

Bourbon and Rum: A 10th Circle Project Christmas

Bourbon and Eggnog: A 10th Circle Project Christmas © 2011

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Table of Contents

Introduction

Christmas Past

The Christmas Trees by Eileen Bell

Christmas Present

Away In A Manger by Billie Milholland

A Morphic Christmas by Ryan T. McFadden

Christmas Future

The Saint by Randy McCharles

Afterword

About The Authors



LOL LOL LOL Merry Christmas!

Welcome to The 10th Circle Project's Christmas e-book.

If this is your introduction to *The 10th Circle Project* e-book series, fear not. You don't have to read any of the other books in the series to enjoy this collection. However, you probably wouldn't mind a teeny history lesson, just to bring you up to speed.

The 10th Circle Project is 10-volume, shared-world ebook series, written by the authors of the 2009 Aurora award winning *Women of the Apocalypse*. The books are noir – lots of crime with sci fi and the paranormal, just for flavor, set in the fictional cities of Hope and Glory.

Hope and Glory are twin cities that share a bloody history in the heart of North America. After generations of conflict, the mysterious 10th Circle Project promises a new era of cooperation and peace; if it doesn't plunge both cities into the abyss of total war first.

We've been having so much fun writing about these fictional cities that we began to wonder what it would be like at Christmas. We wrote four stories about people you'd find wandering the streets of these two cities. Call them our holiday gift to you!

A word of warning, though. If you're hoping for happiness and light, with good cheer and choirs singing carols, you've come to the wrong place.

Bourbon and Eggnog: A 10th Circle Project Christmas

However, if “Lethal Weapon” and “Black Christmas” are among your favorite Christmas movies, you are in for a treat!

So, pour yourself an eggnog (or maybe a bourbon neat with a beer chaser) and curl up with our Christmas collection – Hope and Glory style.

Christmas, Past

The Christmas Trees
By Eileen Bell

Oslo Kinder met Jasper Wells every day for lunch and a talk. They'd been doing it for so many years Oslo couldn't imagine a day without it. Since the factory closed and they both lost their jobs, a lot of Jasper's talk wrapped around money making schemes. This day was no different.

"I think it's a good idea," Jasper said, sipping his weak tea and gargling it past his ill-fitting dentures. "I mean, nobody owns those trees up there." He pointed through the wall of the cafe in the general direction of Hope Mountain. "Do they?"

"I dunno," Oslo said. He picked through the remains of his grilled cheese sandwich, then tucked the crusts in his paper napkin and into his pocket. That fat, black squirrel at the park would like them, he figured.

"You're not paying attention to me," Jasper said, slapping the top of the cafe table with his arthritic hand and making the sugar jump. "I got a good idea! A great idea and you aren't listening to me at all."

"Jasper, I heard you," Oslo said patiently. He didn't want Jasper to make a scene. He liked coming to this place. "I just don't know how we'd find out who owns the trees up the mountain."

He also didn't know how they'd cut down the trees and bring them back down the mountain to Hope to set up their own – unlicensed, Oslo assumed – Christmas tree lot, but he didn't want to point out all the flaws in Jasper's money making plan right off the bat. One thing was for certain, though. A little money over Christmas would be nice.

"Can we check that sort of thing out at the library?" he asked.

"What sort of thing?" Jasper barked, still looking peeved.

“Who owns the trees?”

Jasper considered, slurping down another mouthful of tea. “Prob’ly,” he said.

“Just to stay on the good side of the law,” Oslo said.

Jasper finally nodded. “That’s prob’ly a good idea. You gonna do that? I have errands to run.”

Errands to run meant a bottle to buy and consume, but Oslo didn’t harass Jasper about it. They both had their own way of warming up on a day as brisk as this one. Jasper used alcohol, and Oslo used the library. He knew it would be warm. Warmer than his room at the rooming house. A little research seemed like a thing to do.

“Happy to,” he said, and placed a five New Dollar bill on the table to cover his meal. “I’ll let you know what I find out tomorrow.”

“Sounds like a plan.”

The next day, Oslo met Jasper at the cafe. Most of the anxiety he’d felt since he’d lost his job at the factory was gone, replaced with an excitement he barely remembered ever feeling in his life. He must have, because he’d lived over 60 years, but he couldn’t remember his heart ever feeling so light.

He didn’t get a chance to tell Jasper his wonderful news right off the bat, though, because Jasper jabbered on about a guy he’d met the night before who ran an underground fight ring. He wanted cleaners for after the fights, and Oslo realized that Jasper was talking about taking that job – cleaning up blood and broken teeth. He’d forgotten about his Christmas tree idea.

“Whoa, Jasper,” Oslo said. “I thought you and me had a plan. Yesterday. Remember?”

Jasper stared at him for a long moment, as though trying to understand exactly what he was talking about. “Oh,” he finally said. “The trees. Right?”

“Exactly right,” Oslo said.

“I bin thinking about that,” Jasper said. “Lots of work involved. Lots.” He shook his head, acting like he’d given the plan one more thought. “I don’t know how we could pull it off.”

“I got it worked out,” Oslo said.

Jasper looked at him in surprise. “You figured out who owns the trees?”

“Yes.”

“Who?”

“No one.”

Jasper looked suspicious. Oslo didn’t much blame him.

“Really,” he said. “I went to the library and got all the information. No one owns a big patch of forest, right where we were talking about going. We can go up there any time we want. Don’t need to pay anybody for the privilege.”

Jasper didn’t look pleased, and Oslo suspected he was still thinking about what easy money it would be cleaning up after another man’s fight.

“There is the matter of transport,” Jasper said. “I hadn’t thought through the logistics of the whole operation yesterday. I don’t know how we’d get those trees down...”

“I got us a horse and sled,” Oslo said, and smiled brightly, happy to finally tell Jasper the best part of his news.

After he’d been to the library, he’d gone and talked to Jerry Rappaport, another casualty of the factory closing. Jerry lived just outside of town, and Oslo knew he had a horse and sled on his little hobby farm. He also had a wife with a good job at the 10th Circle Project, so he wasn’t hurting for money, and could afford to be generous. When he heard what their scheme was he’d agreed to lend them the horse and sled – and threw in a couple of axes.

“Us factory boys gotta stick together,” he’d said. “Just feed Dusty good and give me the best tree from the first batch you bring down the mountain, and we’ll call it square.”

Jasper’s mouth opened wide, and when his loose dentures slipped, he slapped it shut again. “You ever handle a horse before?” he asked.

“That’s all I worked with, growing up,” Oslo said, allowing a smile to soften his face. “She’s a pretty thing, Jasper. And gentle. You’ll like her.”

Jasper stared at him for a long time, taking a gargle of his tea. “Axes?” he finally asked.

“I got ‘em.”

“Hmm.” Jasper’s face had taken on a pinched look. With a start, Oslo realized Jasper thought he was pulling his leg.

“I’m not kidding,” he said, reaching over and patting Jasper on the arm, hard. “We’re set,” he said. “Can you believe it? We’re gonna make some money before Christmas.”

They'd estimated that they could take twenty trees back without crushing them and possibly breaking branches.

"No broken branches," Jasper kept saying. "People gotta feel like they've plucked the thing from the bosom of the earth themselves, with nothing damaged, or they won't want to buy it."

Oslo had been worried that since they were coming to an untouched part of the forest, there would be no young trees of the right size, but their luck held. They found a stand of evergreens, all about six feet tall, and all beautiful.

"We can start here," Jasper said. They pulled out their axes and walked around the trees.

"These all look good," Oslo said.

"They look great," Jasper replied. "We could take them all and have our twenty, right now."

"Let's not do that," Oslo replied. "Let's just take a few from here. Leave the rest to grow. It's only our first day. We got time."

Jasper grumbled, but finally agreed. They picked five, and carefully cut them down and placed them in the sled. Then they moved on, found another spot, and chose five more. They were thinking about moving on, when Oslo looked at his watch.

"My word, Jasper," he said. "It's almost dusk. We should head back to camp."

Jasper looked like he was going to argue, but surprised Oslo by nodding his head. "I could use some food," he said.

Jasper made supper while Oslo fed the horse, and then the two men ate under the stars.

"That was a good day," Oslo said. He'd thought they'd both be ready to give up after the first day's hard work, but it wasn't that way at all. He was hungry, true, and he felt his muscles, but only because he'd used them. No arthritic ache in his knees and hips, which he was so used to he barely noticed it until it was gone, and no more old man shuffle. As the day had gone on, he realized they both walked proud through the snow, like they were half their ages. It felt glorious.

“It was,” Jasper replied. He pulled a pipe from a pocket and lit it, puffing the aromatic smoke up to the heavens. “But we gotta finish up, and get back to Hope tomorrow.”

“Yeah.” Oslo felt his good feelings dim at the thought of going back to Hope. “I almost wish we didn’t ever have to leave,” he said. “But if things go well, and we sell all the trees, we can come back.”

“We can do that, can’t we?” Jasper said, and blew a smoke ring at the moon. “We can most definitely do that.”

By noon the next day, they had their twenty trees. Oslo tried not to notice his heart settle, heavy in his chest, as they headed back down the mountain. And he tried not to notice that Jasper looked happy, really happy, to be going home.

Hope looked even more dismal than it usually did as they ground their way through the dirty, clotted snow.

“Do you have a place in mind to sell them?” Oslo asked, as the sled groaned up the snow covered street.

“Well, no,” Jasper said. He hunched a little, and rubbed his shoulder, as though it suddenly began to hurt. “I thought maybe you had thought through to this part of the plan.”

“I had not,” Oslo said. He pulled on the reins, and Dusty stopped. “But we better come up with something. These trees won’t last forever.”

Jasper pinched his mouth shut, and glared out over the snow covered houses. “I guess I thought there’d be a place,” he muttered. “Maybe over where I do my business –”

“That’s in Purgatory,” Oslo scoffed. His hands started to ache, and he rubbed them. “Nobody would pay for a tree in Purgatory. We’d be lucky if they didn’t steal the sled, and eat the horse, too.”

“Well, what about...” Jasper started, but a woman who was walking her dog came up to them at that moment, and asked them about the trees. Wanted to know where they were selling them, because they looked so beautiful.

“We don’t know, just yet,” Oslo said.

“Oh, that’s too bad,” the woman replied.

“If you want, we could sell you one now,” Jasper said. “These are fresh from the forest. None fresher. But you’d have to figure out a way to get it home yourself. If you want to buy one now.”

The woman considered, then pulled her cell phone from her purse and called her husband to come and get her.

“How much?” she asked.

“Thirty dollars,” Jasper said. Oslo looked at him, surprised. Thirty dollars seemed high, but the woman didn’t blink.

“New Dollars,” Jasper added.

“It’s a deal,” the woman said without missing a beat. “I’ll take that one right there.” She pointed at the middle of the bunch of trees. It took them a bit to wrestle the tree out of the sled, but by the time the woman’s husband pulled up in his SUV, the deal was done, and Jasper had thirty New Dollars in his pocket.

“See?” Jasper said. “This is going to be easy. These things practically sell themselves.”

As they were considering where next to go, another woman in a small station wagon filled with children pulled up to their sled.

