warm dark leaned upwards. Flour stirred on the flags. A little whirl of straw went round Nutmeg’s feet and slid towards the hatch.

“Somebody,” said Nutmeg, “has opened the door.”

Mouse was already at the harness.

The dumbwaiter rope was still tied to its iron bar. The rope Mouse had threaded through the harness rings was a separate length he’d found coiled beside the workbench. He drew it close round Nutmeg’s chest, behind the forelegs, where the old leather was strongest. Then he made four loops and fastened them with the knot Mrs. Bibs used for hanging hams.

“Left shoulder for Barnaby,” said Henrietta. “Right for Podger. Mouse and I go just behind. Keep your knees in. The narrower we are, the less chimney we’ll bring down with us.”

Podger drew his knees in before he had even got on.

Each loop held a child close to the leather, with room under one arm for a tin cup. Henrietta and Mouse had spoons. Podger tucked his down the front of his shirt until he needed it. Barnaby kept the brass screw in his fist.

“Listen for my collar bell,” said Nutmeg. “It walks the first stretch home. Barnaby answers with his cup, then Podger, then Henrietta, then Mouse. One clear note each. Can you pick my note out of the rest, Podger?”

“I can,” said Podger. “I cry on key.”

“You’ll do,” said Nutmeg.

It was the kindest thing anyone had said to Podger Sims in his life.

They climbed on. Mouse checked each loop twice. Across the cellar, the pale drift still turned in its glass carboy. It caught the oven light as Nutmeg shifted his weight, and for a moment the jar looked warm enough to put your hands against. Then Nutmeg turned away from it.

“The flue will be hot,” he said. “The bricks hold warmth like bread holds steam. Keep your hands off anything iron. When we come out on the roof, the cold will hit you like the sea.”

He put his bent antler through the hatch and turned his head until the other one followed. His forefeet found the sooty ledge. Behind him, Mouse pulled once more on the knot.

“Ready,” said Henrietta.

Nutmeg crouched.

And he jumped.

The children remembered different things about the climb. I can give you all four accounts, because each of them kept a piece the others missed.

Barnaby remembered the dark. The dark in the dumbwaiter shaft had stayed plain however long you looked into it. This dark moved. It rushed past his ears with the brickwork, and somewhere above the kitchen he felt the hooves stop striking brick and strike something else, something that gave like snow and rang like brass. He pressed his cheek against the old leather. Beneath him, Nutmeg had found a road where a moment ago there had only been air.

Henrietta remembered the damper. The iron plate stood edge-on against the wall, and as they passed it she could see where the sweep’s brush had scraped a brown crescent through the soot. Her own shoulder went past with scarcely an inch to spare. She had been counting brick courses to give herself something to do. At the crescent she forgot which number came next.

Podger remembered the warmth. He had been cold for five years, cold in the way that gets into the personality, and the flue was warm as the best bath he had never had. He sat exactly where Mouse had put him, with his knees in and his cup under his arm, and the warmth went into him like soup. By the time he felt the tears on his face, he had been happy for several seconds without knowing what it was.

Mouse remembered the knot. He watched it take the weight at the first jump, draw tight as Nutmeg turned past the damper, and hold when all four children leaned as one around the last bend. Mrs. Bibs tied that knot every time she hung a ham. She had shown him once, with a length of string and a potato. The potato had stayed up. So did they.

And Nutmeg remembered the sky coming.

It was a little square at first. Then it was wide enough for his antlers.

They came out of the chimney into cold like the sea, exactly as he had warned. The snow had stopped. The clouds were breaking west to east like a slow hand opening, and the seven children at the dormitory window saw a grey reindeer rise out of the tallest chimney at St. Pinch’s. He had one bent antler, a cracked red harness and four small ragged children held close to his sides.

All seven witnesses agreed on what happened next.

He stood on the air.

He stepped onto it as if it were the first stair of a staircase he had been away from for twelve years. His legs held. For one breath he stood level with the chimney pot, soot on his nose and the whole village below him.

At the dormitory window, Odd said, “I told you.”

Todd looked at the sky with his mouth open. He had already given Mouse his satsuma. This was harder.

“Yes,” said Todd. “You did.”

Above the roof, Nutmeg lifted his head. From the church at the far end of the village came the first stroke of seven.

“There,” he said.

Barnaby saw a thin line in the air, about as long as Nutmeg’s muzzle. It ran across the grey morning and vanished at both ends. Nutmeg reached it while the first stroke was still sounding. He put his nose to it as he had once put his nose to the seam of the Time-Sack, and drew a breath.

The line opened.

Henrietta counted eleven heartbeats. When she reached eleven, that first stroke of the church clock was still ringing. The second had yet to fall.

“Oh,” she said.

For once it was all the word she needed.

Nutmeg turned north, towards the team that had flown twelve short Christmas nights without him. His voice came to the four children thin and silvery and suddenly young.

“Ten thousand miles,” he said. “That’s what we have. Hold on, and ring.”

The collar bell sounded first.

Barnaby struck his cup with the brass screw. The note came out clear and high, just as it had in the cellar. Podger answered with his spoon. Then Henrietta. Then Mouse. Each note held long enough for the next one to find it, and the five of them went on ringing together after the children’s hands were still.

And because joy is a substance, children, and has a weight and a weather, the first bright gladness Nutmeg had felt in twelve years came off him like heat off a stove. The seam widened above Nether Dribbling. Nutmeg took another step, and another, and Christmas Day began to last longer than Christmas Day has any right to last.

