

## 'Tis The Season

By Jason P. Henry

The department stores and the groceries had already been brainwashing the general public for weeks. Thanksgiving dinners had not even had time to digest when the airwaves began jingling bells and herald angels began to sing glory to the newborn King. Modern subliminal messages in the form of jubilant melodies and joyful hymns rang throughout the world. While shoppers listened to festive lyrics about snowmen and reindeer, their subconscious selves were succumbing to the underlying chant of 'Buy. Buy. Buy. Spend. Spend. Spend.'

The jolly, happy souls who bought into all the holiday crap opened their wallets and emptied their bank accounts all in 'the spirit of giving'. The sane few, the rare few, who knew it all for the sham that it was, wanted nothing more than to douse all the radio wires with eggnog and listen to them sizzle. Then, when all the transmissions had ceased and it truly was a silent night, they wanted to take all the candy canes and stuff them sideways right up Santa's fake, jelly-filled ass.

Okay . . . so I'm not yet into the Christmas spirit. But seriously, I have already heard "We Wish You A Merry Christmas" at least 93 times and in at least five different versions, yes I have counted, and I have yet to fully digest my Thanksgiving dinner. You want capital punishment? Put all the criminals into a giant building and play the same ten holiday tunes over and again. After the third day, they will kill themselves and save the taxpayers millions. Which of course will be dumped right back in to the economy thanks to the same damn songs!!

So . . . as a married man, this is the time of year that I put a smile on my face as she begins to bring dozens of dust covered boxes up from the cellar.

"No, Honey, I don't need help. I am in my own little world, you go on with what you were doing." She says.

(OKAY, GUYS, FOR THOSE OF YOU WHO STILL NEED TRANSLATION, THAT STATEMENT BOILS DOWN TO THIS:

"NO, HONEY, I DON'T WANT YOUR HELP. BECAUSE WHEN I AM DONE, THEY WILL BE ABLE TO SEE OUR HOUSE FROM JUPITER, THE ELECTRIC BILL IS GOING TO TRIPLE, AND YOU ARE GOING TO PUT A SMILE ON YOUR FACE AND ENJOY EVERY DAMN MINUTE OF IT WITH NO ARGUMENT OR YOU WILL BECOME THE

SANTA STATUE ON THE ROOF AND YOUR CANDY CANE IS GOING TO FREEZE AND FALL OFF - INSERT SHORT, DEEP BREATH HERE - BY THE WAY, MY MOTHER IS COMING OVER TOMORROW.” )

Happy damned holidays.

So, after the Christmas boxes were all upstairs and the dust cloud settled, I removed my oxygen mask and eased into my chair for a cup of English black. This of course was after I had originally been forced out of my chair because I was somehow in her way. When she closed the door to the cellar, turned slowly and looked at me with that seductive, yet devious smile, I knew the next words out of her mouth were going to be: “I have something special this year.”

Bonnie had 'something special' every year. Sometimes it was inherited from her mother's basement. Sometimes it was a bargain store closeout. Then there were the oh-so-spectacular yard sale 'treasures' that she bought in mid-summer and hid in the far reaches of the catacombs below our house until that anticipated moment of presentation. This year, it was indeed a yard sale treat that she presented to me.

Her cheeks blushed red as the Christmas spirit filled her and she unveiled a three foot tall replica of the drunk Santa who had posed for pictures at the mall last year. Okay, so the resemblance was most likely coincidental and caused by thirty years of rot and decay. The miniature Christmas gnome wore red garments trimmed by once-white-now-yellow fringe. She claimed a button was missing but I was certain that I saw the tell-tale markings of a cigarette burn. He held a candle with a bulb for a flame. His legs seemed knobby, deformed by arthritis, and only one black boot had a buckle.

This was only half of it. She placed the little man on the floor and flipped a switch somewhere on his back. The little bulb lit up and his bony ass began to shake back and forth as a speaker squelched “Ho. Ho. Ho.” This was repeated eleven times until, on the twelfth, the third 'ho' became more of 'hee' as it squealed to a raspy halt and, hopefully, gave the jolly little devil a permanent case of laryngitis.