“Rosemary called me and told me about your trees,” the woman said. “Do you mind if me and the kids have a look?”

Oslo looked at Jasper, who grinned, and then back at the woman, who, he saw, still had curlers in her hair. “Go ahead,” he said.

The children boiled out of the car, and milled around Dusty as the woman hummed and hawed over the trees. She finally chose one, and even the children were impressed enough to leave the patient horse alone and form a reverent circle around it before it was tied to the top of the vehicle. The woman handed over the money without blinking. “Do you mind if I tell my friends?” she asked. “These are really beautiful trees.”

“Not at all,” Oslo said.

As she drove away, Jasper cackled delightedly, and handed the money to Oslo. “They sell themselves.”

All through the evening, people kept finding them, and buying trees from them. The people never haggled about the price, and then started bringing gifts. First carrots and apples for Dusty, and then chocolates and candy canes for the men.

“I wish someone would bring me a sandwich,” Jasper said, when they were down to three trees, and darkness surrounded them like a thick, black cloud that the streetlights could barely pierce. “I’m hungry.”

“That would be nice, wouldn’t it?” Oslo replied. He wasn’t as surprised as he should have been when the next van that drove up was full of people waving paper bags full of sandwiches and begging to get one of the trees before they all were gone, please!

“Rosemary said they’re special,” a young woman with soulful, brown eyes and shockingly blonde and blue hair said. “She’s convinced the tree you sold her granted her a wish.”

“What?” Oslo mumbled, his mouth full of succulent ham and Swiss cheese on rye, his personal favorite when it came to sandwiches. “She said it did what now?”

“She said it granted her wish and cured her dog.” The young woman grinned and shrugged. “Sounds silly to me, but she took it to the vet after she bought your tree, and his cancer’s gone. Completely gone. She figures it’s the tree.”

She pointed to a tall thin tree leaning against the front of the sled. “For thirty New Dollars, I’m willing to chance it. Besides, I need a tree, and these are really pretty. And cheap.”

“Cheap?” Jasper asked, looking dismayed.

“Oh yeah,” the girl replied. “The tree lots charge you at least sixty. At least.”

Oslo tried to ignore the angry look Jasper threw his way. He was acting like Oslo had somehow made Jasper ask for the amount they were being paid, and for a second, Oslo wanted to smack him right across the chops.

“So what’s your wish going to be?” Jasper asked the woman.

“I can’t tell you,” she said. “You know wishes don’t work that way.” She handed him the money, and then she and the tree disappeared into the wildly colored van. The door slammed shut, the heavy metal music boomed out, causing Dusty to throw her head nervously, and then they were gone.

“Did you hear that?” Oslo asked Jasper. “They think the trees are giving wishes.”

“Well, isn’t that something?” Jasper said, and Oslo saw a sly look fall over his face. A look he didn’t care for. “Trees that grant wishes. We’ll have to charge a lot more.”

Oslo was going to ask him what he meant by a lot more, but he looked in the back of the sled, and saw there was just one tree left. “We need to save this tree,” he said. “I promised it.”

“To who?” Jasper asked sharply.

“To Jerry. Dusty’s owner. If it hadn’t been for him, we never would have made the money we did.”

Jasper sucked air through his teeth. “All right,” he finally said. “We do owe him something.” He jumped from the sled. “You deliver it,” he said. “I got errands to run.”

Oslo wanted to yell “don’t drink tonight, you old fool!” He didn’t. He just clicked his tongue and slapped the reins on Dusty’s back, heading out to make the last delivery of the night.

He dropped off the tree for Jerry, and took Dusty to her barn for the night. Then he walked back to his room and tucked his roll of money into a ripped corner of his mattress. This was a good start. With a little bit more, he could ride out the winter, almost in style. Then he slept. Not as well as he slept out in the forest, but well enough. He was going to go back, the next day. That soothed him to sleep.

Jasper looked much the worse for wear when he and Oslo met at the cafe that next morning. His hair was tousled, his eyes bloodshot, and when he swilled down a mouthful of his tea, Oslo could see he didn’t have his dentures in his mouth.

“Where are your teeth?” he asked.

Jasper glowered. “I lost ‘em.”

Oslo scoffed. “You lost your teeth?”

“I don’t want to talk about it.”

The rest of their breakfast was spent in tight silence. It wasn’t until they paid the bill – actually, Oslo paid the bill, because it appeared that Jasper had lost more than his dentures – that the two of them discussed whether they should go back for more trees.

“Of course we should,” Jasper snapped, shuddering in the early morning cold as they walked the three miles down back alleys to lane ways surrounded by snow covered gardens, to the barn where Dusty and the sled were kept. “I

say we double the number of trees we bring, and double the price, too. We worked too hard for too little the last time.”

“What about the trees getting crushed?” Oslo asked. “We pack too many in the back of that sled, we’ll break branches. You said so.”

“I know what I said,” Jasper snapped. “But if they’re granting wishes –”

“Trees don’t grant wishes, Jasper. You know that.”

“If people think they’re granting wishes,” Jasper continued, as though Oslo hadn’t said a word. “They’ll pay more for them, and they won’t be bothered by a broken branch or two. Now, will they?”

“It don’t seem right,” Oslo said, stubbornly.

“I don’t care what you think,” Jasper replied. The tight silence descended over the two of them again, lasting well past getting to the barn, harnessing the horse, and heading back out to the mountain.

The closer they got to the forest, the less the silence felt tight and angry to Oslo. He took a deep breath of the pine scented air, and then another.

“Can we split the difference?” he asked. “Cut half again as many trees, and charge half again as much?”

Jasper glanced over at him, and Oslo was happy to see that he didn’t look half as bad as he had at the cafe. “That sounds like a deal,” he said.

“A deal,” Oslo repeated the words, then shivered when he heard his own voice echoing through the trees, bouncing off the mountain, and away. The voice sounded lost, like it had just made a deal with the Devil.

He shook his head. The sun was shining, sparkling off the freshly fallen snow, making everything look fresh and clean. Safe.

They were just selling trees, he reminded himself. There was nothing wrong with them making money this way. Nothing at all.

They dropped their few supplies at their makeshift camp, then headed back into the forest to begin cutting more trees. They found stand after stand that looked suitable, but Jasper shook his head every time.

“Keep going,” he said. “I know there are better ones. We just have to find them.”

The further up the mountain they went, the darker the forest got, and the bigger and coarser the trees looked. Oslo looked up, and could see blue sky and sunshine above them, but it didn’t seem to reach down to where they were. He shivered. Even the temperature felt like it had dropped by ten degrees.

“We’ve gone far enough,” he finally said, and pulled on the reins. Dusty stopped, seemingly thankful they weren’t going any further into the forest. Jasper growled, but jumped out of the sled when he couldn’t convince either Oslo or the horse to move an inch further.

“These look good,” he said. “Let’s start here.”

Oslo didn’t think they looked good. Not at all. There was a darkness to the needles that didn’t have anything to do with the ever lessening light around them. Oslo stepped closer and could see the limbs were twisted and deformed, as though they had been bound by rope before they were able to properly grow. He shuddered, deep in his skin. They looked like they were reaching for him with crippled hands.

He and Jasper cut the trees down quickly and quietly, going well past five. Oslo didn’t care whether they wiped out the whole stand. Even the bark felt wrong under his gloved hands as he tossed the trees up into the sled.

“That’s enough,” Jasper said after they cut down fifteen trees. “Let’s move on.”

Though Oslo wanted to scream “I don’t want to!” he followed Jasper back on to the sled, and clucked his tongue to get Dusty moving. She turned her head and stared at them as though they were both mad, then began to pull the sled further into the forest.

They heard the wolves before they found the next stand of trees. At least Oslo thought they were wolves. There was something not right about their howls, but he couldn’t put his finger on it. All he knew for sure was they sounded dangerously close.

“How close are they?” he asked, as Dusty danced nervously in her harness and the sled jogged back and forth, leaving a jerky trail in the unmarked snow. “They sound close.”

“Not too,” Jasper said, but he looked nervous. “Maybe they smell the horse.”

“We don’t have a gun,” Oslo said, looking around and wishing he was anywhere but where he was. “Maybe we should head back.”

“No,” Jasper said, and straightened his back. “We need more trees.” He pointed. “Just over there.”

They pulled up to another twisted, dark stand of young trees. Oslo had difficulty making Dusty stay. Her nervous dance had become more manic, and he could see the whites of her eyes.

The wolves howled again, and they sounded much closer. The horse gave a short sharp whinny, and tried to pull away, back down the mountain to the light.

“Hurry up!” Oslo called to Jasper. Jasper nodded his head.

He began to cut down the trees, walking from one to the next, cutting the thin trunks with three quick slashes of his axe. Oslo followed, grabbing the trees and tossing them into the sled, and working at keeping the panic stricken horse from running. In no time, they had fifteen more trees, and Jasper threw himself into the sled.

“Time to go.” He looked back and jumped nervously as the wolves howled a third time. “Get the horse moving,” he said. “I think I see one.”

“Good grief!” Oslo gasped. He slapped the reins on Dusty’s back, and she leapt to, grunting as she pulled the heavily laden sled free from the snow that seemed to be grabbing and holding them in place. Then he glanced back to the stand of trees, and was certain he saw three or four shadowy figures moving from tree to tree. Stalking them.

The wolves were stalking them.

“Go!” Jasper cried, clutching the seat with both hands. “Go go go!”

The sled pulled free, and then they were careening down the mountain, the dark twisted trees slapping at the sled and the horse, and sometimes, the faces of the frightened men.

Finally, they bounded around a curve, and sunlight touched their faces. The temperature bounded up ten degrees, and they could no longer hear the wolves. Oslo pulled on the reins, slowing the horse.

“Are we going to stop at camp?” he asked. “To have something to eat, and rest the horse?”

Jasper frowned, as though he was considering. “No,” he finally said. “We got business down in Hope. Besides, the horse looks all right.”

Oslo didn’t think the horse looked all right. Her sides were lathered with sweat and she walked with her head down, swaying side to side with every step she took. He shook his head.

“At least let me feed and water her,” he said. “It’ll only take a few minutes.”

“Fine,” Jasper said, his face tight, like a fist.

They pulled up to their camp, and Oslo unharnessed Dusty, rubbing her down with his blanket, and then feeding and watering her. She ate greedily and drank deeply, and after an hour, looked like she could finish the trip.

“We gotta treat her better,” he said to Jasper as he settled the harness on the horse and backed her to the sled. “She isn’t ours.”

“The horse is fine,” Jasper said. “Let’s go.”

“You got an errand to run?” Oslo asked, sarcastically.

“So what if I do?” Jasper snapped.

“You’re wasting your money,” Oslo said. “We can get maybe one more load of trees after this. Then it’s Christmas.”

“You don’t worry about me and my money,” Jasper said. “You just convince that bag of bones to get us back to town.”

Oslo clucked his tongue, and the horse jumped to, and before the sun had fully set, they were back on the streets of Hope, and their first customer of the evening sidled up to them as though he’d been waiting for the sled to appear.

“I hear you have special trees,” the man said, looking around as though he was watching for the cops. “Sell me one.”