Below them, the Persuader beat on the Pickle Cupboard door.

And in Mrs. Gristle’s empty office, on a saucer beside Podger’s satsuma, the little brass bell began, very faintly, to hum.



Barnaby Crumb and the Twelfth Christmas

Chapter Ten: The Extra-Jolly Batch

At eight o’clock on Christmas morning, Mrs. Bibs opened the Pickle Cupboard.

By then the sky had closed over the last grey speck of the reindeer, and the seven children had come away from the dormitory window. Mrs. Gristle had stopped beating the door with the Persuader. For a while she had walked up and down inside, which took two steps each way. Then even that stopped.

Mrs. Bibs had spent twelve years learning what Mrs. Gristle sounded like when she was thinking. She was beginning to worry that this time the woman had gone quiet for some other reason.

She fetched the kitchen poker, slid the bolt and stood back.

Mrs. Gristle came out of the cupboard the way weather comes over a hill. Her hair had come down on one side. There was rock salt in the folds of her black dress. She had the Persuader in one hand, and both her eyes were searching the passage for somebody to blame.

“The cellar,” she said.

She went first to her office. On the saucer beside Podger’s satsuma, the little brass bell was still humming. It made the china tremble. Mrs. Gristle picked up the bell, waited until it fell quiet in her hand, and put it in her pocket with the satsuma.

Then she went to the iron door at the end of the passage.

Mrs. Bibs stayed by the stairs with the poker across her apron. She heard the first padlock open. One for the first husband. Then the second. Then the third.

“Ran,” Mrs. Gristle said, to nobody in particular. “All three. Cowards.”

And she laughed, one note, like a gate.

The iron door swung open. Warm air came up the steps, smelling of flour and ovens and the cruellest smell in England.

Mrs. Gristle went down. She set the bell and the satsuma on the workbench beside the pie tins and looked towards the corner where the warmth gathered.

The stall was empty.

There was a hollow in the matted grey straw where Nutmeg had lain, and orange peel scattered between the stall and the trough. Mrs. Gristle counted the ragged heaps twice. Ten. Then she looked back at the whole satsuma on the workbench. She turned it so the little green stalk pointed up.

Above the stall hung the brass funnel, as tall as a child. Its mouth pointed at the empty straw. She followed the pipe from the narrow end across the cellar to the jar.

The pale drift was turning slowly inside the glass carboy. Mrs. Gristle put her palm against it. The glass was cold. Nothing fresh had come down the pipe since Nutmeg left, and nothing ever would again.

Some people, on finding they have lost their fortune, sit down and weep. Mrs. Gristle went round the room and counted what was left.

Three ovens, banked and hot. Flour to the ceiling. Currants, peel, sugar, dripping. Tins by the hundred.

And the jar.

Each morning for twelve years she had drawn off the fresh harvest and left a little in the bottom. At first it had been barely enough to wet the glass. Now it was a cold, bright drift that twisted slowly even when the cellar was still. She had tasted a drop from the bottom once, on the end of a spoon. She remembered standing at the workbench for eleven minutes afterwards, smiling at a crack in the wall.

The Royal Run stood idle in the yard. The shops she supplied were shut for Christmas. But there was Boxing Day, and the day after, and all the flat, hungry days of January when the lights came down and the bills came in. A pie that could make somebody smile at a crack in the wall would fetch two shillings easily.

Perhaps three.

Mrs. Gristle fetched her biggest mixing bowl.

She would bake the Extra-Jolly Batch.

A spoonful per hundred pies had served her well when there was another spoonful coming in the morning. She had enough tins for a thousand now, and she meant to use every drop in the jar. People would queue in the snow for pies like these. They would tell their neighbours. The neighbours would tell London. By the time she had sold the lot, she would have enough money to buy herself another cellar and set another trap.

The sky was full of things. She had only ever caught one of them.

Upstairs, the seven children heard the ovens roar through the floorboards. Mrs. Bibs served Christmas dinner on the good plates, the white ones with the gold line that were kept for visitors who never came. There was cabbage water and there were potatoes, some of them with character. Seven children ate off gold-rimmed china and felt like royalty, probably.

Below them, Mrs. Gristle baked.

At noon she lifted the stopper from the carboy. The drift came out like fog deciding to be a river. It was cold enough to whiten the mixing bowl where it touched, and for a moment she could see her breath above it. She stirred it into the mincemeat with a wooden spoon, working the bright threads down among the currants and peel until she could see nothing moving on its own.

She rolled and cut and filled and crimped through the afternoon and into the evening. She hummed as she worked. It was the sound counting makes when it thinks it has won.

The smell that rose through the floorboards that night was sweeter than anything the children had ever smelt at St. Pinch’s. Odd laughed before anybody had said anything. Todd laughed because

Odd had laughed, and that set them both off again. Out in the lane, the vicar was walking home from his second service when the smell reached him. He stopped in the snow, shut his eyes and took off his hat. If you had asked him why, he could not have told you.

At midnight Mrs. Gristle pulled the last tray out of the oven. She set the pies to cool and counted the racks twice. A thousand pies. On the workbench lay one whole satsuma and one little brass bell. Across the cellar stood one empty jar and one empty stall.

She fetched a pencil and wrote down the takings she expected at two shillings a pie. Then she wrote them down at three. She did the sums again to see what they looked like after flour and sugar. By the time she put down the pencil, she remembered that she had eaten nothing all day.

