Thank you for being an alpha reader.

And I apologize in advance.

As an alpha reader, you are reading a rough manuscript. What do I mean by "rough"? In my first draft, I wrote without looking back, simply trying to get the story down on paper even if it was radically changing and contradicting the story I originally intended to tell at the start. In my second draft, I went back and made it coherent. That's it—little to no line editing. There’s no polish, typos exist, and I need to rework some scenes, but the general structure is there.

I also must warn you of the following: this is a rough manuscript from someone who never has written a novel and, if that wasn't enough, it's a rough manuscript from a first-time writer who has never written anything inover a decade and is very much out of practice with the craft. I’m a rookie. Expect rookie mistakes.

And did I mention it's rough?

But enough of the warnings, lest I frighten you to the point where you dare not read it.

In all likelihood, this will be my only novel. It was exhausting to manage work, family, and all other responsibilities while trying to write this narrative. Since this may be my only work, I want to give this one everything I got, which includes a rigorous analysis from you and further re-writes from me to make this story the best that it can be.

I need your help. I have been immersed in this story for months so it’s difficult to see the forest for the trees. I am hoping, as a visitor to this story, you can see things I can no longer see.

Please make comments as you read. I am especially interested in your comments on plot, character, and theme. Problems with these three elements will have greater ramifications in my re-writes than problems with style or setting, for instance. That said, since all these elements need to be addressed eventually, I would welcome comments on all aspects.

Be honest. If you hated a scene, let me know. If you despised a character, let me know. If you think a theme is morally confused, let me know. Don’t withhold valid criticism for fear of offense. But…

Be constructive. *"This is horrible!*" or even *"This is good!"* aren't particularly helpful. I need to know why it’s horrible so I can change it or why it’s good so I don’t, which leads me to…

Be specific. If there is a problem, try to diagnose it with some precision. I understand that the diagnosis is sometimes elusive. In these cases, it's better to know there is a problem (e.g., *"This scene feels off but I don’t know why…"*)than to either think there is none or, perhaps worse, to misdiagnose the problem completely.

Be exhaustive. Note everything, no matter how small. If you had to re-read a paragraph to understand what was happening, note it. If you didn't have a good sense of space for a scene, note it. If sentences felt clunky or overly repetitious, note it. If you couldn't follow who was talking, note it. If your mind started to wander during a passage, note it. If a line of dialogue fell flat, note it. Note it, note it, note it.

And if you survive the reading process, I would also like to know your overall response to the story—beyond the comments written as you read, which speak on details (*the trees*) but not necessarily on big picture (*the forest*). Having everything in view, what ultimately worked and what ultimately didn’t? What pieces keep it from being cohesive? What pieces tie everything together?

Sharing this novel is an unnerving experience for me. I seldom share my writing with anyone—I can count the number of times on one hand—and I have never shared a piece of writing that was in such an early, rough form. To be honest, it’s slightly embarrassing and very much a humbling process. But I realize that it’s needed for the story to ultimately flourish. So please, let me know everything that’s right and wrong with the writing, even if it may be uncomfortable for me to hear. It’s best for the story.

I better end there before this introduction becomes longer than the novel itself.

Again, thank you for being an alpha reader.

* **David Schwenker**



This is a complicated story of a simple Christmas miracle.

A man named Paul and a woman named Annie met and fell in love.

Wednesday, December 22nd, 1954

New York City

**1**

Remove the gizzard. Looks like clam muscles. Keep.

Remove the heart. Looks like a human one. Keep.

Remove the liver. Flabby and dark purple. Adds a metallic taste. Throw away.

Remove the neck. Needs to be chopped. Keep.

Loosen the folds of the skin around the neck.

Slide fingers under the skin and rub the herb butter onto the breasts. Do not tear the skin.

Fill the small neck cavity with stuffing.

Fold skin over the cavity and pin it with a trussing needle.

Fill the large cavity with herb stuffing.

“Archibald!”

The scream shook Archibald out of his daydream.

The phonograph in the living room inundated his ears with the festive melody “Deck the Halls”.

*Deck the halls with boughs of holly*

*Fa-la-la-la-la, la-la-la-la*

Archibald was in throes of stuffing a giant turkey, his arm fully immersed in the cavity of the meaty bird. He pulled it out and was now covered in sage, onion, pepper, and savory indeterminables. He ought to wipe that off. It was quite unsightly.

He looked up towards the voice and saw a strange woman standing in the kitchen doorway. She was beautiful but uncomfortably intense. Her elbows were bent outwards and her hands were placed on her hips in visible frustration. Her eyes then lowered into a harsh glare.

Goodness gracious! It was his wife, Mary! He must have been momentarily disoriented, but he recognized that bitter look anywhere. The one wives often give their husbands. Now, where was the towel to wipe his hands?

“Did you hear a word that I said?” Mary demanded.

How embarrassing. He did not. Best not let her know that. Ah, there was the towel, under his homemade cranberry sauce.

“I said I am leaving you,” she repeated.

“Oh? Where are you going?” He moved the bowl of the red condiment which sloshed more than he would have liked. It hadn't sufficiently gelled. Did he add enough sugar? Did he not boil the cranberries long enough?

“No, you dunce. I am leaving you. *Leaving*.” She stressed that word like a parent teaching new words to a child. “Do you understand? I am moving out of this cramped prison.”

The words finally hit. Leaving? Prison? But how do I fix my cranberry sauce? His head began to swirl. He wasn’t expecting to go from culinary science to marital arbitration in a matter of seconds. Through the jumbled mess of his thoughts he could only conceive of a single word to say.

“Why?” He thought it was a perfectly sensible word to say.

“*Why?*“ She thought it was a perfectly idiotic word to say.

“Really, Archibald? Really? Isn’t it obvious? I’m not happy. This place doesn’t make me happy. *You* don’t make me happy. Nothing *here* makes me happy.”

He didn't make her happy? Why was she being so cruel? Also, what temperature was the oven to be set?

“But I found someone who does make me happy.”

Someone else? What does she mean? And was it 400 degrees? 375 degrees? If only he could remember.

“So I am packing up my things and leaving with him tonight.”

Him? A man? An affair! How could she betray his love so flippantly? Oh yes, he remembered. It was 350 degrees. No! Now wasn't the time! He needed to stop thinking about the turkey! His marriage was in jeopardy!

“But," Archibald began, collecting his thoughts, "I’ve tried everything to make you happy.”

“And that’s why I am leaving, Archibald. You’ve tried everything. You just can’t. You’re incapable of it.”

With those words she may as well have stabbed him directly in the heart, which evidently looked like a turkey's heart if his recipe notes were accurate.

“This is good for the both of us, you know.”

She said that as if it would make everything better. It didn’t, of course.

She motioned to turn around but paused, then turned back with a smile. A sly, insincere smile. “Oh, by the way, could you drop off those gift boxes to my work? The ones under the tree? I won’t have time now because I have to pack and make it to the train in time.”

“Do it yourself,” Archibald snapped. It was very uncharacteristic of him, but how do you expect the man to respond when his significant other tells him that she is having an affair and plans to move out before even tasting his delicious Christmas turkey that he has been painstakingly preparing for the past few hours yet she somehow still expects him to do her frivolous errands which she can’t do herself only because she needs time to pack her things and catch a train with her lover? Really! Such audacity!

Mary looked at Archibald like a parent would look at a disobedient child; one who is trying to act like a big boy but still can’t even tie his own shoes. How quaint. How pathetic.

“Well, you can do as you please, of course. You don’t have to bring them. But I hope you realize that these gifts are for the children. If you don’t bring them, then you will be ruining Christmas morning for all those little girls and boys. So, do it for them, not for me.”

Her smile broadened. She took pleasure in manipulating Archibald.

Now, Archibald wasn’t a vulgar man, but a certain word came to his mind. He didn’t say it out loud, but it began with the letter B and rhymed with “witch” (because the word was *bitch*).

But confound his kind, turkey-like heart! He began to think of the children!

You see, Archibald always wanted to be a parent to children of his own. In fact, on the side table in the kitchen, he still had a copy of *Treatise on Parents and Children* by George Bernard Shaw waiting to be read, courtesy of their neighbor who was a librarian. It was overdue by a few years and he had been avoiding their neighbor ever since, but more on that later. However, Mary didn’t want stretch marks so they compromised by having Archibald compromise. As such, since he was condemned to a childless life, he found himself acting rather fatherly towards all children everywhere.

Why should the little children suffer? Why deprive them of gifts on Christmas morning? Just to prove some point? For some of those kids, it may be the only gift they’ll get! No, no. He can’t do that to them.

Archibald nodded, acknowledging defeat.

Mary smiled a toothy grin, acknowledging victory. “Thanks, Archie.”

She turned down the hall and disappeared into the bedroom which was just out of view.

*Deck the halls with boughs of holly*

*Fa-la-la-la-la, la-la-la-la*

The song was in its concluding verse, which was simply a repeat of the opening verse just like most unimaginative songs.

Archibald stood there motionless. He was trying to make sense of what just happened—one moment, he was experiencing the joy of cooking and then the next moment he experienced the complete and total annihilation of his life as he knew it.

*'Tis the season to be jolly*

*Fa-la-la-la-la, la-la-la-la*

“Oh, shush.” Archibald chastised the music for its jolly demeanor.

He looked back at the food which he had been in the process of carefully preparing. He didn't feel like cooking anymore. It all seemed different. It no longer appeared quite as appetizing. That's not to say it looked bad, but while daydreaming he thought he was a culinary expert like Fannie Farmer or Fanny Cradock (a male version, of course, and not a Fanny) whose food was worthy of the gods, or at least those in the Upper East Side. Now the food seemed to be more appropriate for the low-income immigrant families of East Harlem.

Even the kitchen itself seemed different from how it looked just a few moments ago. It looked smaller. His pots, pans, trays, lids, and all other cookware were forcibly crammed into an overheard rack dangling from the ceiling that was on the verge of spilling over. The countertop offered little room for any meaningful food preparation so he had sheets of canvas laid down on the floor to catch all the overflow which invariably happened. Mary detested nary a crumb left on the floor which forced him to improvise with crude solutions. It was not uncommon for Archibald’s feet to be caught up in the folds of the canvas as he shuffled around his small cookery. No, the kitchen was not ideal for aspiring butchers, bakers, and culinary makers, all of which Archibald aspired to be but had little hope of becoming.

He wished he could have more but this small apartment was all that Archibald could afford. That is, all he could afford while also financing his wife’s extravagant lifestyle.

You see, Mary fancied the ornate and the glamorous. She fancied the latest styles and trends. She fancied to put it on the Ritz. She would buy chic dresses, mod shoes, sharp gloves, and swank jewelry, adorning herself with rings, earrings, necklaces, and bracelets like ornaments on a Christmas tree. She would go to salons to get the Bouffant hairdo, nails trimmed, filed, and painted, and face waxed and dabbed with rouge. And when she went out on the town, it was not uncommon for someone to wonder if she indeed was a Rockefeller or perhaps a Roosevelt. She looked the part.

And scattered across all the tables in the apartment were photographs of Mary very much looking that part. Whenever she thought she looked especially good, she would go to a local studio a few blocks away and try to preserve the image she saw in the mirror. Now the framed portraits of her glamour stood on the table like a vain military formation. It was beyond narcissistic. It was a physical impediment to daily life. Archibald found it difficult to even place a single cup on a table without knocking a row of them over like dominoes.

But despite putting her alluring face everywhere, she hated the small apartment—absolutely hated it—because the apartment itself wasn’t great and glorious and grand as she thought of herself. Of course, the irony that it was so small because she lived so big was totally lost on her. Instead, she hated the apartment because it revealed her as a fraud, a fake, a phony, a Fabergé egg that is hollow and crested with imitation gems. It was a reminder that she wasn’t Veronica Lake or Rita Hayworth or even Barabara Rush from *It Came From Outer Space*—a movie Archibald dragged her to see last Halloween to her absolute displeasure—but rather it reminded her she was simply Mary Nowakowski of 304 North Terrace, Third Floor, Apartment B in a crowded city where she was no more noticeable or remarkable than the next person. Not a Rockefeller. Not a Roosevelt.

It also should be said that her sharing the same name as the Virgin Mary was purely a coincidence. In fact, she was far from virginal. Archibald always suspected his wife of being faithful in her infidelity but lacked any tangible proof. On one occasion, Mary came home with a stunning pair of earrings and a dazzling necklace which were so impossibly expensive that there was no conceivable way she could have afford them from either of their incomes. Were they gifts from another man? The notion passed through his mind. But when asked, Mary simply said they were family heirlooms. Archibald had never seen them stored around the apartment before, but neither did he ever rifle through her jewelry boxes—improbable, but not proof.

The phonograph transitioned to its next song:

*Silent Night, Holy Night*

*All is calm and all is bright*

The gentle harmony of the melody hypnotically drew Archibald’s gaze towards the window. Snow was gently fluttering pass the frosted glass. The flakes were large and glistened in the setting sun. Moments like this were the only time the view could ever be considered beautiful for not even ten feet away from the glass pane was the very next building—a blackened brick wall with another window that provided an unobstructed view directly into the neighbor’s living room. This was hardly a picturesque landscape.

The neighbor who graced this view was a 70 year old woman named Angela Crocetti who emigrated from Montesilvano, Italy as a child and had been living in the very same apartment for over 50 years. Her apartment was where her parents had lived to their deaths and it also was where her family had lived—that is, before her husband left her for a much younger woman from Sarasota, Florida, before her older son left her to become a *goombah* and was now shacking up with some dame in Little Italy, and before her younger son involuntarily left her by becoming excommunicated from the family and now can never see them again under penalty of death (it's a long story, and probably better than the one being told here). She now lived alone with a scrappy dog named Pooch who could very well be the devil himself materialized as a canine. At least, that was what her neighbors believed because its bark was irritating and unrelenting. If only some unfortunate accident were to happen to that infernal beast.

The old Italian woman also had a strange obsession with dolls. Every year she would get a new doll for Christmas and place its lifeless body on her window sills. The dolls slowly multiplied over the years. More and more glass eyes began to watch over the apartments of her neighbors with their unblinking stares. Frankly, they were creepy, like something out of Tod Borwning's *The Devil-Doll*. Archibald would also be pleased if an unfortunate accident befell them too. Nothing too dramatic, such as a window unintentionally left open and all them plummeting down to the alley floor below, shattering into a million tiny pieces.

When not yelling at her dog, Mrs. Crocetti spent most of her days watching television. It was just after 4:15PM so she was watching “First Love” on NBC. This was followed by “The World of Mr. Sweeny” at 4:30PM and “Modern Romances” at 4:45PM. At 5PM was “The Pinky Lee Show” and she simply couldn’t stand that childish vaudevillian so she would spend a half hour away from the television until “The Howdy Doody Show” broadcasted at 5:30PM. One could easily set at watch by her viewing habits, though it wouldn't be recommended.

And in those occasions where she was neither yelling at the dog nor watching her television, she was either cooking Italian dishes or looking out her window, which itself was like watching fifty television screens simultaneously. Once the sun sets and the night falls, the illuminated windows of each apartment show bright like the day. If the curtains were drawn, those small screens merely showed silhouettes as in a shadow play, but if the curtains were open—oh, boy—she would then be treated to melodrama that would rival anything on the soap opera “Search For Tomorrow”. Low income neighbors often have a flair for the dramatic.

Archibald pitied her and would frequently engage her in conversation about Italian cooking—their only common interest. There was a clothes line tethered to both apartments which could be used as a means of transport for various food items between the two of them. This transport was accomplished by fastening a wool sock with a metal safety pin onto the rope and filling the sock whatever was needed—a can of tomatoes or a jar of olives, for instance—and feeding the line through the pulley to bring it to whichever person was in need of the provisions. This was how Archibald got the peppercorn for his Christmas turkey recipe—in fact, the wool sock was still on the line.

Seeing Mrs. Crocetti enclosed by the border of the window with the muntins crisscrossing the glass, and seeing her sitting all alone with no friends, no family, no visitors, and seeing her confined to a life of de facto isolation, Archibald was struck by the scene’s startling resemblance to that of a prison cell. The implication was chilling, but what frightened Archibald even more was the quick glimpse of his own reflection in the window, seeing himself framed in an uncomfortably similar confinement.

Mary was right! This was a cramped prison! Only Archibald was the prisoner and Mary was the guard who was telling him to get back to his cell and rattling his cage in a display of power.

The thought was most unpleasant. To distract himself from facing the reality of situation as most would do, Archibald refocused on the flakes of snow and followed their descent as they drifted down into the pits of the alley. The bottom was dark. Light from the setting sun could not quite reach this depth, though some light from traffic and street lamps illuminated its entrance.

It was there, at the entrance, he saw the silhouette of what appeared to be a snowman. It was a large and perfectly formed snowman with three round sections and a top hat. Other than a fringe of white, he couldn't see any other features. Did it have a corncob pipe and a button nose and two eyes made out of coal?

God, he hated that song. First Rudolph then Frosty. What were you thinking, Gene? They'll never last.

The phonograph transitioned to its next song:

*God rest ye merry gentlemen*

*Let nothing you dismay*

The lyrics of the song comforted Archibald. He had to remind himself that there was one glimmer of hope—his secret.

For the past ten years, he has been setting aside funds within a savings account. He did so slowly, diligently, and deposited as much as he was able after providing for his own bare necessities and his wife’s trivial unnecessities. To date, he had amassed precisely $3000—a sum which was quite sufficient for a down payment on a small country house. In fact, that $3000 was the entire purpose of the Christmas turkey dinner. He had reached his financial goal and wanted to celebrate by cooking the best holiday meal imaginable and share with his wife the glorious news of how they were going to exchange the hustle and bustle of the city for the quiet and peace of the countryside.

Of course, he had to keep all this a secret to safeguard the funds from Mary’s squandering hands, remaining steadfast and vigilant to the concealment. After a deposit, he would immediately discard the bank statement in the trash so that not even a paper trail could be followed. Only once did he mistakenly bring a receipt home. Naturally he could not simply throw it in the trash for fear she would go through it (not that she ever does go through the trash due to its unsanitary nature), but he cleverly hid it and promptly disposed it later when he had an opportunity. The crisis was averted.

He had no issue with the secrecy. He naively thought that upon hearing the amount saved and that their escape was now a reality, she would run away to the country with him and they would live happily ever after. But, of course, Mary’s own secret had put a stop to that. She was now escaping with some man and living happily ever after with him, not Archibald.

Maybe it’s all for the best, Archibald thought. At the very least, they were both able to escape in their own way, right? She may be able to find true happiness with this mystery man while Archibald may, who knows, open a bakery? A delicatessen? A butcher’s shop? Work as a chef at some quaint restaurant in the country? Anything would be better than the current job he had as a poultry handler in one of the city's largest slaughterhouses. True, it was technically working with food which had always been Archibald's dream, but he had always imagined his food to already be dead—chopping the heads off turkeys all day wasn't very stimulating. It also greatly embarrassed Mary who forbid Archibald from ever talking about work to anyone ever, even in private. Oh, the idea of freedom from both the city and Mary now started to whet his appetite. Yes, maybe this will be for the best!

But something caught Archibald’s notice. There, sitting on the wall table between two framed pictures of Mary doing various Marlene Dietrich impersonations, was her overly expensive handbag (Mary's, not Marlene Dietrich's). And there, peeking out ever so slightly from the upper lip of that overly expensive handbag was an envelope—an envelope of yellow and tan hues which had an air of familiarity to it.

Archibald glanced towards the doorway. Mary was still in the bedroom packing. He silently moved towards the handbag, reached out towards the envelope, and slipped it out of its place.

Stamped on the envelope were the words “Bankers Trust” which explained the familiarity—this was the bank in which he had his savings account.

Archibald’s heart raced. The envelope was thick and heavy, as if densely packed with paper. Paper which were in the shape of bills. He was terrified. He quickly folded back the envelope’s flap and slid out its contents—in his trembling hands were twenty-five $100 bills and twenty-five $20 bills, totaling precisely $3000.

He staggered back, nearly tripping on the confounded canvas sheet on the floor.

How did she know about the account? How? He had been so cautious! Where did he go wrong? And why does she have it? Was she planning on stealing it? Good, God! If he hadn’t noticed it! If she had left with it! He would have been left with nothing! Penniless! Ten years of work, all for nothing!

“What are you doing with that?”

Archibald looked up to see Mary, her eyes staring at him with burning intensity.

“What am *I* doing with *this*?!” Archibald was shocked at the question.

She aggressively stepped forward. Her hand began to gesture towards him violently. “I can’t believe you—hiding all that money from me! Hoarding it all for yourself! How could anyone be so selfish! You louse! How dare you!”

“How dare *I*?” Archibald was so dumbfounded that she somehow turned this all around on him, that the only words he was able to get out were just repetitions of what she just said.

“Who knows how much money you’ve been keeping from me! How much you have been spending throughout all these years! How could I have been so blind! While I’m working, who knows what you have been doing or where this money has been going! You bastard!”

Archibald wanted to scream that every penny was saved for them, that every nickel was put away for their happiness, that he never spent a dime on himself for ten long years so they could finally get out of this place. But nothing came out.

“Give me back the money!” Mary held out her hand towards Archibald, the disobedient child who was being scolded.

He merely starred back in disbelief. How did this happen? How was everything suddenly his fault and he had now taken what appeared to be *her* money?

It was then that Archibald noticed his wife had put on the same earrings and that same necklace he had long thought to be from another man. He simply had to know once and for all. "You're one to talk, you... cheat! That jewelry isn't some family heirloom! It's from your new beau, isn't it? How long has this been going on? Months? Years?!"

Mary's anger collapsed into laughter. "Oh, you pathetic, pitiful, little boy! This jewelry isn't from my new *beau*. It's not even from my previous *beau*. It's from the *beau* before that, you sad, small, senseless child. I have had more *beaus* than you can even count!"

Archibald could count pretty high, so that was a lot of *beaus*.

"Now give me the money!" Mary snapped.

Mary is leaving him. Mary loves another man. Mary has loved many other men. Mary is stealing his money. Mary is keeping him trapped here. Mary is destroying his dreams. Mary is a word that starts with a B and rhymes with witch and that word is *bitch*.

“Give me the money, Archibald Nowakowski!” Mary was now shouting.

Archibald closed his eyes and started to day-dream again. He imagined what it would be like if Mary just went away and never returned. He imagined what it would be like if she never existed. He imagined what it would be like if he killed her. Yes, it would be so simple. Just like at work. He is given a live turkey. He wraps it in a bag to restrict movement. The head is brought out through a hole. You calm the turkey with a pet. You severe its spinal column with an axe. You hold the bag as its body flails about to prevent bruising. You pass the bag to the next guy. You are given the next turkey. Chop. Next. Chop. Next. Chop. Chop. Chop.

The phonograph transitioned to its next song:

*We wish you a merry Christmas*  
*We wish you a merry Christmas*

When Archibald opened his eyes, Mary was gone! Vanished into thin air! A Christmas miracle!

*We wish you a merry Christmas*  
*And a happy New Year.*

His arms felt heavy. He looked down and in his hands was the entire Christmas turkey he had been meticulously preparing to celebrate their impending happiness. How the devil did that get into his hands?

*Good tidings we bring*  
*To you and your kin*

Looking onto the floor past the Christmas turkey he saw a pair of feet. These were naturally attached to legs which, in turn, were attached to a torso, arms, and a head. It was Mary. She was not moving. A smear of sage, onion, and pepper was streaked across her head—a familiar seasoning blend.

*Good tidings for Christmas*  
*And a happy New Year!*

“Jiminey Christmas!”

**2**

*Oh, bring us some figgy pudding*  
*Oh, bring us some figgy pudding*

Archibald remained motionless. The Christmas turkey was clenched in his hands. The grit from the seasoning felt coarse on his palms and fingers.

“Figgy pudding… I should make that,” he thought in a daze.

*Oh, bring us some figgy pudding*  
*And bring it right here*

What was he talking about? Figgy pudding? His wife was dead on the floor! That is, he though she was dead. Was she dead? Should he check? How do they do it in the movies? Grab the wrist? He never had to do it before. What if she wasn't dead? What would she do to him? Call the police? But did he even do anything? He had no recollection, after all. He was just thinking of turkeys. Maybe she just slipped and fell into the turkey. Or maybe the turkey slipped and fell onto her. How would that even be possible? What was he thinking?

He suddenly grew pale.

Good, God! The curtains were open! Mrs. Crocetti! What if she saw!

A chill ran down his spine. The hair on his neck stood up. He snapped his head towards the window.

A pair of dark, blank eyes stared back at him.

These were not the glass eyes of those confounded dolls which sat on Mrs. Crocetti's windows sills—Archibald was accustomed to seeing those. No, these eyes shimmered. They moved. They *blinked*.

Archibald nearly leaped out of his skin. He gasped. He sighed. He rolled his eyes in relief.

Those beady eyes belonged to that pestilent pup named Pooch, perched on his windowsill. The dog tremored excitedly. A bark was working its way up in his throat.

Archibald ignored that impish dog and looked beyond it.

The chair was empty! Mrs. Crocetti was not in the room! What luck! Thank God!

The dog began to bark incessantly.

A shadow appeared on the wall behind the dog. Something was approaching. Something old. Something ancient. Something elderly.

Archibald glanced up at a clock ticking on the wall—4:59PM! Holy Mother of God! Dear Lord in heaven! It’s time! The Pinky Lee Show!

All the neighbors knew the time well and lived in fear of its arrival! It was the witching hour which beckoned Mrs. Crocetti to the window to gaze upon all their lives with her intrusive, unblinking eye—just like her dolls.

And indeed, like clockwork, the old Italian woman shuffled from the kitchen to join her yapping hell hound at the window. She sat in her wooden chair, which creaked and groaned under the weight of the well-fed Italian woman. Her wide frame rolled over the edge of the seat like holiday pudding. She adjusted her dolls on the sill as she always did and placed a hand on the infernal beast to subside his bark. It never worked. Pooch was a little devil and would continue to bark to its demonic heart’s content.

Archibald's mind began to work in a frenzy. Should he lunge for the hallway? Would that be suspicious? Should he just stay there? Could she see the body? Was he just foolishly standing over his wife, giving a pathetic look of guilt that would remove any doubt as to what happened?

Archibald was paralyzed with fear.

He told himself he needed to calm down—calm down and examine the predicament, damn it! No, *darn* it! Watch it! No need for vulgarities! Control yourself!

Well, *he* couldn’t see *her* floor. Their windows were at the same height, more or less. He also had the advantage of standing whereas the old woman was sitting. These facts suggested she couldn’t see anything below, say, the height of his knees? The threshold was probably higher but knee-level was a safe estimation. Mary certainly fit under that line. Yes, easily. He was safe. There was no way she could see Mary. Quite safe indeed.

He then realized he was now stupidly staring at Mrs. Crocetti.

She was staring back at him.

Archibald continued to stare at her.

She continued to stare back at him.

It was obvious that he needed to relieve the awkwardness of this moment. Archibald jostled the turkey into one hand, waved sheepishly with the other hand, and gave an exaggerated smile.

Mrs. Crocetti was puzzled by the strange sight. She waved back.

“*Oobatz*!” She mumbled to herself in her native Italian tongue.

Pooch barked in his native dog tongue.

Archibald lingered, awkwardly, then placed the turkey down on the counter, awkwardly, and took an unnaturally wide step over Mary’s body, awkwardly, into the shrouded protection of the hallway.

Mrs. Crocetti continued to watch in puzzlement. *Oobatz* indeed!

Suffice to say, no awkwardness was relieved.

Archibald braced himself against the wall and burst out a series of short breaths to expel the tension which had been building up inside him. He was relieved that he now couldn’t see Mrs. Crocetti, but he felt that somehow her eyes could still see him. The continual barking from that hellion creature also didn't help calm his nerves.

Archibald looked at Mary’s body. Amid the flavorful seasoning which smeared her head, there was a red, viscous liquid which slowly trickled down the side of her face. He convinced himself it was only the homemade cranberry sauce he had just prepared. In general, he didn't like store-bought cranberry sauce—especially the Sedaris brand which was mostly just corn syrup—so he always made his own. Yes, that must have been it. Cranberry sauce. What else could possibly be on his wife's body whose head had just been hit with blunt force?

He looked at the clock again—5:01PM. Mrs. Crocetti would remain at the window for thirty more minutes until it was finally “Howdy Doody Time” —that jubilant moment which all the neighbors anxiously awaited each and every weeknight.

He couldn’t simply wait in the hallway during all that time, could he? Should he walk to the windows and close the curtains? Out of the question! Mrs. Crocetti would immediately become inquisitive. But he couldn’t leave the turkey out either. The old Italian woman was aware of Archibald’s culinary skills and would become equally curious if that turkey didn’t move for a full thirty minutes. Should he just continue preparing the turkey? No, he couldn’t work in the kitchen with a body on the floor. He would constantly be taking large steps over it. Perhaps she would just think his pants were uncomfortably fitted? Unlikely. No, he needed to move the body somehow without her suspecting anything.

It was at that moment Archibald noticed Mary was lying on one of the sheets of canvas which he had laid on the floor to keep it clean.

How convenient.

Archibald surveyed his surroundings. The bathroom was in front of him with a small window that pointed towards Mrs. Crocetti’s apartment. Fortunately, the curtains were drawn for a bit of rare privacy making it a sensible option to take Mary’s body. The bedroom was behind him which meant it was hidden from Mrs. Crocetti’s view, but it was so cluttered with Mary’s clothes that one could hardly see where one thing ended and another thing began. The living room from which merry melodies were being played was at the opposite end of the hallway and was the least appealing option as it had double-bay windows which gave an unobstructed view of their finely decorated Christmas tree as well as the rest of the room behind it.

The only sensible option was to take her into the bathroom for the time being. There he could assess the situation. If she was alive, perhaps a cold shower would revive her. If she was dead, well, he would have to figure something out.

Archibald got on his hands and knees, crawled to the kitchen doorway, and peeked around the corner. Through the window into Mrs. Crocetti's apartment, he could see a cracked ceiling and a gaudy chandelier but not the old woman herself from this low vantage point. As a consequence, she could not see him either. Good. The floor really wasn't in view.

Archibald leaned forward, clutched the edge of the canvas with his right hand, and pulled.

She didn't budge. She weighed more than she looked. Archibald regretted cooking so well.

He took hold with his other hand, braced his feet against the posts of the doorframe, and pulled again.

She began to move, slowly. Very slowly. Archibald regretted not doing his daily exercises.

After a few strenuous moments which felt like an eternity, Mary’s body was fully in the narrow hallway.

There was another problem. The space was far too tight to drag a prone body around the sharp corner of the bathroom doorway. This would require some finessing.

Archibald stepped over Mary’s body, braced his legs on either side of the hallway, bent his knees, slid his arms under her shoulders, and pulled up with as much strength as he could muster. She slowly began to rise off the ground. How accommodating of her.

He continued to pull. She continued to rise.

He then pulled too much. She then rose too much.

He became unsteady as her weight leaned over his center of balance, causing him to stumble backwards. He fought to regain stability as his legs kicked the ground and his body swayed to find counterpoise.

He found it.

Unfortunately, he found it in the middle of the living room, right in front of the open windows.

Archibald looked at Mrs. Crocetti.

Mrs. Crocetti looked back at Archibald.

The illuminated Christmas tree stood between them, but they still had a clear view of one another. The topper for the Christmas tree, an angel, also had a clear view of them.

An angel? Didn’t he have a star on his tree? Where did that come from? Stop. There’s no time for this. Think!

Archibald smiled and did the first thing which came to his mind. He started to dance with Mary’s body. Such a thing was not unprecedented in his apartment—when she was alive, of course, the dead part was very much unprecedented. Mary occasionally practiced new dance routines at home with Archibald before leaving to go to dance clubs without Archibald.

Unfortunately, the music wasn’t very conducive to the ruse. By some cruel happenstance, the needle of the phonograph reached the end of the record and became caught in a static loop:

*Eeeeeech-Ker’nch*  
*Eeeeeech-Ker’nch*

Regardless, Archibald persevered. He twirled his wife's body to the tempo of the repetitive noise. He constantly moved as the momentum helped keep her from slumping. He did all the dances that came to his mind – the jitterbug, the jive, and the lindy hop—but when one’s partner is a limp body, the movements looked less like dancing and more like dry humping in a strange sexual ritual. Mrs. Crocetti interpreted it as the latter and was appalled.

*“Che schifo*!” Mrs. Crocetti quickly turned the head of her dolls away from the window and covered Pooch’s eyes to preserve his innocence.

The dog yelped.

Cautiously, she glanced from side to side and leaned forward. Her eyes widen in anticipation of where this debauchery may lead.

Archibald became too committed to the ruse and attempted to dip Mary’s body to sell its authenticity, clearly forgetting that the dancing duet was predominantly one-sided. His wife's dead weight nearly pulled him to the ground. He flung his torso back and stretched is leg forward to counterbalance the weight. He started to fumble backwards and quickly twirled the body to regain control. By pure luck, he discovered that he gracefully went through the threshold of the hallway. Without hesitating, he brought the body into the bathroom where he promptly tossed it into bath tub.

The body landed with a sound that resembled the word “clunk”.

“Accidenti!” Mrs. Crocetti cursed. She was disappointed that she lost sight of the sex-craved lovers.

Archibald bent over from exhaustion. He gasped, trying to regain his breath. At work he would occasionally throw around dead turkeys, but dead humans are a whole different matter.

He stumbled towards the bathroom’s doorframe and peered around the corner. He looked again at the kitchen clock.

5:06PM! Only five minutes transpired? Oh, for the love of all that is good and holy! Come on, Howdy Doody Time! Just show me Buffalo Bob, for Pete's sake!

Calm down. No need to panic. She's in a safe place. He could now simply wait it out. He could even finish his Christmas turkey. Yes, that would be fine. Finish the turkey, have it ready in a few hours.

Oh. Perhaps he should first check and see if she's alive.

Archibald turned back into the bathroom but caught his reflection in the mirror. He stopped. He noticed his white shirt was now stained with all the various drippings from his wife’s head, including that red, viscous stuff that couldn't possibly be anything else other than cranberry sauce. It had to be.

“Jiminey Christmas!” He moved to clean it but stopped when he heard a sound.

*Knock! Knock!*

Archibald’s heart skipped a beat.

*Knock! Knock!*

It was the door.

*Knock! Knock!*

Jesus, Mary, and Joseph with the three magi! Someone is at the door! Did someone hear something? What sound could have been made? Did Mrs. Crocetti actually see everything and call the police? Is this the end? Should he ignore it? No, no, people know he was there because of the music. Good grief, the music—it stopped! Perhaps it’s just someone complaining about that grating static noise. Yes, perhaps it’s only that. But what if it's not?

“Mr. Nowakowski?” In the distance, a muffled voice could be faintly heard from the door. It sounded timid, feminine, and familiar.

Archibald slowly stuck his head out into the hallway, half trembling. The front door was on the opposite end of the living room. Its dark wood grain stood out against the bright floral wallpaper. It never bothered him before, but the door now seemed threatening and sinister. He shuddered.

“Mr. Nowakowski?” The voice behind the door asked again.

Archibald carefully closed the bathroom door behind him and slowly crossed the living room to the door. Each step on the carpeted floor felt heavier than the last. He felt like sinking right into plush fabric, drowning in its woven fibers. Who could possibly at the door?

“*Eh? Chi è questo*?” Mrs. Crocetti was just as curious as Archibald.

“Who is it?” Archibald inquired.

## “Oh." The voice sounded surprised to have received a response. "It’s Beatrice Thurber, Mr. Nowakowski. Your neighbor from apartment 3C. Your next-door neighbor. The librarian. I lent you a copy of *Treatise on Parents and Children* by George Bernard Shaw a few years ago. I also lent your wife *The Sayings of Mrs. Solomon; Being the Confessions of the Seven Hundredth Wife as Revealed to Helen Rowland*. Written by Helen Rowland.”

The voice, named Beatrice, was so used to being forgotten that she would provide her biography in miniature upon identifying herself to others. This was done even when the other would have certainly known her. It drove her mother batty every time Beatrice called her mother. She also felt compelled to give the full subtitle of all books, if it had one.

Archibald hesitated. Why was she here? Had she come to collect those overdue books! Why now? It has already been several years, so what's a few more? Perhaps if he said nothing she will just go away? Wait, that won't work. He already said something.

Reluctantly, he unlocked the bolt and opened the door, opening it enough to suggest he had nothing to hide but keeping it closed it enough to suggest that there was no offer to enter. Archibald then extended his head through the opening.

Beatrice was a middle-aged woman, agreeable in features but not overtly attractive, with cat eye glasses and brown hair fashioned to a soft bob. She wore a gray wool tweed coat over a simple red dress, all of which were pleasant but none of which would ever be mistaken for high fashion. Mary would have certainly castigated the outfit, most likely behind Beatrice’s back where criticism is given the easiest. That Mary was a real bitch.

Excuse me, a word that starts with a B and rhymes with witch.

“Ah, Miss Thurber. Merry Christmas! A delight. A pleasure." Archibald smiled, which Beatrice sheepishly returned. "Are you in need of those books? I can quickly grab them for you if necessary. I have them right here. My wife was reading it, but I don't think she will ever finish it now."

Archibald suddenly grew pale upon realizing the implication of his words.

"I mean, not because she isn't able to or doesn't have the time or anything. She has plenty of time. It's just that, uh, you see, uh, she thought it was, um, dull? Yes, dull. That's what she said. Her words, not mine. But any book that doesn't feature copious sex would seem dull to her." He forced a laugh. It was hoarse and raspy. It sounded nothing like a laugh.

“Oh, no, Mr. Nowakowski. I'm sorry. I'm not here for the books. I only mentioned them... well, I'm not sure why I did. I guess it's because I work with books all day." She forced a laugh. It also sounded nothing like one. "And I'm sorry she didn't like it. It can be a difficult book to digest. I mean, how the Helen Rowland uses the Biblical text of Song of Solomon as a foundation for creating a feminine reflection of the male gaze in modern society while boldly maintaining the lyrical cadence and lofty prose of the King James translation of the piece, yet somehow also maintaining a light and cheery tone due to her playful humor and mordant observations of male seduction practices..."

Beatrice suddenly grew pale upon realizing she was providing an unprompted critical analysis of the book.

"Oh. Oh, dear me. I got carried away. I mean, yes. I can see how one may find it dull. There is no descriptions of... of sex in it."

Beatrice became self-conscious as she often did in conversations and decided it would be best to say nothing more. She was more accustomed to internal monologues rather than external dialogues.

*Eeeeeech-Ker’nch*  
*Eeeeeech-Ker’nch*

The sound of the phonograph's looping static caught her ear. She made eyes towards the direction from which the sound was emanating.

Archibald followed her eyes nervously. He quickly realized that she was alarmed by the sound and smiled. “Oh, that, yes. I was playing a little Christmas music to put myself in the festive spirit, you know. Haven’t had a chance to swap out records just yet. I have been cooking, you see, and got carried away.”

“Yes, I do see.” She smiled, eyeing the multi-color stain on his shirt left by Mary’s head.

“Oh, yes. This. A fine mess I made. Cranberry sauce and a variety of spices, no doubt. Enough on me that you’d think I was the main course!” Archibald laughed nervously.