“Pick your tree,” Oslo said, frowning. The man looked familiar, but Oslo couldn’t place his face.

“They’re sixty dollars,” Jasper said. “And no haggling.”

Though Oslo goggled at Jasper, because the price was more than they had agreed to, the man simply shrugged and pointed at the tree closest to the back of the sled. “That one will do,” he said.

As Oslo pulled the tree with the twisted branches down and handed it to the man, he saw other people waiting in the dark.

“Thank you,” he said as the man walked away, pulling the tree behind him. “Merry Christmas.”

“Whatever,” the man said. “It just better work.” Then he disappeared into the darkness.

Oslo frowned. “Wasn’t that Rosemary’s husband?”

“Who is Rosemary?” Jasper asked.

“The woman with the dog from yesterday,” Oslo replied. “I’m sure that’s the guy who helped her haul the tree home. Why would he need another tree?”

Jasper didn’t answer, and Oslo soon forgot about Rosemary’s husband buying a second tree, because people had surrounded the sled demanding trees, right now, dammit!

They sold all but one before Rosemary’s husband came back, looking wild.

“What did you sell me?” he cried. “What the hell did you do to that tree?”

“No refunds,” Jasper said shortly, looking past him to see if there was anyone else hiding in the darkness to whom he could sell the last tree.

“What happened?” Oslo asked. He felt a jerk of fear at the wild look on the guy’s face. Something had happened.

“I just wanted her to be quiet,” he said. He put his hands in his pockets and pulled them out again, as though he couldn’t decide whether he was cold or not. “She told me about the tree, and the wish. That yappy little dog of hers being cured. And I thought, ‘what the hell.’ Know what I mean? But I didn’t want –” He grunted, as though trying to keep from sobbing. “I want to take the wish back.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Oslo said. “All we did was sell you a tree.”

“My wife nearly died!” Rosemary’s husband cried. “Her mouth stitched shut or something, and then her eyes, and then her ears. She’s just sitting there, beside that damned tree. Like a statue. With her mouth stitched shut. What did you sell me?”

“No refunds,” Jasper snarled. “Now get outta here.”

“Jasper,” Oslo whispered, horrified.

Jasper turned on him, and snarled. “Shut your mouth,” he said. “They pay their money and take their chances.” He turned to the man. “Get outta here!” he yelled.

“I’m going to get the cops on you,” the man said. “I swear to God.” He took a step back, and stumbled on the curb.

“Do what you need to,” Jasper growled. “Just leave us alone.” He turned to Oslo. “Time for us to go.”

Oslo went to the horse's head and got her moving away from the man lying on the street. He could hear him sobbing and saying "I want to take it back, please let me take it back."

Then they rounded a corner, and he couldn't hear the man's voice anymore.

"This was a good run," Jasper said, trotting to catch up with Oslo. "We made a nice batch of cash, this time. Tomorrow –"

"There won't be a tomorrow," Oslo said. "Did you hear that man? Did you hear what that tree did to his wife?"

"Oh come on, Oslo! He's crazy! He probably did it himself, and he's just looking for someone to blame. Quit thinking so hard about this. We go back up tomorrow, get one more load, and we'll be set for the winter. Don't you want to be set for the winter?"

Oslo thought of the roll of bills in his pocket, and the smaller roll in his room at the rooming house. Jasper was right about that, at least. The money was going to make winter much easier to bear. Maybe he was right about the rest of it. Those trees couldn't be granting wishes. They just couldn't be.

Oslo went back to his room and made himself some thin broth, eating four-day-old bread with it as the television with the one wavering channel kept him company. He tried to keep his thoughts on his meal, but he couldn't. In his mind's eye, he kept seeing the wife of the man who had purchased the first dark tree. Lips sewn shut, as though psychotic elves had attacked her. Granting her husband's wish.

Then he drifted to sleep and the wolves invaded his dreams. Snarling and snapping and looking less like wolves than something else. Almost human but not quite. Almost wolf, but not quite.

He woke with a half scream, and promised himself they would go no further into the forest than the first stand of trees, the next day.

"Only to the good trees," he mumbled, staring at the television's snowy picture and waiting for the night to be over. "We are only getting good trees, next time. I don't care what Jasper says."

The sun was up, thin and gray looking, before Jasper arrived at the cafe. He looked as though he hadn't been to bed, and he laughed crazily as he stumbled and almost fell into the seat across from Oslo.

Oslo saw the hard look the waitress gave their table. He didn't want to be tossed out. "You all right?" he whispered.

"I'm good. Good," Jasper mumbled. Oslo smelled liquor wafting off him like he'd bathed in it. "Just some coffee and I'll be right as rain."

"Maybe we should take the day off," Oslo said. "You look like you need a little sleep."

"I don't need nothin'!" Jasper bellowed, slapping the top of the table, hard. Both waitresses jumped and stared, then began whispering. Oslo sighed. Not too long before they were going to be invited to leave. Damn Jasper, anyhow.

He persuaded the waitress to sell them a coffee to go, and Jasper swilled it back as they walked to the barn. The temperature was much colder than it had been the day before, and Oslo watched the steam rise from the coffee cup, thinking it would have been smart of him to get one for himself.

By the time they'd harnessed the horse and set out down the road to the forest, Jasper had finished the coffee and tossed the cup. He seemed more together. He wasn't in a good mood, but at least he was stringing words together in a coherent sentence. Oslo was almost glad, until he realized what Jasper was saying.

"Are you crazy?" he shouted. Dusty threw up her head and showed the whites of her eyes. "Why the heck do you think we need to go further into the forest? There are plenty of good trees right by our camp."

"Like you said, we don't want to use them all up," Jasper said. "We gotta think of next year. This is a good scam, so we go further in to the forest this time."

"But the wolves," Oslo whispered. He remembered his dreams – or nightmares – and shuddered. "We gotta watch out for the wolves."

"We're set," Jasper said, and wrestled with his pocket, finally pulling out an ancient hand gun. "No problem."

He waved it around and accidentally pulled the trigger, shooting between Dusty's ears. She screamed and ran, and for a hectic moment or two all Oslo

could do was yank the reins as he tried to get the horse under control. Jasper clutched the seat, the gun still in one hand.

“Point it away from me!” Oslo screamed, as he finally pulled the horse to a stop. “You crazy fool! You want to kill me too?”

“Sorry, sorry,” Jasper muttered, pulling on the safety catch, and tucking the gun back into his pocket. “Just wanted you to see it. Cost us a pretty penny.”

“Us?” Oslo snarled. “Us?”

“Well, yeah,” Jasper said. He frowned. “We need protection, and I got us some. I figure you got to pay for half of it.” He held out his hand as though he expected Oslo to pay him for half the gun right there.

“I don’t have any money with me,” Oslo said, even though he didn’t feel like he needed to pay for half a gun that had almost killed Dusty.

“It’s OK,” Jasper replied. “I’ll take it out of your money for the next batch.”

He leaned back, whistling tonelessly, and didn’t look at Oslo until he chucked the reins and got Dusty moving again.

Oslo thought hard about turning around and heading back to town. To hell with Jasper and his gun and his idea of going further into that forest. Oslo had enough money in his mattress that he could keep body and soul together until spring.

But the further they went into the forest, the less he wanted to turn around and go back. The sun warmed the skin of his face, and the pine scented air soothed his soul. When they finally got to their camp, he felt all right with the world.

He stopped the horse and leapt from the sled.

“We got to get going,” Jasper said, but Oslo ignored him as he loosened Dusty’s harness and fed her.

“We got lots of time,” he said. “And we all need to eat.”

“No, we don’t,” Jasper said. He was still sitting on the wooden bench of the sled. “We need to be in and get out before it gets dark.”

“We have hours,” Oslo said.

“Remember the wolves,” Jasper said. “It’ll be better for us if we’re gone way before dark. We wouldn’t want anything to happen to the horse.”

Oslo looked at him, sitting cold and stiff on the sled, and wondered if Jasper was actually thinking about the welfare of Dusty, or whether he’d shoot

the horse to save his own butt if the wolves did come back. He suspected the latter.

“No, we do not,” he said. “But we’re not leaving until we eat. You best get down and help me, so we can get going quicker.”

Jasper glared, then jumped down and unhooked the rope that was holding their small cache of food up in a tree. He pulled out a can without looking, and opened it. Snarled that it was frozen, and started a small, smudgy fire, warming the can and the beans within to smoke smelling lukewarm. Then he and Oslo both dug in, eating the beans standing.

“Is that enough?” Jasper asked when the can was cleaned and then buried, and their utensils were slung back up in the tree with the rest of their supplies. “Can we go now?”

“Yes,” Oslo sighed, as he pulled the harness tight on the horse again. “We are ready to go.”

Jasper won half the battle, and they drove past the first stands of trees they’d plundered. They decided to skirt the next bit of the forest, and headed east. The darkness of the forest returned, and the temperature dropped, but Jasper kept saying “just a little further,” so they kept going.

The trees in this part of the forest were gnarled and ancient looking. Long tufts of moss hung from them, looking like gray, moth-eaten shawls over the shoulders of old, crippled witches. Oslo started shivering, and could not stop.

“We should turn around,” he said, shuddering. “This is even worse than yesterday.”

“No, this is good,” Jasper said, looking excited. He pointed at trees that Oslo could only describe as horrifying, and saying, “They look fantastic! These will sell for even more! Even more!”

Oslo didn’t want to fight with him anymore. “Fine,” he said, and leaped from the sled. “But this is as far as I go. If we don’t get enough here, I don’t care. I’m not going any further into this forest.”

“I think we can get fifty,” Jasper said.

“Fifty!” Oslo yelled. His voice carried, echoing ‘fifty!’ up the mountain and through the forest until it sounded like a wild animal roaring insanely.

“Fifty?” he whispered.

“Fifty, at a hundred a piece. Then we’re set.” He smiled, but Oslo felt no warmth from it, and he turned away.

“Whatever,” he muttered.

He set to, hacking the trees down as quickly as he could. He soon worked up a sweat that felt cold on his skin. He couldn’t seem to get warm, no matter how hard he swung the axe. No matter how many of the twisted deformed trees he cut down.

When Jasper cried out “That’s fifty!” Oslo turned around, and felt sick when he saw the swath of destruction he’d wrought on this part of the forest.

Jasper had thrown the trees willy-nilly into the sled, and Oslo could see broken branches even from where he stood. He didn’t say a word though. Just shouldered the axe and walked back to the sled.

“Let’s get the hell out of here,” he said. Jasper scoffed, and took the seat next to him.

“I don’t think I’ve ever heard you swear,” he said.

“I never had the need to swear before,” Oslo replied.

“Even with the year you had?” Jasper asked.

“Even with that,” he said. He slapped the reins on the horse’s back, and she jumped, and then jumped again, as she tried to get the sled to move.

“What’s wrong with the damned horse now?” Jasper asked.

“Nothing,” Oslo replied. “The sled’s too heavy. We should toss some trees. Lighten it up.” He said ‘toss some trees’ but he thought toss them all. Jasper shook his head vehemently.

“No damned way! Beat the frigging horse until she pulls. We got to get down to Hope.”

