

December 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2025

On this festive day, I stumbled into a strip club, which was stupid and bizarre because I don't even like naked women dancing. Not that I have a thing against naked women, nor dancing for that matter, but the nipple pasties and fluorescent neon purple lights really kill that whole mood.

I was wearing a crappy stained red Santa hat with ushanka-like ear flaps; as well as a hideous Christmas sweater that I think was intended to be kitschy or ironic. I was I could say it was knit by someone I knew, like a lover or grandma or even a clingy coworker, but no; it was purchased at a supermarket.

And god it was truly gaudy: atop its red-and-green zigzagging surface of doom, Santa was slamming down a dram—rosy-cheeked as a bright red apple. He was bulbous for sure, hanging in there with the suspenders. Reindeer that skirted the line between realism and disgusting caricature hovered around with shit-eating grins. Some wore blinders, some smoked cigars. One took the shit-eating grin too literally.

Why were my khakis stained in several places? For fuck's sake! It could've been anything. Something my dad, an atypically demure man, always said that I took to heart: one shit-stain at a time. Only today did I truly understand what he meant.

Visible through a sheet of plexiglass behind a desk jockey was a room filled with pulsating multicolored lights, an array that was only a spectacle to the kind of person who thought that ejaculating was higher on Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs than belonging.

The room was so saturated with a kind of perforating atmospheric filth that it was suffocating. You never realized just how reducible to meat the human body could be until you were in a place where people who'd been doing it their whole lives treated it like a business.

At least it was festive, I noted. There were holiday wreaths and a Christmas tree in the corner. And the performers were wearing costumes in the likeness of the Clauses, reindeer, and elves. Though they were inauthentic replicas, of course. The North Pole was much too cold for garments like this.

The woman at the front tried to get my attention by coughing loudly, but it was pretty muted under the loud, thumping, anhedonic, electronic, neuron annihilating, synth drum beating, ass-penetration music.

She was blonde, but probably naturally brunette based on the way colors flitted between strains. Her face was stringent like she got a lemon tucked into her cheek, and her teeth were yellow from smoking. She was fat, but barely. She'd probably spent most of her life up to that point being pretty thin—unhealthily so.

I wanted to say she was dressed like a police officer, but that's not exactly right. It was more in a law enforcer motif, what with the colors, and the badge, and the buttons of which some had been left undone.

"You, Christmas Boy, c'mere," she rasped. Personally, I thought I looked more like a Christmas Man. I earned these notches on my belt, and these wrinkles, and this messy beatnik beard.

“Me?” I asked purposelessly just to be a nettle. She nodded emphatically.

“If you wanna get in, you’re gunna needa buy a tickett,” and she held the final plosive of the word ‘ticket’ before allowing it to explode out. “Then I can stamp your haaand,” she groaned as she spoke.

“You misunderstand,” I start, “I don’t want to go look at strippers!”

“Honey, you walked into the strip club. What the hell else am I supposed to assume you came in here for?”

Unfortunately, that made a lot of sense.

“Ugh, fine. How much for a ticket to the... show, or whatever you call it.”

“It’s sixty bucks,” and she extended her grimy hand for emphasis.

“Fuck,” I cry, “that’s bullshit!” I yelp, “I’m leaving,” I whine.

“...but we have a special first-timer 50% discount.”

“Okay fine, but you’re twisting my hand here,” and I pulled \$30 out of my wallet and threw it at the podium she stood at.

She grabbed the money without stopping to count it, then pulled a nauseatingly pink ticket off a roll of equally pink, equally nauseating tickets. She slid it forward like trash she wanted nothing more to do with.

Mirroring her, I grabbed the ticket like it was trash. I sort of held it up at one end as if at any moment a viscous slime would drip off of it and make my ugly sweater even uglier,

then slipped it in my back pocket where I'd hopefully never see it again. I never remembered to take stuff out of my ass pocket.

Turning the bend into the club, the intensity of the lights only worsened, and so too did the low-budgets of the performers' costumes. Then again, I suppose it did make sense that at a *strip* club the clothes may not be the primary destination for funding.

There wasn't an open seat anymore, this was one absurdly busy strip joint. The grimy content of the characters inside was delightfully diverse in a perverse way. Sweat-stained boozing smelly alcoholics and suit-wearing comb-overed business executives sat side-by-side knee-to-knee staring at the same pole-dancing women. Interclass solidarity the likes of which could be seen nowhere else.