Beatrice returned the laugh, also nervously. She was worried that she may have inadvertently embarrassed Archibald by pointing out the stain. Indeed, she would not like it if someone pointed out a blemish on her dress. She was about to apologize but Archibald spoke again.

“Say, why don't I change that record? That sound is grating enough to wake the dead.” Archibald forced a chuckle. “Figure of speech, of course. No one’s actually dead here.” He turned around and grimaced at the idiotic words he just said.

Archibald retreated back into his apartment. He turned his back to Beatrice and began to change the records on the phonograph. Beatrice shuffled anxiously in place, deciding what to do. She took a deep breath, held it, and boldly stepped into the apartment. Her feet quivered with each step onto the carpet. She looked around the room and down the hall, half expecting to see someone. It seemed they were alone, aside from all the pictures of Mary doing various poses standing on the end tables. She felt intimidated by all Mary’s impersonations of Lauren Becall, Lana Turner, and Rita Hayworth.

“*Due donne*?” Mrs. Crocetti crossed herself. “*Ave Maria, piena di grazia. Il Signore è con te.*”

The phonograph began playing the first song on the record:

*Here we come a-caroling*  
*Among the leaves so green*

“Oh! What a coincidence!”

Archibald abruptly jumped, not expecting Beatrice to have ventured into the room.

Beatrice squeaked, not expecting Archibald to react in such an extreme manner.

He bumped into an end table, knocking some of the pictures of Mary facedown.

*Here we come a-wandering*  
*So fair to be seen*

“Oh, my goodness!" Archibald laughed, placing his hand on his beating heart in a dramatic fashion. "Gave me quite a fright!”

"I'm sorry, I shouldn't have come in. I don't know what I was thinking." She turned towards the door.

"Oh, heavens, no. It's fine, it's fine, it's fine." Archibald desperately tried to show that everything was indeed fine and that he had no reason to be scared that a person had just entered into his apartment and was now mere feet away from his wife's body. "I'm just not the best suited for startles. Never throw me one of those surprise parties or I may die! Come in, come in."

Beatrice slowed her retreat.

Archibald began to stand the picture frames back up on the table. "These pictures fall down all the time. I really should get rid of them. I mean, of course, I can't, naturally, as they're Mary's and she would have wanted them.”

“Wanted?”

Of course a librarian would have caught that past-tense verb slip-up. “I mean, currently, presently, actively wants them, of course." He realized he better change the subject. "Anyway, what's this about a coincidence?”

"About what?"

"A coincidence? You said something about a coincidence?"

"Oh. Yes. The caroling music, yes." Beatrice nervously rubber her fingers. "Well, a group of us—the tenants, that is—are going Christmas caroling and I thought... Er, I mean, *we* thought, it would be nice if you wanted to join me... Er, *us*, on this outing... I mean, not just you. You and your wife, of course. If she's here…" Beatrice began to look around the room.

"Oh, no. She's not here. Out and about and what not. Shopping, most likely. You know her."

"Well, if she's planning on coming back soon—"

"Oh, not soon. I think she said she was visiting a friend afterward. Yes, an old acquaintance. Out of the city. May be gone for several days. A week, perhaps. Who knows? She does as she pleases."

"She's leaving you alone on Christmas?"

"Wouldn't be the first time." Archibald forced a chuckle.

"Well, if you wish... I mean, I don't have plans for Christmas... that is, my family lives too far away... and I'll be all alone, by myself, like every year... So, if you want some company... I mean, that is, if you're bored and have some spare time... and have nothing else to do, we could..."

She suddenly started to feel embarrassed, ashamed, and insecure all at once.

"I'm sorry, I shouldn't have said anything. Sorry. I didn't mean anything. How silly of me. I should go." She quickly turned towards the door as if to run out.

"Wait!" Archibald blurted out, in a verbal effort to keep her lingering for a few moments longer.

He reached out and took hold of her wrist. It was the first time they had touched. Her librarian hand was soft and silken. Beatrice stopped. She turned. Their eyes met. The lights from the Christmas tree were reflected in her eyes like a luminous mosaic. Her lips quivered. She held her breath. There was always something unspoken between them for years; a deep-seated desire that had to be repressed. Beatrice's body began to tremble, in part because of that deep-seated desire, but mostly because of her chronic anxiety for which she took Meprobamate twice a day.

*Love and joy come to you*  
*And to you a glad Christmas too*

Archibald began to forget about the body in the bathtub. Admittedly, this fumbling flirtation was fairly stupid. How on earth could you think about love when your wife's body was mere feet away?

*And God bless you and send you*  
*A Happy New Year*

"*Sbrigatevi*!" Mrs. Crocetti grumbled impatiently.

*And God send you a Happy New Year.*

The song ended.

There was silence.

Archibald smiled. "That sounds delightful."

Beatrice returned the smile.

"Caroling, that is," Archibald clarified. "I will consider it."

"OKAY!" She spewed out, expelling a rough gasp of air with the word. She did not realize she had been holding her breath the entire time and had forgotten to breathe. The gasp was followed by shallow coughs. She tried to regain composure, but it only became exasperated as she became more flustered about ruining the moment. The shallow coughs gave way to a full-blown coughing fit.

The phonograph transitioned to its next song:

*On the first day of Christmas my true love sent to me*

"Are you okay?"

*A partridge in a pear tree*

She gestured towards her throat and then waved her hands from side-to-side in an attempt to indicate it was simply a harmless cough.

"Oh! Chocking! Hold on. I know the Holger Nielsen method." Archibald quickly and forcefully maneuvered his hands and around Beatrice's body, having her lying face down on the floor in a matter of seconds. He then proceeded to straddle her, lifting her arms up over her head, and then pressing down on the center of her back, as the Holger Nielsen method dictated. Beatrice was so alarmed as to what was happening that the coughing became more aggravated and severe.

"*Sesso? Qui? Oh, mio Dio!*" Mrs. Crocetti was appalled by the wanton perversity on display, crossed herself again in absolution, and leaned in with feverish excitement.

"In goes the good air..." Archibald lifted her arms up. Beatrice felt like her shoulders would be pulled out of their sockets at any moment.

"Out goes the bad..." Archibald pushed down on her back. Beatrice felt like her chest was going to be crushed at any second.

"Stop! Stop! Stop!" Beatrice managed to gasp out between his recitations.

Archibald halted his actions, allowing her to climb onto all fours and take several deep breaths.

"*Finito? Cosi presto?*" Mrs. Crocetti sighed in disappointment.

"Thanks, I just... need a moment... I'll make sure... to take my inhaler... when I get back..." Beatrice wheezed out in several breaths.

*On the fourth day of Christmas my true love sent to me*

Just then, a rapid succession of knocks were made on the door, which was left open in the commotion.

*Knock! Knock! Knock!*

The knocks were done in such a manner to warn the occupants that someone was entering the room and not as a means to request admittance.

*Four calling birds, three french hens, two turtle doves*  
*And a partridge in a pear tree*

"I say, is everything alright in here?" A voice bellowed.

Archibald didn't even have an opportunity to panic. A man quickly entered the room with an authoritative presence suggesting he owned the place, which he did since he was the landlord.

"*Chi e quest'uomo?*" Mrs. Crocetti was now thoroughly perplexed.

The man was well-dressed in winter garb with a dusting of snow on his cap and coat. He wore a white pin which said "Ives" in blue letters. "What's this now? Why do you have a woman parading around on all fours here? I don't know what type of establishment you think this is, Nowakowski."

Archibald stammered, having been caught off guard with the arrival a second person. "Oh, uh, Mr. Bemelmans! Well, you see, Ms. Thurber was chocking and—"

"Oh, Ms. Thurber?" Mr. Bemelmans cocked his head to look at her face. "Is that you trotting about down there like a filly?"

"Yes... Mr. Bemelmans..." She responded in gasps, remaining on all fours like a filly.

"Ah, good. Serendipitous. I have been making the rounds to each apartment and having you both here saves me a trip." Mr. Bemelmans lost total interest in Archibald's current affairs and moved onto his own. "Well, as you know, it's the holiday season and finances are tight all around. We all wish to take time off from work, buy gifts for the family, and what not. But I must remind you that the rent is promptly due at its normal time with no extensions, and that the rent will have to be increased in the new year to compensate for the increased tax burden placed upon property owners such as myself, a very much maligned demographic. And it's only going to get worse with Harriman being elected. A shame. A goddamn shame." Mr. Bemelmans stroked his button woefully, as one would stroke a dying pet.

"Yes, I need to get out of this city. Out of this state, no doubt. They're going to drive people out like me, just you wait. Tax the rich into the ground, causing us folks to leave. I already got plans, you know. Big plans." Mr. Bemelmans then caught sight of the canvas sheet on the floor of the hallway. "What's this? What goes on here?"

Archibald's heart skipped a beat. This is it. It's all over.

"You best be not doing any remodeling without formal and written consent, Nowakowski! Is that red paint I see? You know the restrictions we have on the color palette!"

"Oh, no. I use the canvas for, uh, cooking."

"Cooking?" Mr. Bemelmans' eyebrows rose in confusion.

"Yes, um, to keep the floor clean, you see. Catches... things. I believe that's cranberry sauce and not bl—. Er, not red paint."

"Hmmm." Mr. Bemelman stared thoughtfully at the canvas. "Not bad, Nowakowski. Not bad. May institute that as renter policy in the new year. Keep the wood floors spic-n-span. I'll consider it."

Just then, there was a third set of knocks on the door!

*Knock! Knock! Knock! Knock!*

What is happening? Will this nightmare ever end?

*On the twelfth day of Christmas my true love sent to me*

"Mr. Nowakowski?" A boy peeked his head around the door. "May I come in?"

*Twelve drummers drumming*

Archibald recognized him as Timmy, one of the neighbors' boys.

*Eleven pipers piping*

"Ah, uh, hello, Timmy!" Archibald glanced at Beatrice, who was now struggling to stand up, and Mr. Beleman who was, of course, still standing. Since there had already been two invaders, a third would hardly matter, right?

*Ten lords a-leaping*

"Well, I don't see why not. Tis the season and all that! The more the merrier! Come on in!"

*Nine ladies dancing*

"Great!" Timmy motioned behind the door. "Come on, boys!"

*Seven Swans a-swimming*

As Timmy entered the room, eleven other boys followed him into the apartment. All of them were heavily wrapped in winter apparel—hats, scarves, gloves, and coats—with a pair of skates hanging from one shoulder and a hockey stick resting on the other. It was like an avalanche of adolescence.

*Six geese a-laying*

"*Mi arrendo!*" Mrs. Crocetti threw her arms up in an act of surrender.

*Five golden rings*

Archibald was mortified. A third intrusion could be accommodated, a fourth perhaps, but a fourteenth? This was ridiculous! What if they wish to ransack the kitchen for food? Or worse, what if—heaven forbid—someone needed to use the bathroom?

*Four calling birds, three french hens, two turtle doves*

"Hey, Mr. Nowakowski, can I use the bathroom?" A chubby boy in the back asked.

*And a partridge in a pear tree*

Archibald was stunned! It was as if his worst thoughts were being materialized! The powers of the world were conspiring against him! This was a cosmic joke at his expense! He looked at the Christmas angel on top of the tree. It appeared to be smiling. Even his ornaments were having a laugh at his expense.

He began to stammer like an idiot. How could he get out of this one? How was it even possible? But before he had a chance to form any words, Mr. Bemelman spoke up instead.

"Boys, boys. The maximum occupancy of this room is eight and you have just exceeded that limit. A few of you will have to wait outside. That said, those who wait in the hall must ensure that a clear path to the exit is consistently maintained to ensure adherence to New York State fire safety regulations. Understood?"

The phonograph transitioned to its next song:

*Good King Wenceslas looked out*  
*On the feast of Stephen*

"Ok... Uh... How many of us need to leave?" Timmy asked, evidently the boys' defacto leader.

*When the snow lay round about*  
*Deep and crisp and even*

"Count, dammit. Add. Then subtract. My word, the educational system must be in a woeful state. It will only get worse with Harriman, I should wonder." Mr. Bemelman had very little patience for children. They were a burden to society for many years, contributing nothing and consuming everything, until adulthood where they could finally become productive members of the workforce and pay back the figurative debt they incurred throughout childhood.

Timmy began to count, but then Mr. Bemelman had a thought which was more important than attempting to follow New York State fire safety regulations. "Wait a minute! Are all of you children of tenants within this building?"

They nodded.

"Splendid. Another stroke of good fortune. I have a message for which you must share with your parents. You are to repeat it to them. Wholly, completely, and without deviation. Do I have your understanding?"

They nodded.

Mr. Bemelman proceeded to recite the same warning he told Archibald and Beatrice, adding, "As you age into maturity, I hope you understand the importance of fiscal responsibility. Don't be like the goddamn socialist who sees the government as a wet nurse from whom one can simply suck at the proverbial teet whenever they damn well please. Mollycoddles, the lot of them. It will only be getting worse, my boys. Mark my words. Harriman will soon be increasing taxes just to dandle those milksops. On our hard-earned dime, no less!"

"My dad says that Ives is a two-faced jackass and he's glad Harriman won." One boy with glasses blurted out, defiantly.

Mr. Bemelman turned red. "What? What's this? Two-faced? What an utterly boneheaded, dim-witted observation! Your father clearly knows nothing about politics, my boy. He's nothing but a naif."

"Well, my dad says Ives advocated for labor unions during his Senate election in order to gain their votes but then proceeded to vote for the Taft-Hartley Act, crippling the power of the very labor unions he ostensibly supported, betraying his supporters and thereby confirming my dad's assessment that he's a two-faced jackass." The boy replied, smugly, as he pushed up his glasses in nerdish glee.

Mr. Bemelman was shocked at the valid criticism and turned a deeper shade of red. "What? Who's your father? That blithering idiot! That nitwit! How would he like it if I increased his rent to discourage his foolish hogwash!"

"My dad says that retaliatory rent in response to one exercising their freedom of speech is an extreme abuse of power akin to the censorship practices of the agitprop in the Soviet Union, thereby making you a two-faced jackass too!" The four-eyed boy rebuked.

For Mr. Bemelman, there was no fouler obscenity than to be compared in one way or another to the Russian communists. "You cheeky little son of a bitch! Come here, boy! I'll knock some sense into you!"

The boy ran out of the room, his glasses jostling on his face. Mr. Bemelman pushed his way through the children. The other boys started to hoot and holler. The wisenheimer boy started to make some remarks concerning his dad's views on the inefficiencies of corporal punishment within the rearing of a child, but the words became lost in the distance as he fled down the stairs. Mr. Bemelman fumbled down the steps as one would expect an old, overweight man to fumble down the steps. It was clear that he would never catch the boy. The boys' shouts for bloodlust dwindled to disappointed groans.

Suddenly, a door slammed somewhere outside the apartment. Footsteps began to thump and thud down the hall. Each step shook the floor like an earthquake. The boys looked at each other in bewilderment. Archibald heard the picture frames rattling on the table. He saw the baubles on the Christmas tree swinging. What horror was approaching?

Soon, an astonishingly large and immensely fat man with unkempt hair and stripped pajamas pushed his way into the door frame which could hardly contain his massive size. "Stifle! Stifle this noise! Stifle!"

All the boys turned and stared at him. His pot-belly protruded from under his nightshirt

"I need sleep! So stifle it!" He continued to shout. "Stifle or I will call the cops! STIFLE!"

"Oh, yes, Mr. Feiffer," assured Arthur. "I will send them along their way. No need for the police."

"Humpf." The fat man snorted. He glared at the boys before he lifted his stomach, turned, and carried the colossal tummy back to his apartment with thunderous steps.

"So, uh, Timmy, did you want to tell me something?" Archibald prompted. The sooner the boys left, the better.

"Well, me and the boys—” Timmy took note of the librarian, now standing upright and fully composed. "Sorry, Ms. Thurber, I mean, *the boys and I* are gonna to... *going* to play in a big hockey game down on the river. It's all frozen, you see, and we were wondering if you wanna come... *wanted to* come and watch the game."

"Ya gotta come 'n see, Mr. N. Timmy's gonna be the next 'Rocket'. Ya gotta see 'em in action!" One boy said, referencing Maurice "The Rocket" Richard and making no attempts to use proper grammar.

"Yeah, but not a Canuck." Another boy added patriotically.

"Just you wait! He'll be drafted by the Rangers and he'll be gettin' out of this dump! Make his old man proud!" Yet another boy exclaimed, slapping Timmy on the back.

"Yeah, yeah, I guess so." Timmy said modestly. "So, our parents will be there, and the missus can come to—” Timmy started to motion towards Beatrice before remembering that she wasn't the missus. There was a flash of suspicion on the boy's face which Archibald sought to extinguish quickly.

"Oh, Ms. Thurber just stopped by to invite me along for Christmas caroling, that's all. I'm afraid she beat you to it."

"Oh, no, Mr. Nowakowski," Beatrice interjected. "If the boys want you to see their game—”

"Well, let's see if I can somehow make both work out?" Archibald interrupted. "Regardless, I do have a few things I need to tidy up here before I can do anything. So how about you all run along and I will try to join you if I can. Ok? Merry Christmas, boys, Merry Christmas." He proceeded to lightly shoo them away with hand gestures.

The boys started to turn towards the door, but one lingered behind.

"So can I use your bathroom or what?" The same chubby boy inquired again.

"My wife's delicates are hanging about in there. You wouldn't want to see them." Archibald's shooing intensified.

"My mom always has her panties hanging about the bathroom. It's no big deal," the chubby boy replied, slowly turning towards the door with great objection.

"One shouldn't use that word so casually." Archibald admonished.

"What? Panties?" The chubby boy questioned as he took one step towards the door. "It's what they are, ain't it?"

"*Isn't* it." Timmy corrected, giving a wink towards Beatrice before disappearing into the outside hallway.

"Why don't you relieve yourself outside?" Archibald suggested, gently pushing the boy.

"My piss would freeze mid-stream!" The chubby boy exclaimed.

"Out!" Archibald retorted, pushing the boy more forcefully.

"Okay! Okay! But don't be sore at me if you slip on an icy patch of piss outside!" The chubby boy complained, finally leaving the apartment.

The song from the record ended, leaving an awkward silence between Archibald and Beatrice. They were alone. Alone with nothing but themselves and a body in the bathtub. They stared at one another in the stillness. Archibald knew she had to leave—there was that body after all—but there was a momentary hesitation. Beatrice made a motion as if to speak, but the phonograph transitioned to its next song.

*The holly and the ivy*  
*When they are both full grown*

The song broke her daze. Feelings of insecurity and the need for her inhaler had her moving clumsily towards the door. Archibald watched her leave. She stopped at the door frame and looked back at Archibald. "It would be nice to have you join us... but I understand if you can't."

She didn't wait for a reply. She quickly left.

*Of all the trees that are in the wood*  
*The holly bears the crown*

Archibald stood there silently for a moment, spending a few moments looking at the red stain on his nice white shirt. Why one would wear a nice white shirt while baking is anybody's guess. He ventured forth a finger, dabbed the stain, sniffed it, and then—with some trepidation—licked it. His lips smacked.

"Well I'll be. It *is* cranberry sauce."

He licked the rest of his finger.

"Needs more sugar."

He closed and locked the door. He stood by it for a few moments to listen to the faintest sounds within the hall. There were none. He finally was alone.

But what of Mrs. Crocetti?

Suddenly, his eyes widened. His head snapped towards a clock—5:31PM.

*Say kids, what time is it?* Archibald thought to himself.

"Howdy Doody Time!" Archibald said aloud.

He ran to the bay windows by the Christmas tree and looked out like a little boy about to catch a glimpse of Santa's sleigh and his eight tiny reindeer. Mrs. Crocetti was not at the window! Not even Pooch! Nothing but her lifeless dolls! At last! At last!

But his extreme paranoia deprived him of complete relief. What if she was out there somewhere? Waiting? Watching? He pressed up against the window and looked everywhere outside to put his mind at ease. Of course he saw no trace of her. Why would she be out there in the cold? All he saw was the snowman down in the alley.

The snowman!

Archibald remembered that he once saw a French film where a dead body was hidden inside a snowman. Could that actually work? The fire escape was conveniently attached to the bathroom window which conveniently led right down into the alley! Perfect!

But then Archibald thought about it more.

Dragging that body all the way down three flights of loud, rickety stairs? Passing by windows that directly look into the apartments below him? Leaving all those footprints and others tracks in the snow? Not to mention, he would have to somehow remove snow and stuff a body inside that snowman?

On second thought, the idea was completely ridiculous. It had seemed to be clever in the movie, but now it seemed stupid. And what was the name of that movie? All he could remember was that Fernandel was in it.

No time to figure that out now! He needed to act before Mrs. Crocetti came back or some other neighbor started to become nosy.

He quickly wrenched the curtains of the bay window to a close—now the only curtain remaining to shroud his apartment from the outside world was the one in the kitchen.

He began to dash towards it, crossing the living room, over the canvas in the hallway, through the doorway of the kitchen, and then...

SMACK!

A frying pan from around the corner flew into Archibald's face.

THUNK!

Archibald fell flat on his back on the kitchen floor.

"You goddamn, son of a bitch, bastard!" The words came from a screaming voice, but it sounded like a distant echo in Archibald’s battered head.

He was in a daze. Visions of sugar plums danced within his head. He opened his eyes. The ceiling lamp blinded him with its luminescence. A dark silhouette eclipsed the light. The sugar plums began to dance away. His eyes became adjusted to the figure.

"Mary?"

His brain was incapable of processing this illusion. How was this possible? To be dead but alive? To be in the bathroom but in the kitchen? Was he dreaming?

"You goddamn right it's me, you monster!" Mary growled as she brought the cast iron frying pan down on his crotch.

Archibald's eyes bulged out. He opened his mouth to scream but only a tiny squeak escaped. He scrunched forward and rolled to his side in a state of emasculated agony.

"I woke up in a bathtub! A bathtub! I mean, are you kidding me?! Are you for real?! What were you going to do? Drown me?! Chop me up?! You sick freak!" She began to repeatedly kick his back with the tip of her baby-doll shoes. How on earth was she still wearing those?

Archibald rolled onto his stomach due to the blunt force of the kicks.

Mary drove and twisted the pointed heel of her shoe deep into his kidney.

Archibald moaned in agony.

"And how dare you hit me with a goddamn Christmas turkey!" While keeping her foot firmly on his back, she wildly swung the frying pan onto his buttocks like a parent spanking her child, albeit an incredibly cruel and malicious parent.

Archibald continued to give tormented groans of pain.

"And not only that, you bastard, but the turkey was smothered in pepper! In pepper! You goddamn know I hate pepper, you son of a bitch!"

The pepper in question was neatly piled in a dish on the counter. Mary grabbed a handful of it. She leaned over Archibald and pulled back his hair to raise his face off the ground.

He winced with pain.

"Now let's see how you like it!" She smeared it generously in Archibald's eyes. If he was a turkey, this would be called a *brine*.

Being the pepper was from Mrs. Crocetti, it was Italian in origin. As such, the pepper burned intensely as all good Italian pepper do.

Archibald screamed. He flung his entire body back, pushing himself off the floor. He flailed his arms and slapped his face like a mad man trying to wipe away the pepper. Of course, he succeeded in only rubbing the pepper deeper into his eyes. He screamed more.

During his thrashing, he first smacked the photo frames of Mary doing Marlene onto the floor and then smacked Mary herself across the face.

It was quite unintentional.

She proceeded to lose her balance in her baby-doll high heels. She stumbled backwards, instinctively reaching out to the overheard rack dangling from the ceiling. She managed to grab onto one of the support chains anchored into the ceiling, thereby saving her fall.

That unintentional smack was clearly intentional!

She wiped her cheek with her hand—it was covered in red, oily wax. “You bastard! You smeared my Max Factor Color-Fast Rouge Mode lipstick!” She eyed the knife block on the counter. “Oh, you're a dead man now, Archibald Nowakowski!” She extended her arm towards the chef's knife, smiling with murderous blood-lust.

By pure and complete happenstance, the chain which Mary was grasping broke free from its anchor in the ceiling. Mary lost balance yet again and fell soundly on her back.

THUNK!

She was in a daze. Visions of sugar plums danced within her head. She looked up and saw all the contents of the overhead rack tumbling down towards her. The sugar plums ran out of the way to avoid being crushed.

She screamed.

The first object to hit her was a skillet, followed by a griddle and then an egg poacher. This was then followed by a sauté pan, a roasting pan, and a frying pan. A stock pot, a rondo pot, and a sauce pot came next. Lastly, a dutch over and a french oven landed with a thud, leaving an indelible impression on her.

Archibald tried to walk towards the sink to wash away the pepper. His burning eyes and blurred vision caused him to stumble into the counter.

He first accidentally knocked over the knife block. The knives slid out and fell with their points aimed down towards the floor. Unfortunately, Mary was between the floor and the point of each knife. The first to fall was the cheese knife, followed by the tomato knife, utility knife, vegetable knife, and paring knife. The considerably larger serrated knife, slicing knife, and chef's knife followed suit. Finally, the six steak knives were evenly distributed down across her torso.

Archibald then unintentionally knocked over the Christmas turkey, which flopped down onto the knives to ensure they were sufficiently driven down deeply.

For good measure, he unwittingly bumped into a variety of complimentary seasoning and spices which sprinkled over Mary like a dusting of snow.

Conveniently, Mary fell onto another canvas sheet. Mr. Bemelman's floor would remain untarnished by the deluge of kitchen paraphernalia.

Archibald arrived at the sink, twisted the knobs as far as possible, and swung his head under the faucet. The water was scalding hot. He yelped with pain, twisted the knobs in the opposite direction, and swung his head back under the faucet again. Ah, ice-cold. He let the stream of water fall directly on his eyes. After several moments, he groped for a towel, found one, and wiped his eyes. Though his eyes continued to sting, he could now see, albeit with an abundance of wincing and blinking.

He began to realize that Mary's violent berating had ceased. This alarmed him. With his blurred vision, he scanned the room but saw no sign of her. He then stood still, listening for any indication of movement in any of the rooms. All he could hear was the phonograph in the living room.

*The holly bears a berry*  
*As red as any blood*

The song appeared to be stuck in a loop as it continually repeated the same line over and over again.

*The holly bears a berry*  
*As red as any blood*

He took a step forward and knocked into something that was blocking his path on the floor.

*The holly bears a berry*  
*As red as any blood*

He looked down and saw a shape—a pile of pots and pans, a turkey, a collection of knives, and something resembling a body under all of it. What a strange shape.

*As red as any blood*

He took a step back, his step feeling sticky as he lifted it off the canvas.

*As red as any blood*

A red, pulpy footprint was left on the canvas where he had stepped.

*As red as any blood*

It finally clicked with Archibald as to what the shape represented.

*As red as any blood*

“Jiminey Christmas!”

**3**

An intense pounding came from the front door.

Archibald whistled a festive tune as he carefully unlocked the bolt and slowly opened the door to a narrow crack, keeping his foot braced on the other side to ensure the crack did not widen any farther than intended.

"Yes?" Archibald greeted with a smile, expecting yet another neighbor.

Out in the hallway was a tall man, broad shouldered with handsome yet intense facial features. Faint marks above his right eye as well on his cheek and chin suggested a history. It was the type of history where if they told you they would have to kill you so it was best not to ask. He wore a Brent style hat and a trench coat, both of which were damp from a dusting of snow that was now melting from being indoors. That said, the hallway wasn't much warmer than the outside since Mr. Bemelman footed that heating bill and therefore kept the thermostat to the absolute minimum to save expenses.

Archibald smile melted at the sight of the intimidating figure.

"You Archie Nowakowski?" The man's voice was deep, low, and authoritative. His eyes became locked with Archibald's own. His stare never wavered and his eyes never blinked. At least, so it appeared.

"Yes. May I help you?"

The man reached into his jacket and pulled out a black leather wallet which he proceeded to flop open towards Archibald. Inside the wallet was a badge. One of those shiny ones they typically give to police.

"Police." The man stated, just in case Archibald was blind and couldn't see the badge.

"Oh... Police?" Archibald tried his best not to jump out the window in sheer unbridled panic.

"Detective Slobodkin. Mind if I come in?" He asked, sliding the wallet back into his coat.

"Why? Is something wrong, officer?"

"Detective."

"I mean, detective. Did someone call to complain?"

"What would someone be complainin' about?"

"Oh, uh, nothing. Well, I guess I was playing some Christmas tunes a little louder than usual. Perhaps someone wasn't feeling so jolly."

"I just wanna' ask a few questions."

"Am I in some sort of trouble, officer?"

"Detective."

"Right, detective."

"Why? Should ya' be?"

"Should I what?"

"Should ya' be in trouble?"

"Oh, no... It's just that... I mean, couldn't you ask your questions here in the hallway?"

"Inside's better."

"But don't you need a warrant to enter?"

"Do I?"

"Do you?"

"Why? Hidin' somethin'?"

"No."

"Then why would I be needin' a warrant?"

"Well, I mean, it's the law, right, officer?"

"Detective!"

"Yeah, yeah. That."

"I suppose it is."

"Suppose it's what?"

"The law."

"Ah, so I guess you would need a warrant."

"It's a private matter."

"Needing a warrant is a private matter?"

"What? No. The questions."

"If it's private, is this then a property, contractual, or familial dispute?"

"You tryin' to be smart? It concerns your wife."

"Oh? Who has the dispute with my wife?"

"You're actin' slipperier than the ice outside, pal. Unless you really are this dumb."

The man reached into his pocket.

Fearing the worst, Archibald expected a gun. His life flashed before his eyes. It was a rather dull existence so it was a relatively short flash.

Instead, the man pulled out a cigarette.

Archibald breathed a sigh of relief.

The man slipped the cigarette into his mouth, lit it with a match, waved the stick to extinguish the flame, tossed it onto the hallway floor without a care for the carpeting, and took a puff. He then locked his eyes back onto Archibald's and blew a billowing cloud of smoke.

Archibald tried his best not to cough, but did so anyway.

"What happened to your face?" The man asked.

"What about it?"

"The eyes and cheek."

"Oh, an allergic reaction. And then falling. Separate instances."

"Yea, I bet. Ya wife home?"

"No, uh... she left."

"Left, huh? Where'd she go?"

"Well, I'm not sure exactly. She said something about visiting a friend. Going away for a few days."

"And what friend would this be?"

"Not sure. She didn't say."

"Ya wife plans to go away for a few days and she doesn't say where she's goin'?"

"Why all these questions? Did something happen to Mary?"

"I don't know. *Did* something happen to Mary?"

"What are you insinuating, officer?"

"Detective, goddammit!"

"Yes, yes. Detective."

The officer—that is, the detective—puffed at his cigarette in frustration. "Alright. I'll level with ya. But it's something you may not want the neighbors to overhear, if ya get my meaning."

"Oh, don't worry. They all left. The neighbors, that is. Caroling and a hockey game, you see. So you can just say it here. In the hallway. Not inside." It was a bluff. Archibald wasn't actually sure if all his neighbors were gone. He just didn't want the man to enter, no matter what he had to say.

"Okay. I'll talk straight. I'm the guy screwin' your wife."

"Please come in!" Archibald widen the door, realizing he did care what the man said.

The man stepped through the threshold like water gushing through a cracked dam.

Archibald poked his head out into the hallway, glanced about to catch a glimpse of any eavesdroppers, and promptly closed the door behind him.

The phonograph was still playing festive songs as it had all evening.

*O Christmas tree, O Christmas tree*  
*How lovely are thy branches*

Hearing those words, the man's gaze was drawn to Archibald's own Christmas tree, which was finely decorated with gold and silver bulbs and aglow in red, green, and white lights. An angel was perched at its peak, smiling. It was one of the nicest trees the man had ever seen. Sure, it was no tree in Rockefeller Center, but what was? Aside the tree in Rockefeller Center, of course.

"Nice tree." The man commented. His mother never gave him much in the way of positive affirmation so he never gave much of it himself.

Archibald beamed and admired his tree. He was proud of it, though he had some apprehension about the angel on top. Its smile appeared to be one of mockery, at least to him. He also was never quite sure how he ended up with it. "Thanks. I read in *Mademoiselle* how to best decorate—”

"Don't care." The man interrupted.

Mary had a subscription to *Mademoiselle*. Archibald would peruse the magazine for recipes and clip out those he was interested in attempting. He had an envelope full of those clippings. Over time, he began to read their articles on interior decorating as well. He began to rip out those articles too. Mary would scream at him for eviscerating her magazines. Currently they were all piled on his coffee table.

The man noted all the presents meticulously stacked about under the tree, each wrapped in paper depicting children sledding and ice-skating. His mother also never gave him much in the way of presents so he thought the amount was excessive. "A lotta' presents. Didn't think you had kids." He picked one up.

"Oh, no, we don't. Mary had bodily objections to them. Kids, that is. Those presents are, uh... Well, Mary was going to drop them off at her work... For some children's event tonight."

"And she just went and left 'em here? Seems strange." He put the present back down.

"Uh, no, she asked me to drop them off."

"And why haven't ya?"

"Well, I mean, I was about to. I just got carried away with things."

"What carried ya 'way?"

"Oh, you know, odds and ends."

"No. I don't know. What odds 'n ends?"

"Uh, cleaning and... things."

"Things?"

"Well, just cleaning, really. No things."

The man eyed Archibald suspiciously as he paced about the room, taking drags on his cigarette. He examined every detail in the room, as if he was playing the parlor game *I Spy* with himself.

Archibald slowly edged towards the hallway to discourage venturing farther into the apartment.

"So are you going to *level* with me or what?" Archibald asked, using the man's lingo. The quicker this man talked, the quicker he would leave, so Archibald thought.

The man smiled, took another puff, and exhaled the smoke.

"Sure. I'll level with ya. Me and your wife are lovers. No Romeo and Juliet but the sex is good. She wants to leave you and get outta' the city with me. Sure. Fine by me. It would be nice to come home to that fine piece of work every night and not have to pay for it. So we plan to leave by train at 6PM. Only, she never shows. I come here lookin' for her and you spin me some yarn 'bout her sayin' she left to see some friend. Now Mary is a straight-shooter. She wouldn't bother to lie. She'd tell ya' how it was. So either you're savin' face and not wantin' people to know you're a cuckold or you're hidin' somethin'."

The man walked right up to Archibald and blew smoke into his face.

"And I think ya hidin' somethin'."

"Oh, no. Just a saving-face cuckold, as you say."

"In that case, ya wouldn't mind if I looked around?"

"Well, with a warrant, I'll even let you look through my underwear drawer."

"Okay, wise guy. Here's my warrant." The man grabbed Archibald's collar, spun him around, and punched him on his non-bruised cheek to ensure perfect symmetry. The man's mother never showed him much in the way of patience and would fly off the handle at a moment's notice, so he naturally behaved the same. The man certainly had mommy issues, but don't we all? Wasn't it Freud who said if it's not one thing, it's your mother?

Archibald stumbled backwards in a daze. The sugar plums danced back into view. The room swirled like the white specks in a shaken snow globe and just as the specks would ultimately fall when the shaking stopped, so did Archibald.

THUNK!

The man quickly frisked Archibald, checking all his pocket but found nothing.

He then turned, stomped down the hallway, and first opened the bathroom door. The room was spotless, recently scrubbed to a high sheen. He saw the shower curtain was drawn to a close. He stepped in and threw it back. Nothing. The tub was just as spotless as the rest of the room. Nothing remotely suspicious was found.

The man quickly turned and opened the bedroom door. The room was immaculate as well, having been recently vacuumed and organized. He checked the bed. The sheets were missing. Why? He checked under the bed. Nothing. He slid out the bureau drawers and rifled through Mary's accessories. Nothing. He flung open the closet door and rummaged through her dresses. A frock, a plisse, a sanforized, an elf suit...

Wait, an elf suit?

He pulled out the outfit. Yes, it was a green velvet elf suit. He turned it to view it from both sides. It was not sexy enough for any kinky role-play, which was all he cared about. He put the elf suit back in the closet in disappointment.

Everywhere he looked he saw nothing particularly questionable, aside from the bizarre inclusion of an elf suit and sheets strangely missing from the bed. There was an abundance of Mary's garments remaining in the closet, but her necessities—handbag, wallet, or other items she would have certainly kept with her when traveling—were missing.

The man then ran into the kitchen. As with the others, the room was pristine. Pots, pans, dishware, silverware, and utensils were all neatly organized next to the sink where they were recently washed, rinsed, and dried. The man noticed a line of twine tied from an anchor in the ceiling to a corner of the overhead shelf.

He then saw a large trash can in the corner of the room. If there were to be any evidence of foul play, it would certainly be there.

He ran towards the cylindrical metal can, threw aside the lid which fell with a clatter, and poured the contents of the trash onto the floor without giving a second thought to the mess it would make for poor Archibald. The contents of the trash consisted of a half-prepared turkey generously basked in pepper, some large sheets of canvas and, strangely, an assortment of tchotchke toys which were cheap and disposable. Still, better than anything his mother would have ever given him. Around each toy was a tag which read "Donated to the Children of Dahl's by Quentin's Toys." None of this literal garbage interested him in the slightest.

And then he saw it. An enormous red spot on one of the sheets of canvas!

The man smacked aside the knickknacks, clutched the sheet, and brought it close for inspection. The spot was a deep crimson stain soaked deep into the canvas with pulpy, fleshy clots clinging to the surface.

Blood! There was no doubt! It was beyond question! It was as plain as the nose on his face! He had his proof! At last!

However, the man paused. He carefully ventured forth a finger, dabbed the pulpy red substance, sniffed it, and—with some trepidation—licked it.

"Goddamncranberry sauce!" The man threw the canvas onto the pile of garbage in frustration.

The man looked around the room. He had looked everywhere. Everywhere but the window.

Yes, the window! That's it!

Away to the window, he flew like a flash, tearing open the shutters and throwing up the sash, just like the poem! A blast of cold air and a flurry of snow swept into the room. He leaned out into the frosty night. The snow was undisturbed on the first escape. He looked down into the alley below. There was the trail of something that had dragged through the blanketed ground, but it was impossible that had anything to do with Archibald.

The man looked straight ahead and froze. He saw a throng of eyes staring at him with one of those pairs shimmering and blinking in excitement. He shivered at sight then sighed with annoyance. It was nothing but a bunch of dolls and that pestilent pup, Pooch.

The dog growled and yelped.

The man always wanted a dog but his mother always forbade it. However, when he moved out, she ended up getting a dog for herself. How was that fair? What a hypocrite. Now he generally hated them. Dogs and mothers alike.

He gave the dog the finger. The middle one.

Pooch was offended. He shook his head and barked again.

After withdrawing the obscene hand gesture, the man noticed a wool sock hanging on the clothes line, now covered in snow. It was a strange sight, to say the least.

"If you don't leave, I'll call the police," a voice warned from inside the room.

The man spun around and saw Archibald in the kitchen who was standing in absolute defiance.

Archibald was sick and tired of being bullied by everyone, whether it was his boss, his wife, his landlord, or this man. Well, he had enough. No more. He refused. Tonight, he was taking charge of his life.

"Go ahead. Call 'em," the man said.

"Well, let's not be so hasty. It would be easier if you just left." Archibald's stance immediately became limp and he cowered back.

The man marched towards Archibald like the German army marched towards Poland.

"You're hidin' something," the man growled.