Oslo slapped the reins against the horse’s back again, and she gamely tried to pull, but the sled was too heavy.

What are those trees made of? Oslo thought. Concrete?

He jumped off the sled, to lighten the load. Dusty still couldn’t pull it.

“Get off the sled,” he said to Jasper.

“Why the hell should I?” Jasper snarled.

“Because if you don’t, all of us will be stuck in this godforsaken part of the forest after dark” Oslo said. “Get down. Now.”

Jasper snarled again, but did get down. He stood watching as Oslo tried again to get the horse to pull.

“Go and push,” Oslo said to him. “As hard as you can.”

“Jesus,” Jasper said, and stepped to the back of the sled. Oslo couldn’t be sure that he was putting his shoulder to the sled, but hoped he was. Poor Dusty needed all the help she could get.

He leaned his head close to hers. “Come on, girl,” he whispered. Her ears flicked back and she whickered softly, then put every ounce of her strength into straining on the harness.

The sled creaked, and then groaned.

“We’re almost out!” Oslo cried. “Push, Jasper.”

“Oslo,” Jasper said, his voice sounding strange. “Oslo –”

Oslo ignored Jasper, and patted Dusty on the neck. “You can do it, girl,” he said. “I know you can.”

She jumped against the harness, and the sled seemed to move an inch forward. “Good girl,” Oslo said. “Keep going.”

“Oslo, it’s the wolves.” Jasper’s voice barely carried from the back of the sled, but Oslo’s heart clamped, painfully, in his chest.

“Oh my God, pull girl,” he whispered to the horse, as Jasper bellowed in fear. The horse neighed, frightened by his tone, and lunged against the harness, finally making the sled move. She took another lunging step, and another and the sled lurched along behind her. Slow, but picking up speed.

“Jasper,” Oslo called. “Are you all right?”

“Help me!” Jasper cried. He sounded like he was further away from the sled than a moment before.

“We’re moving, Jasper!” Oslo cried. “Catch up you fool! Get back on the sled!”

He heard another strangled cry from Jasper, and then a gunshot. Dusty threw her head back, screamed in fear, and threw herself even harder against the harness. The sled picked up even more speed, but Oslo stopped, and let the sled slide by him. He didn’t know what he could do, but he was going to go back and save Jasper.

Jasper was ten yards away, lying in the snow. He had his gun out, waving it at an animal stalking back and forth around him. Oslo breathed in relief. Only one. They could chase away one of the things.

As he ran back, the creature half stood, and howled in frustration, or anger. Oslo got a really good look at it, and felt his bowels loosen as he slid next to Jasper.

“Shoot it!” he screamed.

“I did!” Jasper screamed back. He took aim and shot again, and Oslo watched the bullet hit the thing full in the chest. The pink, mostly hairless chest. It barely reacted. Just fell back on all fours and resumed stalking Jasper.

“What is that thing?” Oslo breathed.

“A wolf,” Jasper cried. “It has to be a wolf.” He took aim again, and another shot rang out, echoing through the trees and up the mountain.

“That’s no wolf,” Oslo said. Then he frowned. “Is it a man?”

The creature growled, its teeth huge and pointed, so many of them they barely seemed to fit in its mouth. Pressed against the lips, with the small, pathetic looking mustache. A mustache Oslo thought he recognized.

“My God,” he said. “It looks like Riven. Charles Riven. He worked at the factory with us, before it shut down.”

Jasper didn’t answer, just took another shot at the creature with the bad mustache and pointy teeth that was bearing down on the two of them.

“Charles!” Oslo cried. “Charles Riven! It’s me, Oslo!”

Oslo wasn’t sure what he expected the creature to do – sit down and have tea with them, perhaps -- but whatever he was expecting, he got a lot more than he bargained for. The creature stopped, stared at them with Charles Riven’s faded blue eyes, and then fell in a puddle of skin and hair.

Both Oslo and Jasper sat stock still and stared at the empty skin lying on the snow, steam puffing from the empty eye holes.

“Let’s get out of here,” Jasper said. “I don’t even want to know what the hell we just saw. Let’s go!”

“That is a plan,” Oslo said. He helped Jasper up, and together they chased after the sled and the horse.

Four hours later they were on the outskirts of Hope. The darkness hung cold and damp over both of them, though the horse still steamed with the sweat she’d worked up pulling the sled down the mountain.

“We should stop and feed her,” Oslo said, but didn’t argue much when Jasper shook his head, silently. He wanted to get rid of these trees, too.

When they came to the corner where they'd sold the trees the night before, he pulled off his coat, and placed it over Dusty's shoulders, silently promising he'd take her back to her barn where it was warm and dry, and treat her like a queen. But first they had to get rid of the trees.

There were people waiting, just like the evening before. But these people were rough looking. Angry looking. They waved money like magic wands and demanded a tree, pronto.

Jasper sold three before they were properly stopped and two more before Oslo had covered the horse and promised her everything under the sun if she'd just be patient a little while longer. Jasper stuffed his half of the bills in Oslo's hand without making eye contact.

"This won't take any time at all," he whispered.

"Thank God," Oslo whispered back.

They were half way through their twisted, deformed stock when the first person Jasper had sold a tree to came back.

"She better not ask for a refund," Jasper said, pointing at her past the throng of people waiting for a turn to buy a tree. Oslo looked where he was pointing, and frowned. Something about her was familiar.

"Looks to me like she's grinning ear to ear," he said. "Maybe she's bringing Dusty a carrot, or us a sandwich. My stomach thinks my throat's been cut –"

"No, she's not smiling," Jasper said. "Her face just looks like that. Bad plastic surgery or something."

Oslo looked harder, and felt a thrill of horror run down his back when he really saw her face as she walked up to them. It was Rosemary, the woman who bought their first tree. At least he thought it was.

"That's not bad plastic surgery," he said. "It looks like she did the job herself. Jesus!"

Rosemary's face was a mishmash of cuts, most of them still leaking thin drools of blood. Cuts around her eyes, and her ears, and her mouth. Many, many cuts around her mouth, as though she'd used a kitchen knife to open it wider. One corner had been sliced two extra inches, and Oslo could see her teeth through her split cheek.

As she walked under the street light, Oslo could see bits of thick black thread still running through her lips, where they'd been sewn shut. Oslo felt sick, and turned to Jasper.

"I told you it was Rosemary's husband who bought a tree yesterday."

"What about it?" Jasper was so busy selling trees to the angry crowd around the sled, he barely paid Oslo any mind.

"Look at her face," Oslo said, grabbing him by the shoulder and whirling him around. "You can still see the thread. Why did you sell her another tree?"

"Oh." Jasper shrugged. "She must've been getting a little of her own back."

Before Oslo could reply, Rosemary pushed her way up to the front of the crowd, and held out a half-full bottle of whiskey to Jasper.

"Thanksh," she said, blood from her lips spattering on the snow at her feet. "It worked like a charm. That son of a bitch husband of mine will never tell me to be quiet again. Ever."

Jasper took the bottle and upended it, gargling back the liquor and then throwing the empty bottle out into the street. It smashed, and Dusty jerked nervously.

"What did you do?" Oslo asked.

"I didn't do anything," Rosemary said. "It was your tree. Made him hack himself up into little pieces. Little pieces!" She turned away from Oslo, and spoke to the crowd. "These things work! They'll get rid of anybody you want gone! Well worth the price!"

The crowd roared its approval, and more money was waved at Jasper. Oslo felt frozen. They weren't just selling trees. They were selling vengeance. They were selling murder.

"We gotta stop," Oslo said. "Jasper, this is wrong."

"There's nothing wrong with selling a tree or two," Jasper replied, stuffing bills in his pocket and throwing trees out of the back of the sled into the waiting hands of the crowd.

"These trees are evil," Oslo said. "We can't do this anymore."

"Screw you," Jasper growled. He grabbed a tree and threw it over the side of the sled to a small child who looked as though he'd never eaten a decent meal in his life. The child grinned, and hugged the tree to him, pushing his way

through the crowd, and growling like a little animal at someone who dared reach out a hand to touch his tree.

“Stop,” Oslo said. “Please stop.”

“Leave him alone,” Jasper cackled. “Kids deserve a good Christmas wish too.”

“That’s enough!” Oslo roared. He leapt up into the sled and grabbed Jasper, shaking him like a terrier would a rat. “We’re not selling any more of these trees!”

“Screw you!” Jasper roared back. “We’re giving the people what they want!”

The crowd roared its angry approval, and surged toward the sled as Jasper tried to pull free from Oslo. Oslo didn’t care about any of that. He was going to put a stop to what they were doing, no matter what.

He yanked Jasper closer, and reached into the inner pocket of his coat. He pulled out Jasper’s big gold lighter.

As Jasper growled and reached for it, the crowd silenced, and as one took a big step back. “Give me that,” Jasper yelled. “Right now!”

“No,” Oslo said, holding the lighter above his head. “I’m putting a stop to all of this, even if you won’t!”

“You crazy bastard!” Jasper yelled. “It’s no wonder you lost your frigging job! You don’t have a clue about making money!”

“And you don’t know how to be a decent human being,” Oslo yelled back. He pushed Jasper into the trees in disgust. “If this is the way we need to make money, I want no more of it. We are going to stop. Now!”

“Walk away then, you pussy!” Jasper screeched, kicking out at him with his boots. “This was my idea anyhow!”

“I wish you and these trees would just get lost,” Oslo said. He suddenly felt exhausted, and his ankles hurt where Jasper had kicked him. He leaned over his knees and closed his eyes, tossing the gold lighter down to the bottom of the sled. It clattered as it struck wood. “Preferably somewhere far away.”

The crowd took in a collective breath, and then went completely silent. Oslo opened his eyes, afraid that somehow the stupid lighter had opened and he’d caught the sled on fire. *Would serve me right*, he thought.

Then he looked around, and went silent himself. Jasper was gone. So were the trees. Not a needle or branch remained. Only the gold plated lighter, still lying where Oslo had thrown it.

“Where did he go?” he asked, stupidly looking around as though he thought Jasper was hiding. “Did you see where he went?”

No-one in the crowd answered, and though a couple of men shouted that he should be shot for getting rid of the rest of the trees, no one else took up the chant. In clots of one and two, they drifted off, until finally, Oslo was alone.

“What did I do?” he whispered. Then a sound touched his ears. A sound, coming from so far away, he couldn’t quite make it out. A voice. Calling.

Calling his name.

He looked around, thinking that perhaps some of the crowd had stuck around and were taunting him. But there was no one there. Just he and the horse remained.

“Did you hear anything, Dusty?” he asked.

The horse neighed and nodded her head, as though letting him know that he wasn’t losing his mind. She’d heard the voice, too.

Again, he heard his name being called. From far away. He frowned. “Is that Jasper?” he asked. Then he called. “Jasper? Is that you?”

And he was certain he heard Jasper’s voice cry “I’m coming back to Hope with more trees, Oslo! They practically sell themselves!” He didn’t take Dusty back to Jerry’s. He didn’t even return the sled. He just turned the rig around, whispering in Dusty’s ear that she only had to walk a little bit further, just a little bit further, and he’d treat her to apples and carrots and all the good things a dandy little horse like her deserved. He held her bridle and walked beside her, following Jasper’s voice back up the mountain.