She looked up at me, doe eyed, with a smile and said, “Well, maybe a little TLC is needed, but what do you think?”

(GENTLEMAN, WE ARE ALL BORN WITH A PAUSE BUTTON. HOWEVER, AN UNFORTUNATE FEW OF US WERE GIVEN ONE WITH A DEFECT. TRUST ME WHEN I SAY THAT THE FOLLOWING EXCLAMATION WAS NOT THE APPROPRIATE RESPONSE:

“I THINK YOU'RE FUCKING CRAZY IF YOU BELIEVE I AM LETTING YOUR MOTHER'S TWIN SISTER STAY

UP HERE!”)

We live in new England and on the eastern seaboard it gets pretty damned cold in December. However, after the ice daggers she shot out of her eyes, the front porch felt like a tropical oasis. I stayed there for a while. A long while. Not by choice really. Mainly I was trying to think of something clever and witty to say before I went back in. Mainly because that is what she told me to. I needed a poetic line of brilliance to pull my ass out of the Arctic Circle and back into the warmth of her good graces. I love my wife, but I would have a better chance at pulling a rump roast from a tiger’s mouth. Still, I tried.

I re-entered my house cautiously. I chose my footsteps carefully. I gingerly closed the front door behind me and peaked around the corner for any sign of danger. What I saw was the North Pole in my living room. Only one phrase came to mind, one my father had repeated over and again. Hell hath no fury like that of a woman scorned.

Though it felt like an eternity on my front porch, it had only been roughly half an hour in real time. During those thirty minutes, she had raised the tree, trimmed it, strung lights through the entire room, hung cards from the last twelve decades on the walls and even placed dishes of rock-hard Christmas candy, also from the last twelve decades, on all the tables. This was only the icing on the cake.

I have a nice TV. I love it more than my own life. In all its plasmatic, HD flat-screened glory I had received concussions from watching football games. When Ocho celebrated in his sombrero I could taste the tacos and chimichangas. When he did his Lambeau leap, he damn near landed in my lap. Late at night, when I was banned to my chair, I got up close and personal with after-hours movie channels and semi-attractive yet well-endowed actresses I didn't know. I loved my TV. Now, it was lined all around with red and green glittered garland and on the floor just below it, dead center with the yellow-stained white ball of his jolly elf hat just high enough to come into view . . . stood drunk Santa.

I felt an urge rising from deep within. I felt a need to replace the fake candle with a whiskey bottle to add to the realism and then lift his little lush ass up and throw him as far as I could into the neighbor’s yard. Then, I would get my bow from the den, set an arrow tip on fire, and aim for that whiskey bottle. As the glass shatters, the little damned elf would burst into flames, melt into a plastic ball as he 'ho, ho, hees' his tiny ass to an icy grave.

(YOU SEE GUYS, THIS IS HOW WE ARE; WE THINK ABOUT WHAT WE WANT TO DO AND WE DO THE

EXACT OPPOSITE. WE DO THE RIGHT THING, ALL IN THE NAME OF LOVE. WOMEN SAY WE ARE HEARTLESS AND WE THINK ONLY OF OURSELVES. IF THEY COULD SEE DEEP INTO THE RECESSES OF OUR INTRICATE MINDS, THEY WOULD UNDERSTAND THAT, YES, THEY ARE WRONG. OH YEAH, I WENT THERE. IT IS POSSIBLE FOR A WOMAN TO BE WRONG. IT IS JUST NOT ALWAYS POSSIBLE FOR HER TO ACCEPT THAT SHE IS WRONG, NOR IS IT A MAN'S RIGHT TO POINT IT OUT.)