"If I was hiding something, don't you think you would have found it by now?"

Just then, Archibald saw a woman's severed finger in the trash. His face became ghastly pale.

The man noticed the draining color in Archibald's complexion.

"Why the pale face?" The man asked. He began to turn in the direction of Archibald's deathly stare.

"It's, uh, the trash!" Archibald blurted out as he darted pass the man towards the garbage, blocking his view. "I mean, I do all this cleaning and you proceed to dump my garbage all over the floor!" He knelt down, pretending to inspect the mess but was surreptitiously picking up the finger instead.

Now what to do with it? Pocket it? What if he frisks him again?

Archibald noticed the open window and the proverbial lightbulb went on in his head. It may have been low wattage but it was the best idea he had at the moment.

"And on top of that, you opened the window! I have heating bills to pay!" He feigned anger as he darted towards the window. While sliding open the window pane with one hand, he quickly slid the severed finger down into the hanging wool sock with his other. Once finished, he quickly slammed the window shut.

Thanks to Archibald's quick, clever, and nimble mind, a crisis had been averted.

"Ya got a sock out there," the man observed.

"Pardon?"

"I said, you got a sock."

"Yes, two of them, both on my feet."

"No, smart ass. The sock outside. In the snow."

"Oh, that sock."

"Ya gonna' bring it in?"

"Do what now?"

"Bring it in, I said."

"Oh, no, we leave it out there. It's for, uh, culinary conveyance. Long story. It doesn't matter. I mean, this mess!" Archibald forcibly changed topics. "I hope you plan on picking it up before you leave."

"Did ya wife leave anything for me?" The man asked, ignoring Archibald's complaints entirely.

"She left me, isn't that good enough for you?"

"I mean somethin' like a letter or envelope."

"You come here, punch me, throw all my stuff around, dump trash on my floor, and you're expecting me to thank you by entertaining more of your questions?"

The man lunged forward and picked up Archibald by his collar, raising him off the ground by an inch. Perhaps two. It doesn't matter. The point is, Archibald couldn't touch the ground with his toes.

"Okay, asshole. Shut up and listen. If I can't find Mary, I'm comin' back! Understand? You see these scars?" He pulled Archibald closer to his face. "You don't wanna see what the other guys look like. But if I have to come back, you will. Each time ya look in the mirror. Ya get me?"

Archibald didn't answer. He was too focused on touching the ground.

"I said do you get me?!" The man shook Archibald to get his attention.

"Yes, officer!"

"Detective!"

The man violently threw Archibald to the floor and then flicked his cigarette into Archibald's face.

Archibald winced in pain. It was good to be back on the ground but he could have done without the associated violence.

The man proceeded to stomp out of the kitchen in a fury. The steps faded and culminated with the apartment door being slammed shut. The place shook in response.

Archibald sat on the floor, staring at the smoldering ember of the cigarette that rolled onto the floor. After a moment, he slowly stood up and drove the heel of his shoe into the cinders. He then turned the trashcan upright and began to pile the garbage back into it.

As he picked up the canvas, he thought how fortunate it was that he dumped all that extra cranberry sauce onto it. It disguised the blood quite well. However, missing that severed finger was a gross oversight on his part. In his defense, the parts of a person's body are usually all attached, so accounting for body parts is usually a trivial task. It's just not in this particular case.

Archibald then picked up the turkey. A shame he had to throw it away. He probably had to get another one, but New York City was currently experiencing a turkey shortage. He had purchased his plump bird some time ago, but now it would be outrageously expensive or nearly impossible to acquire such a specimen by Christmas. It was ironic that he killed turkeys all day but couldn't get his hands on just one. This was because his boss was a penny-pinching cheapskate, a real-life Ebenezer Scrooge, who wouldn't give his employees any for the holidays. In the story, at least Scrooge ultimately changed his ways and gave a turkey to Tiny Tim. Archibald doubt he would ever see such a miraculous transformation.

Archibald was about to drop the turkey into the trashcan, but paused.

What if the man came back? What if he wasn't satisfied with his search? What if he wanted to look through everything again? Paranoia began to take hold. He better not take any chances.

Archibald shoved his arm up the turkey's cavity and began to pull back on it violently. After a few tugs, a wad of rags came out of the cavity and he dropped the turkey into the trash. He unwrapped the rags, revealing an envelope. He then opened the envelope, revealing a collection of his wife's identifying documents, including a driver's license, a Diner's Club card, and a passport. He had wanted to keep these separate from the body parts to make everything more difficult to identify, but he was now compelled to bring the documents along.

Archibald suddenly had a frightful thought.

The man asked about an envelope! An envelope! Did he know about the money? Mary must have told him! But how did she know? How?

His paranoia became more constrictive. He must ensure that the money was safe. He lurched toward the wall table, pushed aside the photos of his wife doing her Marlene Dietrich thing, and grabbed *The Sayings of Mrs. Solomon; Being the Confessions of the Seven Hundredth Wife as Revealed to Helen Rowland*. He quickly opened the book, pulled out a plain white envelope, and looked inside. It was filled with recipe clippings from *Mademoiselle* magazine.

Oops, wrong envelope.

Instead, he grabbed *Treatise on Parents and Children* by George Bernard Shaw, opened the book, pulled out another plain white envelope, and looked inside. It was filled with thousands of dollars in cash.

Yes, right envelope.

Archibald sighed in relief. He had transferred the money to a plain white envelope as he did not want to publicly advertise to the world that its contents came from a bank. He also pulled out a single twenty dollar bill and put it in his wallet for travel expenses.

Archibald noticed a large red stain had formed on the corner of *Treatise on Parents and Children*. It must have gotten blood on it when he knocked everything over. Another gross oversight. But again, in his defense, blood is usually kept inside a body. Usually one does not have to keep track of such things.

Archibald then had another frightful thought.

He realized that he only *heard* the man leave. He didn't actually *see* him leave. What if he only closed the door and never left?

His paranoia was suffocating. He quickly threw the envelopes back into their respective books to hide them and tiptoed into the hallway. He looked in the bathroom. Nothing. He looked in the bedroom. Nothing. He then crept to the end of the hallway and peered into the living room. Nothing. Absolutely nothing. How embarrassing.

He knew he had to move fast. There was no telling when the man would return. He looked at the presents under the tree. There were all still there. Good. All he had to do now was to add one or two more things and then he would be on his merry way. Soon, this nightmare will be over.

He walked over to the tree and stopped. He looked at the Christmas angel. It continued to grin.

"You think this is funny, don't you?" Archibald chided. Where did that angel come from anyway? Was it something his wife brought home? Surely it didn't just appear there?

There wasn't any time to ponder such silly ideas. He bent over, piled up the packages, and—with some considerable effort—lifted them off the ground. Collectively, the packages weighed about the same as a small woman—sans one finger.

**4**

Archibald began the treacherous journey of descending the stairs of the apartment building.

The heavy pile of gift boxes obscured his vision and strained his legs. Each new step felt narrower than the last. He shuffled his feet to fight for a foothold with each descending step. The incline was becoming progressively steeper as his legs wobbled with an ever increasing intensity. His arms began to slacken more and more as the weight of the packages felt heavier and heavier. Everything was becoming amplified to an unbearable degree.

Surely this is what the great explorer Sir Edmund Hillary must have felt when he climbed Mount Everest—the insufferable fatigue, the oppressive exhaustion. At least he was in good company. Metaphorically speaking. Literally, Hillary's company was a Sherpa mountaineer and Archibald's company was a dismembered body, but metaphorically Hillary and Archibald shared in their sufferings.

Yet it reached a point where Archibald wanted to collapse—to end it all, turn himself over to the authorities, and throw himself upon the mercy of the court. But there was one thought which kept him pushing forward through all that debilitating weariness—he was near the end! Yes, just a few more steps and it will all be over! And then he would stroll along flat, level ground!

He looked back to take pride in his progress.

His face grew pale.

He had only taken five steps. The door to his apartment was only a few paces behind.

How embarrassing. It seemed so much longer. He really needed to exercise more.

He turned and looked over the railing.

Dozens upon dozens of steps remained before he would reach the ground floor far below, a sight which made him positively vertiginous (a fancy way of saying he was dizzy from the height).

"Jiminey Christmas!" He gasped.

At that moment, a blast of cold wind blew through the doors below and rushed up the corridor, chilling Archibald's face. Two snow-covered boys burst into the building and proceeded to barrel up the stairs. Their ascent was so visibly reckless—taking steps two-by-two, laughing, and not looking ahead—that Archibald feared the boys would surely collide with him. Indeed, they continued to race upwards and were now nearly upon him.

"Whoah! Whoah!" Archibald shouted as one would halt a pair of galloping horses.

The two boys reared up immediately before him in surprise. They had not taken note of anyone on the stairs.

Archibald recognized the two boys as Keith and Cody, two troublesome twin boys who were the ire of the apartment tenants due to their pillaging hands and pilfering fingers.

"Gee whiz, Mis'r N! Whaz with all da' gifts?" Keith asked.

"Oh, uh, it's for some children's event at my wife's workplace."

"Ah, so ya givin' 'em to s'm ankle-biters?" Cody grinned. "Can we have 'un? Weez 'non tuh be chil'ren ta' s'm folks."

What? Was that English? What language are these hooligans speaking?

Cody reached out towards one of the packages.

Archibald motioned the gifts away. "I'm afraid not. They have a tally, you see. If I don't bring all of them then the number will be off." He assumed that Cody said something about having one of the gifts, but he honestly wasn't quite sure. It was all rather unintelligible.

"A'ight, ya wet rag, a'ight." Cody bemoaned, retracting his hand.

"Well, can weez help ya' down the stairs, Mis'r N? It sure is a lot f' ya ta carry." Keith asked with a seemingly innocent smile.

Archibald paused. He now faced a dilemma. He certainly needed the help since he lacked the physical prowess to carry the packages down the stairs, but it was also widely known that Keith and Cody had a proclivity for penny larceny. When anything was purloined, invariably these two were the culprits. As such, he would be running a considerable risk that the twins could run off with whatever packages they got their thieving hands on.

He looked at all the remaining stairs.

Yup, he'd take that risk.

"Okay, Cody," Archibald replied.

"I'm Keith. That's Cody," Keith corrected.

"I'm Cody." Cody affirmed.

"Yes, uh, Keith. Well, let me tell you that—”

"Say, what happ'n to ya face?" Keith interrupted.

Archibald forgot that his face had two black eyes now, one from Mary's pan and the other from the detective's fist. "Oh, that, well, you see, uh, my father was a raccoon. It runs in the family."

The twins stared at him blankly.

"Never mind. Bad joke. As I was saying, you see, these presents are for orphans... blind orphans... uh, handicapped blind orphans... and the presents are made especially for them... so, you know, they're simple shapes with, uh, some braille... boring things that don't require any sort of walking... or any movement for that matter... because, you know, none of them can walk... because, well, they're handicapped blind orphans... who are, you know, paralyzed and such... from the waist down... in wheelchairs and... crutches... some of them, at least, I would imagine."

Obviously, none of this was true, but a sob story just might tug at whatever heart strings were left in the boys and put them on their best behavior. Making the presents sound utterly boring was a bonus. Of course, the sob story was so extreme in its pensiveness that it was borderline unbelievable, though it would have made a fine melodrama in the hands of Douglas Sirk.

Keith and Cody stared blankly at him.

"Gee... that's da pits." Keith sympathized.

"Yeah, somethin' awful." Cody agreed, solemnly.

Were they feigning sympathy or were they actually buying it? And why do they abbreviate every other word?

"So, you know, you wouldn't simply be helping me down to the bottom of the stairs—it would be your way of helping out these poor unfortunate souls on Christmas! Lonely children, deprived of the simple pleasures we have taken for granted on Christmas morning—gifts, coming together with family, and caroling. So what do you say, boys? Are you with me? Shall we give them a Christmas they will never forget?"

Good God was he overselling it. It was like listening to a third-rate MacArthur desperately trying to rally troops on a suicide mission in Korea.

Keith and Cody looked at one another, communicating inaudibly as only twins can do, and turned back to Archibald.

"G'ess I can do a g'd deed f' a change!" Cody shrugged.

"Hell, it's Chris'mas! Tis da season 'n all dat!" Keith said.

Was this sincerity? Did a Christmas miracle happen? Or were they preparing to pull a fast one? And should Archibald find them a speech language pathologist?

Keith reached forward and grabbed a few packages, followed by Cody who took a few more.

Archibald heart raced. This was it. They now had them in their hands.

The twins turned their backs towards Archibald.

Archibald waited. Will they make a break for the door?

The twins started to descend the stairs, slowly and carefully.

Archibald followed, eyeing the twins cautiously. He kept close; a step or two behind.

The twins continued to descend the stairs, picking up speed as they went.

Were they trying to widen the gap between them and Archibald? Looking for an opportunity to run?

Archibald matched their speed to close the gap; with the lighter burden, he could maneuver more easily and move much faster than before.

The twins reached an intermediate landing. They quickened their pace considerably as they crossed to the next flight of stairs. The gap increased.

Archibald again matched their speed, closing the gap and remaining right on top of them.

The twins descended down the next flight, hustling even faster than before. The gap increased again.

Archibald started to struggle to maintain their speed, but managed to keep the gap closed.

The twins reached another landing. They crossed at an even faster speed. The gap increased yet again.

Archibald was now moving at a jogging pace. The packages were sliding in his arms. His legs started to shake. He was fighting to close the gap.

The twins were descending the final flight of stairs, this time taking two steps at a time.

Archibald tried to match the intense pace, but it was far too difficult to traverse multiple steps as being only one. His feet became jumbled. He tripped, falling into the two boys and knocking them down onto the steps. The packages fell out of their collective hands—some in the air, a few tumbling down the steps, and others sliding across the bottom floor.

"Ow!" Keith hollered.

"What gives?" Cody bellowed.

Archibald scurried to his feet, bolted passed the twins, and began to collect the packages scattered on the floor.

Did any tear open? Dear God, did anything tumble out? A finger? A toe?

He inspected each package carefully as he piled them together. A few dents, but nothing significant.

He breathed a heavy sigh of relief.

"Hey, why wuz ya on top o' us like dat, Mis'r N?" Keith complained.

"Ya, we hads to start runin' 'cuz we wuz afraids y'd crash right inta us!" Cody chimed.

"And ya did!" Keith added.

"Sorry, boys... it was... just the excitement of bringing these gifts to those unfortunate children... just got the best of me, you know? Wanting to see their smiling faces and all that! You can understand that, can't you? Sure you can understand that! The smile of children!"

Keith and Cody stared blankly at him.

"Uh, can't you, boys?"

The two boys didn't respond. They simply grumbled as they started to pick up a few of the outlying presents that Archibald hadn't yet collected.

"Say, dis one's startin' ta leak!" Cody exclaimed.

Archibald's head snapped towards Cody. His eyes widened. The color immediately drained from his face—a now a frequent occurrence. His face had become something like a barber's pole over the past few hours, alternating between red and white tones with regularity.

In the boy's hands was a package. A red stain had formed at one of its corners. A small red drop pooled at the corner's tip and then fell onto the floor.

Good God! It must have started to soak through the bed sheets! He thought he sufficiently wrapped the parts, but the blood had found its way to the outer box!

"Oh, uh, that must be the gift that had a jar of cranberry sauce in it. I made a jar for the deaf orphans to enjoy, you know, in addition to all the other gifts." Archibald quickly grabbed the gift out of Cody's hand.

"Deaf? Didn't ya' say blind?" Cody questioned.

"Did I?" Archibald replied as he pulled out a handkerchief and wiped both the spot on the floor as well as the corner of the box. Fortunately, the stain had already begun to congeal.

"Yea. Hand'capped blind orphans, I tot. Whooz paralyz'd." Keith added.

"Ah, yes. Quite right. Neck down." Archibald added the present to the pile.

"Wait, ya said waist down." Cody questioned again.

Inarticulate attentive hoodlums!

"Oh, my, yes. Though I would imagine some must be quadriplegic, right? And some deaf too? Surely they don't discriminate there. All disabilities must be welcomed. Quardrapelgic deaf orphans living together with handicapped blind orphans in perfect harmony, putting aside any prejudice for one another's ailments and existing in idyllic bliss." Archibald had no idea what he was saying.

Keith and Cody stared blankly at Archibald.

"Say, is dis place on the level?" Keith asked.

"Yea, sounds like deez people may be scammin' yooz, Mis'r N," Cody cautioned.

"Next y'll be tellin' us they gots mute orphans with dwarfism or somethin' else ya see in Ripley's!" Keith said.

"Yea, they're prolly tellin' ya a sob story to sucker ya into bringin' 'em all dis stuff," Cody further warned, motioning towards the boxes.

"Say, ya' sure these gifts are what they sez it is?" Keith questioned.

"Hey, ya' right! They could be havin' ya run guns for 'em or somethin'! Just like in tha' movies! Usin' some stupid, pathetic, idiotic, birdbrained dope whooz none da' wiser to their scheme! Oh, no offense, Mis'r N!" Cody added.

"Yeah, we sho' open one jus' ta be sure!" Keith suggested, moving towards the pile with an outstretched arm.

"Oh, well, um, hold on. Now, uh, don't worry, boys. It's perfectly legitimate, I assure you. You see, I wrapped these gifts myself. I'm probably just, um, misrepresenting them. I don't quite recall the needs of the children, so I may have, uh, conjectured a bit and got, well, carried away in... commiserating with their sufferings."

"Oh... if ya say so, Mis'r N." Keith backed down, wondering what "commiserating" meant.

"Well, I thank you kindly for the help, but now that we're safe on level ground I think I can take it from here. You two have done a very good deed and you will be rewarded handsomely for it."

They both held out their hands.

"Oh, uh. I meant, uh, treasures in heaven and... uh... the like..."

They retracted their hands.

"I mean, if I had something to give..." Archibald reached into his pants pockets, pretending to search for some coins but knowing he had none.

He glanced at the boys, expecting them to speak up and quell his act of futile generosity.

They kept staring at him.

Now feeling pressured, Archibald continued to fumble through his pant pockets, managing to pull out a button and some lint.

He again looked at the boys for a signal to end this embarrassing charade.

They continued to wait patiently.

This was rapidly becoming awkward.

Archibald moved onto his inner coat pockets, finding his envelope full of cash, his wallet with the twenty dollars—both too rich for a tip—and a ticket stub for "White Christmas" with Bing Crosby and Danny Kaye he saw a few days ago with Mary, pre-death-and-dismemberment, of course.

"Uh, how about an I.O.U.?" Archibald suggested.

The twins looked at one another, performed their inaudible communication, and turned to Archibald.

"Nah, fo'get it, it's Chris'mas," Keith said, waving his hand like he was canceling a debt.

"Yeah, M'rry Chris'mas, Mis'r N," Cody agreed.

Archibald smiled. "Well, thank you, boys. Thank you. And I hope you have a very Merry Christmas too."

**5**

Archibald opened the door to the outside air and was immediately greeted with a blast of cold wind which felt like a punch in the face, though nothing to the caliber of Mary's pan or the detective's fist.

The snow was falling heavily and its flakes were being spun around in swirls of glistening white, illuminated by the streetlamps lining the sidewalks and headlights of cars driving down the street. There was a substantial number of people shuffling through the snow despite the wintry weather, all attempting to do last minute shopping before Christmas this weekend.

Archibald had already considered his options for the disposal of the packages. The ideal location would be the Fresh Kills landfill—a vast wasteland of garbage in which these boxes would be lost forever under a mountain of junk and sewage. Unfortunately, the waste collection for his block had already occurred and would not occur until again after Christmas, so simply throwing the boxes in some nearby dumpster wasn't an option. Besides, could he really trust the garbage men to handle them with care? A careless toss and one would have quite the revealing mess. No, this was something he would have to deliver himself. The landfill was also outside his borough—an hour by bus, if not more.

He turned to the left which was the direction of the nearest bus stop but immediately froze.

A dark figure was leaning against the side of the building. The swirling snow made it difficult to decipher its details but there was something vaguely familiar about the black, inky shape.

Just then, a match was lit by the shadowy figure. It brought the flame to its face and lit a cigarette. The light of the match briefly illuminated a face—a face which was unmistakable, a face which belonged to the detective.

"Nope," Archibald muttered. He immediately turned around and began to walk in the opposite direction.

He had no idea if the detective saw him, but he certainly wasn't going to walk right by him. He figured that he could walk to the end of the street, take a right, and loop around the block to reach the bus stop from the other side.

With each step Archibald took, his foot would compress the blanket of snow on the ground, giving a muffled crunching sound. Though this sound would undoubtedly be drowned out in all of the ambient noise, it felt frightfully loud to Archibald.

He didn't dare look back just yet. After fifteen or twenty steps from the door, he approached the alley which the windows of his apartment overlooked. As he passed, he glanced down the dark chasm between the two buildings and was surprised to see nothing. The snowman which he had seen earlier was now gone. In its place was a trench of snow which disappeared down into the darkness, as if something had been dragged.

Kids, no doubt. Probably those twins. Dragging that snowman and doing God knows what with it.

After a few more steps past the alley, he couldn't resist—he looked back. It was difficult to see much of anything in the distance. The falling snow shrouded the night in billowing grayness and only objects caught directly under a streetlamp or the light of a passing car could be recognized. Yet he saw something. Obscured, shrouded, but there. An approaching figure in the darkness. Perhaps it was just one of the many Christmas shopper?

A dot of orange, a glowing ember flared and faded. The figure was smoking a cigarette.

Archibald looked forward again and kept walking.

He attempted to move faster but the slickness of the sidewalk made it hazardous. He instead kept his slow and steady pace.

He reached the end of the street.

Archibald knew that he could no longer turn right and loop back around to the bus stop. That would make it obvious that he was aware of the detective's pursuit.

So, instead, he turned to the left and crossed the street.

After a few more paces on the next block, Archibald again looked back.

The figure was still following him. The embers of the cigarette was like a beacon in a storm.

Archibald again tried to increase his pace, but immediately slid on the sidewalk. Not enough to fall but enough to startle. He had to walk slowly, despite the fear and adrenaline screaming at him to run.

As he approached the end of the next block, Archibald felt directionless. He certainly couldn't dispose of the boxes while being watched. What should he do? Try to lose him? But how?

It was starting to become clear that the detective didn't find what he wanted in the apartment, so he decided to leave Archibald alone and simply watch what he does. Did he think that Archibald would lead him to Mary? Or did he want to ensure that Archibald was going where he said he was going?

Yes, that's where he needs to go! The only location that wouldn't raise any suspicion from the detective—Mary's workplace!

With a clear destination in mind, Archibald took a right, crossed the street, and walked up the block.

The figure followed.

He took a left, crossed another street, and walked down another block.

The figure still followed.

Finally, Archibald took another right turn and crossed yet another street.

The figure was in close pursuit.

Archibald was now in the business district of his area. Enormous buildings loomed overhead, each being filled with multi-level department stores, luxurious apartments, elegant offices, and extravagant restaurants. The sidewalks became congested with people, some carrying shopping bags, others carrying their own pile of boxes wrapped in paper, but all with a single-minded determination to get their gifts at any expense. Similarly, the streets were jammed with taxi cabs, buses, and cars which played a symphony of honks, beeps, and shouts. Adding to the melody were holiday records played by stores, carolers on the sidewalks, and the ringing bells of the Salvation Army volunteers with their red kettles.

Archibald carefully navigated through the crowd, gripping the pile of gifts as if his life depended on it, which it did. He couldn't let any of the packages escape his grasp from all the bumps and budges he was constantly receiving from the inconsiderate shoppers flooding past him. He felt like he was directly plowing into a rushing avalanche. The deluge of shoppers was relentless. He was afraid he would soon be buried.

But then he saw it! The end of his journey! Before him was a brightly lit entrance to a staggeringly huge department store and above the entrance hung gigantic letters in blinding white light which read DAHL'S.

Seeing it gave him more strength. He began to push through the stream of shoppers with greater force. As he approached, he noticed a narrow alleyway next to Dahl's. Perhaps there was a side door in the building? If so, he could enter the store, lose the detective, and slip out the side. He wasn't sure if such a side door even existed, but he took note of the possibility.

The waves of shoppers became more and more fierce as he neared the door. They crashed against them as they poured in and out of the entrance's revolving door. He desperately held onto his gifts. He muscled his way through and soon found himself slipping into a line for the entrance. He made it. The line was moving forward through the revolving door. It would be only a few more seconds until he was inside.

As he shuffled forward, Archibald saw posters in the store window depicting various Christmas characters. The first poster was unquestionably Santa Clause with a note that said that Santa's trip from the North Pole to Dah''s was sponsored by Collier Poultry.

Collier Poultry? That was where he worked! Why on earth are they sponsoring Santa Clause?

Archibald shuffled forward. The next character posters showed a reindeer named Grudolf with a green nose and the one after that showed a snowman named Icey with a coal nose and two eyes made out of buttons. What happened to Rudolph and Frosty? They were like distorted mirror images of the popular characters.

Suddenly, Archibald found himself swinging through the golden revolving door and was flung into the department store. The loud symphony of the busy street was finally silenced and replaced with the glorious beauty of commercial holiday music devoid of any significant meaning.

*Up on the housetop, reindeer pause*  
*Out jumps good ol' Santa Claus*

It was chaos. Shoppers were scouring through every department, throwing items into their bags with little thought as to why they were even buying them as if preparing for a natural disaster. Other shoppers were standing in long lines—lines so abominably long that they had been forsaken by God himself—and brooding with impatient agony that finally erupted into angry shouts upon reaching the cashier.

Employees appeared to be also in a state of frenzy. Some were frantically running about to help direct customers, others were wildly punching buttons on their cash registers to process sales, a few were desperately wrapping items in gift wrap with tape and paper flying every which way like streamers in a party, and others had broken down in tears from the constant abuse customers and supervisors alike.

*Down through the chimney, with lots of toys,*  
*All for the little one's Christmas joys.*

Archibald descended into the hellish madness, like Orpheus descending into the underworld.

*Ho Ho Ho, who wouldn't go?*

Archibald became lost in the sea of raging customers.

*Ho Ho Ho, who wouldn't go?*

He looked back at the entryway.

*Up on the housetop, click click click*

The detective had just stepped through the revolving door and was now surveying the landscape.

*Down through the chimney with good Saint Nick*

Archibald looked forward again and pushed deeper into the crowd, hoping he hadn't been seen.

*First comes the stocking of little Nell;*  
*Oh, dear Santa fill it well!*

Archibald noticed three mannequins among the crowd that had a small opening behind them. It was just large enough to conceal himself. He quickly pushed his way over and placed the presents down at the feet of the mannequins. Carrying the weight of person across several city blocks in the middle of a winter storm was exhausting work, even if they were missing the weight of a finger.

*Give her a dolly that laughs and cries;*  
*One that will open and shut her eyes!*

Archibald eyed the entryway.

At first, there was no sign of the detective. Yet upon closer examination, he spotted his pursuer standing off to the side, watching the entryway carefully. The detective was in no rush; he knew if Archibald came into the store, he had to come out of the store.

This was a pickle. If Archibald left with the packages in hand, that would be highly suspicious. If he left with no packages, that came with its own set of problems. Where should they be placed? How could he ensure they would be safe? He could look for a side door to the alley, but does one even exist? If so, would he have access to it? Should he just wait here and hope the detective eventually leaves on his own accord? That could be quite some time.

Archibald looked at the three mannequins. They each had a red, green, or white dress on it. He then looked at the clothing racks around the mannequins. All the racks were cannibalized by the carnivorous shoppers, leaving them threadbare.

No one was touching the store display!

Archibald began to arrange the packages around the feet of the mannequins frantically, hiding the box with the red stain under the others. Upon completion, one would have thought they were always there. He thought himself as being clever. It was just like Poe's *The Purloined Letter* in which a crime was hidden in plain sight. He now only hoped that the detective was no C. Auguste Dupin but rather Whistling Red Skelton.

Archibald stood up and took a deep breath. This was it. He was taking a huge risk but his distraught mind could conceive no better alternative. He would leave the boxes behind, but only momentarily.

He advanced towards the entryway. Each step placed him farther away from the boxes. Each step made him increasingly anxious. Each step made his clever idea of hiding the boxes in the open seem more and more idiotic, downright stupid, incomprehensibly bad and, oh God, why was he doing this, he should turn back before it's too late!

He forced himself to whistle along with the festive music that was drowning the shoppers in oppressive holiday cheer.

*Ho Ho Ho, who wouldn't go?*

He looked forward. He avoided eye contact with the detective at all costs. He dared not look.

*Ho Ho Ho, who wouldn't go?*

He was at the revolving door. This was it. The detective must have seen him now.

*Up on the housetop, click click click*

He pushed through the door and stepped forward into the raging blizzard.

*Down through the chimney with good Saint Nick*

He aggressively shoved his way into the stream of shoppers, taking a hard right into the direction from which he came. After a few steps, he quickly pushed himself out of the stream and ducked into the alley, positioning himself behind some crates.

He waited, watching the sidewalk. He saw a stream of bodies walking in both directions. After a minute, one of the bodies stopped directly in front of the alley.

It was the detective.

Archibald held his breath and braced himself against the wall as much as he could to obscure himself behind the crates further.

The detective looked back towards the entrance to Dahl's. He looked forward in the direction he last saw Archibald walking. He looked across the street. He then looked down the alley.

It was then that Archibald saw the footprints he had made in the snow. A trail of footprints which led directly to the spot where he was hiding. How could he have been so stupid?

The detective squinted his eyes to peer down the dark alley.

Don't look down! For the love of God, don't look down!

The detective turned his head away. He proceeded to walk forward out of sight.

Archibald breathed a sigh of relief but remained behind the crate. He was nervous the detective would reach the end of the block, not see Archibald in any direction, and double-back.

So he waited.

No detective.

And waited.

Still no detective.

After what felt like an eternity (sixteen minutes to be precise), Archibald ventured forward.

He got to the end of the alley and peered around the corner.

No detective.

He looked across the street and back towards Dahl's.

Still no detective.

Archibald quickly stepped out, pushed his way to the department store, and thrust himself into the revolving door.

He was greeted with the most iconic Christmas song of all time.

*Jingle bells, jingle bells,*  
*Jingle all the way.*

Archibald descended into the madness once again.

*Oh what fun it is to ride*  
*In a one-horse open sleigh.*

He squeezed through customers.

*Jingle bells, jingle bells*

He saw the three red, green, and white mannequins in the distance.

*Jingle all the way.*

He pushed aside shoppers.

*Oh what fun it is to ride*

He reached the mannequins and froze in terror.

*In a one-horse open sleigh.*

The presents were gone.

Good, God! Oh, Jesus born in Bethlehem! It can't be! It's impossible!

His heart raced. His legs shook. His hands trembled.

Where? Where are they? For the love of all that is good and holy still left in the world, where are they?

Archibald scoured the area, pushing and shoving everyone in his way. He had to find them, but they weren't there. They weren't anywhere.

Did a customer take them? Customers don't touch displays. They never do. It was an unwritten code among shoppers. It was simply taboo. No, it must have been an employee. It had to be an employee.

Just then, Archibald saw a timid little employee shuffling across the floor, trying not to make eye contact with anyone for fear of being berated. He grabbed the employee's arm.

"Where are the boxes?!" Archibald demanded in absolute hysteria.

"Oh, uh, hello, may I help you?" The frazzled employee inquired.

"The boxes! In the display! Where are they?!" Archibald blurted out in short, gasping breaths.

"I, uh, don't know. This... This isn't my department." The employee stammered.

"Get me someone! In this department!" Archibald shouted.

The employee was quite distressed. He thought Archibald to be nuttier than a fruitcake, but he was still nothing like the crazed parents he had seen back in the toy department. Dear Lord, he never wished to return to that godforsaken place again. It was barbaric. It was savage. It was inhuman. He once saw a father tear an oversize candy cane from a display and beat another with it just so he could get the last toy pistol set. The fact that the one being beaten was the father's own dad, that he was the grandfather of the man's very own child and that they both intended to get the toy pistol set for the exact same boy, showed just how utterly cruel and primal the toy department had become. They didn't think. They didn't care. They simply devolved to their prior states of development on the evolutionary scale a soon at the entered that damnable land of the children playthings. It was hellish. The employee still suffered from post-traumatic stress disorder.

"Oh, Mr. Toole! Mr. Toole!" The employee hailed a passerby.

A man wearing a suit and tie walked towards them.

"What is it, seasonal?" Mr. Toole called all seasonal employees by that title. It was inefficient to learn their names.

"This customer is wondering—”

"Where are the boxes?! The ones in the display!" Archibald interrupted, pointing wildly at the mannequins.

Mr. Toole eyed Archibald with some trepidation. "Those are dresses, sir, not boxes."

"No! The boxes! At their feet!"

Mr. Toole began to suspect Archibald may have had too much rum in his eggnog. "My dear sir, there are no boxes at their feet."

"Not now! Earlier! Boxes wrapped with boys and girls on it!"

"Oh? Are you saying some boys and girls have them?"

"No, you... you dummy! The wrapping paper!"

A woman approached Archibald and the employees.

"Is there a problem, Mr. Toole?" The woman inquired.

"Ah, Ms. Stevenson. This man is under the influence, er, impression that there were boxes at the feet of the mannequins, or something like that. Could you inform this man that there are—”

"Oh, yes. We moved them."

"—no boxes... Oh?" Mr. Toole's voice indicated surprise.

"Yes. They didn't belong there. I had someone move them to the toy department."

The toy department?! Not there. Anywhere but there. The timid employee shuddered at the mere utterance of the place. Flashes of animalistic violence seized his mind. It was the stuff of nightmares.

"Where? Where is the toy department?" Archibald grabbed the woman's shoulders.

"Sir!" The woman protested.

"Now see here!" Mr. Toole objected, raising a finger but doing little else.

"Where?" Archibald shouted.

"In the back! By the kitchenware!" The woman replied.

Archibald pushed aside the woman who fell back into the arms of her coworkers. He bolted towards the back of the store, pushing people aside and knocking customers over left and right.

"Lord be with him," the timid employee muttered. “The poor bastard doesn’t know what he’s in for.”

Archibald ran through the perfume section. Strong scents of holiday aromas washed over him. Spiced ginger, woodsy cloves, country cinnamon—they all caused him to gag on the thick air.

He ran through the jewelry section. The shimmering light from the decorative trinkets momentarily blinded him. He knocked over a few elderly ladies. One shouted something about their hip.

He ran through the book section. Copies of the newly released *Lord of the Flies* by William Golding lined the shelves. No one was buying it. The customers were too busy exerting power and dominance over one another in barbaric shopping feuds to show much interest in the book.

He ran through the kitchenware section. He saw a new electric knife. God, that would have made cutting up his wife easier. Perhaps next time.

Finally, he saw it. There, before him, was the sign. Upon it, written in large, blood-red lettering, was the four-letter word that disturbed so many people in the store—the word TOYS.

He stepped across the threshold, leaving behind him a long, tortuous trail of customers lying on the floor, all of which he had knocked down in his crazed frenzy.

It was a madhouse! A lunatic's asylum! Bedlam! Parents were biting, scratching, and gnawing one another as they wrestled over the last remaining Ginny dolls. Others were pushing or pulling people down to the floor and climbing onto their prone bodies to get the leftover Red Ryder carbines. They were all compelled to grab the toys on the shelves that would surely bring meaning and fulfillment to their children's lives.

Archibald began to search for an employee when someone shouted, "Buck Rogers Sonic Ray Light Guns now in stock!"

The ground rumbled and Archibald was swept into a wave of parents. They were stampeding in the direction of the announced surplus inventory, each trying to head off the other to lay claim to one. Their children had to have it. It lights! It buzzes! It signals!

Archibald tried to pull himself out of the charging herd, tripped, and fell into a pile of fake snow which burst into a billowy cloud. He coughed, gagged, and spit the gritty white material out of his mouth. It tasted horrible. He looked up and suddenly saw himself surrounded by pine trees. They were all fake, of course, and much smaller than the real thing. He had landed in a winter landscape display. A sign nearby read "Penguin's Asbestos Pure White Fireproof Snow! Be Safe With Your Decorations! Only Fifty Cents!"

Archibald got to his hands and knees and began to crawl through the short trees. He figured it was quicker to move through the display than to fight through the rampaging shoppers. He was making good progress until his hand landed on something warm, soft, and squishy. He looked down. His hand was embedded into something brown and stinky. It was poop.

"Jiminey Christmas!" Archibald muttered as tried to wipe the fecal matter onto the asbestos snow. Instead of it wiping off, the asbestos snow simply stuck to his hand. It now looked like his hand was covered with feathers.

He then began to wipe it on the pine tree when he heard a loud "Humph." He looked up and saw a large creature looming over him. Its black eyes stared at him. Its large horns pointed down towards him. Its large snout snorted at him. It was a rather intimidating figure, except for the green ball which dangled at the end of his snout and jingled as it moved. It was a real-life reindeer.

"Hey! Buster!" A voice yelled.

Archibald looked beyond the green-nosed reindeer and saw a man who, coincidentally, was also dressed as a reindeer, only just more silly and cartoonish.

"I'm gettin' sick and tired of you goddamn parents sneaking through our goddamn winter forest!" The silly man-reindeer stomped forward, kicking up asbestos snow as he went. "If you wanna pet Grudolf, you gotta wait in the goddamn line like everyone else!"

"Rudolph?" Archibald questioned, still not understanding the name.

"No, jackass! Grudolf! The green-nosed reindeer! Green! If you want Rudolph and his red bullshit, go to goddamn Montgomery Ward! Now get to the back of the line, goddammit!" The silly man-reindeer pointed.

Archibald followed the visual cue and looked over at the line. He saw parents with children all lined up to pet Grudolf the green-nosed reindeer. They were now all staring at him. Archibald sheepishly wiped the remaining excrement onto the tree.

"You deaf? Back of the line!" The silly man-reindeer pointed again, this time with more gusto.

"I'm not here for your second-rate Rudolph!" Archibald started to protest. "I'm looking for my presents!"

"I'll give you a present!" The silly man-reindeer took out a little whip. He typically only used it when Grudolf started misbehaving or a child needed disciplining. He began to snap it towards Archibald.

Archibald stumbled backwards into the winter forest, trying to avoid the lashes.

All the parents and children cheered in seeing justice served. Shoppers should never touch displays. It was simply taboo.

Archibald rolled out of the other side of the display and landed in the middle of another wintry setup. It looked like a quiet New England town with small buildings covered in snow, children ice-skating and sledding, and couples in sleighs traveling down streets and over bridges. It was like a Norman Rockwell painting brought to life. Nearby there was a sign that said, "Meet Icey the Snowman," and near the sign were customers shouting at employees with bile and bitterness.

"What mean Frosty isn't here?" A mother screamed. "We walked ten blocks in that blizzard just to see him!"

"I told you already, madam. It's Icey, not Frosty," the employee calmly responded. "We would never infringe on the Warner Brothers copyright."

"Icey. Frosty. Snowy. Chilly. I don't care what you call that freak of nature. My son wants to see a snowman and he will see a snowman!" The woman pointed a finger at the employee like she was brandishing a gun.

"I'm sorry, madam. The employee who played Icey was let go. He had a habit of taking things which weren't his."

"Well, get someone else to wear the suit!"

"I'm sorry, madam. The employee we let go took the suit even though it wasn't his."