There was so little room anywhere in the establishment, in fact, that some asshole stormed past me and slammed his shoulder into mine. What a dick! I didn't think people actually did that in real life, I thought that was a movie trope! Did he drop some kind of secret letter on the ground? No! He just rammed into me, bloody fucking cunt.

"Hey, fuckface!" I yelled as I whipped around. I'm not sure where the confidence came from. Maybe I was drunk and had forgotten?

The man who turned to face me a skinhead. Classic skinhead. How else do I put it? He had the tattoos, the studded leather jacket, and the, y'know, skin on his head. Despite some of the ink on him, I really doubted he was much into Buddhism. Buddhists didn't scowl quite like this guy did now.

“Fuckface? Me fuckface?! Fuckface you! I’m gonna beat your ass!” cried the skinhead.

Boy, I wasn’t really sure why I got myself into this situation. Must’ve been that awful office Christmas party. It had spoiled my whole mood, enough to bring me to a strip club; though to be entirely honest I still wasn’t quite sure why I was here either.

“Beating my ass won’t make your mother love you!”

The skinhead emphatically brought his hand to his pale and sturdy chest out of hurt.  
“My mom loves me!”

“Yeah, and her brother too, I’d wager!”

“It’s a purity thing! We’re a dying race!”

“Oh, you’re about to be!”

Again, I wasn’t entirely sure why I was saying these things. I’d wager he likely weighed twice, almost thrice my weight in pure muscle. I had some scrappy strength as a result of my strange obsession with parkour back in college, but that had been more than a few years ago by this point.

The skinhead came charging forward, winding up a big punch like a cartoon character. I tensed up. Good, he was easy to read. That meant I could dodge and hit him with a surprise attack, maybe I’d jam my knee into his testicles. How’s that for family legacy?

But, by the time I'd had that full thought process, he had already arrived, and the calloused fist of a troubled blue-collar worker came crashing into my very glass-like chin. *At least I have a beard, that should cushion some of the blow*, I thought as I fell to the ground crying. I'd bit my tongue a little and I could already taste blood.

But, y'know, it was only a hint of a taste: like flossing after going way longer than you told your dentist you had gone without flossing.

I pushed myself up off the ground, all too aware of the very unpleasant concoction of mystery fluids and dirty shoe prints and a couple peanut shells that now clung to half my face. Were they peanut shells? Did strip clubs serve peanuts? Not a question I could answer now.

I looked up and saw the bottom-side of a steel-toed military boot leering over me. I'd never felt so much like a cockroach, except for some days waking up in my apartment after an especially soulless week on the job.

I didn't doubt that the skinhead might actually stomp down, turning my facial structure and skin into a combined fractal mass of bloody goop. For one: he was a skinhead. And for two: military fetishists who bought boots like this would look for absolutely any opportunity to make them seem like a worthwhile buy.

I rolled out of the way as fast as I could, slamming my face into more mystery stains on the floor. The floor roll was not a difficult combat maneuver, very beginner-accessible.

Sure enough, a boot crashed down where I had just been. Good thing about picking a fight with inebriated racists is that they weren't very coordinated.

Seizing the moment, I lurched for his leg he had just stomped down with. I had it! I was clinging onto it like a sad puppy and... well, I wasn't sure what I was going to do from here.

The skinhead didn't know what to do either. He looked down at me like I was some sort of rodent. Which, I had gotten that kind of comment before; some people likened me to a bit of a rat-man. It wasn't flattering, but I'd grown accustomed to it by now.

Besides, no way was I beating the rat-man allegations now that I had just bit this man in the leg. Yeah, well. He screamed.

And while the healthy and wholesome outbursts of a fascist punching me in the face can be safely ignored, the high-pitched yelp of pain this skinhead released called the bouncer over quickly. That'll show me to have a high pain threshold, I suppose.

The bouncer used two arms and grabbed me firmly by the Christmas sweater, lifting me up like you might lift a dog in a carrier. We had a heart-to-heart staring each other in the eyes. Such rich, grey eyes. And wouldn't you know it, this man had no hair, either. Must've been some form of bald solidarity.

I was thrown, quite literally, out the front of the strip club and back into the freezing cold snow. And you already know that for a seedy location like this, the snow outside would not be a winter wonderland of beautiful, clean, fresh snowfall. No, of course it was dirty slush and black ice. Someone's spilled energy drink trickled into a mountain piled up against the wall and melted it drop by drop.