The nearest pies were still warm.

Surely one won't be missed.

She took a pie from the rack and bit into it. The jolly went through her like sunlight through a window. Mrs. Gristle, who had not felt jolly since before her first husband ran, took another bite and found that her boots had come off the flagstones.

Only an inch. About the thickness of a hymn book.

She looked down at the gap and laughed. The jolly was already busy telling her what it had told a hundred thousand strangers. Everything was fine. Have another.

She had another.

By the third pie she was level with the workbench. By the fifth she was floating up past the top rack with her arms out like a girl at a fair. The keys at her waist rang against each other. She laughed again, and this time the laugh was soft and round and would have surprised anybody who knew her.

Then the hem of her dress stirred towards the open cleaning hatch.

Mrs. Gristle knew the flue was there. What she didn't know was that Mrs. Bibs had opened the damper. Warm air had been drawing up through the bricks all day. It lifted a twist of flour from the workbench, caught the corner of her paper and pulled it towards the hatch. Then it caught her dress.

She could have put a hand out and caught the rack. Instead she reached for a sixth pie. Six pies. Twelve shillings at the very least. Her fingers closed round the crust just as her boots cleared the top shelf.

At one o'clock on Boxing Day morning, the seven children woke to a rushing, rising, rustling sound overhead, like a chimney sweeping itself from the inside.

“Father Christmas,” said Odd. “Coming down.”

“Yes,” said Todd, without stopping to think.

And for the first time in their lives, they were both wrong about the same thing.

It was Mrs. Gristle going up.



Barnaby Crumb and the Twelfth Christmas

Chapter Eleven: The Longest Night

They flew north.

The seam opened wherever Nutmeg's gladness fell, and it fell all the way from the chimney of St. Pinch's to the sea. The sky above Nether Dribbling had been grey when they left it. Here, inside the last fold of Christmas Eve, there were stars. Below them England turned slowly in the dark. Villages lay like spilled sugar, cities like banked fires, and the black sea went past on their left with white lines drawn on it by nothing anyone could see.

And the children rang.

Nutmeg's collar bell called the first stretch home. Barnaby struck his tin cup with Mouse's brass screw, and Podger, Henrietta and Mouse answered in turn with their spoons. The minutes came home along the sound the way cats come home to a whistle. Behind them the seam folded up, and the night went back to its ordinary size.

Barnaby's note was the steadiest. He kept the screw between his thumb and first finger, and when the cold took the feeling out of his thumb, he watched the place where the brass touched the tin.

Henrietta counted between notes. Her numbers had quarrelled with one another in the chimney, but up here she could count by Nutmeg's stride and always knew when it was her turn.

Podger rang loudest. He had discovered that the note he cried on was the very note his cup made. After a while he took to humming it as well, just under his breath, so that he could find it again if the wind blew it away.

Mouse waited until the other three had rung. Then he tilted his cup a little away from the wind and struck it once. He had first spoken on Christmas Eve, after six years of keeping his words to himself. He brought the same care to ringing the cup. One tap did the work.

They crossed the last dark water. Ahead of them the ice showed pale in long broken plates, and far beyond it a row of little lamps marked the place where Nutmeg meant to land.

That was when his stride shortened.

Barnaby felt it first at the shoulder ring. The harness had been pulling steadily against his chest. Now it slackened between strides, and each time Nutmeg reached out with his forefeet it took him a little longer to find something to stand on.

"Fuel," said Nutmeg, underneath everything. "I'm burning the last of it."

Henrietta looked at the lights. "How far?"

"Near enough to see. Too far to fall."

The cold reached through the harness like a hand feeling for a loose thread. Barnaby looked down. Between Nutmeg's hooves and the ice there was a great deal of nothing.

"One more satsuma would have done it," said Nutmeg.

"Podger's," said Barnaby.

"Podger's."

He could picture it on the workbench beside his bell, with the little green stalk pointing up. Podger had held it out in the cellar with his chin wobbling. Mrs. Gristle had taken it, and now there was a stretch of sky between them and the lamps that one small orange could have carried them across.

Nutmeg's collar bell rang as he stumbled. The seam flickered, and the lamps seemed suddenly much farther away.

"Again," said Barnaby.

He struck his cup. Podger struck his, and this time he sang the note as well. Henrietta joined him. Mouse drew a deep breath and sang with the others, quietly at first, then loud enough for Barnaby to hear him over the wind.

Their four cups went on ringing beneath their voices. The seam leaned towards the sound the way the warm dark in the cellar had leaned when Mrs. Bibs pulled the damper rod. For a little longer there was something under Nutmeg's hooves.

He took the last of his running speed and made a glide of it.

The first lamp went under them. Then the second. Nutmeg stretched his forelegs and touched the ice. His hind feet came down a moment later, and he skidded sideways through a drift that came halfway up his harness.

For a while nobody moved. Podger still had his mouth open on the last note.

Then the snow settled, and they saw the team.

Eight reindeer stood round a grey old sleigh. They were glossy as chestnuts, with antlers like chandeliers, just as they had been in the torn magazine at St. Pinch's.

The eight looked at the ninth.

Then they stamped. All eight, once, together. It sounded like the world clearing its throat. The ice rang beneath them, and Nutmeg shut his eyes.

A tall figure in red came out from behind the sleigh. He went straight past the lamps and knelt in the snow. He put both hands flat against Nutmeg's old grey face and said something too low for any of the children to hear.