Archibald pushed aside the mother who was berating the employee. "I need your help!"

"Excuse me! What do you think you are doing?!" The mother shouted at the boorish interruption.

Archibald turned and barked at the woman like an animal. He was surprised at his own actions. The place really did devolve its inhabitants.

The woman was stunned by the barbaric action and grabbed hold of the boy next to her. "Let's go, William."

The boy didn't move.

"William, I said, *let's go*!"

The boy still didn't move.

"All right, you little brat!" She knelt down to look at him directly in the face. She removed his hat and scarf. Her eyes widened. She recoiled in horror. "You're not William!"

The boy looked at her, confused. "No, I'm Michael."

"Oh my God!" The mother stood up. "I grabbed the wrong boy!"

"Where's my mommy?" The boy asked.

"William! William, where are you, honey?!" She shouted as she ran off, leaving the other boy all alone.

"Erm, anyway, what can I do for you, sir?" The employee asked, caught off guard by the whole incident.

"I am looking for some gift boxes!"

"Ah, yes. Gift Wrap. Section D6."

"No! Not that! Not gift boxes."

"But you said—”

"I meant presents! Presents that were just delivered here by some employee! Presents wrapped in paper with boys and girls printed on them!"

"Oh, I would imagine that..." The employee stopped. He sniffed. "Do you smell that?"

Archibald realized some residual reindeer excrement must still be on his hand. He shoved it into his coat pocket. "Forget the smell! What about the presents?"

"Sorry, I believe those would have been sent over there. Talk to the elf." The employee pointed.

Archibald was directed towards a woman in an elf costume. The costume was identical to the one in his wife's closet. Shiny gold bells were on her shoes. Here legs were wrapped in candy cane stockings with a dress of green velvet flowing over them. Glitter was lightly speckled across her cheeks. Her brunette hair was pulled tightly under a green cap. She was beautiful, magical, so much so that he forgot what he was doing. It was like the enchanting elf had cast a spell over him. But the distraction was only for a moment. He began to push aside the ravenous parents as he ran towards her.

"Miss! Excuse me! Excuse me, miss!" Archibald hailed from a distance.

The woman turned towards him and smiled. Her smile was bewitching.

"Oh, Mr. Nowakowski."

Archibald was taken aback. No, stunned. He stopped in his tracks. How did she know his name?

There was a long pause before the elf spoke again. "It is Mr. Nowakowski, right?"

"Uh, yes. Uh, do I know you?"

"I'm Carol. I work with your wife, Mary. We're the store elves. Ta da!" She twirled in place, her green skirt flaring out to the side. Archibald glanced away out of decency. "But you could have probably guessed that."

"Have we... met before?"

"We never had the pleasure, but Mary showed me your photograph once."

"You recognized me from a photograph... that Mary showed you only once?" Was his face that recognizable? That handsome? That ugly? He always thought himself as being rather nondescript just like how he never was described anywhere in this story.

"What can I say? We elves are good with faces." She smiled and gave a wink. "Though I must say your eyes are a little darker than I remembered."

God, she was perfectly charming. She even made having two black eyes sound delightful. Archibald found it difficult to keep focus on his life-and-death struggle to find his wife's severed limbs.

"Mary's not working tonight if you are looking for her," Carol added.

"Oh, I know. It's just that... Well, I am looking for some gift boxes that were just brought here. Just a few minutes ago."

"Oh, yes. Don't worry. We got them."

"Oh, good!" Archibald was relieved.

"Thank you for them. I was afraid Mary wouldn't have brought them in time."

"Oh, no, I mean, you see, I, uh, dropped off the wrong boxes."

"The wrong boxes?"

"Yeah, I... uh, wrapped the wrong boxes with the wrong paper and... mixed them up."

"Oh, dear."

"It's all very embarrassing. So... is there any way I could get them back?"

"Oh." Her face changed. It was the first time her expression was anything but sprightly. "I'm afraid it may not be possible."

Archibald became gravely concerned. "What do you mean?"

"Well... I..." Carol stammered. "Well, perhaps it would be better if I just showed you."

Carol turned slightly and held out her hand.

The gesture surprised Archibald. Did she really intend him to grab it? To hold hands so soon after meeting? Archibald started to reach out towards her palm as if in a trance, but then quickly realized his hand still had reindeer excrement on it. He quickly stuffed it back into his coat. "Oh, I have a slight cold. Best I just follow."

"Oh, how silly of me." She laughed. "Forgive me, Mr. Nowakoski. I'm used to leading children by the hand to see Santa."

Archibald noticed her cheeks became a little rosier from a touch of embarrassment.

She turned and stepped onto a display. Her green shoes kicked up the asbestos snow. The gold bells on her shoes jingled with each step. Archibald followed.

They began to walk towards an enormous structure. From the back, Archibald could tell it was a wooden cottage, blanketed with rolls of cotton on its roof to give the impression of snow. As they wrapped around to the side of it, a white fence with candy cane posts protruded from the wall of the cottage and ran towards the front of the cottage. As they approached the front, Archibald saw a pile of presents come into view, all of them nestled together on the other side of the fence. Each present was wrapped in a familiar paper depicting little girls and boys ice-skating and sledding in the snow.

Hallelujah! Gloria in excelsis Deo! It was Archibald's presents!

But wait! Something was wrong!

Archibald had carried only ten or so presents into the store.

This pile had *hundreds* of presents, each with the same exact wrapping.

Dear Lord in Heaven! They all look the same! How will he find them now? Open up every single one?

The word "turkey" somehow reached his ears.

Confused, he looked beyond the enormous pile of presents was a jolly man in a red suit. Santa Clause! It was old Kris Kringle himself, complete with a long white beard and a belly like a bowl full of jelly.

A little girl sat on what little space was left on Santa's lap after accommodating the man's fat stomach. She looked up into Santa's gold spectacles with wonderment.

Santa took his white glove and delicately grabbed a present from the pile and placed it gently in her hands.

Her eyes lit up. She gave a toothy smile. She thanked and praised Santa for his generosity.

Beyond Santa and the little girl, stretching for what appeared to be miles, was a line consisting of hundreds of children and their parents, all eagerly awaiting to get a present from Santa. And to the other side of Santa were scores of children who had already received their free gifts. These little boys and girls couldn't wait to take home their gifts and open them on Christmas morning. They eagerly grabbed their parent's hand and skipped towards the exit with glee.

Archibald simply stood there and stared.

"Jiminey Christmas!"

**6**

Archibald wanted to die.

It was impossible. He could never get all those presents back. Never. He just knew it.

His wife's body parts were now being scattered everywhere. They were going to enter homes. They were going to be gifts for children. They were going to be opened on Christmas morning with entire families gathered around to witness their opening.

They'll be psychologically damaged! They'll be in therapy for the rest of their lives! They'll never recover! All of them! Boys, girls, moms, dads, aunts, uncles, grandmas, and grandpas! All of them will be traumatized! The older ones may even die from shock!

It was a waking nightmare. It was a sick cosmic joke. Yes, that was it! He earlier saw that Christmas angel laughing at him from up on high. They were letting him know. No, they *wanted* him to know. They were using him as a character in their uncanny farce! They! They! Who the hell are they? He was losing it.

He wanted to laugh.

But he suddenly snapped back into reality when he saw one particular present in the pile. A present with a red stain on its corner. A present which undoubtedly contained his wife's head!

Without the head, how long would it take for them to identify the body? Days? Weeks? Could they even identify the body? He had no idea, but if he could get the head, perhaps it would buy him some extra time. Even if it didn't, what did he have to lose? Don't answer that!

"There!" Archibald pointed. "The present with the red stain! That's one of mine!"

"Yes. I think I see it." Carol said, leaning slightly over the fence to look closer. "But what on earth is in your boxes that would make it stain like that?"

"Uh, cranberry sauce. Yes, jarred cranberry sauce. That one must have broke."

"Oh, you brought the Sedaris brand gifts?"

Sedaris? Archibald bristled at the name. He wanted to go on a tirade on how their sauce was nothing but corn syrup, but he didn't. "No, it's homemade."

"Okay. I'll go and grab that—”

As she was talking, kindhearted St. Nick grabbed the very gift Archibald wanted and handed it to a different girl now sitting on her lap.

Goddammit! Are you serious?

"Oh. Well, I guess we will have to ask her to exchange it when she comes to the exit." Carol started to walk towards the exit of Santa's workshop to intercept the girl when someone came running.

"Carol! Hey, Carol!" An elf came running up to them.

"Now Tinklebottom, you know we use our North Pole names in front of the children."

"Sorry, Jingledrops. You got a phone call. It sounds serious."

Her face became concerned. "Did the person on the phone mention the word *mistletoe*?"

"Yeah. What's it mean, Jingledrops?"

"Oh, dear." She turned to Archibald. "I'm so sorry, Mr. Nowakoswki. I simply must take this."

Archibald began to panic. "But what about getting my gift back?"

She placed her hand on his shoulder. "It's okay. Just ask her to exchange it with another in the pile. I'll make sure Tinklebottom knows about it. I'll check back with you."

Her touch was soothing and calming. Archibald stopped worrying. Carol then disappeared around Santa's workshop in the back. Archibald started worrying.

Then he heard it. The word "turkey". He could have sworn he heard it before. Was his mind playing tricks on him, just as in *The Tell-Tale Heart*?

Archibald looked at Santa Clause. Did he say turkey? Why would he? And yet there was something vaguely familiar about him. Did he know him?

While contemplating Santa's identity, the little girl hopped off Santa's lap and walked towards the exit. She wore large, black-rimmed glasses which made her head appear smaller than it was. Her black hair was tied off in pig-tails and her winter jacket was red with fur trimming around the neck, hands, and base. She was obnoxiously cute.

Archibald followed her on the other side of the fence. "Um, excuse me, uh, little girl."

"Daddy says I shouldn't talk to strangers," she snapped. She kept walking with her eyes forward.

"Oh, yes, fine advice, but, uh, your gift is broken."

"And how would *you* know?"

"Well, I mean, just look! The corner of the box is all... stained!"

She stopped and decided to humor the strange man by looking at the box. She saw the stain. "So?"

"So... it's stained! It's leaking!"

"And how do you know this is something that even *can* leak?"

"How do I know? I wrapped them."

"*You* wrapped them." She eyed him with incredulity.

"Yeah, I wrapped them. Why is that so hard to believe."

"*You*?"

"Yes! Is this one of those gender stereotype things? Men can wrap a presents!"

"Ok, then what's in it?"

"Uh, a jar of cranberry sauce."

"Boloney!"

"Huh?"

"Bah-lone-ee! They wouldn't give a kid a jar of cranberry sauce."

"You're right, so why don't you exchange it with another gift from the pile so you can get something else instead."

"Oh, so none of the other boxes have jars of cranberry sauce?"

"Nope."

"So you're saying that I happened to get the only box in the entire pile with a jar of cranberry sauce?"

"Uh, I guess."

"Boloney!" She started walking.

"Wait! Wait! Why don't you want to exchange it?"

"Daddy says never trust a man who speaks in *ad hoc* hypotheses."

"What?"

She stopped and sighed. "Ugh. Ad hoc hypotheses. Upon being presented with an anomaly by the skeptic (that's me), the defender (that's you) will adjust their theory (that is, your claim) with unsubstantiated hypotheses (that is, your explanations) to avoid nullifying the theory but at the expense of verisimilitude. Debate champion." She pointed to herself.

"Ver.. Vera—”

"Verisimilitude. V-E-R-I-S-I-M-I-L-I-T-U-D-E. Definition. The appearance of truth. Verisimilitude. Spelling bee champion." She pointed to herself again and then she started to walk again.

"Okay, fine, how about I just buy it off of you?"

She stopped. "Make me an offer.”

"What do you say to a dollar?"

"I say that’s insulting."

"What? It's just a broken toy—”

“You mean, a jar of cranberry sauce?”

“Yeah, yeah, a jar of cranberry sauce. It’s not even worth a dollar. It's leaking.”

"Have you read *The Wealth of Nations* by Adam Smith?"

"Who?"

"I thought so. My daddy has been reading it to me for bed time. I sleep like a baby. In it, Smith discusses the value paradox between water and diamonds. You heard of *that* at least, right?"

"Uh..."

"Oh, god." She took a deep breath. "According to Smith, there are two factors which defines an object's value—*use* and *exchange*. To put it simply, its utility and its price. The apparent paradox is that objects with the greatest value of *use* (like water) have little value in *exchange*, while the objects with the greatest value of *exchange* (like diamonds) have little value in *use*. With me so far?"

"Yeah..."

"So while this stained box may be very low in terms of its *use* value, it evidently is very high in terms of its *exchange* value, just like the diamond. It's elementary supply and demand microeconomics.”

"Right…"

“So with those basic principles in mind, could you please make an offer that is more equitable?"

“Two dollars.”

She started walking.

Archibald adjusted his offer. “Five dollars.”

She stopped. “Okay, it’s Christmas…”

Archibald smiled. The holiday spirit was at work!

“I will give it to you for... ten dollars.”

“Ten dollars?!”

“Admittedly, its value is probably much greater than that amount as indicated by your apparent desperation to obtain it, but quickly performing inferential statistical analysis from the known incomes of a subset of parents (and making the requisite distributional assumptions, of course), I can safely conclude that the average cash value of the holiday shopper here would be ten dollars, with a 95% confidence level."

Archibald just stared at her.

"My daddy wants me to be an economic statistician."

“All I got is a twenty.”

She stared at him in disbelief – this sucker is making this too easy. The price just went up.

"Do you have change?" Archibald asked.

"What do I look like? A bank?"

"Can you wait while I get change?"

She started walking.

"Okay, okay, you little —”

"You little what?" She snapped. She gave a glare that dared him to complete that sentence.

"Uh, sweet... angel... thing..."

She smiled.

"Here, take it..." He handed over the twenty dollar bill.

She snatched it out of his hand, raised her glasses, and examined it closely to verify it wasn't counterfeit.

"What? Do I really look that disreputable? That I'd pass fake bills?"

She sniffed it. Her nose scrunched up. She recoiled in disgust. "Why does this smell like you pooped on it?"

"God! What can I tell you? I haven't had a chance to wash my hands yet."

"But why would your *hands* smell like that?"

"It wasn't me! It was a reindeer!"

"A *reindeer*?"

"Yes, a reindeer! You know what? Fine, if you don't want the twenty dollars, I'll take it back. How about that? I don't care anymore. Keep the present."

The girl glared at Archibald. She slowly took out a handkerchief, delicately placed the bill in the handkerchief, neatly folded the handkerchief, and carefully slid the handkerchief in her coat pocket.

Archibald tapped his foot impatiently.

"I'll just sterilize it when I get home." The girl handed the present over to Archibald.

He snatched it up just as quickly as the girl had snatched the twenty dollar bill.

“Nowakowski!” A voice bellowed.

Archibald turned and saw his landlord lumbering towards him.

“Oh, uh, Mr. Bemelman!” Archibald stammered. What was his landlord doing here?

“What's going on here, Nowakowski?" He turned to the girl. "Is he's giving you trouble, my dear?"

"Oh, no, daddy. I was actually discussing the fundamental principles of economics as outlined by Adam Smith. This man was quite receptive to his theories." The girl smiled as she padded the twenty dollars in her coat pocket.

The brat was his daughter? How fitting.

"Ah, good man, that Adam Smith. The Father of Capitalism, you know. Glad you're showing an interest, Nowakowski. It's important to know these things. Be informed! Yes, we must all make a valiant effort to educate others—especially the next generation! I'm doing my part by educating my daughter. Aren't I, sugarplum?"

"Yes, daddy."

"Yes, sir, we must fight that toxic communist disease spreading through our blessed country like a malignant cancer. New York has it the worst, I fear. It's positively tumorous. Gads, just think of that little socialist imp back in your apartment! Like a member of the Hitler Youth! If only I had gotten my hands on that—plug your ears, pumpkin."

She plugged her ears.

"Goddamn son of a bitch Harriman-supporting bastard boy!" He tapped his daughter's hand. "Unplug your ears, sweet pea."

She unplugged her ears.

"Think about that, Nowakowski! That little parasitical monstrosity could be running our country some day! All because his bloodsucking leech of a father indoctrinated, brainwashed, and forced-fed his child some perverse, foul, Marxist twaddle! Confound it! I won't have it! I won't ever let that happen to my sweet innocent child, right, honey bun?" He turned towards his daughter.

"Yes, daddy."

"Well, let's go home, buttercup. We can review the *Communist Control Act* and make a list of people we suspect of being communist. We'll start with parents from your school and then get to my tenants if we have time." He turned to Archibald. "Keep up the good fight, Nowakoswki! And don't forget the rent! Due the first of month! Got to pay off the holiday shopping debt I just incurred to keep my little chickadee happy! Come on, pudding!"

"Bye, Mr. Nowakowski!" The girl grinned.

Archibald watched as two of his least favorite people in the world left.

Well, he had the present, at least.

He looked at the large pile of presents which remained next to Santa. Perhaps he could get them all back after all. Sure, why not? If he ran and got change, he could buy all of the gifts from the children as they exited Santa's workshop. Surely none of the other children would be as cold, calculating, and conniving as that little brat. Perhaps it would just cost him a dollar or two for each. Yeah, it would burn into his savings to get them all, but not having to explain how his wife's dismembered remains ended up in wrapped presents under Christmas trees across the city may just be worth the cost.

But then Archibald saw Carol. She was walking alongside the wooden cottage towards him. For a moment, he forgot everything. Why did she have to be so beguiling?

Suddenly, a customer grabbed Carol's arm and stopped her, diverting her attention away from Archibald.

This made Archibald jealous. He knew it was foolish to feel that way. After all, he hardly knew her and she was only talking to a customer.

Unexpectedly, Carol pointed directly at Archibald. This caught him completely off guard. Why would she be pointing at him?

He examined her face. It was no longer cheery. It looked concerned.

The customer turned in the direction she was pointing.

Archibald gasped.

That was no customer at all! It was the detective!

The man smiled at Archibald. It was not a welcoming smile. It was more like a smile Krampus would make at a Viennese boy before whipping him with a bundle of birch branches. It was a you're-gonna-get-it type of smile. It was a smile that said, "I'm angry that you tricked me but now I have you cornered and I am going to take great pleasure in exacting revenge on your worthless hide." Well, I suppose one can say quite a bit with just a smile.

"Jiminey Christmas!"

**7**

Having only Mary's head would have to suffice. Sorry, kids. Hopefully the years of therapy will help you recover. At least they'd be just severed limbs. Those are less personable.

Archibald bolted towards the door.

The detective ran after him.

Archibald knocked over shoppers as he raced towards the exit.

The detective jumped over the fallen shoppers.

Archibald slammed through the revolving door, flinging customers about like a pinwheel.

The cold wind blew snow into his face as he ran outside, blinding him. He stumbled into a body.

"I say!" The body bellowed.

It was Mr. Bemelmen. The fascist landlord face-planted into the snowy sidewalk.

Archibald scrambled to his feet and kept running.

"Clodhopper!" A little voice hollered.

The detective flew out of the revolving door. Like Archibald, the snow blinded him and he stumbled into a body.

"Ah!" The body squeaked.

It was Mr. Bemelmen's daughter. The bratty economic statistician face-planted into the snow beside her dad.

Archibald frantically ran in the opposite direction from which he came. Where was he going? He had no idea. Random ideas flashed into his desperate mind. The Fresh Kills landfill was generally in this direction, right? But why go there when he only had the head? If not there, then where?

As he sprinted up the street in utter indecisiveness, the sound of carolers in the distance greeted his ears and grew progressively louder as he ran forward. It was the quality of caroling that would make someone shut their doors and windows.

*Hark! The herald angels sing*  
*Glory to the newborn king*

He glanced back. The detective was barreling down behind him.

*Peace on earth and mercy mild*  
*God and sinners reconciled.*

He glanced at his side. Carolers were walking forward on the opposite side of the street. They were in full Victorian garb that was straight out of Charles Dicken's *A Christmas Carol*. They also sang off-key.

*Joyful, all ye nations, rise,*  
*Join the triumph of the skies;*

He continued running. There was something familiar about them. What was it?

*With the angelic host proclaim,*  
*"Christ is born in Bethlehem."*

Archibald glanced back at the carolers.

*Hark! The herald angels sing,*  
*"Glory to the new-born King!"*

Beatrice! His neighbors! Are you kidding? They're caroling here? Now? How this must look! A blood stained package and a police detective running after him! Dear Lord, don't recognize him! For the love of God, don't recognize him!

Beatrice immediately recognized him. She smiled and waved.

The other carolers took notice. They all stopped and waved.

Archibald returned the wave out of social obligation. He continued running.

All the neighbors eyed him as he ran by, their heads moving from left to right.

They then saw the detective run after Archibald.

All the neighbors eyed *him* as he ran by, their heads moving from left to right

They then saw their landlord run after the detective, shouting obscene political epithets.

All the neighbors then eyed *him* as he ran by, their heads moving from left to right

They then saw a girl run after the landlord, shouting polite political epithets.

All the neighbors then eyed *her* as she ran by, their heads moving from left to right.

It was like the carriage-return of a typewriter.

Compelled by the strangeness of the sight, the carolers decided to follow the foursome. They began singing again.

*Christ, by highest heaven adored:*  
*Christ, the everlasting Lord;*

Archibald glanced back. He saw his landlord behind the detective. He was chasing him too?

"Can this get any worse?" Archibald gasped aloud.

The landlord grabbed his chest and collapsed.

Archibald jinxed himself. He snapped his head forward and ran even faster. He had no idea what he was doing. He was just following the road.

Ahead was a bridge which spanned a body of water. Archibald was so disoriented that he didn't know if the water was the Hudson, the East river, or some park lake, let alone where the bridge would end up. He didn't care. He just had to run and lose that detective.

He started to cross the bridge.

He looked back.

Against all odds, the detective was falling behind! Archibald was gaining ground!

Motivated, Archibald pushed himself to the limit. His legs throbbed. His head pounded. His throat swelled. His breath constricted.

Twenty feet. Fifty feet. Hundred feet. Two hundred feet. He was halfway over the bridge. The detective was falling farther behind. He was going to break free.

Then he slipped.

He floated like a snowflake in the air.

He shifted his body to protect the package.

THUNK!

He landed on his tailbone.

He rolled to his side and gripped his rear. Soon it will be black-and-blue like his face.

He groaned and moaned and did all the usual sounds one would make when in pain.

Then he smelled urine. Did he wet himself? He felt his pants. No. He sniffed the ground and gagged. He had slipped on frozen piss. Why? First reindeer poop and now this?

Then it hit him. He recalled the words he heard back in his apartment—the words from the chubby boy who had wanted to use his bathroom. That fatty warned Archibald that his piss would freeze! He warned that Archibald would slip on the icy patch the piss would leave behind! Of course! That was it! Through some divine cosmic revelation, Archibald was absolutely certain that this piss was the outflow of that chubby boy and that Archibald's steps had been orchestrated to this very spot as a cosmological joke! Oh, why didn't he just let the boy use the toilet?!

Well, his wife was unconscious in the tub at the time, so that was why.

He leaned his head back so the world was upside down. Everything seemed to make more sense this way. He saw two feet begin to slow from a run to a walk. It was funny seeing everything flipped. The feet were trotting on a snow-covered ceiling and the night sky was a bottomless floor with snow falling upwards. It was funny. Everything was funny when you are fatigued, delusional, and hopeless.

"Get up." A gruff voice commanded.

"Sure." Archibald complied with a shrug. He slowly rolled to his knees and eventually stood, pushing on the concrete barrier for support. Every part of his body ached.

The detective greeted Archibald with a knife. It was sharp. Too sharp for Archibald's liking.

"Do you have something a little less pointy? A butter knife, perhaps?" Archibald inquired..

"God, you're annoyin'!"

"But, are you sure you want to handle that? Libel to cut yourself. Don't officers use guns anyway?"

"Detectives!" The man snapped. "And not when we want to make somethin' look like a muggin'."

"Oh, well, if that's the effect you're going for..."

"There's a lot of 'em around Christmas, ya know?"

"Detectives?"

"No! Muggings!"

"Oh, yes, well, let's not add to the count, shall we?"

"How about you hand over the present? I got a feelin' I know what's in it."

Archibald thought about throwing the gift over the edge. Yes, that would be perfect. The box would take on water, sink, and forever be buried somewhere deep down in the river bed. Why didn't he think of that before? It was so simple! What an idiot he has been with all that landfill nonsense. And as an added bonus, the look on the detective's face when he sees Archibald throw the present over the barrier would be priceless! He could use a laugh right now.

Archibald prepared to throw the gift, but then noticed it wasn't in his hands. The detective had already taken the present and was in the process of opening it.

"Jiminey Christmas!." Archibald muttered.

He turned away. He couldn't bear to see his wife's face again. It was bad enough that the last mental image he had of his poor darling wife was him sawing her neck bone.

"What the hell is this?" The detective exclaimed.

"I'm sorry! I panicked! I know it was a little excessive, but —”

"More goddamn cranberry sauce!?"

Archibald stopped dead in his tracks.

"Huh?" Archibald quickly turned back and looked into the box. Inside was a broken jar of cranberry sauce.

"Well, I'll be..." Archibald's mouth was agape. "They would give a kid a jar of cranberry sauce!"

Around the jar was a tag which read "Donated to the Children of Dahl's by the Sedaris Jams and Preserves".

Sedaris? Ugh. Then that wasn't cranberry sauce. It was corn syrup and glucose.

"Ok! No more playin' games! I know you killed her."

"That... That means..." Archibald didn't hear the detective. He was still recovering from the fact that he had just paid twenty dollars for a broken jar of cranberry sauce. He felt financially violated by the girl.

"Did ya' bump her off because you found out about us? About the money we took?"

"So that means I paid..." Archibald continued to dwell on the bum deal he had just received, but then registered what the detective just said. "Wait, money?"

"Don't play dumb. I'm on to ya' act. You knew Mary was taking the three Gs from you. So you bumped the broad off."

So he did know about the money! He suspected as much. Mary obviously told him, but how did *she* know about it? He had been so careful.

"Ya know, she didn't know about your little nest egg," the detective continued. "When I told her about all that money ya been keepin' from her, she couldn't wait to take it out for herself."

What? How on earth did *he* know about the money if Mary never did? Archibald couldn't make sense of this. His head spun. He attempted to question this mystery but was caught off.

"And I couldn't believe you put her name on the account! You dumb schmuck!" The detective began to laugh. "It was so easy! She just had to walk in, withdraw it, no questions asked! You sap! You sucker!"

That thought never occurred to Archibald. Why did he do that? It must have been out of habit.

"And you want to know a dirty little secret? I don't give a rat's ass about your wife. She means nothin' to me. Not a goddamn thing. I already got my own woman, see? A dish tastier than what your wife could ever offer. Don't get me wrong, your wife can really put out, but who cares? Forget her! I only wanted the money. It was *always* about the money."

"Does your woman know you're sleeping around?"

"Know it?" He laughed again. "My baby knows everything. So does my momma, for that matter. What of it?" The detective told his mother everything. Freud would probably find that natural. Archibald found it uncomfortably strange.

"Oh, I didn't realize this was a family affair." Archibald said sarcastically. One gets sassy after a certain point.

"So you see," the detective continued, ignoring Archibald's remark, "your wife was gonna bring me the money, and we would go on a train to the country, and then, well, I was gonna bump her off. But it would have been nice-like. She would have just gone missin' and everyone would of assumed she ran off with some guy. It would be neat. Clean. But you beat me to it. I'm flattered you wanted to help, but you're makin' a goddamn mess of it."

"Well, you know, technically, there's still no proof—”

"Save it, bub. It doesn't take Kris Kringle to know that you've been naughty and put your wife's body into some Christmas presents. But I don't care. I just want the money. I need it. It's my ticket out of this place. I'll pay off some bookies, clear some debt, take my woman, and get out of this godforsaken prison."

Archibald started to realize that the detective was being strangely forthcoming with the motivations and details of his plan. Was he boasting about his ingenuity? Or was this some therapeutic catharsis where he was laying out his life struggles to a man who was about to die? Just in case, Archibald felt that he should ask about the man's mother like a good psychiatrist. Or was it like a good psychologist?

"But what about your mother?"

"Shaddup!" The detective growled. "Of course I'm gonna take care of momma!"

Archibald *shaddup'd*.

"Give me the money! I know you have it! It wasn't in your apartment, it's not in those boxes, and I saw you pay that kid for this broken jar of cranberry sauce —”

"Let's, uh, not bring up that transaction. I still feel cheated over that."

The detective brought the knife to Archibald's neck. The blade pressed into his skin. "If you move a single muscle, you're gonna' be signing carols from your throat."

Archibald froze.

The detective's free hand searched Archibald's jacket, going through each and every pocket. It was when he reached into the pocket on the inside of the jacket that the detective found a white envelope. It felt densely packed with paper.

"Well, well, what do we have here?" The detective smiled.

Archibald closed his eyes again. This was it. He was going to lose all his money. All his hopes and dreams which he had been saving for ten years was about to be taken from him.

The detective took a step back, removing the knife from Archibald's neck.

Archibald gasped.

The detective took the knife and cut open the envelope. He reached in a pulled out a stack of cash... cash which looked more like recipe clippings from *Mademoiselle* magazine. "What the hell is this?"

Archibald looked at the clippings in the man's hand. His mouth dropped in shock. He had grabbed the wrong envelope again. He couldn't get anything right today.

"What the hell is this?!" The detective threw the clippings at Archibald. They splashed on impact, flying all about them like the snow that was falling around them.

"Okay, you son of a bitch. Here's the deal. Either I first slowly and painfully kill you and then search your body or ransack your apartment until I find the money, or you willingly show me the money and then I quickly and painlessly kill you. Which will it be?"

"Is there a third option?"

"You got three seconds."

"Hold on, can we sit down and discuss this?"

"Three."

"I'm still trying to figure things out myself."

"Two."

"Wait, you're starting?"

"One."

The detective pulled his knife back in preparation for a stab.

Archibald recoiled back, closing his eyes and wincing.

The detective stepped forward, swinging the knife in front of him.

He then slipped on the same patch of frozen piss. His legs kicked back and his upper body fell forward. He instinctively tucked his fists inwards to brace for impact with the ground. Unfortunately, his knife was still in his hand. He landed full force onto the ground with the knife plunging deeply into his chest. The detective didn't move.

Archibald opened his eyes.

The detective was gone?

Archibald looked down. He blinked in disbelief. Did the detective really just slip and fall on his own knife? And it just so happened that the knife instantly killed him? Are you kidding? What is going on here?

Panic took hold. Did anyone see?

He looked down the bridge in the direction he had been running. He could see the headlights of a car in the distance. It would be a minute or two before it would see him. Beyond the car was a truck, about another minute or two behind it. Really? No traffic until right now?

He then looked back from the direction in which he came. Good grief! The carolers were approaching. Fortunately, they were far enough away that they couldn't see him at the moment. Also, they were about to come upon Mr. Bemelman who was still lying in the snow so that may buy him some time. It seemed that his landlord's daughter was walking with the carolers.

There was very little time to act. He had a minute or two at most. Without giving it further thought, Archibald resolved to throw the body into the water just as he had planned to throw the present in the water. He stepped over the detective's body, tucked his arms under the shoulders, and hoisted up the carcass.

"Jesus! Born in a manager!" Archibald exclaimed. The man did not share his wife's slim figure nor Archibald's slack muscles. The detective's body was densely packed with considerable weight.

The car started to approach the bridge.

With Herculean effort, Archibald managed to plop the body against the barrier. He then grabbed the feet of the detective and lifted them up. The body began to rock over the barrier like a seesaw.

The car began to climb the bridge.

Archibald continued to lift until gravity took over and dragged the body over the edge.

The car's headlight just caught Archibald at that moment and then quickly passed without a thought.

Archibald sighed. A close call. Now all he had to do was wait for a reassuring sound of a splash.

CRUNCH!

Archibald's body flinched at the sound.

That was not the sound of a body falling into water! That was the sound of a body slamming into hard ice!

Archibald then heard screams. First one, then two, then dozens, all rising from the below the bridge.

In terror, Archibald climbed over the barrier and looked down.

On the frozen water below, a large red splat had formed from the body that had just been dropped, and around that large red splat were a dozen of children in hockey gear tripping over their skates at the horrific sight of the mutilated and mangled body.

Substitute players sitting on the benches bolted upright and skated towards their teammates. Parents who were watching the game from the shoreline poured onto the ice.

"Timmy! Timmy!" Adults and children alike began to shout.

Archibald saw that something was moving *under* the body. The detective had landed on poor young Timmy. The boy who was to be the next 'Rocket' and drafted to the Rangers someday.

The adults had reached the body and, with the help of some of the boys, began to pull Timmy out from under the body. Timmy wasn't moving. Was he unconscious? Was he dead?

Archibald hoped he was just knocked out and he would recover.

CRACK!

A loud, splintering sound boomed from below.

Everyone stopped.

Suddenly, the ice rapidly gave way and everyone—fathers, mothers, sisters, brothers—were pulled into the water. Screams quickly erupted and then quickly ceased as they were pulled under by the current.

It was suddenly still.

All that remained was a large chasm of dark water in the middle of white ice.

Archibald staggered backwards.

"God. Oh, God."

He was in utter disbelief. There wasn't any way that actually happened. He was trapped in a nightmare. He look up at the vast darkness above him. The white snow was dropping from nothingness, stinging his face with ice crystals. He stared into the void.

"Are you done yet?!" Archibald screamed into the void. "Are you done having your sick joke?"

HONK!

Archibald snapped his head towards the sound and saw two headlights barreling down on him. It was the truck! He had staggered back into the road! He took a step forward and slipped. He fell on the ground. It was too late. He couldn't get out of the way in time. He closed his eyes.

Miraculously, the truck swerved around Archibald. It drove up onto the sidewalk, skidded across the concrete barrier, then swerved back across the road.

Archibald opened his eyes in surprise. He looked back at the truck. He his eyes widened in terror.

The truck was out of control. It slid and veered. It was heading right at the carolers, who were congregating around Mr. Bemelman's lifeless body.

Archibald scrambled to his feet. He started running towards them.

"Watch out!" He screamed.

HONK!

The carolers looked up at the bright lights barreling down on them. They all screamed in perfect harmony, the women in mezzo-soprano and the men in complementary tenor at a high C.

CRUNCH!

The truck plowed into them, collapsing their bodies into one another like an accordion, before slamming into a brick wall immediately behind them.

CRASH!

The truck driver flew through the windshield and smashed against the wall.

Archibald legs became weak. He could no longer feel them. He collapsed onto the ground.

The impact burst the back doors of the truck open and dozens of frozen turkeys poured out onto the street. One skidded across the snow and landed right in front of Archibald.

He sat there in the wet snow, staring at the turkey.

All of this was inconceivable. Too horrible to imagine. Somehow, within mere seconds, Archibald had wiped out the lives of dozens upon dozens of people. Men, women, and children. Entire families. All the occupants in his apartment building. The consequences were so extreme, so outrageous, and so unreasonable that he was compelled to believe that all this could not have been accidental. This was not by random chance. This was carefully designed. How? By who? Why? He had no idea. No clue.

As he drifted back into reality, he finally noticed the brand on the frozen turkey in front of him.

It read "Collier Poultry", the place of his employment. So he destroyed his company's truck, killed a co-worker, and probably killed all these turkeys earlier in the day during his normal working hours. Now that just added insult to injury.

At least he would be getting a free turkey out of this.

**8**

Archibald walked in a daze, cradling the frozen turkey in his arms like an infant child. He staggered about like a drunk man, wandering aimlessly about the snow covered sidewalks. The cold began to numb his face. Numb his body. Numb his spirit.

A distant bell began to ring. It gradually became louder.

Archibald looked up.

A Salvation Army volunteer was standing at a street corner. Beside him was a large red kettle hung on chains. This was attached to an easel with a sign that read "share with others". He was ringing his bell.

Archibald stumbled up to the man in a stupor and stopped.

The volunteer stared at him. He eventually stopped ringing his bell after he realized that Archibald was neither donating any money nor was moving along on his way. He was just standing there. "Merry Christmas," the volunteer cautiously greeted.

Archibald didn't hear the greeting. He looked at the frozen turkey in his hands and then looked at the volunteer. "Have you ever wondered... why turkey is called *turkey*?"

"Excuse me?"

"Why do we call turkey *turkey*?"

"Well, that's what it is."

"But why? We call cow *beef*. Pig *pork*. But turkey... it's just turkey."

"You feelin' alright?"

"I wonder if its a disassociation thing."

"Come again?"

"No animal is called *beef*, so when we eat it we're not thinking of the cow, right?"

"I suppose."

"But why not for the turkey?"

"Huh. Never thought of that before." The volunteer first thought the question was utter nonsense. Now he became captivated by the question. He looked off in deep contemplation. "Maybe it's because we undervalue turkeys? We do that for chicken too, don't we?"

Archibald nodded his head. "That's probably it. I guess the smarter they are, the more words we need to hide what we're cutting up."

"Yeah, that sounds about right."

Archibald continued nodding as walked off, not giving any sort of farewell.

The volunteer was disheartened to see Archibald leave. He just became engaged in the conversation and felt that they were on the verge of something profound. The bell began to ring again.

Archibald wandered for what felt like hours. Perhaps it was hours. Perhaps it was minutes. He couldn't tell. He loss all sense of time and space. He felt like he was floating. He was detached from existence.

Eventually, he stopped. He looked up. He was at his apartment building. Somehow his subconscious led himself here. Or was it something else the guided him back?

He walked inside. The light of the entryway blinded him. He became used to the darkness of winter night. The hallway, despite being kept at its lowest legal limit, felt warm in comparison to the outside world. The place was eerily quiet, which makes sense since most of the tenants had just been killed.

Archibald ascended the stairs at a glacial pace. Each creak of a step echoed throughout the empty tomb of the building. He had no idea what he was doing. Why even return home? He knew it would be only a matter of time before the police came. Should he turn himself in? Should he run out of the city? Right now, all he wanted to do was to lay down.

After the slow ascent up the stairs, he had reached his floor. He shuffled across the hall to his door and pulled out his key. He stopped.

He heard the faint sound of jingling bells.

In his delusion, he thought the bells were from Santa's sleigh, landing on the room of the building.

"Mr. Nowakowski?" A voice, soft, sweet, and melodic, danced through the air.

Archibald turned and saw an elf. The little creature wore gold bells on its shoes, candy cane stockings, a dress of green velvet, glitter on its face, and a green cap. Coincidently, the elf's outfit was just like the woman's costume at the department store.

"Is... is it true? Is Santa here?" Archibald asked.

"Santa?" The elf asked, confused by the question.

"I always believed in him. I always knew he was real." Archibald became emotional.

"I'm not sure what you mean." The elf looked puzzled.

"I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. I've been naughty." Archibald was on the verge of tears.

"Oh, no, Mr. Nowakowski. Don't cry. It's just me. Carol."

Archibald continued to stare at the elf. He couldn't quite process what the creature was saying. Suddenly, like a puzzle piece being rotated enough times that it finally fell into place, he realized it was Carol and not a fantasy creature suddenly proved to be real.

"Oh... yes. Carol." Archibald tried to regain control of his emotions.

"Are you okay, Mr. Nowakowski?" Carol stepped forward. Her bells gave a jingle.