He never came back down.

Christmas, Present

Away In A Manger
By Billie Milholland

All morning Grace tried to find a reason not to have coffee with Tania. This close to Christmas she didn't want to see or talk to anybody, but by ten o'clock she knew she didn't have the heart to disappoint her friend. Tuesday had been their coffee day for over two years. They met at Ginter's Penny University no matter what kind of hell ran rampant on the streets of Hope. These days, Ginter's was one of few coffee places still open to the public.

So there she sat, in a small corner booth far away from the windows. That was the other reason she couldn't use an excuse. Mr. Ginter always saved that stupid booth for them on Tuesdays. He could charge extra for the safer seats and on other days she knew he charged a lot extra for that corner booth. Not only was it out of direct range from anything lobbed through the front windows, it was near the back-alley door for a quick escape.

Tania, late as usual, slid into the seat across from her. She unwound two knitted scarves from around her neck and handed one to Grace.

"Twinsies!"

Grace stared at it.

"Come on. Don't go snotty on me. This isn't a present. This is me having nothing to do in the evening. This is me using the yarn the old lady across the hall was going to throw out."

"Fine." Grace hung the scarf of many colors around her neck.

"Gracie, I worry about you."

"Well, don't."

“I know how you get at Christmas but, I’m scared you might piss-off something you can’t chase away with a blast of obscenities.”

“Don’t be crazy.”

Tania gave her the look that said – ‘I’m not the one who’s crazy’. “Why don’t you stay with me over Christmas? I got nobody in the spare room since Nessa went to jail. I’m going to rent it out in the New Year, but until then I could use some company.”

“I like living alone.”

“Well, I don’t, and it would make me feel better if you’d come.”

“How about I promise not to look at the manger?”

“As if.”

“What if I promise to shut the blinds? Move my TV into the bedroom.”

“Gracie, you’re so oppositional.” Tania grinned and lifted her coffee cup. “Don’t you dare stay with me over Christmas.” She took a long, slow sip. “Or maybe, I should say, ‘I dare you to stay with me. Double dare.’”

Grace added more sugar to her coffee. “Stop, Tee. Please.” She wrapped her hands around her cooling mug. “You need a distraction. Find a man. It’s not as if there aren’t a dozen sniffing around.”

Tania grinned and waggled her head. “I told you, I’m done with men. In fact I was done with men, two boyfriends ago.”

Grace shrugged.

“Okay. You staying with me is probably a dumb idea. I know I talk too much. I watch the drippy, sappy movies you don’t like and the dance competitions and the game shows. I know you hate the game shows.”

“So, why do you put up with me? Sounds like I hate everything.”

“You didn’t used to hate everything, Gracie. Just since... since.” Tania leaned across the table and gripped Grace’s hand. “Crap! I’m so sorry, sweetie. I promised not to talk about it.”

Grace didn’t jerk her hand away like she wanted to.

“It’s okay.” She tried to smile at Tania.

It wasn’t okay. They couldn’t get a good, gossip session going after that. Grace did manage to stay long enough for the free refill and to share the giant cinnamon bun Mr. Ginter set in the middle of their table.

He was in a festive mood. “Merry Christmas to two of my most loyal customers.”

Tania smiled up at him. She grabbed his hand with both of hers. “Chad, you’re the best.”

Mr. Ginter grinned at her and winked at Grace. “I know.”

He turned away when the door opened, blowing in a skiff of snow and two guys in long coats. He flipped up the big key that always dangled from his waist and led the men into his locked back room. As usual not a word passed between Mr. Ginter and the men.

Grace and Tania had seen hundreds of silent men follow Chadwick Ginter into that back room. They’d never stayed long enough to see them come back out, and they knew enough not to ask what went on in there. It had to be something illegal, not that it was any of Grace’s business and not that she cared. Most of what went on in Hope these days was tinged with ‘illegal’. Even Grace’s morning job.

From six a.m. till nine a.m. she cleaned toilets in the office tower behind city hall. She made better money than she should for a job like that, because she was paid to keep her mouth shut about the packages and envelopes she carried from one floor to another.

No skin off her nose. That three hour job and her five hour job in the warehouse at Walmart kept her off welfare. Kept her mug off the ‘persons of interest’ lists.

Most of the time.

She hadn’t had a run-in with the law in over a year and she intended to keep it that way. Cops weren’t just cops anymore. They were vigilantes. They were judge and jury; and in bed with the money boys in every way.

When Grace got home at seven that evening the old guys were setting up the baby-Jesus-in-the-manger display across the street in front of the old stone church. At least five of them, all bundled up, dragging plywood cut-outs out of the basement and propping them up on the straw-covered flower bed.

She slammed the door hard behind her and yanked the heavy drapes across the one window that faced the street. She took a full wine bottle out of the long pocket she had sewn into her coat lining. She was supposed to throw out any booze left lying around in those offices and leave the empty bottles on the desk of the big boss in the penthouse. She did that like clockwork, but only after she poured the best wine or whiskey into the empty bottle she kept in her coat.

Today it was whiskey. Not her favourite, but she'd cook with it; make stuff smell sophisticated. She poured two fingers in a chipped espresso cup and sipped it in her small living room while she stared at the closed drapes. She knew she wouldn't open them tonight and she couldn't decide if she was pleased about that or disappointed.

When her phone rang, she didn't answer it. It'd be Tania, checking up on her, but Grace was talked out. She told herself she'd phone Tee tomorrow, but she knew she wouldn't. Once a week was enough talking.

She had never been a talker, not like her little sister, Amber. Grace didn't have anything smart to add to a conversation, but she used to love listening to Amber. The kid had been smart, too smart as it turned out. Amber'd wanted to go to university. She had the marks for it; she could have gone. Grace even gave her money for the first semester, but that ass-wipe boyfriend of hers put it all up his nose.

Amber made every kind of excuse for him, but Grace didn't give her any more money, until she quit seeing him. Then the stupid kid put it up her own nose. Every cent she took from Grace went for blow. Grace never gave her another dime. Not even when she banged on Grace's door Christmas Eve, loud, obnoxious and high. Grace let her in and offered her the couch. But Amber didn't want a place to sleep. She wanted money for another hit. Grace wouldn't give her money, so she left, slamming the door so hard it cracked the glass in the little window. That was the last time Grace saw her alive.

Sometime early Christmas morning Amber ODeD in the manger scene across the street while Grace slept sound and safe in her bed. The cops drove Grace downtown to identify her sister, but her poor face was so messed up, if it hadn't been for the ankle bracelet Grace had given her for Christmas (a worthless thing, made out of junk beads – nothing that could be pawned) she would never have been sure it was Amber.

Grace stood up and hurled her cup at the door. The shards sprayed the room. She left them where they landed.

She turned off all the lights, and then crawled into bed with her clothes on.

It was still dark in the morning when Grace left for work, but no lights shone on baby Jesus. By the time she got home in the evening a sickly, blue glow outlined the manger. Solar lights. The faux log shed behind the crèche had

a misshapen wire star sticking up with one, lonely light on top. With continual brown-outs and electricity expensive she was surprised they even had one bulb lit. She didn't see any movement around the display, so she went inside her apartment.

She turned the sound up on the TV and ate the pizza somebody had left unguarded in the Walmart lunchroom. It would have tasted better if she'd heated it, but she didn't have the jam to do it. She was stupidly tired and fell asleep on the couch in the middle of NCIS.

Grace managed to ignore the crèche until Sunday. She didn't have a Walmart shift on Sunday and she nearly went bugged stuck in her apartment all day. When the phone rang about seven thirty that night, she answered it.

"Hey Gracie!"

Grace shut her eyes. She was ashamed to admit how good Tania's voice sounded to her. She tried to keep enthusiasm out of her response. "Hey."

"I've been crazy busy this week. Got an extra shift at the Bargain Barn. You?"

"Same old."

"Any new additions to your liquor cabinet?"

"I closed the drapes Tuesday and I haven't looked out." Why the Hell did she have to say that? Blurted it right out.

"Shut up! That's fantastic! It's just a week till Christmas. And only one more day till coffee."

"Yeah."

"Honey. You okay?"

"I'm fine. Yeah. Really. Fine."

Grace didn't try to escape the Tuesday coffee date this time. She'd scored a box of high-class chocolates that morning and her pockets bulged with mixed nuts she scooped off boardroom tables on every floor. There'd been Christmas party mess everywhere. The janitor's night squad hadn't shown up, so scrounging their turf was fair game.

Grace shared the chocolates with Tania and Mr. Ginter. She let him choose first and made him take two. He took nut clusters. Tania popped a nougat into her mouth whole. With her front teeth, Grace poked a hole in a cherry centre and sucked the sticky juice over her tongue.

They lingered longer over coffee than they'd ever had and Grace ran all

the way to Walmart to make her shift.

Four days until Christmas.

After work, Wednesday, there was a freak pacing back and forth in front of the crèche with a tray around his neck. She couldn't help it. She had to go over and investigate.

"Hey, lady. You want Holy Water?"

"What would I do with Holy Water?"

"You don't do anything with it. You keep it. For good luck." He held up a small vial full of yellowish liquid.

She snatched it.

"Hey, you got to pay for that."

"I'm just checking it." She twisted off the cap. "Smells like piss."

"Don't you know nothing?" He snatched it back. It's supposed to smell like piss. It passed right through the Pope. Can't get more holy than that."

"I bet you never been out of Hope. Where'd you see the Pope?"

"Okay, it's not directly from the Pope. You know that guy, Stumpy? Hangs out over to City Hall?"

Grace did know Stumpy. Crafty old street guy. He could talk you out of your coat buttons if you let him near. She nodded.

"Yeah, well, when Stumpy was a kid, he went to Rome, you know. With Sisters of Charity and the Pope blessed him. Touched him right on the head. It's his piss, but it's still Holy Water. I'll swear on a stack of Bibles about that."

"Where'll you find a stack of Bibles in Hope?"

The guy frowned. "You want one or not? Just a buck. A friggin' buck."

Grace tossed him a couple of dollar coins. "I'll take two. Now move your bony butt out of here."

"Why? I'm selling Holy Water beside a church. God likes that."

"Really."

Grace frowned, but couldn't work up any decent anger. She tried to picture her sister laying there in a heap in the stable. That usually worked. A cold sweat prickled her face and neck. Shit. Maybe she was over it. But she couldn't be. She'd bloody slept through her sister's flippin' murder. She'd ignored drug deals going down in the stable. She didn't lift an eyebrow at hookers lounging beside the baby Jesus. She turned her back when she saw them lead men behind the stable. Her sister died because she hadn't given a shit

about what went on over there.

She shoved the two vials into her coat pocket and went home.

On Thursday, Grace agreed to go to Tania's on Christmas Eve. Maybe even in time for supper.

"Don't shit me with no maybe, Gracie. Your skinny ass better be at my table for supper on Saturday or I'm over there to haul you out and you'll pay for the cab."

Grace surprised herself and Tania by laughing. "Okay. Okay. I'll be there."