Something stunk. Well, several things stunk. The petrichor of the filthy asphalt stunk. The intoxication of booze-breath in the air respirated and recirculated by the same gaggle of drunken bums stunk. But the spilled over dumpster forming a ring of ice around it really, REALLY stunk.

Ugh, garbage. Garbage day was two days from now and my neighbor still hadn't finished borrowing my rolling garbage cans for some mysterious, ostensibly food-related purpose. I just remembered.

I relinquished myself to just sitting on the frozen concrete for a moment, lying on my side. It wasn't horribly uncomfortable except for the stiffness in my joints, but the effort of moving would be even worse.

I knew I had a car somewhere in the world, but I don't think it was in this parking lot. Or even in this county. I had had one rough, rough month. An "Unhappy Holidays", if you will. And it's just as well. As a person, I don't like to look to symbolism too much where unnecessary, or at least that's what I would tell myself up until I saw another great symbol to look to.

Garbage day was on Christmas this year, and the mayor had just passed a law requiring garbagemen and other "necessary" civil workers to work on holidays. If that wasn't representative of how I felt, lying here in the ice-cold parking lot of a strip club this holiday season, I wasn't sure what would be.

I dreamt that a girl I knew in high school was introducing me to her family. They were amicable enough, but I could tell from their looks that they didn't really approve of me. That was typical enough, I suppose. I had a bit of a rat face. It offput some people. But quickly after that, I didn't see the girl again and only caught glimpses of her family members, of which there were many.

For the most part, I was just wandering the house.

It was always cold because they never turned the heater on, and the house layout was just bizarre. It had an indoor garden, and a whole room that was a hot spring serving as a joiner to several other rooms, such that you would have to dip waist-high into the water and wade through to reach the other rooms it connected to. There were bedrooms and powder rooms at random points, and as far as I know, there was no exit or entrance to the building.

At some point, I walked into a room that sort of resembled a shed if a shed had more cooking supplies, and someone in there dropped and broke my favorite Christmas ornament from childhood. Asshole.

December 24<sup>th</sup>, 2025

At some point during the night I must've peeled myself off that nasty old parking lot asphalt and found a nice municipal bench to rest on, because that's where I woke up. As kitschy as those ear flaps on my Santa hat were, I was quite grateful for them upon waking

because I can only imagine my own drool would've frozen my face to the bench in my sleep were I not using the left flap as a pillow.

I opened my eyes slowly. I was in no rush to get up because I had nothing to look forward to. First my right eye, then my left. My vision was still misty from the blur of sleep, and the cold had made my face red and puffy.

I could sort of make out the blurry figures of bushy pine trees coated in frosting, and maybe that was a jogger who just past by at a freakishly early hour. That was to be expected, though. Joggers were freaks by nature.

My nose hurt real bad. Or it would, if I could feel it. My lips were sealed together from dry air. My stomach grumbled like I'd given it orders. But my ears were toasty warm!

I pushed off the bench and tried to sit up. In an instant, I felt an indescribable soreness all over my body. Places I didn't even know I had pressure points at were aching like they were tense sheets of metal being bent.

Right. And my jaw hurt really, really bad. That was the worst ache of all. It felt as if someone had—well, you were there, you know what happened.

Sitting up took a Herculean effort. I was alive, and by god was I. This little park wasn't half bad. The snow here much more resembled that idyllic gentle snowfield one would hope for. You could practically see the little magic stocking-prints of a cherub elf-boy materializing on the surface there where he used his weird little invisibility cantrip.

No, that wasn't actually happening, I was just being strange for hyperbolic effect. It's important to clarify; you can never quite tell with these unreliable narrator types, and

despite my best efforts this year that's still very much the camp I end up in. Must be the Naughty list again!

Well, I'm not really sure why. It's not like as if I went around beating up grandmas, blowing up cities, or working as an advertising consultant or anything evil like that. It just felt like whenever I tried to do what feels right to me, someone ended up getting hurt.

Hey, maybe it's a curse—but you learn to live with it, and when you think about it curses are actually quite cool. If truly I suffered from a one-of-a-kind supernatural phenomenon, could I complain? I bet that's something no one else gets to claim in history.

I sneezed, bringing me back into physical space. Right. Maybe I should stop sitting out here in the cold, so that the sweat from my pits would stop making a muggy mess, and I could stop smelling like B.O., and I could not die of frostbite.