Archibald looked down at the frozen turkey in his hands, then at his coat which was covered with snow and streaks of mud. The numbness from the cold started to dissipate and he started to feel his aches more intensely. His entire body throbbed from being hit in the right eye, buttocks, and groin with a frying pan, punched in the left eye with a fist, and landing on his tailbone after slipping on frozen piss, not to mention all the other aches and pains which come from running and carrying dead bodies. He also had reindeer poop on his hand.

"Yeah," he answered, despite all evidence to the contrary.

"Well, may I come inside with you? Please? I just want to make sure everything is alright."

Archibald still couldn't think straight. He wasn't sure why Carol was here. He didn't particularly care at the moment. He was tired and a beautiful elf woman was asking to come into his apartment.

"Sure," he replied. He unlocked the door and stepped into his apartment.

Carol followed. Her bells jingled as she crossed the threshold.

Upon entering, Archibald had the sensation that something was different within his apartment. Perhaps because he now knew his wife would no longer return and that he would always be alone in this apartment? Perhaps because the overturned trash in the kitchen hadn't been fully cleaned up which produced a slight but noticeable odor? Or was that odor from his hands? He should wash his hands.

"Sorry for the smell," Archibald began. "The trash got knocked over. I didn't get a chance to wipe up the floor yet."

"Oh, it's okay." Carol jingled as she walked further into the room. She saw all the many pictures of Mary framed on the end tables, posing as famous blonde bombshells in each. She saw several piles of *Mademoiselle* magazines on the coffee table from which Archibald clipped many recipes. And she saw the Christmas tree positioned by the bay windows that shone with merry brilliance. This caught her eye and she walked over it. "Oh, my. What a beautiful tree. It's more magical than anything we have at the store. It's simply radiant. You should be so proud."

"Thanks." Archibald was flattered. He never received compliments like that from Mary. In fact, she didn't like the tree at all. It was too tall. Too wide. Too piney.

"And where did you get that charming Christmas angel up on top? I have never seen such intricate detail on an ornament before." She pointed at the angel figure with its outstretched arm, flowing white robes, golden halo, and delicate smile.

Archibald glared at the angel. Something about that figure deeply disturbed him. "I don't remember. It sort of just appeared there."

"Appeared? Oh, don't be silly. But what a lovely thought. That it would simply *appear*." She smiled at the idea as she inspected the long string of lights which wrapped around the tree. It was one continual strand, perhaps twenty feet or more.

Archibald realized he was still holding the frozen turkey with his soiled hands.

"I suppose I should put this in the kitchen and wash up. If you'll excuse me for a moment."

"Oh, please, go about your business. I'd love to admire your tree while you do." She smiled. The light from the tree glinted off the glitter on her cheeks causing them to sparkle.

Archibald was falling under her spell again. She was simply enchanting. Bewitching. He could admire her for the rest of his days, but the weight of the frozen turkey and smell of his hands pulled him back. He took off his damp jacket, hung it up on the rack, and walked into the kitchen with his poultry.

Upon entering the kitchen, he again had that strange sensation of something being unusual. It wasn't just the odor. It was something more. Something was intangibly different. Again, being considerably tired and achy, he didn't care enough to think it through. He placed the turkey down on the counter.

He stopped. He suddenly remembered the envelope of cash. Since he accidently grabbed the one with the *Mademoiselle* clippings, the cash must be back in the Helen Rowland book. He glanced down the hallway. Carol was out of sight, presumably looking at the tree. Taking this opportunity, he walked over to the wall table and pulled out *The Sayings of Mrs. Solomon; Being the Confessions of the Seven Hundredth Wife as Revealed to Helen Rowland*. That title was far too long.

He saw the library number written on the spine. Poor Beatrice. Crushed by a truck full of frozen turkeys. There was something between them in that moment they shared, when they held hands for the briefest of moments. They were like two lost souls finding each other in a sea of loneliness. Alas, it was never meant to be. It was doomed.

Archibald flipped open the book. The envelope was there, nestled safely between two pages. He sighed. He wasn't going to let it out of his sight again. The tucked it under his arm.

He began to walk down the hallway back to Carol when he realized he never washed his hands. To address this oversight, he opened the bathroom door and entered. It was shockingly cold. To his surprise, the window was slightly ajar and some snow had drifted onto the sill while some melted into a small puddle on the floor. He quickly shut and locked the window. How did that happen? Did the detective open it when he searched the apartment? He certainly opened the kitchen window, so maybe he opened this one too? Archibald must have just missed it. He did leave in a hurry after all. Yes, that must have been it.

Archibald set the book down by the sink and began to wash his hands vigorously to remove all the remnants of the reindeer.

He began to dry his hands when he heard the jingling of bells. The bells were getting louder. They were becoming more energetic. Grunting could be heard which were becoming more intense. What the devil was going on in the next room?

He grabbed the book and rushed to the living room. He stopped. He saw Carol yanking on the strand of Christmas lights wrapped around the tree. The bells on her feet and the clanking of the glass ornaments jingled and jangled under the fierce strain. The tree began to spin wildly as she violently tugged at the rope of lights. It was like watching a Christmas rodeo.

"Uh..." Archibald made an audible sound but said no discernible words. He had no idea what she was doing. She seemed to have admired the tree. Why would she suddenly want to destroy it?

Eventually, the long strand of lights broke free with one final clattering of bells. Some baubles dropped to the floor like ornamental snow. The lights remain lit, having not fully unplugged it from the wall socket. The light bathed Carol in festive red, white, and green. God, she looked mesmerizing as she basked in the glow, if not a bit eccentric too.

"There!" She proudly declared.

Archibald simply starred at her.

Carol looped the lights around her arm, walked over to the socket, and unplugged them.

"Uh..." Archibald continued to make questioning noises without any words.

Carol looked at him and smiled. "Come on, I'll show you."

She walked next to Archibald and tenderly grabbed his hand. It felt warm and soft in his cold, aching fingers. The touch sent shivers throughout his entire body.

"Oh, where is your bedroom?"

Archibald's heart skipped a beat at the question. He pointed at the door across from the bathroom.

Carol smiled. She gently pulled his hand toward her as she walked down the hall.

As his arm extended, the Helen Rowland book he had tucked under his arm dropped to the floor. Instead of picking it up, he simply followed her. He was spellbound by her very being. Hypnotized and fully under her control. Even the three thousand dollars in cash which he said he would never let out of his sight now seemed secondary to her.

Carol opened the door and guided him across the threshold into the sacred bedroom chamber. All of Mary's clothes remained strewn about the room as a result of the detective's search.

"Sorry for the mess," Archibald apologized.

Carol simply smiled. She let go of Archibald's arm.

Losing her touch was agonizing for him.

She walked around the bed, jingling as she went, and plugged the cord of lights back into the outlet. They illuminated once again, basking the entire room in a cheerful holiday glow. She then laid a section of the lights lengthwise across the center of the bed.

"Come here." Carol softly patted the bed.

Archibald starred at the beguiling creature before him. The spell was waning ever so slightly. He started to question his situation. What on earth was she doing? Was she a nymphomaniac? Was this some sort of kinky sex game? Admittedly, part of him hoped this was the case. Another part of him hope it wasn't. To go from chopping up your wife, giving the body parts to children, and killing all your neighbors to having sex with an elf among Christmas lights was dramatically intense.

"Come on, Mr. Nowakowski. Don't worry." Carol smiled again. The colored lights shimmered over the glitter that was speckled across her cheeks. Her eyes were warm and welcoming. She held out her hand in a supportive and compassionate gesture. "Everything is going to be all right. I promise."

The spell put Archibald back in a trance. He felt detached. Disembodied. He saw himself reaching out to her hand and grabbing it. The energy from the touch was palpable. He slowly put a knee on the bed.

"Oh, shoes off." Carol said, noticing he hadn't taken them off yet.

"Oh, yeah." Archibald moved his right foot behind his left, stepped the tip of his right shoe on the heel of his left, and pulled out his left foot. He repeated the procedure for his other foot. "My socks are a little wet."

"That's okay," Carol assured. "I don't mind."

Archibald continued to climb onto the bed in a daze.

"Good," she reassured. "Now face the foot of the bed. Good. Now put your right knee on the other side of the lights. Excellent. Now lean forward and put your elbows on either side of the lights."

Archibald complied, having no idea what he was doing or why. He felt rather silly on all fours and straddling a strand of Christmas lights, but he so anyway.

Carol grabbed the end of the lights with her one hand and gently stroked Archibald's back with the other. The delicate touch sent an excited chill down Archibald's spine. "Good. Very good, Mr. Nowakowski. Now, I'm going to be getting on the bed with you, okay? And while I am with you, I am going to be doing some things that may seem strange. Don't worry. You just need to trust me, okay?"

Archibald nodded, though his excitement began to turn into uneasiness.

Carol climbed onto the bed, her bells jingling and the bed creaking loudly.

"Sorry, the bed has issues supporting two people. The slats always slide out of place," Archibald warned.

"Oh? Do you and Mary have a special trick to make it work?"

"Yeah. I sleep on the couch. She sleeps here."

"You poor man! I had no idea." She consoled him by rubbing his back in graceful circles. "Well, don't worry. I'll make sure to be gentle." She began to lean over Archibald. Her firm body slowly pressed up against his back. Archibald gradually felt the contours of her body. He admired several qualities about her figure—two large ones in particular. He also noticed her costume was scented with the faint aroma of sugar cookies. He really should try baking them again. He had a recipe which added orange zest to the batter which sounded heavenly.

As she remained pressed up against him, she began to pull the strand of lights over his shoulder. She leaned her body back and began to weave the lights about him, her hand sliding against his skin with a soft and delicate touch.

"Now, carefully lie down," Carol directed.

Archibald hesitated. He was worried about crushing the bulbs, which in his estimation would be rather painful. He hoped she wasn't a practitioner in sadomasochism.

"Don't worry. Move slowly. I'll help you. You'll be okay." Carol's voice was sweet and melodic. Warm and comforting.

This eased his mind. Archibald began to lay flat on the bed, slowly and gingerly.

Carol held his torso in his hands, guiding him down on the descent and moving lights as needed until he laid fully on his stomach. "There you go. Good. Good. Almost done."

Carol took the remaining strand of the lights and yanked at it, pulling Archibald's arms and legs tightly in towards his torso.

It hurt and Archibald winced at the pain.

Carol then tied the cord at his feet.

"Ta da! All done!" Carol hopped off the bed, her bells jingling in delight.

Archibald tried to look up but he found it difficult. "It's a little tight."

Carol walked to the foot of the bed. She lifted her skirt a little so she could freely kneel onto the carpet. Once on the floor, she readjusted her skirt for comfort. She was now on Archibald's level. She looked in Archibald's concerned eyes and smiled. She delicately cupped his face into her hands. "You're cute, you know that?"

"Do you think you could... loosen the lights?"

"Aw, too cute!" She stroked his cheek, looking at him like he was a puppy.

"The lights... they really are hurting me."

"But baby..." She leaned in closer to his face. "We're just getting started."

There was a subtle change in her voice. It had a hint of an accent. Was she now role-playing? This was getting too bizarre for Archibald's comfort.

Carol slowly slid her hands from his cheeks, caressing them as they parted from his face. "Now watch closely. This is where things get really fun."

She gave a sly and suggestive smile.

Archibald had no idea was to expect. He was simultaneously scared and excited.

She reached down and brought up a little green pouch hanging from her belt. She unsnapped its clasp and pulled out what appeared to be a shiny silver ornament—one in shape of a Colt Detective Special snubnosed revolver.

Archibald jerked back at the sight of the gun but the tight cord dug into him. He winced in pain.

"Hey, hey. It's okay. It's all right." She stroked his face with her free hand while the other pointed the gun's nozzle up in the air. "I'm so proud of you. I was afraid I would have to use this but you listened so well. You did such a good job. You're good, baby. You're good."

She still had that accent. Was the gun part of this role-play? Archibald's head swirled in confusion. "Are we... is this still... I don't get what's going on here."

"Oh, baby, baby, baby." She continued to caress him softly. "It's so cute how you're so slow at figuring things out." She moved her hand and grabbed his cheeks with her thumb and index. She squeezed them so the compressed cheeks caused his lips to involuntarily pucker. She leaned forward kissed them passionately. Her mouth enveloped his. Her tongue danced along his lips and forced itself into his mouth.

She tasted like gingerbread. Cloves, nutmeg, cinnamon. In addition to the sugar cookies, perhaps Archibald should make a few gingerbread ones? Did he have any recipes on that he wanted to try? He couldn't remember.

Her lips departed his. She gently patted his face as she loosened her grip. "Just to give you a little something for all that teasing."

And without warning, she pointed the gun at Archibald's face.

Archibald's head jerked again.

She giggled and slid her fingers back on the revolver so the gun dangled between her thumb and index at the base of the handle.

"Now keep watching." She re-opened her little green pouch with her free hand and dropped the gun back into it. It disappeared from sight. "Ta-da! All gone."

Archibald breathed a sigh of relief.

"I'm sorry if I scared you. I just wanted you to know about it so there would be no surprises. That's all." She abruptly hopped up from her seated knees to her jingling feet. "Do you want anything to eat?"

The question caught Archibald off guard. "Eat?"

"Are you hungry? I'm going to cook up some food for when Bill arrives. You want any? I would love to feed you." She smiled the same warm and welcoming smile from before. How on earth was she still so completely winsome after threatening him with a gun?

"Bill?" Archibald was confused. Was this now to be a threesome? Was this still all part of some strange sex game? Who the hell is Bill? But suddenly, it hit him. This wasn't a game. He knew Bill. He was sure of it. His face grew pale at the realization. "Bill doesn't happen to be a police officer, does he?"

Carol laughed. She crouched to Archibald's level. "Oh, Bill isn't one. I mean, he tells people that to expedite things. And he prefers *detective*, by the way. He gets real sore when people call him just an officer. I know it's silly since he's not with the police at all, but he's particular in that way."

"I noticed."

"If you ask me, I think it's a psychological thing. His brother really is a police detective, so he's probably a bit jealous. But don't tell anyone I said that. We aren't allowed to speak about his brother."

Archibald felt foolish for being duped. "So... he's a con man or something?"

"Ooo. He wouldn't like that." She giggled at the thought. "He prefers *enterprising entrepreneur*. Again, a particularity. He's cute like that."

"Where did he get the badge? From his brother?"

"Heavens, no! It's just a stage prop. I don't know why everybody believes it. It says 'For Entertainment Purposes Only' right on it."

Archibald became defensive. "Well, his performance sells it."

"Aw, that's really sweet of you. I will tell him you said that."

"So I take it you didn't happen to recognize me from a photo Mary showed you?"

"Oh, that? I just tried to make something up for why I knew your name, that's all. Not the best excuse, but it didn't feel right to tell you that we have been watching and planning to take your money for months."

"And that phone call about *mistletoe*?"

"Just a playful code word between Bill and me in case something went wrong. When he called from a pay phone and said he was looking for you, well... How fortunate you happened to be right there with me."

"I've been very fortunate all night." Archibald was being ironic since his evening was going to hell in a handbasket.

"You know, this is fun. I feel like I am on *Twenty Questions* with Jay Jackson. Do you have any more?"

Archibald had many questions. What was that accent? Was it real? Are elves unionized? But there was one question that had been bothering him from the very start. He had to ask it. "How did you know about the money?"

"Bill told me about it."

"Yes, but how did *he* know about it?"

"Oh, I'm not sure. You'll can ask him when he arrives."

It dawned on Archibald that Bill would never be arriving unless it was as a Christmas ghost. This also meant that Archibald would never get his question answered. A bad start to what will surely be a very long evening tied up in Christmas lights.

"So... this was always about the money?"

"Oh, it sounds so ugly when you say it like that. It was about so much more than that. So much more. You see, Mr. Nowakowski, we're in real deep with some bad guys. Real bad. Scary bad. But this opportunity... Well, it's a godsend. You're our angel. Our little Christmas angel."

Christmas angel? Archibald wished she didn't refer to him as that given the bad blood between him and the one on his tree.

She reached out to his face again, caressing his chin. Tears welled up in her eyes which caused them to glisten. "It's not about the money, baby. It's about our lives. We can pay them off and start fresh, you see? You're saving us."

Archibald felt bad for her, despite the fact that they essentially ruined his entire life with their actions. Now that he thought about it, none of this evening would have happened if it wasn't for them. He felt it was fair to say that they shared some of the blame for the mass genocide of the apartment tenants. Yet despite all this, Archibald sympathized with her plight.

"You have to believe me, Mr. Nowakowski. We were trying to do this clean. Mary would withdraw the money, bring it to Bill, and he would just leave her stranded at some train station. But I don't know what happened. She never showed and Bill, well... sort of snapped. He couldn't find her or the money... and he started to think you had something to do with it."

Had Carol been sold a fairy tale version of the plan? The detective, er, *Bill* told Archibald that he had always planned to bump off Mary. Perhaps Carol was just a pawn in all this? How could someone so charming and sweet be culpable of any of this?

"And what do you think?" Archibald asked.

Carol smiled and leaned into his ear. "I think you have been a very, very, *very* naughty boy and Santa is going to leave you a slug of lead rather than a lump of coal if you don't give this little elf what she wants. Get me? Bang. Bang."

Ok, not so much of a pawn. Archibald was at first empathetic but now was little terrified that this little elf was a little unhinged. He also realized that the book containing the money was now on the floor in the middle of the living room. What would happen to him if she found it? Would he then be expendable?

"Now that's clear..." She leaned away from Archibald's ear and continued to smile as if no threats were ever made. "Bill told me to wait here just in case you decided to show up and to keep you here if you did. He also told me he was hungry. So I am going to cook up some food and keep you here until he comes back. Sounds good? If you want to eat, I can spoon-feed you. I don't mind. It would be my pleasure."

"Thanks, but I'm—" His stomach growled, interrupting him. "Actually, what are you going to make?"

"Oh, I don't know. What do you have?"

Archibald decided that if he were to eat then he ought to eat well. After all, it may be his last meal.

"Well, if you go to the top-left cabinet in the kitchen, on the wall opposite of the hallway, you will find my collection of cookbooks. Pull out *Quick Dinners For The Woman In A Hurry*."

"Oh, that sounds delightful!"

"It's quite good. Despite not being a woman in a hurry, I use it often and most dishes can be prepared in thirty minutes or less."

"You are a dear."

"I should have all of the 'staple supplies' and most of the 'emergency shelf' items listed in the introduction, so you can pretty much make anything in the book."

"Oh, but I wouldn't know where to begin!"

"Well, then may I recommend the sliced ham with cranberry-apple relish. It prepares rather quickly and seems appropriately festive for the holiday."

"Oh, Mr. Nowakowski! I'm so glad you are taking this so well." She kissed him on the nose. "Wish me luck!"

She hopped to her feet and bounded out of the room, jingling the bells on her feet all the while.

**9**

Archibald's opportunities for entertainment were severely limited. He was afraid to move because if he inadvertently shattered a bulb it could easily cut into his skin. So, Archibald simply stared down at the floor, looking at nothing in particular.

First he began to think about how life was a paradox. Somehow, it was both meaninglessly random yet deliberately predetermined. All those deaths seemed senseless and pointless, but simultaneously orchestrated and arranged. How? Why? By who? To what end? To seek answers to these unanswerable questions would drive one to insanity. He was already blaming the Christmas angel on his tree, for God's sake. He would lose his mind if he pressed it any further.

He wished Christmas music was playing. He hated the silence. It made one contemplate their existence.

He then noticed a winter glove lying on the floor directly below him. It was red, made from cheap wool that was fraying along the seams, speckled with dirt and grime, and had the words "Red Ryder" printed on its face in white. He had never seen it before. He certainly didn't own it and Mary wouldn't tolerate such a cheap accessory, let alone have it become soiled. This mystery greatly interested him more than his existential and fatalistic thoughts. He continued to study it intensely because it distracted him from such depressing concepts and because he had nothing else better to do.

Yet as he stared at the glove, he saw something quite unexpected—a hand reached out from under the bed, clutched the red glove, and pulled it under the bed.

Initially, the sight only startled Archibald purely because it was unexpected, but the realization that there was someone hiding under the bed gave way to terror. This was exacerbated by being tied up and incapable of moving like one often is within a nightmare.

His first instinct was to scream but he was worried that whoever was lying underneath him may have a long blade with which they would stab him right through the mattress at the first suggestion of a cry for help. In fact, this seemed overwhelmingly plausible as these fears often do when one is in a state of terror.

Archibald turned his head towards the door. He hoped his unhinged kidnapper would come back into the room. He heard the jingling of her feet. He held his breath, attempting to *will* her into coming. The jingling did not grow louder. She was keeping to herself in the kitchen.

Archibald moved his head about, darting his gaze from one corner of the room to another, desperate to notice something which could help him. He stopped. His eye caught another unfamiliar object. On the ground, protruding out of the closet, was a green scarf. Like the glove, it was made from a cheap wool and it had seen better days. He stared at it with great scrutiny, determined to find some clue to the identity of the person hidden under the shadows of the bed.

Yet something even more shocking happened—the green scarf began to move seemingly by itself. It slithered from side to side along the ground like a snake until it eventually disappeared into the inky blackness of the closet.

The hair on the back of Archibald's neck stood on its end at the sight. Either he was becoming delusional or someone was also hiding in his closet. Madness was the more comforting option, but he knew that wasn't the case. Archibald had an abundance of intruders hidden within his home.

Archibald didn't know what to do. Were these intruders dangerous? Was Carol any less dangerous? He was at least certain that Carol was a danger, but to what degree? In all likelihood, he was going to get that slug of lead either after she finds the money or after she finds out that Bill is dead. That is, unless she was just putting on that tough act. Even then, what about the police? It was only a matter of time before they come here looking for him for all the many things he just did this evening. Ah, what the hell—he would gamble with the intruders. What's the worst that could happen?

"Hey," Archibald whispered.

No response. The room was silent. Was he actually delusional?

"Hey, you. Under the bed. Or in the closet."

Again, no response.

"Come on, I saw you. You grabbed your glove and you grabbed your scarf."

There was the faintest sound of rustling from both the bed and closet.

"Look, I'm tied up and I may be killed by an elf at any moment so I don't particularly care who or why you're here."

"We hear ya'," a voice murmured from under the bed.

Archibald breathed a sigh of relief. At least he wasn't crazy.

"Who are you? Why are you here?" Archibald asked, despite saying he didn't particularly care who or why they were here.

No response.

"I told you, I've been taken hostage by an elf. I have bigger problems right now."

"It's us, Mis'r N... Keith 'n Cody," the voice from the closet said in a hushed tone.

"Keith!" The voice from the bed hissed.

"What? It don't matter! He's tied up by s'm hot psycho elf dame," the closet hissed back.

"Hot?" The bed inquired.

"A knock out!"

"No foolin'?"

"Word from da bird."

"Shucks. I could only see 'er feet."

"She's got a classy chassis. The type dat gives ya' the zorros."

"Boys, boys," Archibald interjected. "Keep it down."

"Sorry, Mis'r N," the closet replied.

"She may be pretty but she's dangerous," Archibald warned. "Remember she's got a gun."

"What? She's packin' heat?" The bed screeched in a hush.

"Ya miss out on a lot bein' unda' da bed," the closet observed.

"I don't wanna mess with no heater!" The bed shrilled.

"Come out quickly and untie me," Archibald commanded.

"No thanks. I didn't come 'er to get killed," the bed retorted.

"Why did you come here?" Archibald asked.

"Why ya' think, cheapskate?" The closet snapped quietly. "Ya' don't grease our palms, we take some a ya' alms."

"Ya jus' make up dat rhyme?" The bed asked.

"Yeah," the closet answered.

"Needs work," the bed criticized.

"Grease your palms? I didn't have money!" Archibald lied.

"Says you, but we's see what we can take here for, uh... *restitution*." The closet pronounced the last word with some pomposity.

"Oh, g'd word, Keith," the bed complimented.

"Thanks," the closet said. "We gettin' good at... pickin' a lock and takin' stock."

"Hey, now dat's better!" The bed encouraged.

"So why did you come through the bathroom window?" Archibald asked, realizing that it must have been them who opened it.

"You 'ard of hearin'? I said we picked ya' lock. We walks t'ru the front door," the closet corrected.

"You didn't come through the window?" Archibald clarified.

"Am I not speakin' Eng'sh?" The closet replied in horrible English.

"Fine, whatever. Just untie me. Quickly," Archibald pleaded.

"Ya', and what if she comes in?" The bed asked. "I don't wanna be pumped full 'a lead."

"Get out here or I'll tell her you're hiding here," Archibald threatened.

"Get out der, Cody," the closet commanded.

"What? Why me? It's easier fa' ya' since ya' don't got ta' climb out o' nuttin'."

"I'm, uh, busy."

"Cut the gas. You do it."

"I'm... tied up at da moment."

"You flip ya' lid? What ya' talkin' about?"

"Cody... I can't."

"Oh, brother! Don't tell me ya'... Ugh, Keith!"

"I'm sorry! I couldn't resist!"

Archibald had no idea what they were talking about, but he was afraid to find out.

"Fine! Ya sicko!" Cody's head stuck out from underneath the bed and became face to face with Archibald.

"Shoot. Ya look terrible," Cody commented in low voice.

"I feel worse."

At that moment, there was a knock on the front door. The elvish bells began to jingle louder.

"Well, we tried." Cody slid back under the bed.

Archibald remained motionless.

The bells grew louder and stopped at the bedroom door.

Carol peered in and smiled. "Is everything alright, Mr. Nowakowski?"

"Oh, sure."

"Splendid! I'm going to go see who's at the door. If it's Bill, fabulous! If it's not, I trust you will be quiet as a mouse?" She patted the pouch which contained the gun.

"Not a creature was stirring... not even a mouse," Archibald quoted.

"Oh, you are simply too cute," Carol smiled. "And dinner is going well, by the way. Scrumptious."

She closed the door fully and the jingling of her feet were heard moving towards the living room.

"I can't believe ya', Keith," the bed shunned again.

"God, I said I'm sorry," the closet apologized.

"Shush!" Archibald hissed.

Archibald listened intensely. He heard the front door creek open. Those hinges needed to be oiled.

"Oh! I am so glad you're here! Just in time! I'm making dinner!" Archibald could hear Carol cheerfully greeting the visitor at the door. This welcoming tone frightened him. The hair on the back of his neck stood on end. Goosebumps flared across his arms. The only person she was expecting was Bill, but Bill was dead! He had to be dead! Stabbed in the chest, thrown off a bridge, splattering on ice, and sinking into the river—yeah, one would be dead after that! Did he really come back as a ghost? As a phantom?

His mind began to race wildly. That was Bill who died, wasn't it? Did he mistaken Bill for some other detective who happen to be chasing him? No, that's absurd! It must have been that man—he was even particular about being called "detective", just like Carol's Bill. Yes, that must have been him. So, if this wasn't Bill at the door, who could it have been? No one else factors in this at all.

Archibald heard the jingling of the feet coming back towards the bedroom.

The door opened.

Carol stepped in. "Oh, Mr. Nowakowski! This is so exciting! We have a visitor!"

In walked Mrs. Crocetti, Archibald's neighbor from the building next door, clutching her little devil pup in her arms.

Pooch growled.

"Mrs. Crocetti!" Archibald cried out.

"*Eh*? What is this?" Mrs. Crocetti said in her thick Italian accent.

"Mrs. Crocetti... I don't think it's safe for you to be here," Archibald warned.

"*Stai zitto*! Quiet!" Mrs. Crocetti barked at Archibald.

Pooch barked at Archibald too.

Archibald was taken aback by the ferocity of this older woman and the pup.

Mrs. Crocetti turned to Carol. "I see you in kitchen. I ask Pooch what she doing here. I come. I find you dress as elf. I find him in lights. What is this? *Sesso* party?"

"Oh, Alfonso told me to keep him here until he came back."

Archibald noticed Carol's accent became thicker.

"*O mio Dio*! And you tie him up? In *Natale* lights? You *pazza*?"

"*Scusa, mama.*" Carol replied in Italian.

That was the accent! Italian! Archibald felt like a fool for not pin-pointing it earlier.

"Why all this? Where is *la puttana*? Mary?"

"Alfonso said she never showed," Carol answered in a solemn tone.

"*O, mio Alfonso*!" Mrs. Crocetti muttered to herself.

"And who is this Alfonso?" Archibald asked.

"Oh, I'm sorry. You must be lost. Bill *is* Alfonso. Alfonso is his *italiano* name. It's what his *mama* calls him," Carol answered.

"Oh... *Mama*!" Archibald had an epiphany. "So it must have been you, Mrs. Crocetti!"

"Me? Me what?"

"You were the one who found out about my money! How did you do it? I must know! It's been driving me crazy trying to figure it out all night."

"What? It not hard. You hide *ricevuta* from wife. You put in sock. I pull on rope. I look at *ricevuta* in sock. I see you have money. I tell Alfonso. Use it to pay *debito* to *Cosa Nostra* and take me to Caribbean. I am old. I don't stay in city. I want to leave. So?"

That was anti-climatic. Archibald was hoping for a more complicated answer. He vaguely recalled hiding the receipt there, but he didn't think much of it. Who knew it would become the catalyst which ultimately destroyed nearly all the residents within his apartment building.

"*Cosa Nostra*?" Archibald asked.

"*La Famiglia*! *Mafiosi*!" The Italian woman

"The bad guys," Carol added.

"How could you, Mrs. Crocetti? Take my life savings?" Archibald shunned.

"What? Take from *pervertito*? You have *sesso* party all day! Your wife, *la puttana*! And *la bibliotecaria*! And her!" Mrs. Crocetti pointed to Carol.

"*Mama! Non lo farei mai!*" Carol objected, appalled that her honor was even in question.

"*Stai zitto*!" Mrs. Crocetti barked again.

Her dog barked again too.

Mrs. Corcetti turned back to Archibald. "You spend money on *puttane*. Sure, I take. Use for good." She then turned to Carol. "Alfonso. *Dov'è*?"

"He went after him." Carol motioned towards Archibald. "Mr. Nowakowski must have slipped away somehow. but fortunately he showed up here. So I tied him up until Bill comes back. *Tornerà presto*."

"And the money?"

"Bill thinks he has it or knows where it is." Carol again motioned towards Archibald.

"*Buono*! And you say you make dinner?"

"Yes! Sliced ham with cranberry-apple relish!" Carol beamed. She was always looking for opportunities to win Mrs. Crocetti's approval.

"Eh? For Alfonso? No, no, no, no."

Carol's face fell in disappointment. "Oh, but Mr. Nowakowski says it's—"

"For Alfonso, he eat Italian only!"

"Mrs. Crocetti," Archibald interjected, "I think you'll find it a rather festive and succulent—"

"Your cooking is *orrendo*!" Mrs. Crocetti snapped. "American *spazzatura*."

The dog yelped in agreement.

Archibald didn't know Italian, but even the implication that his cooking skills were subpar was crippling to his self-esteem.

"But I already started—" Carol began.

"Show me! I look for what is here!" The old, rotund Italian woman started to push past young, shapely Italian woman.

"*Mama*," Carol whined.

"Why Alfonso not find real Italian *la donna*, not American one." Mrs. Crocetti muttered as she walked down the hall.

"*Mama*, please. Not again." Carol followed after her. The jingling of her bells were not as sprightly. "My *genitori* are from Italy. I was just born here. So was Alfonso."

"Ugh! Alfonso! If only he was like my Dino!" Mrs. Corcetti's voice echoed down the hall.

"*Mama*, please. Alfonso doesn't like being compared to Dino. And besides, the *Cosa Nostra* forbids it."

"*Stai zitto*! We cook!"

Pooch panted in hunger.

**10**

Archibald was left alone in the room again. Well, left with the two hoodlums who had broken into his apartment and were currently hiding under his bed and in his closet, the latter having done something which Archibald had no interest in knowing what he did.

"I just can't believe ya', Keith," the bed again proclaimed.

"Drop it, will ya'!" The closet bellowed.

Mrs. Crocetti spoke with such ferocity that Archibald could still hear her barking.

"No, no, no. Recipe is bad. No good. Sugar? Cloves? No, no, no."

Archibald hoped that the culinary bickering would be a sufficient distraction to keep them away.

"Come on! Quick! Untie me!" Archibald urged.

"Pump da brakes! I'm comin'," the bed hissed.

"No sugar. No sweet. Spices!" The old Italian woman belted. "Where is *origano*? *Basiloco*? *Peperoncino*?"

Cody stuck his head out again and looked around carefully.

"What are you waiting for?" Archibald snapped.

"Ya rush me any more n' I'll run right outta here wit out you!"

"Ah, I know where is *peperoncino*!" The immigrant exclaimed.

Cody pulled himself out from under the bed, crouched, and moved around to the side of the bed facing away from the door. He examined the knot Carol tied at his feet.

"Jeez. She in da' boy scouts or somethin'? What is dis?"

"What's wrong?" Archibald asked.

"Dis knot! It's crazy!"

"Can you cut it?"

"What? Wit my machete? Who da ya' think I am? Charlton Heston?"

"Okay, well, just work on it."

Cody began to pick at the knot, trying to loosen any sections of the cords between its various twists and turns. However, it was pulled so tight that it proved to be nearly impossible.

Just then, there was a scream from the kitchen.

"*O mio Dio*! *Madonna, aiuta a me*!"

This was followed by a series of puppy yelps.

Without a moment of hesitation, Cody lunged onto the floor and slid under the bed like a turtle retreating into its shell.

"Wait!" Archibald pleaded.

The cries of terror continued as did the puppy's yelps.

"*Assassino*! *Macellaio*!"

Archibald wondered what caused the shouts. Had Carol had enough of Mrs. Crocetti's culinary brutality and decided to put an end to the old bag?

There was a moment of silence followed by some rustling, gasping, and whimpering. Archibald then heard bells jingling down the hall along with low, laborious wheezing. The sounds passed the bedroom door and slowly disappeared into the living room. This was followed by creaking and some faint muttering. After another moment of silence, the jingling returned to the hallway and paused at the bedroom door.

Archibald waited for the door to open.

"Pooch! No!" Carol scolded.

The sound of the jingling intensified and faded into the kitchen. She was running.

Archibald heard what must have been Carol running around in the kitchen, down the hall, back into the living room, back down the hall, back into the kitchen, before finally ending in a high-pitched puppy yelp.

"Bad dog!" Carol scolded.

Archibald heard whimpering and the scampering of little feet down the hall.

After yet another moment of silence, there were further stirrings in the kitchen. Clanging of pots? Water running?

Jingling then returned to the hallway and yet again paused at the bedroom door.

Archibald waited for it to open.

This time it did.

Carol stepped into the door frame and quietly closed the door behind her.

"That dog is the devil himself. Straight from the pits of hell. *Dannato cane!*" Carol crossed herself like a good Italian Catholic.

"That's most people's feelings," Archibald said in agreement.

Carol looked at the pathetic Christmas glow-worm on the bed. She smiled. "But he's not the only one who's been naughty here."

Her tone was scolding yet sultry. It was difficult to know if she was trying to reprimand him seriously or achieve an arousal from him. Archibald gave up on trying to understand her.

"What happened?"

"Oh, *mama* was looking for some pepper," Carol said, walking towards Archibald. "She then remembered that she sent you some over the clothes line earlier today."

Archibald's face grew quite grim. He knew where this conversation was heading.

"That's so cute, by the way. Sending that sock back and forth. You two are adorable."

Archibald began to calculate a response.

Carol knelt down in front of him.

"And I knew you've been naughty but, oh, my, you've been... so, so naughty." She tapped her finger against his nose on the last three words. "Now *mama* is having an episode on your couch. I got the water on for some tea to calm her down. You should be ashamed, you bad boy."

Archibald thought about lying, but instead said nothing.

"And I turn my back for one second at that little hell hound nipped the finger in his mouth!" Carol turned towards the door, half expecting the impish dog to be sitting there.

"I suppose that explains why Mary never made it to Bill with the money." Her voice trailed off. Her eyes widened. Her mouth fell agape. She turned back to Archibald. "Oh, god! The presents! The presents for the children! Is there where you put them all?"

Archibald look down in shame.

"Oh, this is too much!" Carol's eyes started to water. It looked like she was going to cry, but soon she was laughing hysterically. She even snorted. "Oh, those children! On Christmas morning! Opening those gifts surrounded by family! Can you imagine? What I would pay to see the one which gets your wife's pretty little head!" Carol continued laughing, tears rolling down her glittered cheek.

"I guess I need to be more careful around you." She opened her pouch.

Archibald was worried she would pull out her gun. Again, his life flashed before her eyes. This time, it was a little less boring if only due to the excitement of the last few hours. The rest was still boring.

Instead, she pulled out a cloth and dabbed her tears away, ensuring not to smudge any makeup.

He sighed.

"Well, at least we now know where the money is." She put the cloth back in the pouch, clasped it, and smiled. "It's here. You have it. And you're going to give it to me."

There was a knock on the door. Another visitor? Are you serious? Who could that be?

"There's my man." Carol hopped up enthusiastically. "Be right back!"

She bounded out of the room in excitement.

"Blind kids my foot!" The closet barked. "She sayin' ya' chopped up ya' wife in dem presents!"

"And I t'ot ya' said ya' didn't ha' no money?" The bed added. "What's dis she sayin' that ya' have it on ya'?"

"It's... complicated."

Archibald heard the front door creak open. He strained his ear to hear who it could be. It couldn't possibly be her man.

"Ya' makin' us accessories afta' da' fact!" The closet continued to complain.

"I don't wanna be mix'd up in no murder!" The bed complained.

"Shush! I'm trying to listen!"

There was murmuring, laughter, and then some jingling of bells.

Carol stepped into the bedroom and closed the door. She was even more sprightly and energetic, if that was even possible. She walked over to the foot of the bed and knelt down in front of him. She cupped her hands on either side of his face and gently stroked his cheeks. The constant affection was becoming irritating.

"I'm going to untie you and then we're going to play house, okay?" Carol said with a reassuring smile. "Husband and wife. I'm Mary. We love each other. We can't keep our hands off one another. It'll be fun."

Dear Lord, what was she on about now?

"Oh, and if you don't play along, I tell them what you did to your wife. Okay?" She smiled as sweetly as ever, which somehow made the threat seem non-threatening. She was trying to cast that spell again. To enchant him with her charms. It wasn't working as well anymore.

Before Archibald could even respond, Carol walked over to the outlet and unplugged the lights. The warm Christmas glow that filled the room went out.

"Aw, they were so pretty. I miss the lights already." Her fingers danced about the cord, untying the knot with relative ease. It made one question the skill set of Cody.

"Ta-da!" She proclaimed. She then carefully unraveled the lights, her hands again weaving in and out through the limbs of his body with delicacy and guiding his movements with gentle nudges.

"You did such a good job. No broken bulbs. You laid so still." Carol laid the lights on the floor next to the bed. "I'm so proud of you, my little Christmas mouse."

She shifted him to the edge of the bed with the utmost tenderness.

For a second, Archibald thought about overpowering her, taking the gun, and making a break for the door. As he sat up, all his aches and pains returned to his body. He groaned. Maybe later.

"Oh, and don't worry. I told them you were on a bender and are still little hungover." Carol added, as she helped him to your feet. "So no need to hide how you feel. Be yourself."