Grace picked up a janitor shift Saturday morning. Nobody wanted to work Christmas Eve day. By the end of it she had a big bag of loot. Every single item from the garbage cans. Perfectly good wrapping paper, ribbon, a pair of women's gloves with the price tag still on it, a guy's sweatshirt with Maui Wauai embroidered across the front and more candy, crackers and miniature jars of jam than she could eat in a month. The crowded bus broke down six blocks from her place, so her arms were aching by the time she got home.

There were a couple of kids sitting on the manger across the street, smoking and dangling their feet over the white, plastic-bag sheep. She dumped her load on the floor inside her door and went out to chase the kids away. She started yelling and swearing before she hit the sidewalk. The kids gave her the finger and sauntered away.

She packed two shopping bags. One with her overnight stuff and the other with booze and candy and crackers. She called a cab to pick her up at five. That was a splurge, but it would be dark by then and who knew what buses would be running. She pulled the drapes away from her window and sat in her chair watching the Holy Water guy across the street do a good business from early church goers. Only a few walked past without acknowledging him. She wanted to go to the door and holler at them to stop a friggin' minute.

What was wrong with her? She was cheering the old hawker?

She put on her coat and boots. She set her shopping bags beside the door. She looked at her watch. It was an hour and a half before it was time to leave. The Holy Water guy wandered off and was swallowed by deepening shadows. People entered the church in pairs and clusters. Seemed like nobody went to Christmas Eve church alone. The star above the stable pulsed and went out. Four, dim, outside lights on the church entrance lit up the steps. After several

minutes ticked by without more people entering the church, Grace left her apartment and walked across the street.

She stood beside the manger. Somebody had stolen the baby Jesus, there was a wad of gum pressed into Mary's forehead and the paint on Joseph's face was so faded she couldn't distinguish his features. Why hadn't they repainted him before they put him out? She peeled the gum off Mary and dropped the stiff wad into her pocket. She felt the sting of warm tears rolling down her cheeks. She didn't try to stop them.

Nobody cared about anything. The Christmas Eve her sister died, right here in this manger scene, people went to church that night too, and they came out of the church. There was midnight church that night. More people going in and coming out and not one person noticed anything wrong in the manger scene. Not one person.

Grace turned and stared at her ground floor apartment. The light was on in the living room. Maybe if she'd left a light on in her living room that night, her sister would have come over. Knocked on her door.

The worst of it? Grace knew, even if her sister had knocked and she had answered, she might not have let her in.

Who was she fooling? She didn't care about shit either. She hadn't then and she didn't now. She was a poser. She was no better than any of them in there, singing songs that were old before they were born. Saying Merry Christmas to a baby that had probably been lifted from that manger, days before. Blessing his mother who stared out into the street with some ass-hole's gum smeared on her head. And Joseph standing there, a warped and weathered piece of plywood without a face.

What the Hell was wrong with all of them?

She looked at her watch. Fifteen minutes and she was out of there. She swiped her face with her gloved hand, smearing the wet across her cheeks. She walked back across the street. On her steps she turned to look at the church. Damned religion. A lot of love-your-neighbour crap that didn't mean a god damned thing.

The taxi showed up five minutes early and Grace was out the door and on the side walk before the guy had stopped completely.

It was just after the cabbie popped the trunk for her bags that Grace thought she saw something over by the manger scene. A shadow moving slowly

behind it.

She poked the cabbie. “Do you see that?”

“What? A church?”

“No. Something’s over there. By the stable.”

“Why should I give a shit?” He slammed the trunk.

Grace folded her arms. “You just should.”

He yawned. “Are you fuckin' nuts? Don't nobody pay you to give a shit.”

The guy was right. She could have done some good that night when Amber was curled up dying over there in the stable. But she didn't do a fucking thing. Nothing could change that, now. Nothing.

The cabbie opened the door and she got in. Then she got back out. Something was rooting around in the stable. Grace ran across the street. The cabbie yelled after her. “Hey lady! You got to pay for wait time.”

She hollered back at him. “I'll pay.”

The church doors opened and people spilled out like ants onto the sidewalk, some going one way and some going the other, most of them heading behind the church to the parking lot. She stood by the manger. Nothing moved except a strip of white plastic somebody tore off a sheep. It was caught on the cross bars that held up the manger and flapped in the wind that had sprung up. People scurried past. She stepped toward the stable. Somebody was in there. She stopped. Held her breath. She heard something. A low moan. She took another step.

“Amber?”

Grace slapped her palm across her mouth. She couldn't believe she'd said that. Maybe she was fucking nuts.

Another noise, a whimper. “Who's in there?” She couldn't see anything. Probably a hurt dog. She turned away. There was nothing she could do for a dog. She could hear the cabbie yelling.

“Please.” The voice came from the stable and it was no dog.

“Who's there?”

“Please help. This kid needs help.”

A wail this time. A girl in pain.

Grace waved at the cabbie and then stepped into the stable. Light from a passing car revealed a bent-over form. Somebody small, rocking back and forth. The Holy Water guy. She saw a movement at his feet. Somebody lying there.

Not moving.

Grace's throat tightened. That little bastard. If he... "What the fuck are you doing?"

The little guy stood up and leaned toward her. "If you're not going to help, for god's sake go get somebody who will."

A girl's voice from the shadows. "Baby. Gasp. Coming. Gasp. It's not time."

Holy shit! Some kid was having a baby.

"It's okay. I have a cab. I'll get you to a hospital."

"No!" A shriek of agony. "I can't go there. No money."

"There's the free clinic."

"Nooo!"

The Holy Water guy grabbed Grace's arm. "No staff on tonight. I already took her there. Doors locked."

"Oh, for fuck's sake. She can't have a baby here."

The guy held up something. "I have a blanket."

"Where's her people? She must have people?"

"Nobody willin' to take her in tonight."

Grace pulled her cell phone out of her pocket and then draped her coat over the girl. She yelled at the cabbie. "Get your ass over here. Now."

She jabbed her finger on Tania's number.

Tania didn't even say hello. She just started in. "Hey, if you're phoning to cancel, you're out of luck."

"Tania. Listen to me. I have a cab right here. And a real live person who's having a real baby and there's nobody to help her. We've got to help."

"Sure, honey. Of course we'll help. You coming over right now?"

"Yeah. Be about twenty-minutes. You still got that dolly for moving stuff."

"Yeah."

"Bring it down the elevator. She might not be able to walk when we get there."

Grace hung up. She knew Tania didn't believe her. Hell, she wouldn't have believed her if she was Tania, but Tania was Tania. She'd be there, on the sidewalk with the dolly. She gave a shit. Tania always gave a shit.

And this time. Maybe. Grace gave a shit, too. As she and the Holy Water

guy gently lifted the girl to her feet, she heard Tania's voice in the back of her mind.

“Don't shit me with no maybe, Gracie.”

A Morphic Christmas

By Ryan T. McFadden

The knock on Martha's door came at 5pm on a snowy Christmas Eve. Two Legion Servicemen stood on the front porch in their crisp, pale-blue uniforms with their caps tucked under their arms. Norman was a civilian engineer and not in the Legion, but she knew they were here to tell her that he was dead.

"There's been an accident," they explained.

"What kind of accident?" Noise crashed in her ears and her vision distorted to a grey fog.

Their expressions didn't change as they lied to her about a propane explosion at the 10th Circle Project. He died saving three others, they said. A real hero. It was a nice story, but she knew it wasn't true.

"How did he die?" she asked, wiping her now damp cheeks with the back of her hand.

"Propane explosion."

"No, tell me."

"Ma'am..."

She grabbed his blue shirt. The other man took a step back as if he was preparing to bolt.

"Tell me the god-damned truth," she yelled.

"There was a Morphic-Field Shift," he confessed, as if that explained everything.

They left her alone and she collapsed in front of the artificial Christmas tree that they had put up yesterday. His gift to her was under the tree. As always, it was wrapped perfectly with crisp lines and golden ribbon. A labor of

love. She stared at the tree so long that the lights became a singular blur.

Norman was dead. A propane explosion. A morphic field shifted. She didn't know what that was except that he wasn't coming home tonight. Or tomorrow. Or ever.

She didn't remember closing her eyes, let alone falling asleep but it was dawn when she stirred from her position by the tree. She didn't turn off the lights.

The funeral was four days after Christmas though the 10th Circle didn't release his body. Her friends and family attended the wake at her house, and ate little sandwiches and drank stale beer. A light on the Christmas tree went out and she changed it immediately. They asked if she needed help with anything and she shook her head.

When they left, she lay in front of the tree and remembered their first Christmas together. Back then, their tree had been one of those half-sized hand-me-downs laden with a few ornamental balls that were too heavy for the branches. They had drunk rum and eggnog even though they both hated it. They lay in each other's arms and told stories about their past Christmases, both good and bad. They stayed up late, fell asleep together, then woke up early to open their gifts.

Martha wrapped her arms around herself and tried to imagine it was Norman doing that, but when she closed her eyes, the blackness and the loneliness became so great that she couldn't breathe.

Days passed and still the 10th Circle didn't return Norman's body, saying his corpse was dangerous because of contamination. When she asked if this was because of the Morpheic Field Shift, the clerks would smile, and tell her to fill out form A57-3. She fought for more information but never got anywhere other than filling out more forms, in triplicate. At nights she returned to a home that had transformed from charming to empty and haunting.

Martha didn't take her tree down. She tried convincing herself that it was because she couldn't be bothered to pack it away, but she wondered if it was because the lights gave her comfort – the flickering candle against the moonless night. As the weeks passed, she changed the bulbs as they burned out.

Martha stared at Norman's gift, and for the first time since his death, she found her curiosity piqued. A gentle smile played at her lips, delicate, but

enough that she felt a moment's release. She knelt and retrieved the package. Her fingers traced lines along the crisp edges. She played with the ribbon. He was a perfectionist when it came to wrapping gifts, each one a work of art.

"Norman, what is it?" she asked, the same she did every year. And just like past years, he didn't answer. Because he doesn't want to give away the surprise.

She wanted to rip the paper away like she had always done. This year, however, she used a letter opener to slice away the tape, then carefully peeled away the paper. With each fold she opened, the aching in her chest lessened, just a little, and her heart beat faster. The lights on the tree became more vibrant.

"I'm so excited," she said. The heaviness that had become her constant companion lifted, just a touch. Finally, she reached the box and saw the pink letters on the front. 'Macys'.

"Oh, Norman, you didn't. How can we afford this?"

A Christmas bonus, direct from Mayor Jimmy Wentworth, she imagined him saying.

She opened the box and the crystal figurine inside reflected the multi-colored tree lights. She had seen the crystal ornament for the first time in the summer on their trip to Chicago. Had he bought it then, or ordered it?

She put it on the mantle, stepped back, and admired it. For a fleeting moment, she felt like he was with her. Quickly, the euphoria faded and her grief felt all the more intense. Martha retreated to bed and cried, before sleep mercifully took her.

A noise roused Martha from sleep before dawn. With eyes open and heart pounding, she laid listening. The house was quiet.

"Hello?"

When no one answered, she padded down the hallway.

Under the tree was another gift.

Her skin tingled and the glow from the lights intensified.