Then he helped them out of the harness loops, one by one, and fetched a wooden box from beneath the sleigh seat. When he opened it, the smell of fresh satsumas rose into the cold.

Nutmeg ate the first one with his eyes shut. He took his time over the next. By the time he had finished, he was standing square again and had begun to look over Father Christmas's shoulder at the sleigh.

"There was one more," he said. "The boy gave it to me before I ever had it. It's still on a workbench in England, but it counts."

Podger looked down at his boots.

"It counts," Nutmeg said again. "Take them home when we're done."

Father Christmas stood and looked at the four children in the snow. Henrietta was still holding her spoon. Mouse's cup had a dent in it from the landing. Barnaby had to use his other hand to uncurl the fingers round the brass screw.

"Every chimney in the world," said Father Christmas. "And one more stop besides. In you get."

The children climbed onto the seat and pulled a rug over their knees. It smelled of cinnamon and had a worn place where somebody's boots had rested for a very long time. Under the toys at the back of the sleigh lay the little grey Time-Sack. Nutmeg took his place on the left, clipped his harness to the rail and put his nose to the seam.

Father Christmas picked up the reins.

The eight turned their heads south together. A moment later the ninth turned his after them, unhurried, as though he had been doing it every night of his life.

That was the longest night in twelve years.

You know most of it already, because you were asleep for it, as you should have been. But perhaps there was a moment when your room felt bigger than your room, and a dream you were having went on longer than dreams go. Perhaps you woke feeling that somebody had given you back something you had never known was missing.

From the sleigh seat, the children rang their cups when Nutmeg's collar bell called. At first they watched him for every signal. Before long, Barnaby knew his turn by the way the old reindeer dipped his head. Podger sang softly with his cup, and each time a stretch folded behind them, there was another chimney ahead.

Inside the fold it was still Christmas Eve. In Nether Dribbling the clocks had gone on without them.

When the sleigh came through for its last stop, it was one o'clock on Boxing Day morning. Seven children had just woken in the dormitory at St. Pinch's. Mrs. Bibs was sitting in the kitchen with both hands round a mug gone cold.

Father Christmas drew gently on the reins. Nutmeg lifted his head, and the sleigh came down over the church.

There, small against the enormous moon, a round shape in a billowing black dress drifted slowly westwards. Keys jingled at its waist. Its arms were stretched out like a girl's on a swing, and it was shouting at the stars in a voice the village would argue about for fifty years.

"EH? WHAT? SPEAK UP!"



Barnaby Crumb and the Twelfth Christmas

Chapter Twelve: What the Village Saw

The village of Nether Dribbling argued about that night for fifty years. I have read every account, and they disagree about almost everything. They agree about the weathercock.

At one o'clock on Boxing Day morning, there was a rushing sound over the village, like a chimney sweeping itself from the inside. The weathercock on St. Botolph's church, which had pointed into the wind for a hundred years, swung round and pointed straight up.

And stayed there.

A few minutes later, the shape appeared against the moon.

It was round. It wore a billowing black dress. It drifted westwards above the church with its arms out like a girl at a fair and something jingling at its waist. Half the village took the sound for sleigh bells. The other half took it for keys.

Then the voice came down, thin with distance and enormous with indignation. It was the same old cry the village had heard through shop doors and at parish meetings for twenty years, now addressed to the entire sky.

“EH? WHAT? SPEAK UP!”

The vicar said it was a test of faith. The publican said it was a balloon. The schoolmistress, who had taught three generations of Nether Dribbling to read and had never once been believed about anything outside her classroom, stood at her window in her nightgown, folded her arms and said, “That is Mrs. Gristle, and she has finally eaten something that agrees with her.”

Then she went back to bed.

What the village had missed was the start of it. The open flue had taken Mrs. Gristle up through the heart of St. Pinch’s and sent her out of the tallest chimney. Nutmeg and the four children had come out through the same opening less than a day earlier. Most houses go a hundred years without launching anybody.

Five Extra-Jolly pies, and possibly a bite of the sixth, had made Mrs. Gristle so light that the flue could no longer tell the difference between her and smoke. The wind took her from there. By the time the publican had got his boots on and come out for a better look, she was already past the church.

She kept going.

There have been sightings since. A trawlerman logged a round black shape above the Dogger Bank, shouting. A pilot over the Pennines reported something female, indignant and jingling at his altitude. The Meteorological Office has a thin file labelled **ANOMALOUS BALLOON, RECURRING**. And every Christmas Eve, somewhere in the north of England, a child is lifted to a window and shown a small round shape bobbing across the face of the moon.

Some children believe it Odd-fashion. Some believe it Todd-fashion. Either way, they have a look.

As for Mrs. Gristle, she is still alive and, by all accounts, quite warm. The jolly keeps her floating in one spell of eleven minutes that never quite runs out. She shouts at the stars because they won’t answer, and she has yet to find a way to fine a star. Her keys still jingle at her waist. They have not opened a door in years.

Nutmeg watched her drift away from the sleigh. He was quiet long after the last shout had gone thin enough to be mistaken for wind.

“I asked them to leave the jar,” he said at last. “I did not ask for this.”

Barnaby leaned over the side of the sleigh, looking for the black dress. It was too far away to see now.

“You didn’t do it to her,” he said. “She did it to herself. You just stopped letting her do it to you.”