Archibald stood up. His legs wobbled at first. It felt good to stand.

"This going to be so fun! I can't wait!" She grabbed his face, pulled it down, and kissed him with a burning intensity.

Archibald didn't know how to react. He stood there motionless.

While keeping her lips locked onto his, Carol arched her back and pressed her body deeper into his frame. She then slid her left arm around his neck, raised her right leg around his midsection, and guided his hand to her buttocks using her right hand. She finally pressed his hand against it, indicating her desire for him to squeeze.

Archibald didn't oblige her. He wished he could say it was because of his unwavering honor and uncompromising integrity, but really it was because there were two boys hidden in the room watching them and because she was a mentally unstable nymphomaniac elf with homicidal tendencies and mother-in-law issues.

Carol gently broke away from the kiss and looked deeply into Archibald's eyes. "Remember, baby. We're married. Don't be shy."

She smiled as she backed away, held onto his hand, and led him slowly towards the door.

Archibald looked back into the bedroom. He could not see either of the boys in their hiding places.

**11**

When Archibald stepped out, he was first greeted by the sound of Mrs. Crocetti's mutterings and the dog's whimpering.

"My daughter cooks. I try to help. I old. I get tired. I sit. That is all. No doctor. Just old. My daughter boil water for tea. All I need. Tea. *Zitto*, Pooch, *zitto*."

"Well, glad to hear it's probably not serious, ma'am," a voice replied.

When he reached the living room, Archibald's heart leaped.

Standing on either side of Mrs. Crocetti were police officers. One was old, perhaps fifties, with gray hair and a traditional navy blue uniform. The other was young, perhaps early twenties, with the same style uniform but strangely wore a cowboy hat instead a police cap. They both turned and looked at Archibald as he entered the room.

Archibald froze. His feelings towards seeing the two officers were mixed. On the one hand, he was being forcibly imprisoned, his life was being threatened, and his home was being robbed as they spoke. A police officer would prove handy in that circumstance. On the other hand, he chopped up his wife's body, gave it to children as Christmas gifts, and his kidnapper knew that. A police officer would not be good in that circumstance.

Archibald wished he had an antacid.

"Archibald, these are officers... Oh, well, let me see if I got this straight..." Carol paused for dramatic effect. "O'Malley and O'Toole, right?" She first pointed to the old officer and then to the young one as she said their names.

"Yes, ma'am." The officers nodded in unison, with the young one tipping his cowboy hat.

"Oh, good! Having similar names makes it so easy!" She beamed. "And this is my husband, Archibald."

"Good evening," said O'Malley.

"Fine, thanks." Archibald responded to a question which wasn't asked. He was looking for the book with the money. He dropped it on the floor but it no longer was there.

"The officers are here checking up on some robberies, isn't that so?" Carol smiled at the officers.

"Yes, ma'am," O'Malley replied. The officer turned to address Archibald. "There has been a..." His voice trailed off. Archibald was still scanning the floor for the book. "Sir?"

"Archibald?" Carol nudged her supposed husband.

"Huh?" Archibald looked up.

"Lose something?" O'Malley asked.

Archibald then saw the book on the coffee table. Carol must have picked it up and placed it there. "Oh. The rug is dirty," he said in a bid to throw off everyone's scent.

The officers looked at their feet. Their shoes did track some dirt on the carpet.

"Oh. Apologies, sir," O'Malley said.

"Pardon, ma'am," O'Toole added in a strange Texan droll that seemed unnatural.

"Oh, no, my husband meant we weren't expecting guests," Carol replied. "We didn't vacuum, that's all he's saying. You boys keep your shoes on. Now go on about those robberies, officer."

"Well, as I was saying, there has been a string of burglaries in the adjacent building just across the way. Not much to go on. The homes were broken into while their owners were out shopping. The robbers must have been staking out the homes and you get a pretty good view of them from these windows."

"But I've been tied up!" Archibald blurted out defensively.

"No, sir. I meant to say that we think these robberies were done by the Lane boys. Keith and Cody. You've seen them around?"

"Oh..." Archibald started. "We don't have children."

"Oh, baby, you must still be out of sorts," Carol smiled as she rubbed his shoulder in a display of affection. "They're just asking if you've seen those twin boys, not if we're their parents."

"Ah, yes," Archibald replied. "Sorry, apparently I have been drunk... er, am drunk... uh, am hungover."

Archibald had so much anxiety that he was inadvertently selling the drunk story very well.

"No laws against that in one's home," O'Malley said.

"You get in some fight?" O'Toole asked. "Your eyes sure look mighty black."

"Are you from Texas cowboy?" Archibald replied, ignoring the question completely. He was fascinated by the ten-gallon hat on the officer's head.

"No, born and raised here," O'Toole answered.

"He's watched too many Randolph Scott movies," O'Malley added.

"I applied to be in the mounted unit," O'Toole said proudly. "They get to ride horses. I'll be just like Mister Scott someday."

"That's great, son, now as I was saying," O'Malley interjected. "We're just wondering if you seen those twin boys."

Archibald thought about those twin boys he had just seen in his bedroom.

"Nope," he said.

"Well, if you happen to see them, could you give the precinct a call?" He handed a card to Carol. In the officer's mind, she seemed to be the more responsible of the two.

Carol looked at it. Her face scrunched up. "China Dragon Dry Cleaners?"

"Oops," O'Malley fumbled in his pocket and handed her a different card, taking back the previous one. "Sorry, my wife wants me to pick up our clothes on the way home."

"Well, yes, we certainly will call," reassured Carol. She slipped the card into her green pouch, taking care not to show the gun hidden within.

Archibald looked away from the officers. They gave him the jitters. Instead, he looked at the framed photos on the various tables around the room. All the framed photos depicted his wife. All the framed photos depicted Mary. All the framed photos depicted the real Mary and not Carol.

Holy mother of God! Mary! She's everywhere! Literally! This won't work! What on earth was Carol thinking? Did she not see them? Is this some sort of game for her? The officers needed to leave! They needed to leave now!

The two officers turned to leave, but the older one paused to Archibald's chagrin. He turned back around, tilted his police cap back, and scratched his scalp in thought. "I've got to tell ya'. We've been going door-to-door in this whole apartment building and you three seem to be the only people here."

"Except that there irate fat man next door," O'Toole added, motioning his head towards the door. He was referring to Mr. Feiffer, the irate fat man next door.

"Now, O'Toole," O'Malley admonished. "But yes, except for that *gentleman*, this place is a regular ghost town. What happened to everybody?"

"Oh, I don't know. I've been too busy making dinner to notice." Carol turned to Archibald. "Did you hear anything from our neighbors, honey?"

Archibald remain transfixed on the framed photos.

"Archibald?" Carol discretely pinched his rear.

"Huh?" Archibald awoke from his trance.

"The neighbors. Do you know where they all went?"

"Oh, um," Archibald stammered. "Christmas caroling?"

"Well, no matter," O'Malley said.

Archibald tried to wish the police away through sheer willpower.

The officer turned to leave again but caught a glimpse of the Christmas tree. It looked disheveled, as if its lights were pulled right off it (which they were). Some of the baubles were still scattered on the ground below it.

"What happened to your lights?" O'Malley asked.

Archibald looked at the tree. The Christmas angel was smiling from its perch on high. Archibald was sure that the infernal figure kept the police from leaving.

"Come again?" Archibald said.

"On your tree. Looks like you pulled them off."

"Huh," Archibald said as he looked over the tree. "I see what you mean."

O'Malley became concerned that Archibald's bender may have resulted in some irrecoverable brain damage.

"Well, I won't keep you anymore," the officer added.

They were leaving! They were actually leaving! Try that halo on for size, Christmas angel!

At that moment there was another knock on the door.

The dog barked.

Goddamnit, Christmas angel! Archibald clenched his fists.

Carol smiled. This time it had to be Bill! She knew she had to get to the door quickly if only to prepare him for the sight of police officers in the room.

"Oh, more visitors! How wonderful! How exciting! I'll get it!" Her bells jingled across the room.

O'Toole observed her posterior as she passed.

O'Malley wanted to look, but resisted. He was a married man after all.

Archibald was too terrified at the prospect of who may be at the door to bother looking.

Carol opened the door with glee.

The guest was not who she expected.

"Oh, more of your friends!" She squealed in cheery merriment. "Come in! Please!"

Carol backed away.

Two more police officers stepped into the room.

Archibald eyes widened in panic. He glanced at the Christmas angel. He wanted to throw it out the window. His eyes darted towards the picture frames. He now knew he had to hide them. But how, without making it obvious?

The two police officers who were already in the room were surprised to see them.

The two police officers who had just entered the room were surprised to see the others.

"O'Brien?" O'Malley asked in confusion.

"Holy old Finbar! If it ain't O'Malley!" O'Brien responded in an Irish accent so thick you could distill it and make Guiness out of it. He was a rotund, jolly fellow with bushy hair covering his head and chin. The hair had hints of Irish Red and his breath had hints of Irish whiskey. "And who's the wee lad you got there? And Janey Mack! What be that on his head?"

"This is O'Toole. First night on the beat. And that," O'Malle sighed, "is a cowboy hat."

"O'Toole! A fine Irish name! But why do you have that *seafóid* on your head, my lad?" O'Brien bellowed.

"I'm joining the mounted unit!" O'Toole said proudly.

"But the hat, son, why the hat?"

O'Toole started to feel self-conscious. "You wear one if you gonna' ride a horse, don't you?"

O'Brien laughed. "Sure ya' do! Sure! Don't let no one tell ya otherwise!" He then looked at Carol. "I got ta' ask. Is this a costume party? Ya' got one as a cowboy and the other as one of Santa's midgets?"

"Elves. Santa's elves," O'Malley corrected.

"Elves? Is this now one of those political correct things? Changin' the word after years of people usin' it?" O'Brien was getting riled up. He was an Irish Catholic traditionalist who drank too much.

"No one calls Santa's helpers '*midgets'*. No one has ever called them that. That never was a thing."

"Well, what about my *Mamó*?"

"You're *Mamó* is wrong."

"That's a horrible thing to say about anyone's *Mamó*."

Archibald began to inch closer to one of the end tables as the two continued to bicker.

"Who's the rookie you got there?" O'Malley asked, trying desperately to change the subject.

"Who? Ya' mean O'Reilly here?" O'Brien turned to O'Reilly. "You're not the only one with a new partner. Why don't ya' say '*hello'* O'Reilly!"

O'Reilly nodded slightly, not saying "hello". He was young like O'Toole, but where O'Toole was unmistakably naive and optimistic, O'Reilly was unmistakably weathered and grim.

"O'Reilly. Also a fine Irish name!" O'Malley nodded.

O'Toole tipped his hat.

"Pay no heed to his manners. He's a Korean war vet," O'Brien added. "War has changed the young lad."

Archibald reached one of the end tables. The pictures were in his reach, but how could he remove them quietly? What if they saw him remove them? Would they say anything? Why would they? It's his home, after all. But why would s all the sudden start redecorating? That would seem suspicious.

"So why are you here?" O'Malley finally asked.

"Oh, I got to tell ya'. I got the worst job imaginable." O'Brien huffed in frustration. "Ya' see, a bunch of Christmas carolers got themselves crushed by some truck carrying a hundred frozen turkeys."

"What!" Exclaimed O'Malley.

"How awful!" Said Carol.

"*O Mio Dio*!" Said Mrs. Crocetti.

O'Toole whistled in shock.

The dog barked in annoyance.

O'Reilly stared off into the distance and thought about when he first landed in Korea at Inchon.

And Archibald bumped into the table.

*Click-Clack-Click-Clack-Click*

Everyone turned towards Archibald.

All the picture frames had been knocked off the table and scattered onto the floor. So much for subtlety.

"Sorry," Archibald said sheepishly.

He began to pick them off the floor.

Everyone was so engrossed in the news that they paid little attention to him.

"Now can ya' picture such a thing?" O'Brien continued. "A truck with one hundred frozen turkeys and at least a dozen dead? I mean, a dozen dead carolers, not a dozen dead turkeys. Of course, all hundred of the turkeys are dead too, but I meant the carolers."

"Yeah, yeah, we get you," O'Malley interjected.

"Ok, well get this too..." O'Brien leaned in as if divulging a secret. "All of them dead carolers were tenants of this very building."

There was an audible gasp in the room.

*Click-Clack-Click-Clack-Click*

Everyone turned back towards Archibald.

He had dropped the picture frames, startled by the revelation.

"Jiminey Christmas!" Archibald muttered.

It was then that Carol finally saw the many faces of Mary staring up from the floor.

"Here, let me help you." O'Malley started to kneel down beside Archibald.

"We wouldn't dream of it!" Carol swooped in with her jingling bells between Archibald and O'Malley. "You're our guest! Please, continue with your conversation."

O'Malley obliged.

"I mean, can ya' simply imagine it? An entire floor of tenants wiped out in a single accident?" O'Brien started to laugh. "I'd hate to be this building's landlord, let me tell you!"

Archibald and Carol stood up, each with a stack of picture frames.

"Didn't you just say they were singing Christmas carols?" O'Malley said to Archibald.

"No, she's not Carol, she's Mary. My wife, Mary. We're married." Archibald heard the word "Carol" and responded in a panic.

"What? No, the neighbors. Didn't you say they went caroling?"

"He means '*singing*', you silly goose." Carol pinched his cheek with her free hand. It was a little hard.

"Oh, singing! Caroling!" Archibald laughed awkwardly and plopped his arm over the picture frame just as awkwardly to hide them from view. "Did I say that? Perhaps I did. Alcohol always affected my short term memory." Archibald shuffled to the other end table.

Carol followed.

"So, ya' see, we drew the short straw and we got death duty." O'Brien realized that those not in uniform may not understand the term. "Uh, that's when we gotta' tell friends and family about some unfortunate tragedy."

Those not in uniform nodded in understanding.

"We're tryin' to tell everybody in this here building," O'Brien continued. "But the strangest thing is that there isn't a blessed soul in this place! Except for that irate fat man next door!" Again, referring to Mr. Feiffer, the irate fat man next door.

*Click-Clack-Click-Clack-Click*

Again, everyone turned to Archibald.

The picture frames from the other table were now scattered on the floor as well. This time deliberately.

"Oh, Archibald, how much did you have to drink?" Carol scolded with a smile.

"Sorry, I guess I really am drunk." Archibald smiled back.

Were they actually working together now? Was there synergy between them?

"Ya' not drunk if ya' still standin', I always say." O'Brien laughed.

Archibald and Carol got on the floor and began to pile up the pictures onto their previous stacks.

"And ya' know what that fat guy said?" O'Brien asked rhetorically. "He said he's glad they're dead because he'd finally get some peace and quiet around here. Can ya' believe that now?"

Archibald and Carol stood up with their arms fully loaded with picture frames.

"A dozen dead, you say?" O'Malley asked.

O'Brien nodded.

"Yeah, but I still don't get what happened to everyone else." O'Malley pondered.

Archibald and Carol slid the stacks of picture frames into a cabinet by the phonograph. Mary was now out of sight and out of mind. Archibald was relieved. A crisis had been adverted. He now set his eyes on the Helen Rowland book lying on the coffee table in plain sight. He knew he had to move it before someone decided to open it and see what was inside.

"Well, I still haven't gotten ta' the most interesting part." O'Brien began. "Ya' see, we hava' another duty. We had to—”

Another knock was heard on the door, interrupting O'Brien.

The dog barked again.

Archibald glared at the Christmas angel.

Carol no longer assumed it was Bill. She no longer knew who to expect.

"Might as well make it a party," she said, jingling across the room to the door.

O'Brien looked at her posterior as she passed.

O'Toole joined him.

O'Malley rolled his eyes in annoyance with the both of them.

O'Reilly stared off into the distance and thought about how he was ordered to shoot civilians at Non Gun Ri.

Archibald clenched his teeth in heightened anxiety.

Carol opened the door.

"Oh, my, it's a regular police man's ball!" She howled in delight. "Come on in with the rest of them."

Two additional police officers stepped into the room.

Archibald's heart was not doing well. Now he had even more eyes on him.

He looked back at the book.

Carol walked to Archibald to assume her position as a doting wife.

The four lawmen who were already in the room were surprised to see the other two.

The two new lawmen were equally surprised to see the others, let alone four of them.

"O'Connor." O'Malley nodded, recognizing one of them.

The man he addressed was middle-aged and slender with intense features. The resting expression on his face suggested that he wasn't a pleasant fellow.

"O'Malley." O'Connor nodded. He then looked at O'Brien. "O'Brien. Always a surprise to see you standing."

"Nice ta' see ya' too!" O'Brien retorted in a huff.

Carol noticed Archibald's stare and followed his gaze. She saw he was eyeing the book that she picked up from the floor. She remembered he had been caring it under his arm and found it strange since it was the first thing he grabbed upon returning home. Why was he staring at it now?

Archibald suddenly realized that Carol was next to him. He glanced at her. She was now eyeing the book as well. He began to panic. Why did he just stare at the book like an idiot? Now she was becoming interested in it. He truly had to move fast.

"Who's these two rookies?" O'Connor asked.

"O'Toole." O'Malley nodded to his.

"O'Reilly." O'Brien nodded to his.

"O'Toole, glad you're with O'Malley." O'Connor nodded.

"Thanks," O'Toole responded. "I want to join the mounted unit!"

"Yeah, that's great, kid." The sarcasm was palpable. He turned to the other rookie. "O'Reilly, sorry you got stuck with O'Brien."

"Watch it, you blackguard!" O'Brien bellowed. "Beware of the red-headed Irishman! He is quick-tempered and always ready for a fight!" O'Brien put up his fists.

"Don't make me smack your arse about, O'Brien!" O'Connor retorted.

Archibald saw his opportunity for action among the escalating situation.

He stepped forward.

Carol knew he was after that book. Her instincts told her she needed to get it first.

She skipped forward.

Archibald heard the loud jingling of her steps.

He extended his stride.

Carol saw his increased steps.

She leaped forward.

Her bells jingled.

They both reached out.

They both grabbed onto the book at the same time.

They stared at each other.

Neither would let it go.

"Alright, come on. No fighting here. Let's move on." O'Malley said, attempting to deescalate the confrontation.

Not only did O'Brien and O'Connor back down, but Archibald and Carol relaxed their stance as well. However, they remained holding onto either end of the book.

"What about the rookie you got, O'Connor?" O'Malley asked to keep the conversation moving forward.

"This is O'Higgins." O'Connor turned to his partner and suddenly gave a confused look. "Wait! You're not O'Higgins!"

"Oh, no, sir!" The other officer took of his cap so O'Connor could get a better look at him. He was short and pudgy with a tiny little mustache under his nose that reminded one of Chaplin or Hitler, depending on that person's mood at the time. His eyes also seemed to bug out of his sockets. It was like looking at a cartoon character brought to life.

"Good. I hated O'Higgins. What's your name again?"

"Sullivan, sir."

"Sullivansir?"

"Oh, no, just Sullivan."

"Sean O'Sullivan?"

"Uh, no, Robert Sullivan."

"I had a partner named Sean O'Sullivan."

"Oh, that's not me."

"Of course that's not you. I'm not an idiot. But is he any relation?"

"What's that?"

"Brother? Cousin?"

"I don't believe so. Mother never said."

"There can't be many O'Sullivans on the force, can there?"

"Oh, no. You got it wrong. I'm Sullivan. Without the O."

Everyone stopped. All the police officers stared at Sullivan.

"Saint Áed mac Bricc!" O'Brien muttered.

"Saint Colmán of Cloyne!" O'Malley stammered.

"Saint Lommán mac Dalláin!" O'Toole exclaimed.

"Jaysus," O'Connor growled.

Their words and accents became ostentatiously Irish. Even O'Toole dropped his Texan droll.

O'Reilly stared off into the distance and thought about the mixed race GI-babies that soldiers had with Korean women during the war.

Sullivan looked confused, "What? What is it?" He looked behind him. He wiped his face. He checked the fly of his pants. He didn't see anything out of place. What could possibly be wrong?

"Are you... Irish?" O'Connor asked.

Sullivan eyed the other five officers nervously. "Well..."

They leaned in.

"Father..."

They held their breath.

"...is half-Irish."

They collectively moaned in disappointment.

"You dropped the *O*! You dropped the goddamn *O*! You *Americanized* it!" O'Connor snapped.

"Well, you know, I'm mostly Italian anyway." Sullivan laughed nervously as he played with the tie on his uniform. "My first name is actually Roberto but I dropped the O there too."

"Jaysus! My partner is a goddamn wop!"

"O'Connor!" O'Malley scolded, motioning to the old Italian woman on the couch.

"*Figlio di puttana*! Bog-trotter!" Mrs. Crocetti yelled, glaring at O'Connor.

"*Saluti, signora*!" Sullivan waved with a smile. The old Italian woman reminded him of his own mother.

Mrs. Crocetti nodded with smile. She then went back to glaring at O'Connor.

O'Connor coughed in embarrassment.

During their racial bickering, Archibald and Carol started to pull onto their end of the book.

The two glared at each other.

They squinted their eyes.

They gritted their teeth.

Their hands shook from the exertion of pulling.

It was the most intense duel since *High Noon* with Gary Cooper.

Carol glanced down. She noticed an envelope sticking out her end of the book.

With her other hand, she started to pull it out.

Archibald saw the envelope. He panicked.

He reached his hand out to grab it.

Carol smiled. She released her end of the book.

The book flew towards Archibald, causing him to stumble backwards.

The officers turned towards Archibald.

Carol slipped the envelope into her green purse.

"He was on a bender," O'Malley explained to O'Connor.

Archibald noticed that everyone was staring at him yet again. He held up the book like a pastor holding up the Holy Bible. "A good read, if anyone's interested." He slapped it down onto the coffee table having no need for it anymore.

"I see what you mean," O'Connor said in response to O'Malley He turned back to the officers. "So what brings you all here?"

"I'm looking for two hoodlums," O'Malley replied. "The Lane boys. I think they're involved with some local burglaries."

"And I have the sacred burden of death duty." O'Brien added in over-the-top solemnity. "I am informing the poor souls here of an accident involving a truck with one hundred frozen turkeys."

"Oh?" O'Connor suddenly took interest in what O'Brien had to say, which surprised everyone, including O'Connor. "People in that accident lived here?"

"*All* of them lived here." O'Brien replied, pleased he was now receiving proper attention. "At least a dozen were killed."

"A dozen? From this building?" O'Conner looked shocked. "That's strange. We're here on death duty too, informing people about some incident which happened on the river."

"Ya' mean the one right down the road from ta' accident? With ta' kids?" O'Brien bellowed in excitement. "You're not tellin' me that some of them lived here too?"

"Not some of them. *All* of them," O'Connor said in a heavy tone.

"Mac Nisse baptized by Saint Patrick himself!" O'Brien exclaimed. "That explains everything!"

"What's going on, O'Connor?" O'Malley asked, frustrated that he was out of the loop.

"A bunch of kids were playing hockey on the ice and someone decided to take a swan dive off the bridge," O'Connor replied. "Crashed right into the ice. It started breaking and a whole bunch of kids were pulled into the water, along with all their parents who tried to save them. It's a goddamn mess."

"Good Lord!" Said O'Malley.

"How horrible!" Said Carol.

"*Gesù!*" Said Mrs. Crocetti.

O'Toole whistled in astonishment.

The dog barked.

O'Reilly stared off into the distance and thought about how he held his best friend in his arms as he died from bullet in his left lung shot from a Hanyang 88.

Archibald shuffled nervously in place.

"We're still dragging bodies out, but as far as we can tell, everyone single one of them was a tenant in this building," O'Connor continued.

"At least that explains all the missing people," O'Malley said.

"Did you tell them about all that weird stuff we found? The cranberry sauce, frozen urine, and the magazine clippings?" Sullivan asked excitedly.

"Did you hear me mention those? You've been here the whole time, haven't you?" O'Connor barked.

"I got some of the clippings right here." Sullivan pulled out a handful of the clippings from his pocket.

It took a moment, but Archibald realized the danger of the revelation. The blood rushed to his head. His chest tightened. His pupils dilated. He looked down at the pile of *Mademoiselle* magazines on the table—the magazines from which all those clippings were taken. If any of the police opened just one of the many issues and saw its eviscerated pages, it wouldn't take Sherlock to make the connection.

Why was every single thing in this room so incriminating?

"Give me that!" O'Connor snatched the clippings from Sullivan's hand. "You idiot! Why would you take these?"

"They're just recipes." Sullivan reached out to take the clippings back.

"Recipes? They're evidence!" O'Connor held them back.

"My wife and I like to try new things."

"Like tampering with evidence?"

"What? No. Cooking."

"It figures you're only half Irish."

"Oh, no. A quarter. Father is a half."

"Jaysus."

Archibald started to inch slowly back towards the coffee table.

"Can I at least copy them first?" Sullivan reached out to the clippings again.

"Get your hands off of them!" O'Connor pulled the clippings back. "If you want them so bad, why don't you go out and buy the magazines?"

"*Mademoiselle*? Oh, my wife wouldn't approve. Have you seen this month's cover?"

"Clearly you have."

"Well, my wife would get the wrong idea."

"And what idea would that be?"

"The wrong one."

"Listen, there's a pile of them over there," O'Malley interjected.

Archibald froze in fear.

"I take it these are your issues, ma'am?" O'Malley asked Carol.

"Of course!" Carol smiled. "Mister Sullivan is welcome to cut out whatever recipes he wants!"

God! Carol doesn't know what she's saying! She's going to ruin everything!

"Oh, my!" Sullivan beamed with gratitude. "My wife will be so happy! Thank you, elf."

"Midget," O'Brien incorrectly corrected.

"I mean, midget," Sullivan said.

"No, elf," O'Malley correctly corrected.

"I mean, elf," Suillivan said.

"Carol is fine," Carol said.

"Carol?" O'Malley questioned. "I thought it was Mary."

"Oh, that's my elf name," Carol laughed. "I was just playing along. Mary is fine too."

"I mean, Mary," Sullivan said.

Archibald felt helpless. He needed divine intervention, a deus ex machina., a higher power to intercede upon his behalf and deliver him from this predicament.

Carol picked up the magazines.

He looked at the Christmas angel. Just once would it do something good for him?

And like that, there was a knock on the door.

**12**

All nine heads turned towards the door (ten if you count the dog). They all stood silent and motionless. Even the dog didn't bark. Though none of them would say it, they were all worried to answer the door as worse and worse news followed with each answer. Answering the door now felt like some forbidden act.

"Archibald," Carol said sweetly as she gently put the magazines back down onto the table. "Will you be a dear and open the door?"

Archibald looked back at the Christmas angel. Did it actually listen to his plea for help or was this another one of its cruel jokes?

"Sure," he gulped.

Archibald walked across the room. There was no jingling and no one looked at his posterior.

He reached the door, grabbed the handle, and looked back.

Everyone continued to stare in suspense.

Archibald took a deep breath and swung open the door.

Archibald was so resolute in his expectation that he would be seeing a pair of police officers that it took him a moment to adjust his eyes onto the figure before him. It was a woman. Her brown hair was down and messy. Her simple red dress was disheveled. She looked familiar but Archibald couldn't quite place her face.

"Yes?" He asked.

"Oh, Mr. Nowakowski!" The woman lunged forward and wrapped her arms around him. She immediately burst into tears, squeezing him tightly and burying her face into his chest.

Archibald staggered back in surprise.

All the other people watched as this strange woman grappled him.

Carol glared at Archibald like a jealous wife.

"*Che schifo!*" Mrs. Crocetti was appalled at the obscene sight.

The dog broke free from Mrs. Crocetti and scampered down the hall.

"Uh, can I help you?" Archibald asked.

The woman looked up. Her moist eyes glistened brightly in the lamp light.

"Miss Thurber!" Archibald exclaimed.

It was his neighbor, the librarian! Without her glasses and her hair in a bun, she looked totally unrecognizable. He quickly embraced her, wrapping his arms around her and holding the back of her head in his hand. He held her tightly. He remembered that moment they shared. That moment of two lost souls finding each other in a sea of loneliness. He thought she was dead and had given up hope. He thought it was doomed. He also thought she looked much better without glasses and with her hair down.

"Who is it, Archibald?" Carol asked, eyeing their embrace with some contempt.

Panic seized Archibald again. Beatrice Thurber knew what Mary looks like—the real Mary!

He looked at the Christmas angel. It was smiling. This wasn't an answer to prayers. It was another cruel joke.

Somehow he had to keep Beatrice from saying anything in front of six police officers.

"This... this is Beatrice Thurber... A neighbor." Archibald then stared directly at Carol. He pronounced the next three words slowly and seriously. "*You know her*."

Carol paused, smiled, and winked. She understood.

Beatrice started to lift her head from his shoulder.

Archibald pushed it back down.

"Shhh, shhh, everything is going to be okay." He attempted to make his action appear affectionate and not simply a means to keep her from seeing Carol.

"What's she doin' out ta' bed?" O'Brien remarked.

"What's that?" O'Malley asked.

"This here lady," O'Brien replied. "We dropped 'er off at 'er apartment before comin' here. She was the only survivor, ya' see. Of the truck accident, ta't is."

"What? Why didn't you tell us?" O'Malley challenged.

"I was gettin' to it, but O'Connor came in and interrupted the moment!" O'Brien replied. "Ya' see, a pile of the carolers became wedged between 'er and the truck when it rolled over all of them. Like a human road barrier. She didn't receive a scratch. It's a Christmas miracle on par with the virgin birth. I can only imagine what the poor lass is goin' through. Having all those crushed and dismembered bodies all around 'er."

"Shaddup, you ass," O'Connor scolded.

Beatrice started to lift her head up to take a breath from Archibald's smothering.

She looked in the direction of Carol.

Upon seeing the rising head, Carol dropped to the ground behind the police officers to avoid being seen.

The police officers turned and stared at Carol, who was now on all fours under the tree.

"Oh, I've been meaning to pick up these ornaments!" Carol quickly started to gather up the baubles that happened to be laying near her.

Archibald, noticing that Beatrice's head was up, pushed it back down again.

"It's okay, it's okay." He stroked her hair and smothered her face in his shoulder.

The kettle for Mrs. Crocetti's tea began to whistle. What serendipitous timing.

Carol jumped up to her feet with a jingle. "Oh, the water it ready!" She quickly hung the baubles onto the tree in a haphazard way, glancing back at Beatrice to ensure her head was buried. "I'll go into the kitchen and prepare some tea and coffee. Why don't you make her comfortable, Archibald?"

Carol started towards the kitchen.

"Oh, I'll take some of that too." O'Brien piggybacked onto the offer.

Carol abruptly stopped in the middle of a step and swung back around.

"Of course," Carol begrudgingly agreed. "Anyone else?"

All the hands of the police officers went up.

"Oh, okay then."

"Thank you," Beatrice said feebly upon hearing the offer of tea. She began to raise her head.

Carol leaped into the hallway to avoid being seen, her bells jingling.

Archibald pushed her head back down.

"Shhh, shhh, there, there." He patted her smothered head.

"Boy, that lass is something else," O'Brien muttered about Carol. "Hidin' under a tree, jumpin' around like a prancing' reindeer, dressed as a midget."

O'Malley was tired of correcting him so he didn't.

"Have her sit here." O'Connor pointed to the vacant seat on the couch next to Mrs. Crocetti.

Archibald guided her to the spot, awkwardly keeping her head buried in his shoulder as he passed by Carol who was in the hallway. This required him to lean his torso backwards and take long strides sideways like a crab.

Mrs. Crocetti eyed the scene with disgust.

Beatrice fought to raise her head up. The smothering was becoming too much for her to bear.

Seeing Carol disappear safely out of sight, Archibald allowed it.

Beatrice gasped for breath.

He set her down on the couch beside Mrs. Crocetti, momentarily sitting beside her on the other side.

Beatrice hyperventilated.

The lawmen looked at the whole moment with extreme discomfort. This guy was strange. Who comforts someone like that? Who walks like that? At least he wasn't also dressed like an elf.

Archibald went to stand up but immediately fell back down on the couch. Beatrice held onto his hand tightly and wouldn't let go.

She breathed in and out dramatically, squeezing his hand tighter.

He winced in discomfort.

"Oh, Mr. Nowakowski," she gasped. "It was awful! What I saw!"

Archibald moved to comfort her, but stopped short upon having another notion of panic.

Beatrice Thurber saw him running down the street chased by Bill. Did she see anything else? Like what happened on the bridge? Was he far enough away? The moment he threw Bill over the edge—was this the awful thing she saw? His mind raced. He had to shut her up—with subtlety, of course.

"You don't need to talk about it now." He patted her hand.

"We were just singing carols. That's all we were doing," she said as if in a daze. "Singing, making people happy, and then..."

"You *really* don't need to talk about it now," he stressed.

"...and then..."

"*Really*."

"Blackness."

Archibald paused. "Beg your pardon?"

"I blacked out."

"Blacked out?"

"Yes."

"Blacked out, as in..."

"Next thing I know, I look up and I see a police officer standing over me." Beatrice looked up and now saw six police officers standing over her.

"When you say blacked out, you mean, you have no memory?"

"Yes."

"As in, you can't remember anything?"

"Yes."

"Well, that's convenient. Er, I mean, good. That is, good not to remember such awful things. About the accident, of course, not anything else."

"Don't worry, lass," O'Brien said in an attempt for comfort, "your memory will come back soon enough. You'll remember it all."

Beatrice started to cry and threw her face into Archibald again.

"You dumb *gobdaw*," O'Connor said.

The dog waddled back into the room.

"What?" O'Brien protested.

The dog brushed up against Archibald.

"Why would she want to remember a truck driving over her friends? You *eejit*!" O'Connor yelled.

Archibald looked down at the dog.

"That's it! I've had it with ya' blatherskite!" O'Brien replied.

Archibald's face grew pale.

In the dog's mouth was the finger.

"Let's all calm down," O'Malley interjected.

Archibald stared at the dog. It had an evil glint in his eyes. In fact, he was sure the dog was even smiling with devilish glee.

As the officers continued to argue among themselves, Archibald attempted to reach out towards the dog but found he couldn't move—Beatrice was holding tightly onto both of his hands, tighter now than ever before.

He attempted to shift his body to wrestle his hands free, but Beatrice continued to bawl and burrow her face deeper into his shoulder.

He was trapped.

The dog started to trot around the officers, wagging its tail. It was as if the dog wanted to be petted. It was as if the dog wanted them to find the finger in its mouth.

Archibald turned towards the Christmas angel. This was the sickest of jokes.

By this point in time, O'Malley was holding back O'Connor and O'Toole was holding back O'Brien.

Sullivan stayed back because he had an aversion to violence.

The scene reminded O'Reilly of a moment where his commanding officer was arguing with one of his fellow soldiers at Pork Chop Hill. An artillery barrage blew them all up.

O'Reilly felt something brush against his legs. He looked down and saw Pooch. O'Reilly had a sentry dog in Seoul, spending many nights alone with the canine as they guarded supply areas. The experience made him like dogs. He leaned over and began petting the evil Pooch.

Pooch was faced away from O'Reilly and stared at Archibald with a look of malicious glee, the finger dangling from its small jowls.

O'Reilly started scratching the dog's rear by the tail.

Archibald looked at the scene in horror before turning to Mrs. Crocetti.

"Mrs. Crocetti," Archibald whispered.

Mrs. Crocetti was watching the argument, hoping it would turn into a brawl for her own amusement. She hated the Irish and enjoyed seeing them fight one another.

"Mrs. Crocett!" Archibald nearly yelled.

The old Italian woman looked at him with annoyance.

"The dog!" Archibald motioned towards Pooch with his head.

Mrs. Crocetti looked at Pooch.

O'Reilly had worked his way up to scratching the dog's ear.

Mrs. Crocetti's eyes widen at the sight of the finger in its mouth, "Pooch! *Vieni qui!"*

Pooch didn't immediately respond.

O'Reilly reached under its chin, his hand less than an inch from the severed finger.

The dog closed its eyes in demonic ecstasy.

*"Adesso!*"

Pooch responded compulsory at the Italian word. He ran forward, breaking free from O'Reilly's scratches but ran passed Mrs. Crocetti in defiance.

Archibald also responded compulsory. He wrenched his body away from Beatrice and leaped towards the dog like Santa on a plate of milk and cookies.

Beatrice, now finding no support, started to fall forward.

Archibald grabbed the dog.

The dog yelped.

Beatrice fell flat onto the ground between the quarreling officers.

Archibald snatched the finger from its mouth.

The dog barked.

The officers stopped their shouting and looked down at Beatrice.

Archibald quickly pocketed the finger.

The dog ran down the hall.

"O'Toole, grab her other arm there!" O'Malley commanded.

He and O'Toole stooped down and helped Beatrice to her feet.

"Coffee and tea!" Carol announced as she carried in a tray holding a drip coffee pot and some cups.

Carol stopped cold in her tracks. In front of her was Beatrice being held up by the two officers.

Beatrice stared blankly at Carol.

Carol stared blankly at Beatrice.

"Who are you?" Beatrice asked.

Carol smiled. "What do you mean, Ms. Turner?"

"Thurber," Archibald coughed.

"Thurber?" Carol corrected.

"Who are you? Why are you here with Mr. Nowakowski?" Her tone was mostly that of confusion but there was a hint of jealousy.

"What a silly question," Carol responded with a laugh.

"Oh my god..." O'Brien said, recognizing what was going on.

This is it, Archibald thought. The jig is up. They've been found out.

"What?" Carol gave an innocent smile.

"Her amnesia is worse than she thinks!" O'Brien declared.

Beatrice, upon hearing the poor status of her mental health, collapsed again onto the floor.

"Oh, dear!" Carol exclaimed as she placed the tray down on the coffee table.

O'Malley and O'Toole knelt down to the floor again.

"She should lay down," O'Malley suggested.

"Oh, we can put her in our bed," Carol offered.

"Do what now?" Archibald's ears perked at the word *bed*.

"Good idea." O'Malley agreed. He and O'Toole started to lift her up again.

"*Our* bed?" Archibald repeated.

"Lead the way," O'Malley said as they moved into the hallway.

"Well, what about her own bed? You know, in her own apartment?" Archibald questioned.

"It'd be best not to leave her alone," O'Malley replied as he and O'Toole followed Carol into the bedroom.

"Oh, yes, but I was only thinking how the familiarity of her home may help," Archibald challenged as he pursued them.

"Not a bad idea," O'Brien agreed from the living room.

"Shaddup," O'Connor snapped.

"Oh, Archibald, don't be silly. The bed's right here," Carol said, directing the men to their bed. "We will sort things out later." She gave a reassuring smile toward Archibald.

"Yes, well, the bed has issues. The slats can shift out of place." Archibald continued to argue.

"You think she's going to start jumping on it?" O'Malley said as he and O'Toole gently laid Beatrice down on the bed.

"She just needs to lie down for a little bit." Carol continued to smile reassuringly. "Surrounded by her friends and neighbors."

Archibald anxiety started to rise again. It's one thing to keep Beatrice here, thereby giving her more opportunity to convince the police that Carol isn't Mary. It's another thing entirely to put her on top of the bed under which one of the wanted hoodlums is hiding with the other not too far off.

"Hey, here are your Christmas tree lights." O'Malley commented on the cord of lights which was coiled on the floor by the bedside. "Why do you have them in here?"

