

HOLIDAY CHEER

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It is mid-December. Snow falls. The paper decoration turkeys have disappeared from store shelves. Instead, chocolate marshmallow Santa's and impulse buy hot cocoa sets fill the aisles of the Rite Aid Pharmacy where Kelly stops to pick up cold medicine after work. The heat at the office, everywhere, is cranked up too high. The forced air makes her head pound and her throat feel both dry and drippy.

She's used to this same old winter misery routine and goes straight to aisle nine, grabs the plastic bottle filled with liquid comfort, then walks to the register with chapped hands and her one lone item.

A big-haired blond cashier wearing tree-shaped earrings and holiday cheer tells her to have a Merry Christmas.

"Thank you, you too," Kelly says, though she thinks Christmas is more stressful than merry.

Kelly pushes the door open on her way out and a bell jingles. She thinks of the jaded Santa in *A Christmas Story* mouthing a listless *Ho-ho-ho*. She understands that feeling, that yearning for this stupid holiday to end. It's supposed to be a religious holiday but whatever. Would Jesus want his birth to be celebrated with brightly wrapped Xboxes and iPods for rich kids who want another gadget to add to their endless over-packed game rooms? Or looks of disappointment for poor kids whose moms have to explain year after year after year why Santa couldn't bring them all the toys they wanted? Rich moms spoil their ungrateful brats, and poor moms have to either disappoint the crying kids or max out their credit cards and cash in their Wal-Mart stock options.

Kelly has another reason to be stressed. Christmas is when her family visits, like a bunch of sloppy wise men bearing tasteless gifts and badly cooked fruitcake.

Even though they live only fifteen miles away, they only make the drive out to her place once a year. She is grown now so they believe they've done their parental diaper changing duty. Otherwise, if she wants to see them, she has to go to their house. "We paid for your college and bought your car," they remind her at least once every other week when she talks to them by phone.

These phone calls help ease their sense of guilt, if they have one, over neglecting Kelly, their older daughter. Kelly's sister, Maureen, is twenty-six and still lives at home. The other way her parents ease their guilt is by sending her money she doesn't ask for. Money she tells them she doesn't need. But she doesn't send it back, although she would like to.

They write her unnecessary letters, wasting money on postage stamps, instead of stopping by.

"Oh, you know, we're very busy," her mother intones cheerfully when she calls and explains, though Kelly hasn't asked, why they can't visit, even though all they would have to do to see her is to go from one side of the city to the other.

But, for them, the bridge is as an impassable barrier. As if she lives on one side of the Berlin Wall, and they the other and they can't reach her. Except on one magic Nutcracker-like night where the boundaries are broken down and her East German parents can reunite with their West German daughter.

The other function of the letters is to codify the anger they seem to feel over the very fact of her existence. These texts serve as an antidote to the support they pretend to show Kelly when she talks to them over the phone. They write her to make her feel guilty for the money they send. They write her things like: "We bought you clothes though we couldn't afford shoes. Instead of pajamas and slippers, we walk around in torn T-shirts and creased flip flops."

Kelly teaches English and knows, on one level, that these letters are dripping with movie-of-the-week pathos. But, on another level, their involuntary meanness burns, like Johnny Cash's "Ring of Fire."

Kelly passes the Santa with his fake beard and red kettle, the one who is trying to collect money for the Salvation Army. Believing that all organized charity is an instrument of social oppression, Kelly smiles and passes the cold Santa without dropping one dime. *Am I bitchy*, she thinks? *Does he hate me, think I'm an uptight yuppie?* Good. She likes to give directly to burns. At least then she knows that there is no overhead. The money will buy warming food or drink without promoting Victorian notions of social reform. *Who am I to judge them? Who am I to judge anyone?* she thinks.

When she was in grad school working on her PhD in Rhetoric at CMU, all her parents could say was, look we can't afford to keep sending you money. When are you going to get a real job? But they *still* send her money: checks, twenty-dollar bills, sometimes even rare coins. Money she doesn't want and says she doesn't need. But, for some reason, maybe because it's all they give her, she keeps it. She keeps the letters too and puts them in a small saltwater taffy box from Cape May, New Jersey, that she got one year while vacationing a long time ago with her family. She means to throw the letters, the box, away but she never does.