A shower would be nice. God, a shower would be lovely. A Shower would be godlike, divine. I should return home.

Home, right, home. Home, where it's garbage day. Well, maybe I shouldn't go home. After all, who knows what could be waiting for me there.

Maybe I'd go to the gym instead. They had showers there, and maybe a tacky athleticwear gift shop I could plunder for some less gaudy clothes. I had my membership card, right?

I reached into my back pocket to check my wallet. Yep, wallet was still there. I checked inside.

There was no money inside. Nor a debit card, nor credit card. Which was pretty annoying, because I was certain I had those things before. The wallet was quite barren as a whole, sans for one card tucked away in a front pouch. I pulled it out.

Library card.

I couldn't believe it. Someone robbed me in the night, and instead of merely taking my wallet they opened it up and took everything inside... except my library card! Even my gym membership card had been lifted!

What a meticulous, meticulous, and illiterate thief.

I slipped my wallet back in my back pocket, crushing the strip club ticket beneath it. I guess I was going to the library then. Where else was I gonna go, home? Definitely not home.

I roughly knew the whereabouts of the library, but I had to admit I was not enough of a frequent visitor to know it by heart. But I tried to make a habit of going sometimes. You know, roughly twice a year. Although, admittedly, it had been a few years...

Well, it was right next to that coffee shop, right? The weird one with the tryhard drink names like "Heart Pulverizer" and the alternative nose-studded women at the register?

And I knew where that place was.

It's not what you think. A friend took me there recently because apparently there's a secret hookah parlor in the back. No, I don't do hookah. No, he didn't warn me. Yeah, maybe I need better friends; but pickings are slim out here in the adult world.

Alright, so I know how to get to the half-coffee/half-hookah hybrid store, because it's by that giant statue of an egg or something. The great big bronze egg. Boy, that thing was ugly. But it was the centerpiece of the largest street in the area, so I'm sure I could work my way out from here to the library. And then I'll... get a book or something. Sure, that's a good library plan.

I have to confess: I love walking around snowy, cold, hostile streets during Christmas time. Maybe that's not a controversial opinion; plenty of people love the red and green lights strung around, the glowing electronic tinsel, the inflatable snowmen and ancient pictograms of Santa Claus; and it was true that all that stuff was great in the way that it showed signs of human life, sure—but what I confusingly loved was the bitter misery of it.

The icy wind upon my skin, the look of detached coolth on everyone's faces as they bumbled around to buy candy cane striped versions of things they already owned, and the chance that at any moment I could slip and be drowned in hospital bills.

I enjoyed the contrast of a boarded-up storefront or a bike left in the show equally as much as I enjoyed the warm fireside hearths visible through the windows and heartfelt gifts exchanged by lovers under streetlight. They complimented each other wonderfully.

It was all a little charming in a familiar, brutalist sense. I don't like to internalize existential self-harm too much; but a little indulgence for the holidays wouldn't kill me, now would it?

Does that make me a bad person? I don't think so, but the popular vote may still put me on the Naughty list as I stated prior, so I tend to just preface I'm not the great person I'd like to be.

Does it make me a pretentious asshole though? Oh, undoubtedly. I get that a lot around the office.

And here that great big egg comes into view now. Snow just falls right off its bulbous dome, forming a kind of fairy circle around the statue's podium. Huh. Don't know what it is with me and faefolk today. Christmas spirit, I suppose.

Anyway, I couldn't not take a moment to marvel at the statue's exquisite ugliness. It's only an egg, but its size made it more like a pimply blemish on the rear end of the local architecture.

What was a giant egg even supposed to represent? Fragility? Birth? Or maybe an inability to become one's true self, since a bird born in a bronze egg could never hatch. Or maybe it was just a giant fucking egg.

The cold boiling into my senses, my skin cracking in the dry air, it was hard to say which was more scrambled: me or the egg. It certainly didn't help that I was standing in its shadow, so I moved to the sunny side and embraced the warm metal. I love you, giant egg.

In that moment, hugging the egg, I think I understand the purpose of the statue, and it was deceptively simple: round things are pleasing to the senses.

I disengaged from the egg and saw the way families passing around me were staring, willing themselves to push their strollers and the like faster without making it too obvious.

With my holy pilgrimage to the great big fucking egg complete, it was time to make my way to that strange alternative coffee shop.