Nutmeg turned his head a little. The collar bell moved against his throat without ringing.

Then Father Christmas took the sleigh round behind the hill to wait for the village to put out its lamps. Delivering four children to an orphanage was a delicate business. By then the publican had fetched his binoculars, and Father Christmas preferred to arrive once he’d put them away.

At three o’clock, with the lanes dark again and the weathercock still pointing up, Mrs. Bibs heard a soft knock at the kitchen door.

She opened it with one hand round her cold mug.

Barnaby stood on the step with soot on both ears. Henrietta had a tin cup under her arm. Mouse was holding Podger by the sleeve, and Podger had brought half the snow from the top of the world home on his boots.

Behind them stood a tall man in red.

Mrs. Bibs looked at the four children. She set down the mug.

“Come in, ducks,” she said. “You’ll let all the cold in.”

As Nutmeg stepped past the kitchen window, his collar bell sounded once. From under the floor came a faint answering note.

Barnaby turned towards it.

“My bell.”

“Let’s see where it’s got to,” said Father Christmas.

The three padlocks were still hanging open. Mrs. Bibs fetched her lamp and went down the cellar steps with him. The empty carboy stood beside the ovens. A great many pies were cooling on the racks.

On the workbench, beside the pie tins, they found a little brass bell and a whole satsuma, its green stalk pointing up. Father Christmas picked up both and wrapped them together in a corner of his handkerchief.

“Shall I take them upstairs?” asked Mrs. Bibs.

Father Christmas glanced at the ceiling. “I thought I’d use the chimney, if you don’t mind.”

“Use the one over the dormitory,” she said. “That oven flue’s had enough for one night.”

The seven children upstairs woke to a soft thump.

Something small had landed in the cold grate of the dormitory fireplace, which had not held a fire in twelve years. Odd got there first because Odd always got there first. Todd brought the candle because Todd liked to see what Odd was claiming to have found.

There was a handkerchief in the grate. Odd unfolded it and picked up the bell. Todd lifted out the satsuma.

The satsuma was whole and unpeeled. It felt warm in Todd’s hand, as though somebody had carried it next to a heart. The bell was worn smooth as a pebble, with strange slanted letters that nobody in the dormitory could read.

And it was ringing.

Nobody had shaken it. Odd held it by its little handle, as still as he could, and the note went on quietly while the other children crowded round.

Mrs. Bibs came up with her lamp. The four children followed her, Podger last because he had stopped to take off his wet boots.

Mrs. Bibs took the satsuma from Todd and looked at the little green stalk.

“Yours, duck,” she said to Podger. “I know it from the tray. I’ll keep it safe for you, if you like.”

Podger thought about it. Then he put both hands round the satsuma, just as he had when Mrs. Gristle gave it to him after supper.

“I think we can eat it now,” he said.

Odd held out the bell to Barnaby. Barnaby took it in the hand that still held Mouse’s brass screw. For a moment the two pieces of brass rested together in his palm.

Outside, a hoof touched the windowsill. Nutmeg stood in the air beside the dormitory window, with the sleigh waiting behind him. His collar bell sounded once more. The little bell in Barnaby’s hand answered.

Then Nutmeg tipped his bent antler, stepped back from the window and turned north.

By the time Podger had dug his thumb into the peel, the sleigh was gone. The smell of satsuma filled the dormitory, and for once there was nothing in the house to stop anybody looking forward to breakfast.



Barnaby Crumb and the Twelfth Christmas

Chapter Thirteen: Homecoming

By the time Podger had got the peel off his satsuma, all eleven children were sitting round the cold fireplace in the dormitory.

He separated the segments carefully. There were ten. Henrietta counted them twice, because it seemed a particularly mean thing for a satsuma to do in a house with eleven children.

Podger broke the biggest segment in half. He ate one half himself and gave the other to Mouse.

Then there was a knock from somewhere below. Three slow knocks, with a pause before the third.

“That’s a hoof,” said Odd.

Todd got to the window first.

The sleigh had gone. Its runners had left two shining lines in the yard snow, and standing at the end of them, with one bent antler and a little frost on his nose, was Nutmeg.

“He stayed,” said Barnaby.

They went downstairs in their stocking feet, all eleven of them, making enough noise to wake every person who had ever told them to be quiet.

Mrs. Bibs was at the kitchen table. Father Christmas had left a parcel beside her mug while she was fetching her lamp. She had thought it was his handkerchief again. It turned out to be a folded parchment sealed with wax the colour of holly berries, and a letter with **BARNABY CRUMB** written across the front.

“He left you something,” she said.

Barnaby slipped the bell and Mouse’s screw into his pocket and took the letter.

Inside, there were only a few lines.

> Dear Barnaby,
>
> Nine Christmas Eves ago, someone stopped my sleigh and put a fish basket into my hands. You were in it. They told me your name and asked me to take you somewhere you’d be cared for.
>
> I’d seen Mrs. Bibs leave a bowl of hot soup outside the kitchen door for a man who was too proud to knock. I thought anyone who could do that would know what to do with a baby. I was right about Mrs. Bibs. I was wrong about how much kindness she’d be allowed to get away with in that house.
>
> I found the bell half buried in the snow beside the yard drain. I knew whose it was. I thought he’d lost it in flight. I didn’t know he was under my feet.
>
> I tied it to the basket. Every baby ought to arrive with something of his own.
>
> Father Christmas

Barnaby read the letter again. He had hoped, without knowing he had hoped it, that there would be a name for the person who had put him in the basket. His finger went back to the first line and stayed there.