"Oh, really, officer." Carol quickly leaned down and tossed the lights under the bed. They didn't go under as far as she thought they would. "Can't you be more discreet within a married couple's bedroom?"

O'Malley at first was confused by the response, but then suddenly it all made sense—the elf suit, the Christmas lights in bed, the black eyes on Archibald. This couple was into some peculiar activities. But then he remembered Carol's mother was visiting upon his arrival and he became confused again... unless they were into some *very* peculiar activities.

Pooch waddled into the room, its tail wagging back and forth.

Beatrice began to stir as if regaining consciousness.

"Well, it would be best if I give her peace," Carol announced, not wishing to repeat the scene out in the living room. "I don't think my bells wouldn't help matters." Carol softly giggled as she walked towards the exit, her bells jingling.

The dog walked towards the bed.

Beatrice opened her eyes.

"Miss Thurber," O'Malley started.

Beatrice looked at the police officer.

Archibald looked at the dog whom he had just noticed.

"We have you lying in bed in your neighbor's apartment, the Nowakowskis," O'Malley continued.

The dog stopped at the foot of the bed.

Archibald bit his lower lip in suspense.

The dog looked back at Archibald with that evil glint in its eyes.

"Oh, where is Mr. Nowakowski?" Beatrice asked.

The dog began to growl at something under the bed.

"Here's right here, ma'am." O'Malley motioned towards Archibald.

Beatrice looked at Archibald.

Archibald continued to stare at the dog whose growls were growing louder.

"Mr. Nowakowski?" Beatrice asked.

*Don't bark*, Archibald thought.

The dog barked.

*Jiminey Christmas*, Archibald thought.

Beatrice jumped, not expecting a dog.

O'Malley and O'Toole turned to the barking dog.

The dogs head was halfway under the bed, growling, tugging, and barking.

"Pooch!" Archibald shouted.

The two officers circled towards the foot of the bed to get a better look at the dog.

Archibald quickly moved forward, bent down, and pulled on his rear end sticking out from under the bed. It felt as if the dog had latched onto something. "Come on, Pooch!"

"What's he playing with down there?" O'Malley asked. He started to kneel down towards the floor.

"Oh, old socks," Archibald quickly replied. He yanked the dog with his entire body weight in a last ditch effort to dislodge him before the officer became too curious. The dog suddenly released its grip. Archibald fell backwards into the wall with the dog in his hands. Within the dog's mouth was a cheap red glove.

"Well, and gloves too," Archibald added before quickly standing up with the dog in hand.

O'Malley aborted the process of kneeling down and stood back up to Archibald's delight.

The dog continued to give a low, simmering growl as the glove dangled in its mouth.

O'Malley noticed the printing on the glove. "Does that say 'Red Ryder' on it?"

"Uh, yes, it does." Archibald tucked the dog under his arm and pulled the glove from its mouth.

"I thought you said you didn't have children?"

"Yes, I did." Archibald stuffed the glove in his pocket along with the finger.

"Then why the 'Red Ryder' gloves?"

"Well, can't adults be fans of 'Red Ryder'?" Archibald moved the dog from under his arm and back into his hands. He had no idea what or who 'Red Ryder' represented so he hoped he didn't receive any questions.

"Sure," O'Toole interrupted. "I'm a fan myself. I read and listen to his adventures. What do you like most about Red Ryder?"

You got to be kidding me, Archibald thought.

"Uh, the themes." Archibald answered, having no idea what he was saying.

"Huh? What do you mean?" O'Toole inquired as to what Archibald was saying.

"Oh, er..." Archibald stammer. "Crime doesn't pay?" He thought of the most generic thing to say.

"Sure doesn't!" O'Toole agreed to Archibald's delight. "Red Ryder was the reason I wanted to become a police officer in the first place. Do you have the lever-action, spring-piston Red Ryder BB air gun?"

"Uh..." Archibald droned.

"Look," O'Malley interrupted, "I like Red Ryder as much as the next guy but we should give Miss Thurber some rest."

"That would be nice," Beatrice said. "Though... can I just speak with Mr. Nowakowski for a moment? If he doesn't mind, that is."

"Oh, yes, of course, uh..." Archibald looked at the officers while holding the dog in his hands. "Could one of you bring this dog back to Mrs. Cro... I mean, my mother-in-law?"

O'Toole took the dog in hand. He, O'Malley, and the dog promptly left the room, leaving the Archibald and Beatrice alone (aside from the two hoodlums hidden in the respective places).

For the past ten minutes, Carol played the perfect hostess to her unexpected guests. She poured them coffee in cups she found in the cupboard, added lumps of sugar and cream upon request, smiled and laughed at their attempts at humor, and nodded solemnly whenever the conversation turned serious. Despite the outward signs of relaxation, she was continually worrying about Bill. Where had he gone? If he was following Archibald and lost him, surely he wouldn't still be looking for him? She played out scenarios in her mind. Perhaps he approached the door, heard the police inside, and decided to wait outside until the coast was clear? She was in the middle of such a thought when the conversation turned back to the incident on the ice.

"I can't help wonderin' who that guy was that accidentally fell off the bridge," O'Brien thought aloud.

"Who said it was an accident?" O'Connor replied. He sipped his coffee casually.

"Whaddya' mean? Was it suicide?" O'Brien asked.

"Who said it was suicide?" O'Connor replied.

"So he was pushed!" O'Brien slapped his knee.

"Who said he was pushed?" O'Connor again sipped his coffee.

"I swear, O'Connor. If ya' playing games with me again—”

"We think he was thrown off," O'Connor interrupted.

"Pushed, thrown." O'Brien waved his hand to dismiss the distinction. "What's ta' difference."

"Pushed implies he was still alive."

"So he was dead already!" O'Brien slapped his knee a second time.

"Stabbed right in the heart. There on the bridge."

"Oh, how horrible!" Carol exclaimed.

"*Santo cielo*!" Mrs. Crocetti bellowed.

"Say, wait a minute." O'Brien held up his hand. "I thought ya' said he was swept under the ice? How ya' know he's been stabbed? Ya' got a witness or something?"

"He floated up on a patch of ice. He was one of the first people we pulled out."

"Well how 'bout that!" O'Brien slapped his knee a third time. "Any word how long it will take to identify him?

"Who said we haven't identified him already?"

"What? How?"

"I knew who it was just by looking at him."

"But you can't even remember whoI am," Sullivan interjected.

"That's because I never trust a greaser," O'Connor growled. "I bet your name isn't even Sean O'Sullivan."

"Oh, you're right! It's Robert Sullivan," Sullivan replied. "You know, my wife doesn't appreciate racial—"

"Jaysus. What is it with you and your wife?"

"We're married."

"No, you gombeen, what's her problem?"

"Oh, she has heel spurs. I have to rub her feet every night."

"Jaysus."

"You want to see a picture?"

"Of her heel spurs?"

"What? No. Of her face."

"Don't go through the trouble."

"No trouble. I have it right here."

"Yeah, okay, she looks fine. There."

"I haven't taken the picture out yet."

"Listen, why don't you look through that pile of *Mademoiselle* magazines or something?"

"Say! That's an idea! If I find a good recipe, I'll have you over and my wife and I will cook—”

"Don't hold your breathe," O'Connor interrupted again. "Actually, do."

Sullivan picked up the top issue from the stack. The cover was tad too risqué for his wife.

"So I take it he didn't get disfigured or anything?" O'Brien finally asked.

"Jaysus! I don't even remember what I was saying!" O'Connor complained.

"Ya' said ya' knew him just by lookin' at him," O'Brien prompted.

"Right. Right. He landed feet first onto the ice, so he may be a few inches shorter but his face was intact."

"So then ya' know who it is or what?"

"Yeah, I know who it is..." O'Connor gave a coy smile and sipped his coffee.

O'Brien waited for a response before grumbling, "Well, who is it, then?"

At that moment, O'Malley entered the room with Pooch in his hands. O'Toole followed close behind.

"I believe this is yours, ma'am." O'Malley held out his hand towards Mrs. Crocetti.

Pooch gave a look of irritation.

"Pooch! *Cane cattivo*!" Mrs. Crocetti scooped the dog in her arms and continued to scold him before turning back to her intense glaring at O'Connor.

"How is Miss Thurber?" Carol asked.

"Oh, I think she'll be fine. Just needs some time to rest." O'Malley looked around at his fellow lawmen. "So, what did I miss?"

Archibald stood awkwardly at the foot of the bed. "What, uh, can I do for you, Miss Thurber?"

"Do you think... you could come closer?" Beatrice reached out her hand.

Archibald was apprehensive. Did she not really blackout? Can she recall seeing him there? Did she see him on the bridge? Still, he moved closer, carefully stepping over the lights on the floor.

Beatrice grabbed his hand and held it tightly in her hands. "I am Ivan Ilych."

"Excuse me?"

"You see, in death it had occurred to him that he did not live his life as he should have done. As he laid there in his bed, just as I am in yours, he was given the awareness only privy to those dying that everything by which we live is a deception."

Archibald glanced around the room. What was she talking about?

"It was when I faced death this very evening that the veil had lifted and the deception was expunged. I had become Ivan Ilych, though miraculously in life and not in death." She turned her eyes towards the heavens.

Archibald looked up. There was nothing but a spot on the ceiling.

"*Can it be that I have not lived as one ought?*" She quoted.

"I'm sorry, who is this?"

"Ivan Ilych."

"Who?"

"Ivan Ilych from *The Death of Ivan Ilych*."

"Uh."

"By Leo Tolstoy."

"Oh, this is a book."

"Of course. I let you borrow it. You said you read it."

"Oh, *that* Ivan Illych."

"And... And when I awoke from the crash and saw all those..." She began to choke up with the remembrance of the accident's aftermath. She took a moment to suppress her emotions before continuing. "Well, anyway... what I saw made me understand the ephemeral nature of life... No, not understand. *Absorb*. Yes, that's it. We intellectually understand that life is fleeting but we don't *absorb* it until we behold the face of death. You understand what I mean?"

"Sure."

"And, in absorbing that truth, the deception is gone. I see now that all we do is live a life of conformity. We do nothing but conform to societal expectations. We are slaves to its edicts, don't you see? Prisoners of the institution. Any attempts at escape are met with destruction or, even worse, we're turned into hideous beetles and locked away in a room so that we cannot possibly offend."

"Beetles?"

"*The Metamorphosis*."

"That's..."

"Kafka."

"Of course."

"We ought not to live like this!" She stared into his eyes. "Mr. Nowakowski, don't you understand what I am trying to say?"

"Uh, yes, completely."

"I love you!"

"Oh, maybe I only understood you partly."

"So get this, O'Malley. This guy who fell from the bridge didn't just fall. He was stabbed in the heart and then thrown off the bridge!" O'Brien said, before adding with a smug tone, "that's *thrown*, by the way, not *pushed*."

"What's the difference?" O'Malley asked.

"Well, pushed implies he was still alive, right O'Connor?" O'Brien looked over at O'Connor.

"Obviously," O'Connor affirmed.

"What? You can *push* a dead body," O'Malley objected.

"Yeah, but off a bridge? Over a barrier?" O'Connor objected. "That's not a push. You can't *push* a dead body like that."

"Even so, would it be a *throw*? Would you really *throw* the body? To do that, you would need to pick up the body and throw it up in the air, clearing the barrier entirely."

"Wouldn't that be a *heave*?" O'Toole suggested.

"If anything, it's a *roll*. A body is *rolled* over a barrier," Sullivan added. He put down an issue of *Mademoiselle* magazine and picked up another one.

"Yeah, but you can't *roll* a dead body *up* a barrier," O'Malley challenged.

"Okay, so you would *pick* them up, *prop* them up, and then *pivot* them over the edge. That's the word we're looking for—*pivot*." O'Brien beamed with pride at the profound revelation.

"So you are saying he was *pivoted* over the bridge?" O'Connor asked with contempt.

"Well, when you say it like that..." O'Brien sulked.

"The point is that the guy was killed before being pushed-thrown-rolled-pivoted-whatever off the bridge," O'Connor said to O'Malley.

"And they identified him already." O'Brien interjected.

"Well... who was it?" O'Malley asked.

"He was getting to that before you walked in," O'Brien complained.

"Well, then let him answer!" O'Malley yelled.

"Just some low-life criminal goombah by the name of Bill Crocetti," O'Connor said.

"Say, there doesn't seem to be any recipes in these *Mademoiselle* magazines!" Sullivan complained. "They've been all cut out!"

"Let's run away together."

"But I'm married, or, at least, well, you know, something or another."

"Break free from the shackles of conformity! Should not love constitute a marriage?"

"Well, it certainly plays a role."

"It's everything!"

"Yes, but what of the tax benefits?"

"Marriage is nothing but an institution of the church and state used to confine us!"

"Do you need your meds?"

"That's just it, Mr. Nowakowski! That's it! Yes, that horrible, debilitating anxiety was caused by the pressures of societal conformity! You understand? After seeing the truth, I am free from it! All that medication did was help you cope with the deception, but I'm cured now that the deception is gone!"

"Oh, good. Just checking."

"And what have I been doing with my life? Tell me, what have I been doing?"

"Is that rhetorical?"

"I work ten hours a day cataloging books. I then return to my prison cell of a home for solitary confinement! Then I repeat it all over again! Shall I keep doing this until I die? For all eternity! Camus was right—we are all like Sisyphus!"

"Camus?"

"Albert Camus."

"Oh. And Sisyphus?"

"Greek mythological figure. Had to push a rock uphill forever only to have it tumble down each time."

"Ah."

"But no more! I will be a prisoner no longer! These prison walls won't hold me! I see them now for what they are!" She again stared intensely into Archibald's eyes. "And I see a wife who leaves you every night for others. I see you not loving her or her not loving you. You are imprisoned in a marriage without love. But I love you. She doesn't, but I do. I long for you. I *yearn* for you. I have been wanting to say this for years but I was silenced by the oppressive social order. I wasn't yet free. But now I am. I am free. Come to me, Mr. Nowakowski. Come into my arms."

"Are you sure you don't need your meds?"

Mrs. Crocetti began to shake. Her grip loosened, allowing Pooch to hop onto the floor.

Carol set her cup down. The cup made a clattering noise on the table. She didn't realize that she was shaking as well. She looked at her hand in disbelief. She was always in control. Why this?

All the lawmen were oblivious to the women's reactions except for O'Reilly. He saw similar moments of shock when he told families about the death of their husbands and sons in Korea.

Mrs. Crocetti stood up, her whole body now trembling. "I... I check on food."

Carol stood up. "Do you need help, *mama*?"

Mrs. Crocetti didn't respond. She walked by Carol without giving her a glance. It was as if she was detached from reality, simply floating through existence.

"Look what you did," O'Malley muttered to O'Connor.

"What?"

"All those offensive words."

"She called me a bog-trotter!"

"Say, don't you find it strange that all the recipes missing here look to be the same exact ones we found on the bridge?" Sullivan observed as he flipped through the magazine issues. "Of course, it's probably nothing."

Carol watched Mrs. Crocetti as she walked down the hallway into the kitchen. When she disappeared around the corner, Carol turned back around. It was then she noticed something wet on her cheeks. She took her hand and wiped it under her eyes. Her hand was covered in glitter, mascara, and tears. To her astonishment, she was crying. She was losing control.

O'Reilly stared at her.

Carol looked back at him. Her eyes started to fade from sorrow to anger. She clutched her green pouch.

O'Reilly softly shook his head. He had seen that look often back in Korea whenever a friend was killed. The look of wanting to kill the son of a bitch who did it. He was warning here.

Carol nodded in defiance. She turned and started to walk down the hallway.

O'Reilly placed his hand on his gun and unbuckled the leather strap on his gun.

O'Brien saw his rookie partner on the verge of drawing his weapon.

"Faith and Begorrah!" O'Brien shouted. "O'Reilly is having another episode again!"

"Hold me."

"Here?"

"Kiss me."

"Now?"

"Take me."

"How about a rain check?"

"Don't think. Just act."

Before Archibald had a chance to respond, Beatrice lunged forward and kissed Archibald on the lips. Her aggressiveness was shocking since just a few hours earlier she was the most timid person he had ever met. He attempted to back away but she gripped his hands tightly, keeping him locked in place.

Archibald didn't reciprocate the kiss. Again, this was not because of any honorable intent, but rather because the whole situation was simply awkward. He stood there motionless, but this didn't seem to deter Beatrice. She continued to kiss Archibald passionately on the lips like a teen practicing the art of kissing on a mannequin.

At that very moment, the bedroom door swung open with a loud crash.

Beatrice did not stop kissing Archibald. She was too lost in her own intellectual exercise at expressing her freedom from societal expectations to notice anything.

Archibald glanced over through the oppressive kissing and saw Carol standing in the door frame. Her face was no longer bright and cheerful as he had last seen it. Tears were flowing down her face. Anger was flaring in her eyes.

Archibald attempted to push Beatrice away, but the act of resistance seemed to only intensify her kisses.

"I can explain," Archibald gasped among the onslaught of kisses.

Carol didn't respond. She moved into the room silently, staring at him with cold eyes.

A shiny metallic ornament was in her hand.

It was a gun.

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"Now, uh, Carol. I mean, Mary. Wife. Dear. It's not what it looks like." Archibald tried to back up into the corner, but Beatrice remained on top of him. She was still lost in her celebratory emancipation.

Carol walked to the foot of the bed, continually glaring at Archibald and jingling her bells.

"Miss Thurber is simply, um, grateful for our, uh, hospitality." Archibald turned and gently swatted away Miss Thurber as one may a fly. "Shoo, shoo."

"What's wrong?" Beatrice asked, finally snapping out of her stupor.

Carol raised the gun.

Beatrice screamed. She hustled onto the bed, yanking Archibald's arm. He stumbled onto the bed with her.

"Aren't you taking this role playing too far?" Archibald asked.

"You murdered Bill!" Carol said coldly.

"I can explain!"

"Stabbed him in the heart!"

"I didn't!"

"And threw him into the river."

"I didn't! Well, I mean, on that one... I can explain!"

"Put the gun down, ma'am," a strong, controlled voice said from the doorway.

Carol looked towards the door.

O'Reilly had his gun drawn, pointing directly at Carol.

"O'Reilly, what are ya' doin'?" O'Brien called from the hall.

He ran into the bedroom behind O'Reilly and stopped when he saw Carol pointing at gun at Archibald in bed with Beatrice.

"Jaysus. She caught 'em in the act," O'Brien muttered.

The other lawmen stumbled in behind to see the commotion.

Pooch zig-zagged through all the legs of the police.

"Put the gun down, ma'am," O'Reilly repeated.

"He killed him!" Carol yelled back.

Pooch walked to the closet.

"I didn't kill anyone!" Archibald hollered in defense.

Pooch started pawing at the door.

"Killed who?" O'Malley asked.

"I love him! I don't care who knows!" Beatrice cried. "This woman isn't fit to be his wife! She has given him up! He's mine now!"

"I'm not his wife!" Carol yelled.

Pooch widen the door, allowing him to scurry inside the closet.

"Who died? Who's married? Who's cheating?" O'Malley yelled. "What the hell is going on?"

"Ma'am, lower your weapon," O'Reilly commanded in a more severe tone.

"He killed the love of my life!" Carol cried.

"He just slipped!" Archibald hollered.

The dog barked and growled from inside the closet.

"Ma'am I will be force to fire if you don't lower your weapon!" O'Reilly warned.

"I can't!" Carol screamed.

A huge crash came within the closet.

Everyone stopped shouting.

Pooch yelped.

The dog flew out, clipping the door, soaring over the heads of the police, and slammed into the wall in the hallway. It tumbled to the ground, stood up, shook itself, and trotted into the kitchen.

Something in the closet had punted the pup through the air.

Everyone stared at the closet.

The closet door swung open wide.

Everyone peered inside.

The young boy Keith was sitting on a pile of shoes, dresses, and hangers, having just fallen over from fighting off that infernal dog. He was also dressed in a woman's elf costume.

Carol looked at the costume he was wearing. She looked down at the costume she was wearing. They were identical.

"Jaysus!" O'Brien exclaimed.

O'Malley quickly drew his gun and aimed it at Keith. "Hands up!"

Keith quickly threw his hands up in the air.

"Out of the closet!" O'Malley commanded. "Slowly!"

Keith took a few steps out, the bells on his feet jingling.

"Why is there a boy in a woman's elf costume inside your bedroom closet?" Beatrice asked.

"Uh..." Archibald was at a loss for an explanation.

"These two are into nasty games," O'Malley snapped.

"Ew! Gross! I'm nah mix'd up wit deez perverts!" Keith objected.

"Well, I'll be a son of a bitch!" O'Malley smiled. "It's one of the Lane boys!"

"Deez guys are freaks. All of 'em. Basket cases. Real loons," Keith continued.

"Where is your brother?" O'Malley asked.

"Haven't seen 'em," Keith snapped.

At that moment, one of the slats in the bed shifted, causing the mattress to fall in a foot on one end with Archibald and Beatrice still on it.

The bed yelped from underneath.

Everyone stopped and turned towards the bed.

O'Malley moved his gun between Keith and the bed, not sure what he should be aiming at.

His partner, O'Toole, drew out his weapon and pointed it at Keith.

"You, under the bed. Come out!" O'Malley commanded.

After a few moments, the sound of shuffling could be heard. A hand reached out from underneath the bed, followed by another hand, and soon a head, a torso, and legs. The body, belonging to Cody, stood up.

"Jaysus!" O'Brien exclaimed again.

"Why were there *two* boys hiding in your bedroom?" Beatrice asked again.

"Uh..." Archibald stammered.

"They were in here with us the whole time?!" Carol snapped.

"What sick dealings do you got here?" O'Malley yelled.

"Whoah! I ain't dealin' nothin' with these people!" Cody hollered back.

"Yeah, we jus' came ta rob dis place," Keith added.

"Shaddup, Keith!" Cody scolded. "And ya' sick, you know that? I told ya' to not try on da dresses!"

"I've been looking for you boys!" O'Malley smiled. "We know you've been robbing all those apartments next door."

"What's dis? I think ya' mistaken us fa' someone else. We did no robb'ries," Keith explained.

"You're robbing this one right now!"

"Sure, dis one, outta' spite, but no ot'ers. We swears!"

"Save it!"

"Dis a frame up! We innocent!"

"You're under arrest, that's what you are!"

"Us? What about dis guy over here?" Cody pointed to Archibald. "He chopped his wife and gave her body parts ta children! And ya' gonna take us downtown?"

"And he killed my Bill!" Carol yelled.

"Bill?" O'Connor asked. "You mean, Bill Crocetti?"

"He's the one who stabbed him!" Carol continued yelling. "And threw him into the river!"

"Pivoted," O'Brien corrected.

"She is being hysterical. I didn't kill anyone," Archibald said defensively, before pointing his finger at Carol. "But they *did* steal three thousand dollars from me. It's in her purse right now. In an envelope."

"I don't give a damn about your money anymore! If you want it, take it!" With her free hand, she unclasped her purse, took out the envelope, and threw it at Archibald. As it sailed through the air, its contents spewed out to the ground—contents which consisted of a driver's license, a Diner's Club card, a passport, and other identification papers for the now deceased Mary Nowakowski.

Archibald looked in astonishment. "Jiminey Christmas! I put the wrong envelope in with the head! Some kid has my three thousand dollars!"

"And speakin' of stealin', he stole my glove! My *Red Ryder* glove!" Cody pointed with the same accusatory finger that Archibald gave Carol.

"Okay, well, *steal*, no, but if you want it back, here it is." Archibald reached into his pocket and pulled out the glove. As he did, Mary's finger became caught in the fabric of the glove and was propelled into the air. It fell and landed in the center of the floor in front of all the police officers.

Everyone stopped and looked at the finger.

"Jaysus!" O'Brien exclaimed a third time.

"I can explain!" Archibald said.

O'Brien then drew his gun and pointed it at Archibald. "I would start talkin', my lad. I seldom draw my gun since I'm known ta' shake my trigger finger!"

"Fine! I accidentally hit my wife with a turkey. Well, okay, more or less accidentally, but it doesn't matter because she wasn't dead. I mean, I thought she was dead, but she wasn't. She then attacked me with a frying pan. Then I think she fell backwards and all my kitchen tools fell on her. You know, pots, pans, knives, and such. I panicked and at the time it seemed sensible to chop up her body. I know, it would be a stretch for most but It's my job. It's what I do. Turkeys, though. Not people. Anyway, she was dead already so why did it matter? So I didn't kill her, you see. She was already dead when I chopped her up. That's not murder. It really was an accident. So, you know, I put her body parts in presents and tried to bring them to the dump to get rid of them, but I was followed by a police officer. I mean, a detective. I mean, Bill Crocetti, I guess. I hid in a department store, I put the presents down for a second, and the next thing I knew they were taken to the store's Santa Clause where he gave them out to the kids. I also got reindeer poop on my hand but that's beside the point. Of course I couldn't get them back. I tried, but a kid started to lecture me on diamonds and water and I ended up paying twenty dollars for a jar of broken cranberry sauce. The detective—er, Bill—chased me out of the store and my landlord had a heart attack and died. At least, I think. He was there too. My landlord, that is. I ran onto the bridge, but slipped on some frozen urine some kid left because I didn't let him pee in my apartment. Bill caught me, threw my recipe clippings from *Mademoiselle* magazine and my jar of cranberry sauce, started crying, and was about to stab me when he slipped on the frozen urine and landed on his own knife. What was I to do? I panicked again, so I threw him over the bridge. So, you see, he was already dead when I threw him over. I didn't kill anyone. Of course, I I didn't know the water was frozen. I also didn't know kids were playing hockey on it. So, yeah, the ice broke and all the kids fell into the water, but that wasn't my fault, was it? Oh, and I also backed up a little too far and inadvertently caused the frozen turkey truck to crash into all the Christmas carolers. He swerved to miss me. Again, I didn't mean it. I just backed up too far. Oh, and that's the company I work for, by the way. Collier Poultry. The frozen turkey truck. Coincidence. And when I got back, I found out Carol, the store elf, was Bill's girlfriend and they were trying to extort money from me. Of course, apparently, some random kid now has that money since I hid it in one of the boxes accidentally. Anyway, she tied me up in Christmas lights. I also found out that I was being robbed by these two boys because I never tipped them for carrying my wife's body parts down the stairs. Oh, and Mrs. Crocetti, the old Italian woman, is Bill's mom, apparently. And the finger was in the wool sock on the laundry line. My bathroom window was open when I got back and I am not sure why, but other than that I think that about covers everything. I blame this all on the Christmas angel on my tree. There's too much order in all this to be mere chance. Makes sense?"

Everyone starred at Archibald.

"See? It's all a misunderstanding." It all was perfectly sensible to Archibald. In fact, he felt like a burden was lifted from his shoulders.

Everyone was speechless with their mouths agape.

"So, if anyone should go to jail, it should be these three!" Archibald motioned toward Keith, Cody, and Carol. "Four if you include the old woman in the kitchen. And take the dog to the pound while you're at it."

Everyone remained motionless, no one not sure what to do.

"I know you can't arrest the Christmas angel so I am going to let that one go."

"You... caused the accident?" Beatrice stammered in disbelief.

It just occurred to Archibald that all these events may not have been as clearly understandable as he may have thought, especially to Beatrice. He tried to walk back on his words. "Perhaps I shouldn't have said *'*caused'. More like a single, trivial, insignificant factor among many, larger, more important factors."

"That means..." Beatrice began.

Archibald braced himself for the crying.

"You saved me!" Beatrice cried in joy.

Archibald raised his eyebrows, as did most everyone else. "Excuse me?"

"Oh! This is just like how Lassiter caused everything to be taken away from Jane but in doing so they found love! She was also a prisoner of society, you know! Oh, thank you for delivering me from that imprisonment!"

"Is this another book?" Archibald asked.

"Lassiter and Jane. From *Riders of the Purple Sage*."

"Don't they get trapped in some valley at the end?" O'Toole asked.

"Oh, you read it?" Beatrice asked, turning to O'Toole.

"I enjoy me a good western," O'Toole smiled, tipping his cowboy hat with his free hand.

"Yes, they were trapped, but they had each other!" Beatrice responded in hopeless romanticism.

"I hate to break this book club," O'Malley said, "but I think it would be best if we *all* go downtown and—”

A loud crash came from inside the bathroom.

Everyone turned and looked at the bathroom door.

Except for O'Reilly. He didn't turn. He kept his gun trained on Carol.

"Mrs. Crocetti?" O'Malley inquired.

"*Mama*?" Carol added.

O'Connor stepped out into the hallway. Sullivan followed with some trepidation. They looked down into the kitchen and saw Mrs. Crocetti. Her back was toward them. She was trembling. She was crying. Pooch sat next to her feet whimpering. If Mrs. Crocetti was there, who was in the bathroom?

More clanging echoed from the bathroom.

O'Connor threw open the door with force.

"Jaysus!" O'Connor shouted at the sight.

He drew his gun.

Sullivan desperately tried to pull out his gun. Having never drew his gun before, he forgot he had to unfasten the leather strap around the handle. As such, he kept on hiking up his pants with the exertion.

Before them was a large white mound which rolled and flayed about on the ground. It was entangled in the shower curtain. The shower rod had ripped out from the wall and now laid over the massive, gelatinous figure.

Sullivan realized the strap was on and unfastened it.

"Freeze!" O'Connor shouted.

The white blob stopped. It swung up its hands which were like toothpicks sticking out of a marshmallow. "Don't shoot!"

"It speaks!" Sullivan cried, thinking it was just an abominable creature. He finally drew his gun out. He then readjusted his pants so it wasn't riding up into his crotch.

"Stand up!" O'Connor barked.

"I'm was workin' on it, pig!" The figure yelled back.

The white mound rolled to its side, grabbed onto the sink, and began to pull itself up with its toothpick arms. As it did, it became clear that the large white mound was actually three smaller white mounds, one stacked on top of the other and each getting successively smaller as it went up. The top mound had a top hat sown on it with a coal nose and two eyes made out of buttons. A large hole was cut where the mouth would be located. In it was the face of a boy in his late teens or early twenties.

"Why, it's Icey the Snowman!" Sullivan said in excitement. "I took my wife to see him last week!"

O'Connor turned to Sullivan. "Who takes their wife to... Jaysus!"

"Icey? Why not Frosty?" O'Brien asked.

"Copyright issues," Archibald answered.

"Why is there a boy dressed as a snowman in your bathroom too?" Beatrice asked with great concern.

"You had three boys in here?!" Carol snapped.

"I haven't seen anything more disgusting in my entire life!" O'Malley yelled.

"I have no idea who this guy is," Archibald stammered. "He must be what I saw in the alley a few hours ago."

"Picking off boys from the streets!" O'Malley gasped. "And you don't even bother knowing their names!"

"I'm saying he broke in through the window!" Archibald continued to stammer. "I'm not some boy gigolo!"

"Okay, you disproportionate pile of stuffing," O'Connor shouted at the snowman. "Who the hell are you?"

"He told you." The snowman motioned towards Sullivan. "I'm Icey the Snowman."

"Not your goddamn character! Who are you in the suit?" O'Connor shouted.

"You can call me the snowman *Robin Hood*!" The snowman stretched his toothpick arms out like a showman displaying a name in electric lights. "I am an honorable bandit who stakes out his marks under the guise of a lowly snowman. I pass unnoticed. I slip undetected. I rob from their rich palaces when the bourgeoisie leave to gorge themselves on their commercial gluttony and I give to the poor and needy charities at Christmas with the undeserved excess in which the rich wallow!"

"He's a goddamn communist!" O'Brien bellowed. "A red snowman!"

"Hasn't Robin Hood been banned in schools for being communist?" O'Malley asked.

"Only in Indiana," Beatrice answered.

"*Mannaggia!* He's no Robin Hood," Carol sighed. "That's Jimmy. He worked at Dahl's with me until he was fired for stealing. His daddy is filthy rich."

"Even worse! He's a goddamn communist hypocrite!" O'Brien shouted.

"I renounce my capitalist parents!" The snowman declared.

"I told ya' we waz framed!" Keith felted vindicated.

"Nobody listens ta' nothin' we gots ta' say!" Cody fumed.

"Okay, you're coming downtown with us too!" O'Connor shouted.

"Don't you see how the stratification of social classes is estranging us from our humanity?" The snowman stood on a literal soap box on the floor. "We're being deprived of our ability to control our own lives! We're being alienated! They pit us against one another under the guise of competition! They..."

His voice trailed off. He began to sniff the air.

O'Connor sniffed the air.

Sullivan sniffed the air.

O'Malley sniffed the air.

This was followed by O'Toole, O'Brien, Cody, Keith, Carol, Beatrice, and finally Archibald.

Everyone was sniffing.

Except for O'Reilly. He didn't sniff. He kept his gun trained on Carol.

"Is that... gas?" O'Connor inquired.

The dog started barking from the kitchen.

"Keep your gun trained on him," O'Connor told Sullivan.

"Me? Oh. I'd rather not. My wife wouldn't like it if I killed a man."

"I told you to point the gun at him, not fire it," O'Connor retorted.

O'Connor stepped out into the hallway, following the scent as it became stronger.

At the end of the hallway was Mrs. Crocetti. The oven door was open. Gas was pouring out. The methane caused the entire hallway to shimmer. She had a box of matches in her hand.

The dog continued to bark.

O'Connor pointed his gun at Mrs. Crocetti. "Drop the matches! Turn off the stove!"

Mrs. Crocetti was shaking but she looked at O'Connor with a steely eye. "*Mio figlio*! Alfonso! He is gone! There is no reason to live!"

"She flip'd ha lid!" Cody cried. "We gotta get outta here!" He made a motion to the door.

"Stay put!" O'Malley shouted, his gun still pointing at Cody.

"She's gonna blow us up!" Keith added.

"No one moves until we all calm down!" O'Malley snapped back.

The snowman began to back towards the window.

"Oh, please, I don't think you should move," Sullivan lightly scolded.

"I think I can better serve society out there," the snowman replied.

"Put the matches down!" O'Connor yelled again.

"Bogtrotter! *Sparare*! Shoot! Light fire! I don't care!" Mrs. Crocetti yelled back.

The dog wouldn't shut up.

"No, *mama*, don't!" Carol cried from the other room. She started towards the door.

"No further, ma'am!" O'Reilly said coldly.

Keith shuffled closer to the door, his feet jingling.

"Hey!" O'Toole shouted, his gun shaking.

"I said nobody move!" O'Malley yelled.

The snowman jumped into the window.

Its fat, round body got stuck in the frame. Its toothpick legs picked about, trying to squeeze out.

"Oh, no, no, no, no." Sullivan holstered his gun and ran forward, grabbing its fluffy bottom in his arms.

"Turn off the gas and put the matches down!" O'Connor yelled.

"I know where the line is. I'll turn off the gas," Archibald said. He took a step towards the door.

"Hold up, ya' mad lad," O'Brien snapped.

"Don't leave me!" Beatrice cried, grabbing Archibald's hand. "We just found each other!"

"*Mio bambino*! Alfonso!" Mrs. Crocetti pulled a match out of the box.

Sullivan yanked on the mushy rear end of the snowman, "Please come inside! It's cold out there!"

"No need for name calling!" Sullivan decried.

"Don't do it!" O'Connor yelled.

"No closer or I light!" She held the match against the coarse striking surface.

"Fascist Stormtrooper!" The snowman shouted as he kicked Sullivan backwards.

Sullivan stumbled back into the hallway.

The dog was still barking.

"Someone shut up that dog!" O'Brien yelled.

Just then, the ground began to shake. Tremors reverberated through their feet. The pictures on the wall rattled. Everyone looked at one another in confusion.

Except for O'Reilly. He didn't look around. He kept his gun trained on Carol.

The front door floor open with a loud bang.

Sullivan pulled out his gun, nearly dropping it.

Mr. Feiffer, the large fat man with unkempt hair and stripped pajamas, once again eclipsed the door way with his monstrous physique. "Stifle! Stifle this noise! STIFLE!"

Sullivan, startled by the sound and the hulking figure before him, accidentally pulled the trigger on his gun.

"Oops," he quietly exclaimed.

The muzzle flash ignited the gas.

Time slowed down.

A roaring inferno emerged around Sullivan.

Mr. Fieffer felt the sting of a bullet and finally received what he always wanted—a good night sleep.

The flames began to rush into the adjoining rooms.

The snowman flew out of the window, set on fire in a blaze of glory, his three white mounds turning into three lumps of black coal as he plummeted to his snowy death below.

Sullivan's final thought was how his wife would never forgive him for killing Icey the snowman.

O'Connor blamed himself for trusting Sullivan with anything. What did he expect from someone who was only a quarter Irish?

O'Reilly knew the flame was coming. He knew it had been only a matter of time. He would now join his brother in arms into the great beyond. He accepted it graciously.

O'Brien thought how *Cóiste Bodhar*, the death coach, would have a busy night, carrying the souls in his carriage to another world. He wished he had a parting shot of Irish whiskey before he took his seat.

O'Toole realized he would never ride a horse.

O'Malley realized he would never pick up the clothes at the dry cleaners.

Keith realized his body his body would be found wearing a woman's elf suit.

Cody, who didn't have a progressive mind, thought about how gross Keith was for trying women's clothing.

Since Pooch came from a place of everlasting fire and brimstone, he wagged his tail.

Mrs. Crocetti welcomed the inferno. She was forbidden to see her first son Dino and had now lost her second son Alfonso. She was alone, without *famiglia*. Sure, she had Carol, but she thought she was a *puttana*. Death was preferable.

Carol realized she played too close to the fire this time and got burned, both literally and metaphorically speaking. She always enjoyed pushing boundaries and had been getting away with it. Not this time.

Beatrice felt like she and Archibald were tragic lovers who had finally found each other in the face of a cruel and indifferent world. With this hopeless romanticism, she found it beautifully poetic to be engulfed in the flames. Orpheus and Eurydice, Tristan and Isolde, Romeo and Juliet, Heathcliffe and Cathrine, Anna and Vronsky, and now Archibald and Beatrice.

Archibald continued to feel that he was a victim of a cruel, cosmic joke. The snowman was onto something when he said we were deprived of our ability to control. *Something* controlled his destiny, though he didn't think it was bourgeoisie—it was something limitless and universal with a malicious sense of humor. He did take comfort in one thought among the approaching hellfire—at least it would incinerate the Christmas angel on his tree.

The Christmas tree was blown out of the bay windows, scattering its ornaments onto the snow below.

The figure of the Christmas angel was whisked up into the air by the explosion, floating higher and higher above the cityscape. It was then carried by the snowy winds of the wintry storm to the enormous buildings which loomed over the business district of the city. Here the luxurious penthouse apartments in the upper crust of the skyscrapers housed the rich and wealthy who lorded over the stores, offices, restaurants, and businesses below.

A strong gust of wind had the Christmas angel fluttering through a small window of one of these penthouse apartments, left open to cool a holiday pie.

**14**

"It's Christmas day. A time when a city should be celebrating family, love, and peace. Instead, it is a time when a city is in mourning. Fifty-seven hearses take to the streets today in the largest funeral procession in the history of New York City. Through a series of tragic events, including the breakaway of ice during a hockey game, a traffic accident involving Christmas carolers and a Collier's Poultry truck, and a gas explosion, the lives of sons, daughters, parents, grandparents, couples, and six of New York's finest officers were all taken from us in a single evening."

