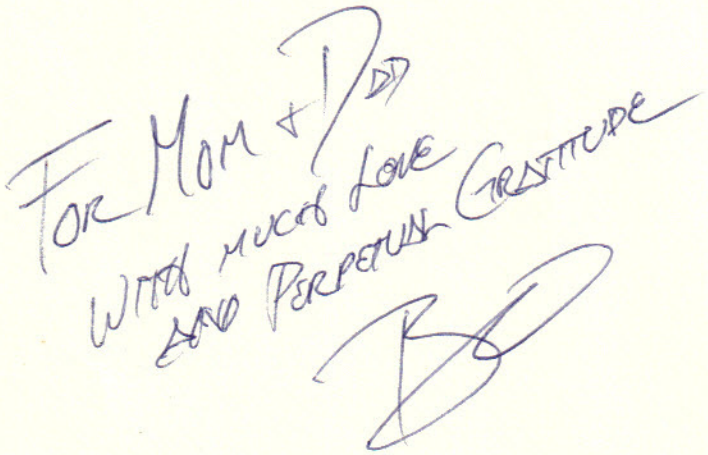
THE SANTA CHANNEL

or

A Cable Christmas



A holiday story by Bo Wilson
for friends, family and colleagues.

Christmas, 1992

A moment of denial, incomprehension. He has heard her wrong; his twelve-year old ears have betrayed him, somehow, he has missed something, he has to ask: "What do you mean?"

His mother, smiling a little sadly. "You heard me Donny. That's it. No tv for two weeks. End of story."

Donny continued to gape, as if the power of his disbelief might somehow alter things. "Mom, it's only one grade, it's not even but a little bit of my final--"

" 'I have allowed Donny's admitted facility as a writer to mislead me in the past, however this paper leaves the truth clearly before us: Donny simply has not read the required material.' " His mother held the offending paper in front of her, the evidence on which he was being convicted. "Mrs. Lewis is right. You've been conning us."

More backpedaling; this is not going the way it's supposed to, he needs manuevering room. "What do you mean, conning?"

"You know perfectly well what I mean,young man. Conning, deceiving, scamming, misleading. And you watch too much tv anyway."

Red alert, worst-case scenario, try anything! "Billy Hapsman watches twice as much tv as I do!"

His mom knelt down to eye level, a terrible sign. She was about to be compassionate but firm, which meant he was losing for sure. She smiled her sad smile again. "It's partly my fault. And it's partly Mrs. Lewis' fault. We let ourselves be fooled, because we know how smart you are and we like you."

"She hates me!" he protested, the proof of this overwhelmingly clear to his eyes.

Mom shook her head. "You know that's not true. But we let you get lazy, and that's the worst thing that an adult can allow a young mind to become. You charmed us into letting get away with doing things your way, and then you took advantage of us. Watching a video based on a book is no substitute for the book."

"But you said--"

"I said that you could watch the video if you read the book too."

"Nuh-uh, I said 'Mom can I watch the video if I use the book too'and you said okay and I did use the book, I read parts of it!"

She rises. It has the feel of finality, that graceful rise. "You knew perfectly well what I would think you meant, and you took advantage of it. No one is denying that you're clever, you're too clever. But leaving yourself a backdoor in the language of your negotiations doesn't work in this instant, and do you know why?" He shakes his head. She smiles again, but this isn't sad, it's a victory smile, followed by the gavel falling: "Because I'm the mommy."

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Later, in his bedroom, staring at the ceiling, his mother's final words still running through his head. He had been trudging up the stairs, mustering his most defeated posture--you never knew, sympathy held a distant chance of succeeding. But instead of the sympathetic reprieve for which his back and shoulders lobbied, he heard "There's magic in books, Donny. Great and powerful magic." He had turned, knowing that to continue walking away from the lecture was suicide. His mom, looking up at him. "You haven't found it yet, and that's not all your fault, but I promise you, tremendous magic awaits. Life-changing magic. All kinds, black magic, white magic, everything in between. But you have to earn it, and you earn it by reading. By meeting the magic on its own terms, and welcoming it into your head. Do you understand?"

He had nodded dutifully. "Yes ma'am," and then turned and continued his slow shuffle into exile.

Now that he has safely in his room, he pondered her statement, because he hadn't really understood it at all. This in itself didn't bother him; parents said a jillion things a day that he didn't understand... but his mom had said that there was magic, and that he was missing out on it, and this was cause for some consideration.