“Did you know it was him?” he asked.

“Father Christmas?” Mrs. Bibs shook her head. “I found you at six in the morning, blue as a bruise and making no noise at all. I knew you needed warming. The rest could wait.”

“You gave me the bell.”

“I did. Mrs. Gristle wanted to put it away with the note. I’d already tucked it in your blanket, and I let her think it had fallen off the basket.”

Barnaby folded the letter. “You let her think that for nine years?”

Mrs. Bibs considered it. “She never asked twice.”

There were three more knocks at the kitchen door.

Mrs. Bibs took up her lamp. “That’ll be the gentleman with the antlers.”

She opened the door. Nutmeg was standing close enough to see his breath in the lamplight.

“I hope you don’t mind,” he said. “I got as far as the gate and found I’d rather come back.”

“Well, come out of the draught,” said Mrs. Bibs.

Nutmeg put his head through the kitchen doorway. His good antler caught the top of the frame. He backed out with great dignity.

“The front door’s wider,” said Henrietta.

“Before we try another door,” said Nutmeg, “did he leave a parcel?”

Mrs. Bibs brought the parchment to the threshold. She broke the seal and held it out to Henrietta, who brought the lamp closer and read aloud.

The document was nearly as old as St. Pinch’s. It spoke of the house and its yards, its cellars, its flues, its dumbwaiters and all its appurtenances. Henrietta read *appurtenances* twice because she had waited years to meet it outside the dictionary.

The house had been set aside for children who had nowhere else to go. Its keeper could use it for as long as she kept it for them. If she failed them, the trustee could name another keeper in her place.

At the foot of the parchment, the trustee’s name was written in small slanted letters.

Henrietta stopped reading.

“Barnaby. Your bell.”

He took it out and held it beside the writing. The little strokes ran at the same slant, as if the person who had made them had been in a hurry to get somewhere.

“That’s the same name,” said Henrietta.

“Mine,” said Nutmeg.

For a moment even Odd had nothing to say.

“The Pole has always kept a few houses where it might need a door,” Nutmeg explained. “This one was put in my care a long time ago. The parchment stayed at the Pole. I thought I’d fetch it when I needed it.” He looked towards the cellar. “Then I spent twelve years trying to get as far as the doorstep.”

Mrs. Bibs lowered the lamp a little. “What will you do with it now?”

“I’ll ask you to keep it.”

She looked at him. “I’m the cook.”

“I know,” said Nutmeg. “You also opened the damper.”

“And oiled the hinge,” said Mouse.

Everyone turned. Mouse had spoken at much the same volume as he might have asked for the salt. He looked back at them until they turned towards Mrs. Bibs again.

“And carried the tray,” said Barnaby.

“It was only a tray,” said Mrs. Bibs.

Her hand tightened round the handle of the lamp.

“It wasn’t only a tray,” she said. “I knew what was under the bowl. I carried it knowing.”

“Yes,” said Nutmeg. “I know.”

He touched the edge of the parchment with his muzzle. Mrs. Bibs took it from Henrietta and held it against her apron.

“What if I make a mess of it?” she asked.

“You have eleven children,” said Nutmeg. “I expect they’ll tell you.”

“We will,” said Todd, and then looked surprised at how readily he’d said it.

Mrs. Bibs laughed. She was still laughing when she took the lamp round to the front of the house and put her hand on the latch.

Above her, the sign said **ESTABLISHMENT**. You could still see a little of the old **H** where the black paint had cracked.

“We’ll want that word back,” she said.

“I can paint it,” said Odd.

“I can make sure he spells it right,” said Todd.

“And tomorrow,” Mrs. Bibs went on, “somebody can fetch me a screwdriver. I want that bolt off the cupboard under the stairs.”

Mouse put his hand towards his pocket. Then he remembered where his brass screw was and looked at Barnaby. Barnaby shook his head. Mouse smiled.

Mrs. Bibs opened the front door wide.

“Come in,” she said to Nutmeg. “There’s cabbage water. It’s better than it sounds. I make it.”

“I know,” said Nutmeg. “I’ve smelled it through the floor for twelve years. It was the kindest smell in the house.”

He ducked his antlers under the lintel and came in through the front door.

The children made room for him in the passage. Podger fetched a bowl. Henrietta went to find a pencil so Mrs. Bibs could sign her name in the place Nutmeg showed her. Odd and Todd stood outside arguing about how big to make the **H**.

Barnaby went upstairs. There was enough grey light at the window to see the little dent in Mouse’s tin cup. It had happened when they came down on the ice at the top of the world. Barnaby ran his thumb over it.

“Can I put it here?” he asked.

Mouse nodded.

Barnaby set the cup on the windowsill where everyone could see it. The brass screw he kept in his pocket beside the bell.

A baby needs one thing that’s his. A house needs one thing that’s everyone’s.

Outside, above the church, the weathercock swung slowly down and pointed into the wind. Below it, somebody opened the front door of St. Pinch’s again. Mrs. Bibs called up the stairs to say breakfast was nearly ready, and for the first time in any of their lives, all eleven children believed it was worth getting out of bed for.



Barnaby Crumb and the Twelfth Christmas

Chapter Fourteen: Christmas Morning

The first Christmas breakfast at St. Pinch's Home began at eight o'clock on Boxing Day, one day late, and lasted, by Henrietta's count, three hours and eleven minutes. She kept count out of habit. At no point did anybody tell her how much time she had left.