"Oh, my God! They said it!" Joseph pounded the table. "They said it!"

"And, in a cruel twist of fate, nearly all were tenants of a single apartment building which has now unfortunately lost all of its occupants as well as its third floor due to the gas leak. This even includes the property's landlord, who died of a heart attack that same evening. Another moment of vicious coincidence. Who knows what other horrors may reveal itself as the police work to identify all the remaining bodies."

"It was only a passing comment," reassured Annabelle.

"Shut your goddamn mouth!" Joseph snapped.

"President Eisenhower has issued a proclamation for a national day of mourning. Governor Dewey will be in attendance for the mass funeral and give its eulogy on behalf of the city. He has issued a statement. It reads, quote, 'Citizens of New York, we have lost much and the city must mourn for what we have lost, but let us honor those lives lost by turning this tragedy into something which propels us towards good. Take this opportunity on Christmas as you gather with friends and family to reflect on our lives, to embrace those we love, and celebrate all that we have. Eat joyfully, laugh merrily, and give gifts cheerfully. Do so for their sake.' End quote. Similarly, New York City commissioner Adams issued a statement honoring the lives of the six police officers killed in the gas explosion. But first—do you need pep in your steps, zip in your skips, and vim in your limbs?"

"Turn it off!" Joseph snapped. "Turn it off! Turn it off!"

Annabelle quickly reached over to the radio on the end table and turned the dial. The radio went silent.

"Good, God! I'm ruined! Ruined!"

"It was just an accident. They can't fault you for that."

"I don't give a damn about who's at fault!" Joseph waved his hand dismissively. "I'm talking about the turkeys!"

"The turkeys?"

"Yes! The turkeys! Don't you get it? This turkey shortage was an outright godsend! We were to get over a dollar a pound! A dollar! God! Do you know how much we would have made?"

"How much?"

"Goddammit, I don't have an exact number! It was rhetorical! And you know how many calls I had to make and strings I had to pull to get those turkeys shipped in from out of state?"

"How many?"

"Goaddammit, I'm still speaking rhetorically!" Joseph held up a finger to silence her. "And just after they're prepared and being delivered to stores, it crashes and dumps all the turkeys onto the goddamn street!"

"And those poor carolers!"

"Forget the carolers! I'm talking about the turkeys!"

"And the driver too!"

"Drivers are a dime a dozen but turkeys are a dollar a pound! Are you even listening to me? Losing those turkeys was like killing the goose which laid the golden eggs! Those cobble colters were our ticket out of the city! Pay off the company's debt, buy a home in the country, and live happily ever after!"

"But isn't home where the heart is?"

"Oh my God! What the hell does that even mean?"

"Oh. I guess it means our home is wherever we are loved."

"What nauseating crock!" He then scratched at his chin. "And this goddamn beard itches! Can't even breathe with this thing on! And this hat gives me a goddamn headache! How can anyone stand this yuletide drivel?"

"Why don't you take it off?"

"I paid good money for this goddamn outfit and I intend to get my money's worth!" Joseph pulled the fluffy white beard off his face, gasped for breath, and then snapped it back on his face. He then pulled back on the red velvet hat so that it wasn't so tight on his head.

"Well, the children appreciate you dressing up as Santa again."

"Children? Our goddamn children! Are you serious? I'm only wearing this because the store washes all returns on their dime! That's one less wash I have to make for my own clothes! Now that we're basically paupers I got to pinch every penny. Make no mistake, I don't give a damn about those two parasitical leeches! Those life-draining, soul-sucking, carnivorous vultures!" Joseph turned to the two children sitting on both of his knees, a boy and a girl. The two children stared back at him with mouths agape. "Oh, my God! Why don't you go open presents or something and stop staring at me like a pair of driveling idiots!"

"But we haven't finished telling you what we want for Christmas!" His son protested. The boy's name was Joseph the Second, or Joe Junior, or JJ. He answered to all of them. His father often called him idiot. He answered to that too.

"It's Christmas right now, you idiot! Get off me before I belt you with this oversize buckle!"

The two children promptly jumped off his knees and ran to the tree to avoid a lashing.

Joseph swatted at his red velvet pant legs to smooth out the wrinkles left by the rear ends of his children. "And to think I did all this for those turkeys! What a waste! Debasing myself as a Kris Kringle whore just to tell kids they need turkeys for Christmas. And for what? Can't fill any orders now! I could have saved the ten dollars that I spent on renting this suit! Ten dollars! Oh, my God! That would have been ten pounds of turkey!"

"Oh, so that's why Santa said we needed a turkey for Christmas dinner!" The boy exclaimed with sudden realization.

"You know, I thought it was strange when I told Santa I wanted a Ginny doll and he said how about a Christmas turkey instead?" The girl's name was Anabellette, which was simply her mother's name with a diminutive suffix at the end (you know, like *kitchenette*). It was their parents' attempt at sounding fancy and French.

"How many times do I have to tell you, *I* was the store Santa!" He gestured his thumb towards himself. "Can't you recognize your own father? Are you that dumb?"

"Why on earth would you advertise to your own children?" Anabelle asked, her name being without the diminutive suffix.

"All those kids look alike! How am I supposed to tell them apart?"

The children continued pulling away the wrapping paper on a present in a frenzy. The paper with images of children sledding down hills and ice-skating on frozen ponds went flying into the air and scattered onto the floor.

"Well, at least the presents were free."

"Free?" Annabelle asked. "What do you mean free?"

"All those kids descended upon the gifts like a pack of starved wolves, but miraculously there were a few gifts left. It was a goddamn Christmas miracle. I grabbed them all. It's probably nothing but cheap junk but at least it didn't cost anything."

"These are the presents the store was giving out?" Annabelle gave a look of shock. "You mean, you didn't buy *any* of the gifts they wanted on their Christmas lists?"

"Did you not hear what I was saying? We lost the turkeys! No turkeys, no money, no gifts! Does this beard muffle my voice? Why doesn't anyone listen to a goddamn thing I say? I'm surrounded by idiots."

"Oh. They will be so disappointed." Annabelle looked at her children. Her eyes began to swell with tears. "Christmas will be ruined."

"And on top of losing all those turkeys, my best slaughterer Archibald hasn't shown up for three days!" Joseph continued his rant against the injustice of his misfortunes, ignoring his wife entirely. "No one could chop off a head like he could, let me tell you!"

Suddenly, the children shrieked in terror.

"Goddamnit!" Joseph jumped to his feet, startled by the rattling screams. "Stop screaming! I know it's not what you wanted but you don't have to wake up the dead with your goddamn screaming!"

The children tossed the present to the floor, ran behind their mother's chair, and cowered in fear.

"What is it?" Annabelle asked, now standing up from her chair.

The boy peered from behind the chair and extended his finger towards the present which laid open on the floor.

"Good, God! I have never seen such ridiculous overreacting!" Joseph hollered. "Such spoiled little brats! You don't get one thing you want and it's the end of the world!"

Unlike her obtuse husband, Annabelle could tell something was seriously wrong. She took a cautious step towards the present, leaned over, and peered inside. Upon seeing the contents, she too gave a terrifying shriek, grabbed her children, and ran behind her husband's chair.

"The present!" Annabelle gasped. "Look inside the present!"

"Don't play along with their game! I told you, it's just some cheap junk the store was giving out!" To demonstrate how foolish they were all acting, Joseph confidently walked up the present and looked down. He immediately recoiled in disgust. Lying within the center of the gift box was the severed head of woman.

"Jesus, it's Mary," said Joseph. He staggered back, tripping over his clunky black boots which he wasn't used to wearing. He quickly rolled to his belly, got up on all fours, and scrambled behind his two children.

The four of them remained motionless, lined up behind the chair, staring at the present.

"Mary?" Annabelle was curious as to how her husband recognized the face so quickly. Though her husband was acting like an embarrassing coward, she resolved to face her fear and investigate the present again. She told her children to remain behind the chair as she slowly walked back up to the present. Each step she took felt heavier than the last. Her body trembled with increasing intensity as the head came into view. With the last step, she took a deep breath and looked into the open gift. She still didn't recognize the face. She looked back at her husband. "And who is Mary?"

"Mary? Who said Mary?" Joseph didn't even realize he said her name aloud. He also didn't realize he was cowering behind his two children. Not to be thought a coward—which was too late for that—he stood up.

"You did," Annabelle replied.

"Oh. Did I?"

"Yes. Who is Mary?"

"No one of consequence. She's married to one of my employees. Of course, I can't be too sure. The decomposition mucks things up a bit."

Annabelle, now determined to recall if she ever saw the woman, looked more intensely at the contents of the present. Upon this closer examination, she noticed a familiar pair of earrings and a necklace. "Goodness gracious me. Why is she wearing my old earrings? And that's my mother's necklace!"

"What?" Joseph snapped. He ran up the present and looked into it. The jewelry was unmistakably Annabelle's family heirlooms. "Oh, my god!"

"You told me you sold them to pay off some of our debt!"

"Of course I did! That's what I did! What else would I have done?"

"Then why is my jewelry on one of your employee's wives?"

"Well, I... sold it to the employee! Of course, that's it! Quite simple."

"They're worth nearly a thousand dollars! You pay your employees next to nothing!"

"I pay above minimum wage!"

"One cent above!"

"Well, I meant to say that I sold them to the jewelry department within Dahl's anyway. I got confused. All these sudden questions. I don't have all my financial transactions on instant recall. She must have bought them there."

"Where did she get all the money?"

"How the hell should I know?"

"Were you cheating on me?"

"What? Of course not! How dare you accuse me! You are offending me with your constant insinuations!"

"Oh, God!" Annabelle started to cry. "Mother was right!"

"Now leave your goddamn mother out of this!"

"All those late hours working. All those business trips. All those frequent cash withdrawals. You were out with this woman!"

"Why would I even give this woman the time of day? She's nothing but some department store elf!"

"Are you telling me that she worked as one of your elves too?!"

Joseph realized he probably should not have added that part. "Well, technically."

"So she was both one of your elves *and* she was one of your employee's wives?"

"That's nothing more than a small coincidence."

"*And* she is wearing my old jewelry which you took from me?"

"Okay, maybe a large coincidence."

"*And* her head also happens to be in our house?"

"All right, all right, it's all a *huge* coincidence."

"And you're telling me you didn't have *any* relationship with this woman?"

"Goddammit. What do you want me to say?"

"Oh my God!" Annabelle cowered back in fear. "It all makes sense! You've gone mad! Stark raving mad!"

"What?"

"You've cracked!"

"What the hell do you mean *cracked*?"

"You killed her!"

"Don't be absurd!"

"She's your employee's wife! She was an elf to your Santa! She is wearing my jewelry! And now her head is under our Christmas tree—a gift box which you brought home! How else can I make sense of all this unless you were having an affair and then you killed her!"

"Okay, fine! Have it your way! While Mrs. Clause was away, Santa was naughty with his elf! He came down her chimney! There! You happy? Is that what you wanted to hear?"

Annabelle started to cry.

JJ started to cry because his mother started to cry.

Anabellette started to cry because her big brother JJ started to cry because their mother started to cry.

"It meant nothing!" Joseph cried out.

"You monster!" Annabelle cried back through a stream of tears.

"But I didn't kill her!"

"I did nothing but love you and love our children and try to make a loving home here!"

"Oh, my God! Are we really going to do this now?"

"But that was never enough for you! Love wasn't enough! You always wanted more!"

"What? I shouldn't have tried to give us a better life?"

Annabelle began to walk away.

"Where are you going?"

"I'm calling the police!"

"Oh, no you don't!" Joseph grabbed Annabelle. "I won't let you!"

"Let got of me!" Annabelle pulled on his fake white beard and snapped it into his eyes.

"Not the beard!" Joseph yelped, pushing Annabelle in the process.

She fell to the ground, knocking over the present. Mary's severed head rolled onto the floor.

He pulled his beard back down onto his face. "You goddamn bitch! This is a rental!"

He jumped on top of her and pinned her to the floor, his jacket becoming spread open in the process. He raised his hand in preparation for a smack.

Quickly, she pulled down the large Santa hat over his eyes, blinding him.

He seethed in annoyance. His hand gave up on the smack and instead fumbled towards his hat.

She then kicked the two large baubles dangling between his legs.

He scrunched forward, gasping in pain.

She scrambled to her feet, kicking Mary's severed head in the process.

The head rolled towards the children and stopped in front of them. Mary stared at them. The children screamed. Instinctively, the boy kicked it back.

Joseph grabbed Annabelle's foot as she got up.

She collapsed forward onto the floor, closing her eyes on impact.

The severed head rolled back and stopped next to Annabelle's head.

Annabelle opened her eyes and saw Mary staring back. She screamed. Instinctively, she knocked it away, causing it to roll back towards the children.

Joseph began to crawl towards Annabelle, holding tightly onto her leg as he inched nearer. "I didn't kill her, but I just may kill you," he growled.

Annabelle's eye caught a glimpse of the turned-over present. Evidently, the severed head wasn't the only thing which tumbled out as she saw a chipped, serrated knife protruding from the box. She extended her arm out towards it, but it was just out of reach.

Joseph saw her reaching out towards something and then saw the knife mere inches from her fingertips. "What the hell do you think you're doing?"

The severed head continued to roll and stopped in front of the children.

They continued screaming.

Joseph let go of her leg in order to lunge for the knife.

Annabelle took advantage of the release and extended her arm out further.

She wasn't fast enough—Joseph grabbed it.

He twirled around towards Annabelle and shook the knife at her. "Now don't make me go and chop your head off!"

Kicking the severed head didn't keep it away, so JJ picked it up. However, upon holding the cold and congealed body part in his small hands, he suddenly realized that he had no idea what he was doing, felt nauseated, and now just wanted the disgusting thing out of his hands. He threw it.

The severed head flew through the air and smacked Joseph in the face with a skull-crushing crack.

The children gasped.

The severed head deflected off Joseph's attached head and landed among the branches of the Christmas tree, hanging like a decorative ornament.

Joseph sat there in his crouched position, dazed and teetering from side-to-side like an unbalanced tower of toy blocks. He then fell forward and, for the second time in this story, a man inadvertently landed on his own knife. The chipped, serrated knife plunged deeply into his chest and, as before and against all probability, it conveniently killed him instantly.

The knife also conveniently went between the open jacket and missed tearing the rental.

Annabelle and her two children stared at the motionless body on the floor.

"Jiminey Christmas!" Annabelle muttered.

"You killed Santa," Anabellette yelled at her brother. "Now I'll never get a Ginny doll!"

"I didn't mean it!" JJ exclaimed. "I don't wanna go on his naughty list!"

Annabelle looked at her children with deep sadness, both because of their lost innocence as well as the realization that they may indeed have a learning disability—could they really not understand that it was their father dressed up as Santa?

"You didn't kill anyone, JJ. It was an accident," his mother consoled.

"Yeah, but Christmas is now ruined forever!" JJ looked down at the floor in despair.

"Honey, you do realize that's your father and not Santa, don't you?"

"Oh?" JJ looked up with his face beaming. "Do you really mean it? I didn't kill Santa?"

"No, dear, but—”

"Wow! What a relief!"

"Does this mean I will get my Ginny doll after all? And not some lame turkey?" Her daughter jumped up and down in unbridled excitement.

"I don't think you two quite understand what just happened here," Annabelle warned.

"Can we open another present?" JJ asked, not waiting for a response. He jumped over his father's corpse and ran to the tree.

"Well, now's not really the time," their mother observed.

"Which one has the Ginny doll, mama?" Her daughter followed after her brother, hopping over her dad and racing to the presents.

"I think it would be best if you went to your rooms," their mother suggested.

"I hope we get something better than some lady's head." JJ shook a present.

"And how!" Annabellette picked up another one.

"Go to your rooms now!" Annabelle screamed.

The scream startled the children and they dropped the presents. Their mother never screamed before and they found it positively frightening. They jumped away from the presents, jostling the tree in their panic.

Mary's severed head was shaken loose, dropped, and once again rolled to the feet of the children.

The two screamed and ran to their rooms as their mother instructed.

Annabelle fell to the floor in tears. Her husband was a complete louse, but she wasn't totally devoid of affection for him. However, her children appeared not to care in the slightest that he had just died. They were more interested in a lifeless doll than their lifeless father. This disturbed Annabelle profoundly. Where did she go wrong? How could she have failed so terribly?

It was at this precise moment, in the midst of her dire thoughts of parental failure, that she noticed the edge of a book peeking out from the present from which the severed head had vacated. Intrigued, she reached over and pulled it out. The book was slim, stained in red along the paper edges, with a green hard cover and gold lettering which read *Treatise on Parents and Children by George Bernard Shaw*. She laughed at the title, in spite of her distraught state. How positively apt for the moment. She opened the front cover, noticed a stamp signifying it was a library book, and hoped there wasn't any overdue fines. She then flipped to the table of contents where a chapter title jumped out to her—"Children are Nuisances". She turned immediately to the indicated page number and read the opening paragraph:

"Experienced parents, when children's rights are preached to them, very naturally ask whether children are to be allowed to do what they like. The best reply is to ask whether adults are to be allowed to do what they like. The two cases are the same. The adult who is nasty is not allowed to do what he likes: neither can the child who likes to be nasty. There is no difference in principle between the rights of a child and those of an adult."

Of course! That's it! She had it all wrong—she was treating her children as children! How foolish!

Her revelatory glee was interrupted by the sound of hissing, like air escaping from a balloon. Confused, she looked around and determined that the sound was emanating from her husband. She then caught the whiff of a horrible stench. She also determined that this emanated from her husband. Santa's corpse was passing gas, as corpses sometimes do as a means of adding insult to death. She cringed as she dropped the book and waved her hand across her face, fanning away the toxic vapors.

The displeasure of the moment caused her to forget the joys of her new parental insight and instead dwell on all the impending hardships that her husband's death would surely bring. Undoubtedly the financial troubles which Joe had been experiencing would be passed to her, just like his rancid gas. They had so much debt that surely she would have to sell everything to pay it all back, leaving her with nothing. Who would have thought that the lingering stench would take on a profound, metaphorical meaning for impending displeasure?

And again it was at this precise moment, in the midst of her dire thoughts of financial woes, that she noticed an envelope peeking out of the same present. Intrigued yet again, she pulled out the envelope. It was hefty and densely packed. She opened it. She audibly gasped. It was stuffed with cash. Her hands began to tremble as she leafed through the bills, counting nearly three thousand dollars. She began to laugh and cry simultaneously. It was simply too much to handle.

She looked upwards as a child would have looked up at a parent after opening a gift. Her eyes fell upon a Christmas angel which was perched on the top of the pine tree. It had a look of solemnity and grandeur. She hadn't noticed this figure before. Had it always been on top of their tree?

Then she blinked. Was it possible? The angelic figure suddenly appeared to be smiling. Was this always the case or was there truly something magical occurring? Either way, she took it as a reassuring sign that all this was a *bona fide* Christmas miracle straight from the heavens! The gift not only put an end to her husband's affair, albeit in a rather morbid fashion with a severed head, but it also returned her family heirlooms, freed her from an abusive marriage, taught her how to be a better parent, and freed her from total financial ruin!

She eyed the other gift which was from Dahl's and then eyed the Christmas angel again—was it too much to expect more miraculous gifts? Would whatever higher power that blessed her with this divine gift see it as ungrateful to open another gift immediately?

She lunged forward, yanked the gift from under the tree, clawed at the wrapping paper, and tossed aside the box top.

Inside the gift was a jar of cranberry sauce.

She looked back in the box, rummaged through the tissue paper, foraged through the torn wrapping paper, but there was nothing but the jar of cranberry sauce with a tag that read "Donated to the Children of Dahl's by the Sedaris Foods and Gifts Company."

She held the jar up to the light and peered through it—there was nothing in it but cranberry sauce.

She became a little disappointed. After having every item in the previous gift be of some value, she expected more of the same.

She looked back at the Christmas angel. It still smiled. Was she mistaken?

At that moment, there was a knock on the door.

Automatically, without thinking about the dead body on her floor, she got up and opened the door.

Standing outside the door was her neighbor.

"Mrs. Sedaris?"

"Annabelle, darling, I hate to bother you on Christmas, but you wouldn't happen to have a jar of cranberry sauce on hand, would you?"

Annabelle's heart skipped a beat. The jar was still in her hand. She stared blankly at her neighbor in disbelief.

Mrs. Sedaris laughed uncomfortably. "I know how it looks. It's rather ironic that the owners of a jam factory wouldn't have a pantry pull of it, but when your husband likes to throw things you eventually run out of such chattels." She pronounced the last word as *shah-tells* because it sounded French. "Now look at me—debasing myself like a common beggar, going from penthouse to penthouse looking for a handout. Spare me from my embarrassment and tell me you happen to have some."

Annabelle raised the jar in which she had in her hand.

"Oh, my!" Mrs. Sedaris squealed and snorted in delight like a pig discovering a truffle. "Did you really that jar already in your hand?"

Annabelle nodded, still stunned at the coincidence.

"Why it's positively a Christmas miracle! And it's even our brand! Oh, you have no idea what this means! You see, I forgot to pick up some at the factory and my husband would have killed me if I didn't have any cranberry sauce for Christmas! Do you think I can have some of it? I'll bring you a whole case as repayment."

Annabelle nodded and handed the jar to her neighbor.

"You are a life-saver! A real life-saver!" Mrs. Sedaris cradled the jar in her arms as one would hold baby Jesus. She gave a big smile which slowly faded. "What is that?"

Annabelle turned and saw that her husband's body was lying in full view of her neighbor. "That's Joe dressed as Santa Clause."

"Oh." The neighbor continued to stare at the lifeless body.

"He's dead." Annabelle added.

The neighbor was confused at first but then realized that Annabelle clearly meant the comment as a joke. "Oh! Ha! Yes! Dead! Yes, same with Mister Sedaris! A little too much Christmas cheer last night, if you know what I mean. He was so drunk that he almost throttled me for not having any cranberry sauce. He's obsessed with the stuff. I suppose that's why he's in the business. He puts it on everything—toast, ice cream, meatballs. He goes crazy when he doesn't get it. A mad man. Hence, well..." She raised the cranberry sauce as if offering a toast. "To tame the savage beast."

"I suppose I should go call the police."

"Police?" Mrs. Sedaris was taken aback. "I mean, Mister Sedaris isn't all bad, he's simply eccentric!"

"No, for Joe."

"Oh!" Mrs. Sedaris was relieved that Annabelle was just continuing her joke. "You are too much. Dead indeed. Well, I will leave you to that. Thanks again for the cranberry sauce! Our brand, no less! Yes, he will be doubly pleased! Have a Merry Christmas!" She turned to leave.

Annabelle motioned to close the door, but suddenly Mrs. Sedaris turned back around. "I'm sorry, but I couldn't help noticing what was on your floor."

"On the floor?" Annabelle glanced back into the room. "Oh, you mean the severed head?"

"No, I mean that copy of *Treatise on Parents and Children* by George Bernard Shaw! What a delightful book! A delight! Tell me, have you read it yet?"

"No."

"Read it, darling! Read it! That's all I can say! My husband quotes it endlessly. He especially loves that chapter on children earning their living. It motivated us to finally cut our son from his daily allowance. Best decision we ever made, parenting-wise. That ungrateful boy has never worked a day in his life, but he's now out in the real world, standing on his own two feet, thanks to that book. He probably has his own place too. I mean, we actually haven't talked to him recently due to the holidays—busy with Thanksgiving, Christmas, and all that—but he probably does, I'd imagine. He must be turning into a fine man!"

"What does he do?"

Mrs. Sedaris became apprehensive. "I'm sure it's only temporary, mind you, and he probably already got a promotion... but out boy Jimmy got a job at Dahl's department store, playing some snowman character. It's not much, but it's good for his constitution. At least, so I am told. "

**15**

After Mrs. Sedaris finally left, Annabelle called the police and told the officer on the other end of the line what had transpired. The officer responded that he would send a squad car over but it wouldn't be until tomorrow at the earliest. The delay surprised Annabelle given the severity of the situation, but she didn't argue and hung up the phone. Unbeknownst to her, the police had been receiving multiple reports throughout the morning in which body parts were found in gift boxes throughout the city. The available police force was already quite thin due to both losing eight officers and managing the largest funeral procession in New York history, so her name was added to the bottom of the list of house calls that the police eventually had to make when manpower became available.

In the meantime, Annabelle was able to practice her new parental skills on her children through the polemic teachings of George Bernard Shaw—"Parents notice that boys brought up at home become mollycoddles, or prigs, or duffers, unable to take care of themselves." Oh, this will never do. Soon enough, Annabelle had her children cleaning the penthouse apartment while she became something akin to a lector at a factory, reading passages from the book aloud while they learned such valuable skills as using an automatic washing machine and a vacuum. Of course, they had to clean around the dead Santa Clause lying in the middle of the living room floor.

The following day being Sunday, Annabelle had to bring her children to church despite never bringing them before this day for it is Shaw who writes, "Children must be taught some sort of religion... the child must have a conscience and a code of honor (which is the essence of religion) even if it be only a provisional one." Indeed, how else would her children have a desire to do what is good? The concept of hell would motivate them perfectly! Though her children protested, Annabelle's new-found command of life brought forth their obedience and they followed her out the door, leaving the corpse still lying on the floor.

Upon returning, she noticed the smell of her husband's corpse started to become more repugnant—a continuation of its gastric relief, no doubt. She had her children sprinkle Santa Clause with cinnamon and nutmeg, changing the gradually decaying corpse into a fragrant and festive air freshener.

After several more days of working around dead Saint Nick, Annabelle decided to call the police again and inquire as to when they expect to send a police car. She wasn't in any particular rush as the daily dusting of spices kept the body fresh, but it started to grow pale which made it rather unsightly and sooner or later she would have to return the Santa suit to collect their deposit. The officer on the other end of the line apologized for the inconvenience and directed a car over immediately.

"Our apologies again, ma'am, for getting here so late," the detective said to Annabelle as the paramedics worked to lift her husband's body from the floor.

"I understand," Annabelle replied. "Christmas is a busy time of year for everyone."

They finally lifted the corpse in the air. It was a strange sight. Her husband's corpse had become stiff due to rigor mortis and was now rigid as a plank. It was like Santa Clause fell off his sleigh and was found frozen in some open field the next morning.

"Well, it wasn't so much Christmas as all those deaths and–"

"Oh, could you please take off his Santa suit?" Annabelle interrupted the detective. She had leaned over his shoulder and was calling out to the two paramedics holding the corpse. "It's a rental."

The paramedics huffed in frustration as they lowered the body back down to the floor.

"I'm sorry," Annabelle apologized, her gaze returning to the officer. "You were saying?"

The detective paused. There was something *familiar* about this woman. It was as if he knew her, but he simply couldn't place her. He shook it off.

"Nothin'. Forget it." The detective flipped back through his notes which he had scrawled in a spiral-bound pad. "Going through this one more time, your children opened the present and found the head. You didn't recognize her but your husband eventually identified the head as belonging to a woman named Mary. He then revealed they were having an affair and proceeded to grab the knife and attack you. However, he fell on top of his knife when your son threw the severed head at him and he's been in that position ever since. Correct?"

"Yes, that's right, officer."

"Detective."

"Oh, yes, detective." Annabelle looked at the paramedics as they struggled to remove the red jacket from her husband's body. The rigor mortis locked the arms at contorted angles which made it cumbersome, if not altogether impossible, to pull sleeve off either arm. They started to gently pry at one of the arms to straighten it, but it refused to budge.

"I suppose you don't know the deceased woman's last name?" The detective asked.

"He didn't say."

The paramedics began to use more force to straighten the arm.

"Do you know how your husband came to know the deceased?"

"He told me that she was the wife of one of his employees."

There was a loud snap. Annabelle cringed. The detective turned around. The paramedics remained motionless, nervous to make eye contact with either the wife or the detective. The arm of the corpse they were holding was now facing the opposite direction. They had snapped the limb in half.

"On second thought," Annabelle began addressing the paramedics, "maybe it would be best if you removed the suit at... wherever you're taking him."

The paramedics nodded, still avoiding eye contact, and lifted the body back into the air. The arm now dangled loosely like an old rag doll.

Annabelle smiled at the detective who had turned back towards her. "Sorry, I shouldn't have asked them to do that here."

The detective was caught off guard by her smile. That feeling of familiarity overwhelmed him again. It was as if he had seen her smile at him before. It felt warm and welcoming, like one returning home after a long journey. How ridiculous. He brushed the notion aside and continued his questioning. "And what was his business?"

"Turkeys."

"Turkeys?" The detective paused in his note-taking. He glanced back at his scribbles. He saw her last name. "You don't mean Collier Poultry?"

"Yes."

"The same Collier Poultry whose truck crashed into all those people?"

"Yes."

He tapped his pencil against the notepad in thought. "Do you know of a man named Archibald Nowakowski?"

"No, I don't believe so."

"He was an employee of Collier Poultry."

"Oh," Annabelle said.

"He died in the last week's gas explosion."

"Oh!" Annabelle exclaimed.

The detective continued his tapping. "And you said the deceased woman's name was Mary?"

"Yes." Annabelle was now wondering where this questioning was leading.

Tap. Tap. Tap. "And she's the wife of one of your husband's employees."

"That's what he said."

Tap. Tap. Tap. "Was there anything else he said about her?"

"Nothing," Annabelle answered, before adding, "Well, other than working as an elf at Dahl's department store."

"*Mio Dio*!" The tapping stopped. "*Cost sta succedendo qui*?" The pencil snapped in his hand.

The violent action and strange words confused and concerned Annabelle. "What's wrong?"

The detective stood silent for a moment before realizing what he had said. "Sorry. I'm Italian."

"Oh."

"This employee I mentioned, Archibald Nowakowski... His wife is named Mary and works as an elf at the department store."

Annabelle's eyes widened in surprise. "You don't think..."

"I do. And it gets stranger." He took a deep breath. "*Mi madre* was in that explosion too."

"*Madre*?" Her face scrunched up in a confused fashion. "You mean, your mother?"

"Yes, ma'am. She lived in the building adjacent to the Mr. Nowakowski, but for some reason she was visiting your husband's employee when it exploded."

"Oh my God!" Annabelle covered her mouth.

"It gets even stranger. My brother was also killed that same night, but not in the gas explosion. He was stabbed and thrown off a bridge. The very same bridge over which all those people drowned. Right next to where the Collier Poultry truck hit all those people."

"Dear Lord." Annabelle felt faint. She sat down.

"And his girlfriend was killed too, but back at the gas explosion. With *mi madre*."

"That's horrible!"

"And this is where it gets really weird..."

"There's more?"

"She worked as an elf at the department store too. With Mary. With your husband."

Annabelle was speechless. Why were their lives so intertwined—her and this man she never met? It felt too connected to be random. They had been deliberately woven together. But why?

She stared blankly into space, letting his words sink into her understanding, before looking back at the detective's eyes. "You lost your entire family... Why are you here?"

"I'm *scomunicato*, uh, excommunicated from my family. Happens when you leave the *Cosa Nostra* and join the law. They let you live but you can't have anything to do with them anymore." He saw that Annabelle was confused by the answer. "*Cosa Nostra*. It's, uh, well, gangsters. Haven't seen my family for years. And the *famiglia* won't even permit me to attend their funerals. So, I'm working."

"I'm so sorry."

"It's just how things are." The detective noticed the mood was becoming quite somber, so to lighten it he added, "Anyway, home is where the heart is."

Annabelle eyes widened. "What did you say?"

"Home is where the heart is. I was just saying, even though I might not have my family, I can still find a home."

Annabelle began to tremble.

The detective noticed this. "Sorry if I said something wrong. I was only trying to say you don't have to worry about me too."

"No..." She reached out and touched his hand. "I say the same thing myself."

Her fingers lingered on the back of his hand. Something felt familiar about the touch, as if she had touched him before. She had the same warm and welcoming sensation he had, like one returning home, though she didn't know he felt the same way.

Silence filled the room. Annabelle noticed that the paramedics had already left with her husband's body, leaving her alone with the detective. She looked at him. She didn't realize how handsome he was. "What was your name again, officer?"

The detective was going to correct her again about his rank, but then realized that it would be quite petty to do so. Instead, he simply looked at her. He didn't realize how beautiful she was. "Dino Crocetti. Though everyone calls me Paul. It's my middle name."

"Paul." She let the name linger in her mind. "Have we... met before?"

"I don't believe so, though..." He looked at her eyes again. "I have the strangest feeling that we did."

"Yeah, me too." Annabelle felt that she was under some heavenly trance.

"I hope you don't find this forward. And I hope you don't think this is too soon, with your husband just being carried out and all. But... would you want to get some coffee sometime?"

The trance began to fade. Annabelle became anxious. She didn't know what to say.

"You know, forget it." Paul also became anxious. "I shouldn't have asked."

"Oh, no, it's just..." She took a deep breath. "So much is happening so fast."

"Totally understandable." Paul tried to move past the failed offer. He looked past Annabelle and saw a photo of her daughter framed on the wall. "Your daughter wouldn't happen to want a Ginny doll, would she?"

Annabelle's heart skipped a beat. Could there really be more to this miracle? She looked at the Christmas angel for a sign. The figure was smiling with delight. She looked back at Paul and smiled with the same delight. "That's all she ever wanted for Christmas!"

"*Mi madre* collected dolls. I would send her one every Christmas. I just bought her a Ginny doll but... well, it now needs a home. Would she want to take care of it?"

Annabelle's eyes began to water. She couldn't understand why all these beautiful, wonderful, incredible things were simply happening to her. Her emotions overwhelmed her.

"She would love that," she managed to say in a broken voice.

"Great. I'll bring it by later." Paul smiled. He saw that Annabelle was becoming emotional so he took that as his cue to leave. "Well, I suppose I should get going, Mrs. Collier."

"Annie!" She quickly blurted out her name. "You can call me Annie."

Paul's smile broadened. "Okay, Annie. I'll be seeing you."

He turned to leave.

Annabelle looked at the Christmas angel. It seemed to have changed. Its outstretched arms now were pointing at the detective. Was it a sign?

"Paul!" She blurted out again.

Paul stopped. He turned back around.

"I think I would enjoy that coffee."

And that was the simple Christmas miracle.

A man named Paul and a woman named Annie met and fell in love.

**16**

The Christmas angel, whose name was Selaphiel, floated up through the clouds into the heavens.

"Behold. It is finished," proclaimed Selaphiel with sanctified self-satisfaction.

"My God! My God!" exclaimed Uriel in thunderstruck astonishment.

"Indeed. *Gloria in excelsis deo*." Selaphiel took a deep breath of that sweet heavenly air, puffing out his chest like the billowy clouds which surrounded the two celestial hosts. Clearly the miraculous fruits of his immaculate handiwork had moved his teacher to holy exaltation.

"Selaphiel, you nincompoop! You ninny! You nitwit!" Uriel screamed, causing the clouds to rumble with thunder.

"Brother Uriel!" Selaphiels wings bent in shock. "What ails thee?"

"You... You... *massacred...* everyone!" Uriel's wings spread open in celestial fury. Lighting began to flash all about him. "It was... a damnable *slaughterhouse*!"

"But..." Selaphiel stammered in consecrated confusion, "Twas this not the Christmas miracle commanded by thy sacred edict? To weave these two mortal threads into a harmonious coil to fulfill that which is ordained?"

"No!" The white clouds began to darken. White flames flared in Uriel's eyes with righteous anger. "Nowhere was *mass extermination* written upon your final edict! And drop that archaic King James bullshit, for Christ's sake, no one speaks like that."

"Well!" Selaphiel folder his wings in sanctimonious contempt. "I thought my guidance cleverly removed the difficult barriers to their destined union."

"Barriers!" Lightning flashed between the clouds. "How is completely annihilating every single person within an entire apartment complex removing barriers?!"

"Oh, these mortal lives are all so complicated and they get tangled up so easily."

"That was the point of the goddamn final exam! To navigate the myriad of interconnections and map out a path to manifest a Christmas miracle directed by our Lord! Did you even study for this?"

"Study? I thought spontaneous inspiration yielded a more organic and believable result. I was merely following the example set by our Lord."

"Our Lord does not guide the lives of mortals by whims and gestures!"

"Oh? Then why does everything down there seem so random and chaotic?"

"Blasphemy!" Uriel's ethereal body flared in a radiant glow.

"Well, how else was I to bring those predestined mortals together?" Selaphiel placed his angelic wings on his angelic hips and crossed his angelic arms.

"Literally an infinite number of ways!" Uriel bellowed. "But in your all-consuming cosmic stupidity, you chose the single worst path possible from limitless possibilities! Satan himself could not have done worse! I haven't seen anything so revoltingly evil, so reprehensibly abhorrent, so heretical and profane, since the goddamn holocaust!"

"What are you trying to say, Brother Uriel?"

"I'm saying an accursed demon trying his damnedest to do sacrilegious debauchery would have done more blessed good than you could ever do!"

"Does this mean I failed the final exam?"

"That was the worst failure conceivable! Across all planes of realities, across every single dimension, across the entire time and space continuum, there was not, is not, and never will be a failure worse than your supreme failure!"

"But I get a second attempt, right?"

"I will never, for all of eternity, allow you to ever meddle in the affairs of mankind again! I can't chance you sneezing and accidentally wiping out all of humanity!"

"Just come out and say it, Brother Uriel. Can I or can I not join the order of Christmas angels?"

"No! You can't join the order of Christmas angels! In fact, I don't think you can even remain in the order of *heavenly* angels! You would be of better service in the demonic order of Lucifer! For all I know, you're a devilish spy! You diabolic cretin! You hellish imbecile! You infernal, fiendish, serpentine twit!"

"A simple 'no' would have sufficed."

"Get out! Get out before I have the archangels wrap you in chains and cast you into the lake of fire and brimstone where you will be tormented day and night for ever and ever!" By now Uriel's radiance was blinding and the clouds surrounding them were inky blots of darkness.

Seraphil wings drooped in excommunicated shame. He turned away from Uriel's luminescence and walked into the dark clouds. The clouds slowly faded from back to gray to white the farther he removed himself from Uriel's presence. Eventually, heaven looked like it always did with streams of light dancing through the billowy clouds—very stereotypical and unsurprising.

He returned to his old job in soul bookkeeping where he sat at his cloud desk, went through his cloud documents, and cross-checked the souls of the recently departed with the Book of Life to ensure that they were all sent to their appointed place above or below. Of course, there never were any mistakes. It was just idle work.

That librarian was right. He felt like that guy Sisyphus who was sent to his appointed place below in 1330 BC. God, 1330 BC? Had Seraphil be doing this job for that long? This made his failed exam sting all the more. His dream of escaping his dead-end celestial job had been forever crushed. It was like fate—or some higher cosmic power—was imprisoning him for all eternity. It was like hell. How ironic.

Back at the Order of Christmas Angels, Uriel's wrath subsided. The clouds around him faded back to white. He turned around. Before him was a heavenly host of angels sitting at their cloud desks. They were all staring at their teacher, their mouths agape at the horrors and atrocities perpetuated by the previous student. A sign above them read:

*Order of Christmas Angels—Final Exam—Testing in Progress—Do Not Disturb*

Uriel smiled. "Okay, who's presenting the next Christmas miracle?"