Kelly walks to her crappy Dodge Neon, starts the car. It sputters. Then she turns the key a second time. A switch somewhere catches. Her father never taught her about cars and how they work. Fixin' cars was not a woman's job. The switch turns over. Foot down on the pedal, Kelly drives without thinking, heads up dangerously snowy hills she is so used to driving that they seem safe.

As she pulls into her haphazardly shoveled driveway, she remembers what she forgot. *I should have picked up eggnog*, she thinks. *They'll want eggnog*. They'll say, "We always have eggnog at home."

She won't say what she's thinking, that her mom is overweight, and eggnog has five million calories of which her mother needs exactly none. Her family doesn't care about things like that. Except her sister, Maureen, who is perpetually eating pita bread and mini-Lean Cuisine meals out of white frozen boxes. Even Maureen has eggnog, though, and sneers at Kelly when she won't.

"What's the matter? Don't you want to join in on the family fun?"

"Do you have cookies?" they'll ask. And she'll break open the frosted sugar holiday cutouts she's bought during her lunch break from the best bakery she knows. She works long hours and doesn't have time to make things from scratch.

And her mom will say, "We never eat those at home."

Well, you're not at home, Kelly will think as they complain, but I wish you were.

As she pulls open the door to get out, she looks at the black numbers on the digital car clock. An hour left to get ready.

She walks up the ice covered path. *I should salt it*, she thinks, *for them*. Because if they fall, she'll never hear the end of it. They'll tell her how this would have never happened. At home.

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She knows that this visit will likely leave her feeling like some soldier trapped in the jungles of a foreign country. Still she does her best to make an effort. They're her parents after all, and the only ones she's got.

She goes outside and salts the walk, re-shovels the driveway. Comes in with stinging hands, puts cookies out on her red and green festive plates, turns on some "Oh the Weather Outside is Frightful" music. She even plugs in the twinkling Christmas tree lights. And then she waits for the jarring sound of the doorbell.

Ding-dong. Kelly walks over to open it.

"Hi, Kelly, we're here," her mom says, clutching wrapped wrinkled packages and sounding cheery. She always sounds cheery for the first five minutes.

"Hi, Mom. So nice to see you." Kelly notices her stained coat and messy hair. Though her mom is critical about Kelly's appearance, she seems to think it's in good taste to wear those awful made-by-a-friend Christmas sweatshirts with glitter and paint pen. One of her friends at the nursing home where she works likely made it for her. Kelly thinks she can see a bit of Santa poking out from beneath her mother's coat.

"You, too, dear."

"Where's Maureen?"

"Oh, she couldn't make it tonight. She had some work to do. You know your sister. Always so busy."

What work? Kelly wonders. Her sister is a waitress. She doesn't have work to do at home. Kelly feels mildly irritated that her stupid little sister couldn't even make the once-a-year trip.

"Oh, okay. I understand. Where's Dad?"

"Parkin' the car. Your driveway looked slippery, so he thought he'd park down the street. Just to be safe. Have you shoveled?"

"Why don't you have a seat? Can I get you something to drink?"

"Do you have eggnog?" she asks. And Kelly thinks, *Oh, great, here we go.*

"No, Mom, I don't have eggnog."

"We always have eggnog at home," her mother begins.

Kelly is about to offer her milk but instead says, "Would you like me to go pick you up some? I could go right now. There's a Giant Eagle just down the street from here not ten minutes away."

"Oh no, dear, don't be silly. I don't want you to go to any trouble for me. Do you have any cookies?"

"Yes," Kelly says and offers her one.

"Did you make these?" her mom asks.

Kelly finds herself lying. "Actually, I did. Let me know if you like them, and I'll be sure to get you the recipe."

"I thought you didn't bake," her mother says.