The present was wrapped in red-and-green Santa Claus paper, with a silver bow and gold ribbon. She knew it hadn't been there before. She glanced about, even though she knew she was alone. Norman had wrapped this gift, and had left it for her.

Unlike the day before, she tore into this one like she was ten-years old.

Each rip and tear lessened her grief. She opened the box and her breath caught: an Anne Klein bracelet watch. Not just any Anne Klein watch. Her old watch. The one stolen from her on their trip to Hawaii. Was this the same one? She looked at the back and saw the inscription: Eternal Love. She put her hand to her mouth. It was the same watch.

"Norman, how did you...?"

I can't tell you all my secrets, she imagined him saying.

She sighed deeply, and marvelled at her lack of anguish, which felt as sweet as anything she'd ever experienced. This time when she wrapped her arms around herself and closed her eyes, she saw Norman with her.

That day, she ventured outside, more because she wanted to show people that she was alive and not a complete basket case. People marvelled at her attitude, and she saw relief in their expressions. 'Norman is with me' she told them.

A gift waited for her each day. Martha raced down the hallway every morning. Some were extravagant (pearl earrings) and some were practical (a spatula) but she knew each was directly from Norman. This ritual lifted her spirit until it felt like Norman wasn't gone at all.

Then, one morning there was nothing. She gasped and felt the threat of the grief hovering over her, ready to unleash its terrible might.

She stared at the tree, not quite believing that there was nothing underneath. Her vision blurred from tears.

The pounding on the door startled her. She wasn't going to answer it, but the pounding came again, probably with a fist, more insistent this time. They yelled something and though she couldn't hear the exact words, it sounded urgent.

Martha wiped her tears and answered the door.

Two utility vans idled at the curb. Two Legion servicemen stood on her porch. Though she wasn't certain, she thought they were the same men that had told her Norman had died.

"Ma'am, we need come in." When she didn't answer, the one man motioned to the vans and people in hazmat suits disembarked.

"I...I don't..."

They ignored her and the biohazard crew pushed into her house, arms full of complicated equipment. She wanted to follow them in so that they

wouldn't touch the tree. She watched as they scoured her house while the servicemen asked her questions about Morphic Field Shifts, Norman's accomplices, and about terrorist cells.

They scribbled down information that was much longer than her single-word answers. She was having problems focusing. Why hadn't Norman left her a gift? Why were these people in her house?

"Have you found Norman's body?" she asked.

"That's classified information," he replied. "Has there been any indication of paranormal activity? Ghosts, poltergeists, perhaps revenants?"

She kept a watchful eye on the tree. She excused herself mid-question so that she could replace a bulb. They asked questions for an hour, then the biohazard crew completed their sweep and everyone left in the vans.

When she returned to the tree, there was a gift waiting for her.

"Oh, Norman. I should've known."

I won't forget you, she imagined him saying.

He was with her again, every day. Every day, there was another gift. Her friends wondered aloud when she was taking her tree down but she ignored them. She didn't tell anyone about her secret gifts. Her house filled with baubles and trinkets. Bracelets, broaches, figurines, collectibles, shoes, lingerie.

She knew when the Legion Servicemen and their biohazard team were returning because there would be no gift waiting for her. The moment they left with their Geiger counters and equipment, she'd find a present under the tree.

The biohazard team began following her when she left her home. She assumed the clicking on her phone was the sound of her line being tapped. A black van sat outside her house twenty-four hours a day.

The seasons passed but every morning was Christmas.

It was a snowy Christmas Eve when she spoke to the Legion for the last time. They stood on her porch in the snow with their caps under their arms.

"There's been a Morphic-Field Shift," they explained. The vans waited by the curb. She closed the door before they could disembark.

"If you don't open the door," the serviceman shouted through the door "the Mayor will send his men. It would be easier if you let us in."

She leaned against the door and closed her eyes until they left.

Tomorrow will be my last gift to you, she heard him saying. She knew

that this should've made her sad. After all, the only thing that had kept her life bearable the last year had been Norman's gifts. If this was the last one, would his presence disappear too?

She tried to ignore that thought and instead made the same feast that she had prepared for them last year. She ate French meat pies, drank wine, and ate roasted nuts. She curled up by the tree and fell asleep.

When she wakened, there was a box wrapped in blue and gold paper. She lifted it but it had no real weight, as if it contained only air. She smelled it, but could smell nothing.

"Norman, what could it be?"

She shook it but heard nothing shifting.

The last one.

She took her time with this gift, just like she did on the first one. She cut the tape with a letter opener, carefully peeled back the paper.

Martha's heart pounded as she laid hands on the naked box. She took a deep breath, closed her eyes, and opened the lid.

"Oh, Norman..."

The next morning, they broke down her door with a battering ram. They came with weapons and shackles. They searched the house but they found no sign of Martha, only an empty box under a dusty old Christmas tree.

As they stood in her living room, the last light on the tree flickered, and died.

Christmas, Future

The Saint
By Randy McCharles

“LOL! LOL! LOL! Merry Christmas!”

The fellow shouting this worn-out phrase wore red. Red Shorts. Red T-shirt. Red beret. Black shoes. And a thick black belt, not that the shorts needed a thick belt; it was just part of the costume.

“Aw dude!” groaned Chris. “It’s not Christmas again, is it?”

Ed took a long sip of his candy-cola before answering his witless sidekick. “It’s December twenty-fourth, dude. Tonight’s the big night.”

“I hate Christmas,” Chris growled.

“I thought you ignored Christmas. That’s what I do.”

Ed lifted his brows as Chris stared at him. The move was usually condescending enough for Chris to drop his complaint du moment.

“Yeah,” Chris said finally. “Got that right. But look, dude. Christmas is easy to ignore. This guy though – The Saint – he’s in your face all the time. Ringing his bloody bells. Shouting LOL! LOL! LOL! And browbeating you into buying crap that nobody needs.”

“Suppose,” said Ed. “If he told us to buy beer I bet you’d stop complaining.”

“LOL! LOL! LOL!” Chris snarled.

“Not so loud, dude,” Ed said. “You want to attract his attention?”

Chris rose from his seat at the food court table and climbed up to stand on it. “LOL! LOL! LOL!” he shouted. “LOL! LOL! LOL! Have a crappy Christmas!”

Everyone in the food court stopped their conversation and stared.

“Oh crap,” Ed muttered.

Chris climbed down and flopped into his chair and folded his arms across his chest, a wide, stupid grin on his face. “See. I could be The Saint. Any idiot could do his job.”

“Suppose,” Ed said, his voice still low as those around him resumed their conversations. “But you’re not just any idiot. You’re a first class idiot.”

“That he is,” agreed a deep, resonant voice.

Ed looked up to see The Saint standing next to their table, his large blue eyes burning and his square jaw jutted forward. Somehow the Harbinger of Christmas had advanced on their table without either of them seeing him. Perhaps he was magic after all, as the tales Ed had heard growing up suggested.

“Hey!” shouted Chris. “I don’t have to take that from you! You’re supposed to be jolly, and reward all the good little boys and with milk and cookies.”

“That’s not—” Ed began, but The Saint cut him off by reaching out and clutching Chris’s throat in a thick-fingered fist.

Ed had never seen The Saint this close. Well, perhaps he had as a child when his parents had turned him over to The Saint’s green-clad Elves to bully for an hour while they shopped the mall. But like other childhood trauma, Ed had erased those experiences from his memory. Now that he was old and wise, eighteen, he could read The Saint like a book, and as a book The Saint was trash.

Standing at six-foot-four and probably three-hundred pounds, The Saint was all muscle. He was maybe fifty-years old with short brown hair turning white in spots, his short beard and moustache mostly white. Ed bet he used to be a wrestler, but now a has-been who hawked toasters and bullied kids for a living. A royal bastard.

“Argle,” Chris croaked, staring at Ed with bulging Help Me! eyes.

“Hey!” said Ed. “Do I have to call Mall Security? You can’t strangle my friend. Only I get to do that.”

“Shaddap!” snorted The Saint. “I’m not going to kill the idiot. Just leave him something to remember me by.”

“Argle,” Chris repeated, waving his arms.

“His parents will sue,” Ed suggested.

The Saint laughed a hearty “LOL! This thing has parents? Anyway, it doesn’t matter. You can’t sue The Saint. I’m an icon.”

Someone else at the food court must have called security; two armor-clad Mall Cops came driving up in an electric jeep and jumped out moments before crashing into their table.

“Down boy,” said one of the cops to The Saint. He wore a name badge that said Gary. “We don’t want an incident here.”

Ed said, “Hey! This is already an incident.”

“No,” said the other cop, “it isn’t.” His name badge said Bart, and he spoke like a Bart, his lips curling in a half-sneer and his eyes focusing and unfocussing like he had been hit on the head too many times.

Cop Gary tapped The Saint’s extended arm with his baton and the Christmas icon slowly relaxed his fingers.

“Gagh!” rasped Chris. “I think he crushed my windpipe.”

“No,” said cop Bart, “He hasn’t. If you insist he has then we’ll have to take you to the Mall infirmary.”

“You don’t want to go to the infirmary,” said cop Gary. “If you get my meaning.”

Ed had no idea what cop Gary’s meaning was, but he didn’t get a chance to ask as the Mall cops wasted no time jumping back into their tiny jeep and racing away. The Saint also raced away, walking back to his pot of gold, or whatever the black cauldron he rang his bells over was.

“LOL! LOL! LOL!” The Saint shouted. “Get your family an X-Box 27 this Christmas.”

“Gagh!” Chris repeated. “I think I should go to a hospital.”

“You don’t need a hospital,” said Ed. “This guy knows how to hurt without leaving permanent damage. Drink your cola, dude.”

“But—” Chris began.

Ed waved a hand. “This isn’t over. I’m still thinking.”

Chris slurped his drink. He may’ve been an idiot but he knew not to interrupt while Ed was thinking. When Ed finished, he asked Chris what time it was.

“Four O’clock,” said Chris, in a voice that didn’t sound like it came from a crushed windpipe.

“Okay,” Ed told him. “We got an hour before the Mall closes for Christmas Eve. Let’s go gear up.”

Chris’s face expanded into a stupid grin. “Dude! Now you’re talkin’!”

“**LOL! LOL! LOL!** Five minutes to finish your Christmas shopping! Don’t forget to check out all the fabulous last-chance deals at your checkout counter. **LOL! LOL! LOL!**”

“So that’s the plan?” Chris whispered from where they sat on one of the wooden benches perhaps twenty yards from The Saint ringing his bells. Ed’s plans were usually pretty smart. This didn’t sound like one of them.

“Simple plans are always the best,” said Ed.

“But dude, what if someone sees us following him?”

“Doesn’t matter,” said Ed. “Walking in the same direction as someone who later takes a beating isn’t a crime.”

“But—”

“Sneaking after someone who later takes a beating can be construed as a crime. Just relax and don’t look suspicious. Hey! He’s putting his bells away.”

The Saint had abruptly stopped hawking the Mall’s wares and was stowing his bells inside the black cauldron. He then folded the cauldron’s tripod legs, tucked them inside, and walked at a fast clip toward the inner maze of the Mall’s shops.

“He’s going the wrong way,” Chris hissed.