But there was magic in tv, too, didn't she see it? The kaleidoscope of possibilities, fifty-two channels, from all over the country, all over the <u>world</u> even, bouncing from satellite to satellite and finally into a little box right in his very own living room, if that wasn't magic then what was? And he himself, twelve-year-old Donny Ferguson, could sift through the images like a deck of cards, all without ever leaving his seat, just lift the remote and push the button. Magic! Even the thought of the remote made him instantly nostalgic for the good old days, yesterday, when the power had been his to command. The slick, spongy feel of the rubber coating on the buttons, his finger resting lightly on it as he contemplated the next exercise of his control over the video universe. Commercial? No problem-- zap, and it's ESPN, but no, it's that stupid soccer with the refs wearing the white coats, so zap! and it's MTV, cool, but no, it's Music News, who cares, so zap! and it's Headline News, shoot, this is the boring zone, Headline News, Cable News, C-Span, Weather Channel, zap,zap,zap,zap! Here... Discover channel, could be cool, no,it's about birds, maybe they'll have monkeys later, zap! Disney, kidstuff, zap, community access... usually just a purple screen with words, but every now and then something cool, he had once seen a man with pierced nipples showing slides of tatoos in strange places and Donny had giggled for a week telling his friends about it, but nothing tonight, another boring zone of community and local access channels, two of which had never shown anything <u>ever</u>, zap-zap-zap and now we're on Home Box Office... and on and on, never boring, always something terrific just one push of the button away.

It wasn't fair! And especially now, at Christmas-time, with all of the specials that came on! In front of his parents he pretended cool indifference , but the simple truth was that he was still thrilled by Rudolf and Frosty and Charlie Brown and Miracle on Thirty-Fourth Street and It's a Wonderful Life and the Grinch and all of it, it wasn't fair! He was gonna miss <u>everything</u>! He had appealed to his father (privately of course) but found no ally there-- just a distracted "What Mom says goes, old sport. You know the rules."

Well these rules needed changing. Just the thought of the remote buttons under his fingers was driving him half mad with desire. He could picture it so clearly, and it was all continuing, and without him, he was missing it!

The feet of his Dr. Dentons were touching the floor before he even knew his plans; he had sat up and pivoted in bed as smoothly as a robot, the objective clear and straightforward: TV. He had to watch tv. Just for a few minutes, just to see what was on, just to check in with his old friend for a moment or two. He stood quietly, and listened to the old house. Nothing. A quick check of his clock: 11:52 pm. He felt the adrenaline surging through him. He had never watched TV at this late hour on a weeknight. Billy Hapsman said that all the naked lady shows came on after midnight. He took a deep breath and forced himself to wait a moment later. Mom and Dad had gone to bed around ten-thirty, but they often stayed awake much later.

Nothing.

He eased his door open, ready to dive back into bed at the slightest hint of trouble, already rehearsing his cover."Huh? No, I was just getting some water. No, I'm okay, Good night mom. See you in the morning." He checked the hall.

Still nothing. Another deep breath, and then the rustle of tip-toes padding softly down the hall and down the stairs. Check again-- anyone up late? All clear. Round the corner, past the front door, into the den.

Safe!

He exhaled slowly, as if the entire journey had been underwater. He was a deep-sea diver, seeking treasure, and here it was: A Twenty-five inch Mitsubishi, stereo sound cable-ready, a beautiful machine. Without even realizing it, his hand had reached out to brush the screen, stroking a loyal pet. He settled down in front of it, cross-legged, remote in hand, a clear view of any approaching danger from his right. He held the remote up, relishing the moment, and then allowed his finger to slowly depress the power switch.

Bedlam! Noise, loud noise, huge cacophonous noise, hand fumbling for the button, panic! Power off, run for the door!

He had made it to the door in the equally deafening silence before he stopped. Hold here. Sit still. See if there's a reaction. Choose your path of escape. Wait.

Nothing.

Did he dare to try again? The set had betrayed him, but now he knew what to expect... and even the brief burst had whet his appetite to the point where it became undeniable, irresistible. Okay. Try again. He returned cautiously to his place before the screen, pondering-- what to do? Okay-- power on, then mute it right away, then change to one of the quiet,access channels, try twenty-six, and then when in safe territory, un-mute it and volume down. Good. Okay. Ready....

And Go.

Slick. He grinnned. He was so slick, talk to him about magic, he had magic, he had zapper power! Okay, what first, start at the top, channel one, big deal, just a listing of programs, did anyone really read that slowly, he was only twelve and it bored the pants off of him, next, it's Santa, there's no real Santa but it never hurts to listen, you never know, what's he saying, he knows if I've been bad or good, you do huh, you got little elf spies in my house or what, and Donny grins at his own wit and then frowns, it's just an ad for pick-up trucks, which is vaguely troubling, Santa shouldn't hawk trucks, it's like Saint Francis selling Tupperware, it's unethical, zap!