There was no cabbage water.

For twelve years at St. Pinch's, you could have told what sort of day it was by looking in your bowl. On Sundays there might be a potato in it. At Christmas there might be a satsuma beside it. On all the other days there was a great deal of room for improvement.

Mrs. Gristle had gone west with the larder key, so Mrs. Bibs sent for the village ironmonger. He came before breakfast, looked at the lock and asked if she wanted him to fit a new one.

"I want you to take that one off," said Mrs. Bibs.

Behind the cabbages and the sacks of bran that were sawdust, she found flour, dripping, currants, peel and two stone jars of butter. There was enough food to make her stand quite still for a moment, thinking about how many times she'd scraped the bottom of a pot while all this sat ten feet away.

Then she cooked.

There were eggs. Nobody knew where they came from, and Mrs. Bibs, when pressed, said only that a kitchen has arrangements and some of them predate the management. There was bread without sawdust in it. There was butter on the bread, and the butter was a slab.

Podger looked at his slab for a long time before he could bring himself to bite it. When he did, he got butter on the end of his nose, and nobody told him to wipe it off before he'd had a chance to taste it.

After breakfast, all eleven children went down to the cellar. Mrs. Bibs led with her lamp. Nutmeg came last, turning his head sideways at the foot of the steps, because the iron doorway was wide enough for a reindeer if the reindeer was willing to do without dignity for a moment.

There were pies on every rack.

"Nine hundred and ninety-four whole ones," said Henrietta, who counted the rows and then counted the gaps. "And one with a bite out of it."

The pie with the bite lay on a sack beside the cleaning hatch. Nutmeg bent to smell it. Then he went to the nearest rack and sniffed a whole pie, first at the crust and then where a little mincemeat had bubbled through the top.

"Well?" said Odd. "Will we float?"

Nutmeg looked up the flue. "All the lift went out of the batch with her. What's left is the ordinary jolly."

"Eleven minutes?" asked Todd.

"Eleven minutes," said Nutmeg. "And every one of them came from me. I'd like to give them away."

"To whom?" said Odd.

"Whomever answers the door," said Nutmeg. "You can start in the lane."

So they did. Mrs. Bibs found baskets. Podger carried the first six pies in his shirt until somebody lent him a tin. Henrietta had worked out what they were to say, and Mouse approved it with one nod.

“A present. From the house. No charge.”

The vicar wept. The publican laughed for eleven minutes and then gave them all lemonade. The schoolmistress lifted the lid of her pie, examined the filling and said, “I knew it.” Nobody asked her what she meant. By then the village had learnt to give her a little time and see whether she turned out to be right.

There were far too many pies for Nether Dribbling, even after Odd counted several households twice. So Mrs. Bibs sent for the drivers. The green vans went out again, to the workhouse at Catterick, to hospital wards and to streets where the vans had only ever stopped to sell things. Mouse went with the driver of the Royal Run. At a house in Harrogate, he handed a pie to a bank manager who had once got up on his desk and sung.

The bank manager looked at the pie. Then he looked at Mouse.

“I haven’t any change,” he said.

Mouse told him what Henrietta had said to say. He said it so quietly that the bank manager knelt in the snow to hear him. Then he stayed on his knees a little longer than he needed to.

By evening the racks were empty. The last pie had gone to the last driver, who’d spent the day handing them out and had forgotten to keep one for himself. People called them Home Pies afterwards. Mrs. Gristle’s name was still on the vans, but nobody used it when they asked where the pies had come from.

Nutmeg looked at the empty racks.

“That’s the jar dealt with,” he said.

The sign was repainted on Boxing Day while the vans were out.

Odd painted. Todd checked the spelling. They argued about the size of the **H** until Mouse pointed to the crack in the black paint where a little of the first **H** still showed. He held his hand flat against the board. That big.

Odd painted it that big.

Mrs. Bibs came out to look. She stood in the lane for a while with her arms folded.

“The ‘unclaimed’ wants something doing about it,” she said.

Henrietta thought about that while Odd washed his brush. Then she borrowed Todd’s pencil and wrote out two lines. Todd checked them. Odd painted them.

ST. PINCH’S HOME FOR CHILDREN

CLAIMED NOW. ALL OF THEM.

On the twenty-seventh the ironmonger sent up a screwdriver, a bag of nails and a note that said **FOR THE DOOR, WHICHEVER ONE**. Mrs. Bibs took the bolt off the cupboard under the stairs herself.

The cupboard holds coats now, and the very old umbrella, which turned out to belong to nobody and therefore to everybody. The rock salt went out to the lanes when the frost came in January. Mouse asked for the bolt. Mrs. Bibs gave it to him, and he put it in his pocket. After all the trouble he'd taken over when to slide it, he had earned the right to carry it wherever he liked.

The parish records say almost nothing about the pies or the night the weathercock pointed straight up. Parish records are generally written by people who were asleep. But the schoolmistress kept a diary, and her last entry for that December reads:

> The Gristle woman has gone up in the world. The children have come down into their own. I have taught this village to read for thirty years and this is the first sentence it has written itself. It is a good sentence.

Nutmeg stayed until Twelfth Night.