Ed stood and began walking after The Saint. Chris sat for a moment, wondering what to do, then raced after his friend. When he caught up, Ed said, “The plan is to follow him, so we follow.”

“But we’re supposed to be leaving the Mall!”

Ed let out a big sigh. “Dude, just act like you know what you’re doing and no one will question you.”

“But—”

“Hey, you guys are going the wrong way!” It was the two Mall cops from earlier. They spun toward them on their tiny electric jeep. “Closing time, boys,” said cop Gary.

Chris stopped walking, but Ed kept going. “Gotta get my mom,” Ed said. “She works here.”

The cops looked at each other. Then cop Bart shrugged and they drove

away.

“That was ultra!” Chris said when he caught up to Ed.

“I told you, dude. Just act like you know what you’re doing and people will think you do.”

“Chill!”

Chris picked up his pace as The Saint outdistanced them, walking at an insanely fast clip toward the center of the Mall.

“Where’s this guy going?” Ed mumbled.

“Maybe his mom works here too,” Chris wheezed, panting to keep up. Ed gave him the look, and Chris shut up.

At last The Saint slowed and walked through a door that said STAFF ONLY.

Chris shook his head as Ed halted outside the door. “That’s it then,” he said hopefully, puffing for breath.

In response, Ed pushed the door open three inches and peered inside. “A corridor,” he whispered, then pushed the door far enough to slip inside.

Chris took a quick look around, saw no one, and followed.

The corridor was narrow and poorly lit. The first room they encountered was a janitor’s closet. No sign of the janitor or The Saint.

“Should we be here?” Chris whispered.

“This is perfect,” Ed whispered back. “Now shsssh.”

The second room was larger and looked like storage. Old chairs and folded tables. Boxes with unlabeled contents. There was no light inside and they didn’t look for a switch.

The corridor then turned a corner. Chris hung back as Ed took a peek and then slipped around it. Chris followed only to find that after three feet the hallway ended in a third and final room. Ed stood looking inside. Chris looked over his shoulder.

It was a large room, filled with benches and more junk. This time the lights were on and Chris saw all sorts of crap, most of it holiday displays. The Thanksgiving paraphernalia that had been crowding the Mall a few weeks ago. Halloween skeletons and zombies. Easter bunny signs and flying eggs. Steve Jobs Day silhouettes. Summer crap. It was twelve months of mall all crammed into one room.

Chris could also see The Saint. He stood at one of the benches. Fortunately

his back was to the door and his attention was focused on the bench in front of him. The Saint's shoulders and arms moved as he worked at something, but the rest of him was still.

Directly in front of him, Chris could almost feel the confidence ooze off Ed, and he had to agree that the circumstances couldn't be better. The Saint. Alone. Oblivious that they were there. No witnesses. Chris watched as Ed pulled the pipe from where it had been concealed against his leg and held in place by his sock and jeans. His friend's knuckles were white where they clenched the pipe. Carefully and quietly, Chris reached down and retrieved his own length of pipe.

Chris's throat hurt from where The Saint had nearly strangled him. The Christmas Icon deserved everything he was about to get. Chris knew that he would feel no remorse afterward.

As an omen that right was on their side, The Saint turned on some equipment. A hair dryer? No, it was too loud for a hair dryer. Some kind of industrial dryer. Was he making toys? Toys to deliver on Christmas Eve? Not that it mattered.

Ed stepped forward, obviously confident that The Saint couldn't hear him over the equipment, and Chris moved up beside him. They both raised their metal pipes.

Chris felt an adrenaline rush, or what he assumed was an adrenaline rush. He felt his pulse quicken and his temperature rise, and he knew he was grinning in that way that annoyed Ed so much. So what. Chris was going to enjoy this. He deserved the right to grin.

Ed's pipe began to swing down, so Chris followed suit. He could see that Ed was going to smack The Saint directly on the back of the head and suddenly wondered if the Christmas icon's skull would smash, spewing brains and blood across the room. Chris didn't want to get in the way of Ed's blow, so he swung to the side, aiming for the right ear. Another omen of righteousness, both blows struck at the same time.

There was a loud CLANG, followed by two terrific cries of pain, one of them Chris's, followed moments later by multiple clangs as both pipes bounced on the floor and rolled under the bench. Chris was certain he had just broken his hand, his wrist, and possibly his arm. By reflex he held his damaged hand in his good one, the pain of caressing broken bones somehow more bearable than not

caressing broken bones.

Chris was about to glance at Ed to confirm what he already knew, that they were both in the same boat, when The Saint spun around and caught his gaze with those burning blue eyes of his. Somehow, Chris pulled his gaze away from those eyes to the focus on the dent on the right side of The Saint's head.

"You two!" shouted The Saint. And then "LOL! LOL! LOL! Congratulations. You've moved from my naughty list to my shit list."

"Holy crap," Ed sputtered from where he stood beside Chris. "You're a droid!"

"And you two," shouted The Saint, "are probably the only two idiots in Glory who didn't know that Santa is a droid."

"Santa?" Chris said. "Who the frack is Santa?"

"Dude, The Saint is Santa," mumbled Ed.

"LOL! LOL! LOL!" yelled The Saint. "And before that I was Nick. And once a upon a time I shouted HA! HA! HA! Instead of LOL! LOL! LOL!"

"What's going on here?" said a new voice.

Chris turned and saw the two Mall cops standing in the doorway. There were both frowning. Cop Gary looked at Chris's hands.

"Jeez. It's the infirmary for you." He glanced at Ed. "And you. I warned you."

Cop Bart was looking at The Saint's head. "AND you damaged the merchandise. Maybe the Mall should sue you instead of bandage you up."

"I can fix myself," boomed The Saint.

Cop Bart chuckled. "Too bad for you boys. You'd prefer the lawsuit to the infirmary."

Chris turned and saw what the droid held in its hands. It was a head. The head of an old, old man.

"Father Time," shouted the droid. "That's who I'll be next week. LOL! LOL! LOL!"

Cop Gary placed a firm grip on Jerry's shoulder. "Speaking of Time, it's time to come with us."

As they were marched out of The Saint's lair, Ed said, "I want to call my parents."

"And tell them what?" snarled cop Bart. "That you tried to brain a Mall employeee."

“It’s just a droid,” Chris interjected. “No law against braining a droid.” He heard Ed grunt and knew he shouldn’t have spoken.

Cop Bart laughed, and then cop Gary said, “Actually, it is against the law to brain a droid. If you had done any serious damage I doubt your folks could afford it.”

“You didn’t know it was a droid until after you tried to kill it,” said cop Bart.

“You can’t know that,” said Ed.

Then Chris heard Ed’s voice say, “Holy crap. You’re a droid!” followed by a click. A recording.

“How did you think we knew you were back there?” said cop Gary.

They continued in silence and a few minutes later they were escorted into a cinderblock walled crypt deep in the basement of the Mall complex.

“Your infirmary is down here?” Ed asked.

“I did tell you that you didn’t want to come here,” said cop Gary.

The crypt ended in a dark space with dust covered boxes sitting on skids. There was a single door with a coded security pad. When the door opened, the Bride of Frankenstein stood on the other side. She was tall. Maybe six-foot-one. Her coiled midnight hair stood an additional foot taller. She wore a white nurses’ coat that covered her from collar to ankles and she held a clipboard in her hands.

“Patients?” asked the Bride, smiling. “It’s been days since I’ve had patients.”

“A Christmas present,” said cop Bart.

“It’s another droid, isn’t it?” said Ed.

Chris stared at her, and knew Ed spoke the truth. She stood too straight and too still. Only her eyes moved. And her mouth when she spoke.”

“Welcome to The Saint’s Workshop,” said cop Bart. “The Elves aren’t in right now. They are at home enjoying Christmas Eve with their families. But here to take care of you is one of their works-in-progress. A Nurse droid.”

“Droids can’t be doctors and nurses,” said Ed. The tasks are too complicated.”

“True,” said cop Bart. “For now. But Nurse Hacksaw here is an advance model droid. As is The Good Saint. Not on the market yet. Able to feign more emotions and handle more complex tasks. Or so the Elves hope.”

The Bride’s smile widened.

“Nurse Hacksaw hasn’t lost a patient yet,” said cop Gary.

Cop Bart continued. “Another few months of trials and she’ll be presented to the Glory City Hospital Board along with her track record. You two will be on that record. Just think. You’ll be famous.”

“Looks like I have some fractured bones to set,” said Hacksaw. She took Ed’s injured hand into hers and started pressing with her fingers and thumbs, shifting bones around. Ed screamed.

“I forgot to mention,” said cop Bart. “Nurse Hacksaw is designed for the treatment of the uninsured. No antiseptic, I’m afraid. Or painkillers. Only the minimum required care. On the bright side, the plastic splints and bandages are free.”

“My parents will have your ass!” Ed shrieked between screams of pain.

“Not our ass,” said cop Bart. “We just work here. They’ll have to sue the Mall management. Or the Elves, if you like. Of course, they’ll return the favour by having you arrested for attempted murder and damaging a droid.”

“I suggest,” said cop Gary, “that you just take your medicine and go home thankful that you are going home rather than prison. I mean, if you think the infirmary is bad, you haven’t met prison yet.”

“So,” Ed grunted. “Good cop, bad cop, huh?”

“Not at all,” said cop Bart. “Bad cop, worse cop. Say one word about this place or what happened here and prison will be the least of your worries.”

“You’ll let us go?” said Ed.

“Of course,” said cop Gary, otherwise known as good cop. “We need you alive and healed up for Nurse Hacksaw’s report card. This is quid pro quo. You injured your hands and our infirmary fixed them. And we have no interest at this time of pressing charges.”

“That could change, of course,” cop Bart said with an evil grin. “With cause.”

Chris had listened to all this in a daze, watching as the droid shifted Ed’s hand and wrist while he screamed. The nurse now applied plastic splints and bandages while Ed gritted his teeth.

“It will take the fractures several weeks to heal,” said the nurse to Ed. “Don’t move your hand, wrist, or even your fingers. Don’t remove the bandages or splints. Don’t get the bandages wet or dirty. You can removed the wrappings in February, but be gentle with hand and wrist for an additional two months.

Next patient.”

Chris almost collapsed when he realized that meant him.

“Go ahead and faint,” suggested cop Gary. “Nature’s antiseptic.”

But Chris felt the adrenaline rush again and knew he wasn’t about to faint. Not yet. The nurse took his hand and through his first scream he heard cop Bart shout, “LOL! LOL! LOL! Merry Christmas!”

Afterword

The 10th Circle Project is 10-volume, shared-world ebook series, written by the authors of the 2009 Aurora award winning *Women of the Apocalypse*.

Hope and Glory, twin cities that share a bloody history in the heart of North America. After generations of conflict, the mysterious 10th Circle Project promises a new era of cooperation and peace; if it doesn't plunge them into the abyss of total war first.

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His novella, "Deus Ex Machina", was part of the Aurora-winning Women of the Apocalypse released in 2009. His most recent publications include Homo Sanguinus in the Evolve 2: Stories of the Future Undead anthology from Edge SF&F, and the story Fight Night in the Broken Time Blues anthology. Follow him at ryanmcfadden.com.

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