And a black-and-white movie, a Christmas movie, there he is again, Santa Claus, not looking a day younger either, telling some little girl that he's making a list and checking it twice, gonna find out who's naughty or nice, not if you play your cards right little girl, do all your dark deeds at eleven fifty-eight at night, Santa will never know! Another grin, the delight of a fat man eating a sundae he knows he shouldn't eat, who cares! Zap, some Lawrence-Welk kinda group, "He sees you when your sleeping, he knows when you're awake," well he must get pretty of tired of that, huh? And zap, uh-oh, more local access, this is the dead zone, nothing ever on here, zap, zap, zap, and--

Waitaminute. What was that? Back up. Zap-zap.

That's never been there before. A map, a mercator projection like they had in that movie, War Games, the whole world, with different areas lit up in different colors... and a voice, kind of high-pitched like a munchkin but at the same time cool and professional, sounding like the guys at NASA who talk to the space shuttle... "Okay, Control, coming up on zone four, repeating, zone four, we have a half-hour uplink on the board, and we're set up for random scanning, with a change every three-point five seconds, that's a change every three and a half, copy?"

And now a deeper, richer, warmer voice, not so official sounding. "Go ahead."

It isn't a movie-- the picture's wrong, it looks live, like news or something, maybe it is the space shuttle, that'd be pretty cool... picture dissoving now, zooming in on an area of the map, the southeastern United States, and now the screen splitting and re-splitting, four images flickering into place...

Donny frowned. It was just little kids, sleeping... but before he could get a good look the munchkin voice said "Stand by to shift... and shift go." and the images flickered and changed... but not really, it was still little kids sleeping... but were they different, yes, they were because the one on the left--

"... and standby and shift go..."

and another flicker and change, whatever this was it sure did move fast, but here were four more sleeping kids, no wait, three more, one was awake, his dad was in the room with him. Over the images, the warmer voice: "Gregory is still having nightmares, let's keep an eye on him, continue please." And now the munchkin voice, and a new set of pictures, what was all of this, some kind of Eyewitness Video thing, again the shift, again new images...

Donny froze. The upper right-hand image looked familiar. Faster than his mind could keep up came the voice "hold it, up-right, isolate and enlarge, please." and the image filled the screen and why shouldn't it look familiar, it was him, it was Donny in his own living room, staring at a tv screen which showed Donny in his living room watching a tv screen which showed Donny.... the effect was dizzying, numbing, terrifying. He froze in place, a jack-lit deer, caught, pinned by the power of television. As if from a great distance he heard the warm voice, a bit sad now, murmuring: "Oh, Donny, Donny, you're supposed to be sleeping..."

ZAP!

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"Why Donny, you're up early."

Not looking up. "Hi,Mom. I made breakfast."

She looks quickly into the kitchen and smiles. "So you did. Well. To what do we owe this sudden burst of domesticity?"

A slight shrug. "I was up already."

"I see... well, thank you."

"You're welcome."

"Oh, Donny, by the way, I need that Christmas list, Aunt Ruth and I are going shopping today, you wouldn't want us to leave you out, would you?"

"I put it on the hall table."

She smiles. "Okay." A pause. "Are you feeling all right, Donny?"

A quick nod. "Yes ma'am."

"I am sorry about yesterday, but you understand-- we have to do what we think isbest for you in the long run."

"You're right. You're absolutely right. I had been watching too much tv. I need to get away from that."

Her eyes widen. "Well first breakfast and now this! I'd better leave before you tell me you've decided to enter the priesthood!" And out she goes, already chalking this little scene up to a boy trying to earn lots of late-in-the-game brownie points before the gifts get bought... let's just see the list, here's where the real extravagances will be....She picks it up, studies it... her jaw drops a bit... A mistake? No, it's his handwriting... a joke? No, he wouldn't dare tinker with something as vital as a list of Christmas gifts to be bought for him. Still, she must check: "Donny, is this list everything?"

From the kitchen: "Yeah, mom, that's everything."

And she looks down in wonder: Burroughs, Tarzan of the Apes. Stoker, Dracula. Dickens, Great Expectations. Cooper, The Last of the Mohicans. Stevenson, Treasure Island. Bradbury, The Martian Chronicles. And a score of others, only some of whom she knows: Hinton, and Knowles and Vonnegut and Salinger and Butterworth and on and on. She clutches the list to her, and looks upward, hoping that it will last.

And from the den, from the television which isn't even turned on, comes the quiet chuckle: "Ho-ho-ho!"