He slept in fresh straw under the kitchen window, where he could hear Mrs. Bibs putting things away at night and taking them out again in the morning. The children took turns sitting with him in the evenings. Sometimes he told them about the long night, or the eighth reindeer's vanity, or the fourth one's terrible sense of direction. Mostly they did nothing together. They grew rather good at it.

On the last evening, Barnaby sat beside him until the kitchen light went out.

"Do you know who gave me to Father Christmas?" he asked.

"No, small one," said Nutmeg.

Barnaby pulled one loose thread out of his cuff. It went on coming for longer than he'd expected.

"I thought you might."

"I wish I did." Nutmeg watched him wind the thread round his finger. "Somebody made sure you reached a pair of hands that would take you. I can tell you that much."

Barnaby slipped the thread off his finger. Nutmeg moved his head until it rested against Barnaby's shoulder, and they sat like that a little longer.

On Twelfth Night, eleven children stood in the lane in their new boots. The parish had sent them, and all eleven pairs fitted, which was so improbable that Podger had cried about it for an hour.

Nutmeg stood among them in the blue dark with frost on his bent antler.

“Next Christmas Eve,” he said, “eleven satsumas in the yard. One each. I’ll see to it myself.”

“Will you come down?” asked Podger.

“How else am I going to get one into your hands?”

Podger considered this and smiled.

Nutmeg lifted his head. His collar bell rang once, clear and unshaken. In Barnaby’s pocket the little brass bell answered.

Then Nutmeg stepped onto the air, as easily as he had stepped out of the chimney. He went north above the lane, unhurried, until Barnaby could see only the pale tips of his antlers. A little later he couldn’t see those either.

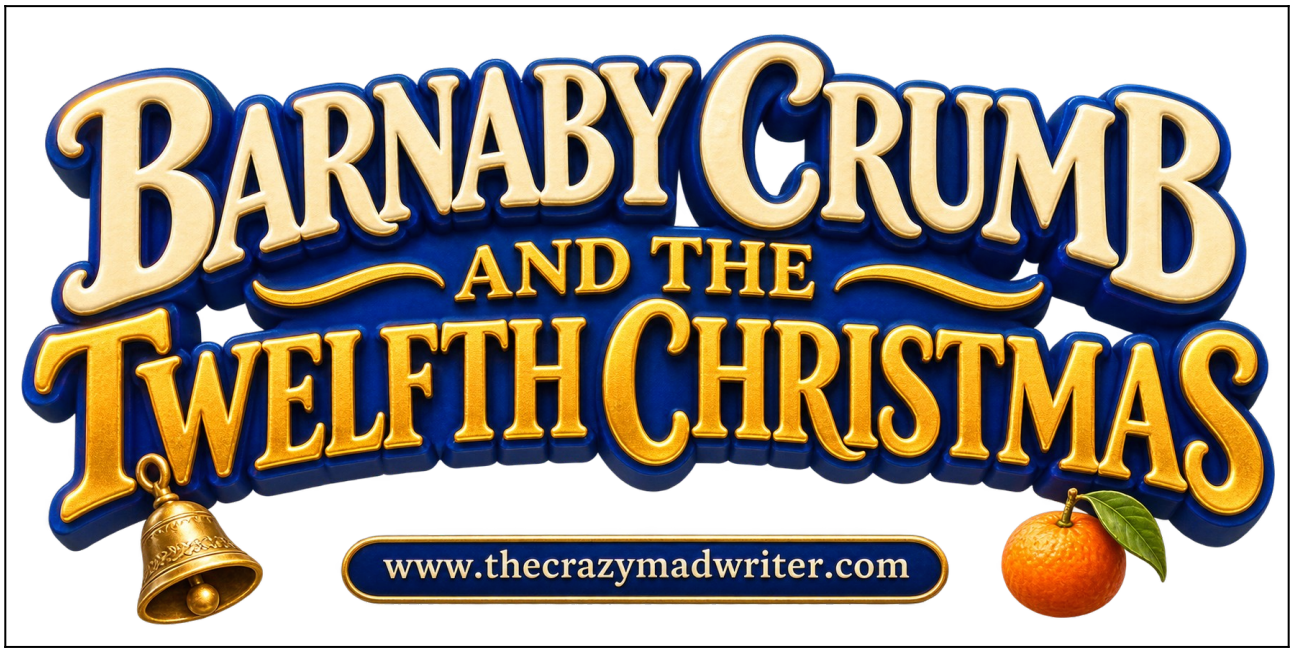
The next morning, Mrs. Bibs called up the stairs that breakfast was nearly ready.

All eleven children came down making enough noise to wake every person who had ever told them to be quiet.

Nobody fined them.

Nobody ever would again.

THE END



Barnaby Crumb and the Twelfth Christmas

Mrs. Gristle has banned singing, snowballs and believing in Father Christmas. She can hear a satsuma being thought about at forty paces, and she keeps the cellar of St. Pinch's locked with three padlocks. Every night, the smell of her famous mince pies rises through the floorboards. The children have never tasted so much as a crumb.

Then, three nights before Christmas, nine-year-old Barnaby Crumb hears a faint jingle from below. The little brass bell he's carried since he was a baby rings back.

With Henrietta, Podger and a boy called Mouse, Barnaby discovers an old reindeer named Nutmeg and learns why Christmas has been growing a little shorter every year. Getting Nutmeg out will take a creaky dumbwaiter, eleven satsumas and enough nerve to risk the only thing Barnaby owns.

And Mrs. Gristle has just heard something move.



www.thecrazymadwriter.com