"Well I learned. Recently."

"Oh," her mother says. "You never mentioned it."

Kelly thinks, *Well I don't mention a lot of things to you*, but says, "It must have slipped my mind." She's so into her role as baker/daughter that she almost forgets that she didn't actually bake the cookies. Kelly adds, for effect, "I've learned how to make bread from scratch too. Such an easy recipe. It only takes about five hours or so. I could go in the kitchen, get my file, and pull the recipe if you like."

"Oh, no," her mother says, "that won't be necessary."

Her mother stops talking, and Kelly finds that she has nothing to say to the woman who taught her to read and bandaged her bruises. *She loved me once, didn't she?* Kelly thinks. She doesn't have time to dwell on this too long because the doorbell rings again. It's Dad. Kelly thinks: *Why doesn't he just come in?* What is it about her house that makes them feel like they don't belong? The music changes. *There's no place like home for the holidays*, one of those old time classic crooners sings. Bing Crosby maybe. Once upon a time, did people make their living making holiday music, spreading cheer like mistletoe to the masses?

Kelly's mother seems uncomfortable. Maybe it's the same thing Kelly feels when she enters their house. Kelly feels like the piece of an old puzzle that no longer fits together. Something has changed. Either the rest of the pieces or her, maybe both. When they're here, do their chests pound, throats close, as if they can't breathe the way hers does when she visits them? When she visits them, she feels trapped all over again in her working-class childhood. She almost forgets about her other self, the professor she has become.

Kelly gets up to get the door, lets her father in, does the vulgar Thanks-for-the-money-speech.

"Oh, no problem," he says, stomach bulging out of a ten-year-old coat. His white hair hangs down from the sides of his head like a sham. "We're happy

to do it.”

Oh, please, Kelly thinks. They’re about as happy to do it as Scrooge was about letting Bob Cratchit light a fire in the office when it was freakin freezing. They’re misers through and through. Penny pinchers, bean counters. They don’t enjoy money, so they give it to her, making certain she won’t enjoy it either.

Maybe, in a way, that is love.

But, if it is, Kelly isn’t sure that she wants it. And yet she doesn’t know if she can reject the thing they offer her, whatever it is. Like the packages they bring, which are practical items like socks and lotion, the love they give her is what they have. And yet it’s not enough.

Kelly wants this time, this night to be different. She wishes she knew a way to reach out to her mother and say something that would connect them once again like in that part of *A Miracle on 34th Street* where Natalie Wood is doubting that Kris Kringle is really Santa because she didn’t get that present she wanted and then she passes that house, that she wanted for Christmas and cries out to Mr. Gailey and her mom to stop. They tell her not to go wandering into strange houses. She says, “But this is my house, the one I asked Mr. Kringle for. It is! I know it is!” and her faith in Mr. Kringle is restored. But maybe that’s the problem. Maybe the holidays try to force happiness where there otherwise was none, or maybe they really are magic because the smell of the pine tree, the feel of its sharp piercing needles reminds people of who they are, who they were and who they could become. Kelly suddenly wants to be like Ebenezer Scrooge on Christmas morning delivering that turkey to the Cratchit family and making it seem, in the words of *The Christmas Story*, that all was ‘right with the world.’

“Mom,” Kelly says. “I need to run to the store really fast. Do you want to come?”

Kelly looks at her with her disheveled hair and crappy sweatshirt and finally feels pity.

“Well, I...”

“I’m out of milk,” Kelly lies. “I forgot to pick it up earlier. And also,” Kelly says, “while I’m out I could pick up some eggnog.”

Kelly doesn’t wait for an answer. Instead, she walks to her closet, puts on her brown suede Macy’s coat, the kind her mother would never buy for herself because she’d consider it to be too extravagant. Kelly moves to the door and outside of the house she’s paid for and decorated herself. Standing there, she can see the red and green and yellow glow of Christmas lights, and she, too, finally feels the first whiff of holiday cheer. It warms her body like the hot chocolate her father used to make for her on their old rundown stove in a metal saucepan.