I stepped gingerly toward the middle of the living room, all the while keeping my eyes on psycho Santa. Something about the little troll did not set right with me. There was an evil in him, I was certain of it. His eyes, through those tiny little gold-rimmed glasses, seemed to glow an iridescent green. She would say it was a reflection of the ambient light in the room. I say it is a demon waiting for me to fall asleep. He had only been upstairs less than an hour and had already managed to destroy my day. Still, there were greater evils to be wary of this December evening. Somewhere in the house, lying in wait and planning the next attack, was my wife.

I did not have to see her to know where she was. The spicy sweet smell of gingerbread was drifting through the house like fog through a cemetery. She was baking. She was pissed. This was going to be a tough hole to dig out of. I was so deep in that the fog blanketing the cemetery wasn't even visible from where I was. I had insulted her mother. True, in my eyes it was more of an insult to Santa, but there would be no convincing her of that.

(FELLAS, HERE IS ONE OF THOSE CATCH 22'S: I COULD ENTER HER DOMAIN, THE KITCHEN, AND TRY TO SUCK UP WHILE SHE IS BAKING. THIS WOULD INEVITABLY SEND HER INTO A TIRADE ABOUT LEAVING HER ALONE WHEN SHE IS IN THE MIDDLE OF BAKING AND THAT NO ONE BELONGS IN HER KITCHEN UNLESS THEY HAVE A DAMNED GOOD REASON TO BE IN IT. OR . . . I COULD STAY AWAY AND ALLOW HER TO TOIL IN HER LAB UNDISTURBED. THIS ACTION WOULD OF COURSE SEND THE MAD SCIENTIST INTO A FRENZY AND A VERY LOUD SPEECH ABOUT HOW I DIDN'T EVEN HAVE THE DECENCY TO COME TO HER AND APOLOGIZE FOR WHAT I SAID. OBVIOUSLY PROVING THAT I REALLY DON'T CARE AND PROBABLY DON'T EVEN LOVE HER. SO, PERHAPS SHE SHOULD GO STAY AT HER MOTHER'S INSTEAD OF HAVING HER MOTHER VISIT HERE. EITHER WAY, BOYS, I'M SCREWED.)

I stood in the center of the living room for several moments, trying to think of the best possible

course of action. I needed guidance. This was only my fourth year of marriage, I was a rookie. Regular days were hard enough, but during the holidays, the ladies are even more sensitive and emotional. All actions and words should be considered with great trepidation when it came to these delicate creatures that we could not live without. So, I did the only thing I could. I channeled the wisdom of someone who would know exactly what to do in this situation. This was a time for spiritual guidance, so I closed my eyes, took in a deep breath and asked myself: what would Bernie Mac do?

Within seconds, the answer was upon me. My nerves tingled, I felt giddy. I jumped up once and silently fist-pumped the air and followed that up with my best running-man dance. I then reached into a box in the corner and pulled out a long strand of garland and a sprig of mistletoe. I turned toward the little half-pint Kris Kringle, grabbed my crotch in a 'suck-this' kinda motion and flipped his sorry little ass off. Then I took that garland and mistletoe, choosing each step carefully, and I made my way toward the kitchen using the beautiful warm smell of gingerbread like an invisible GPS.

Out of the living room and into the dining room.

I made it to within five feet of the doorway that led into the devil's lair and I stopped. There she was. She hovered over the kitchen counter. She looked taller; more imposing as her enraged aura filled the kitchen like an offensive lineman fills a Speedo! Her reddish hair was a disheveled mess and I was certain I saw horns peeking through. There was a darkness that hung about her like a cloak and her breath glowed red with flame. I could hear a slight growl emitting from her as she wielded a large knife. I am positive I saw her remove the legs from a helpless gingerbread man and smile sadistically as she did so. Between growls she mumbled with a hellish rhythm, like she was uttering some dark incantation that would give her power over the world . . . mainly me.

"Till death do us part. Till death do us part. Till death . . ." she repeated this over and over in a barely audible hiss.

My knees trembled and my hands shook. I wanted to collapse under the pressure; just fold up into a fetal position and end the agony I was feeling. I knew I could not win but I also knew the consequences of not trying. The fetal position would not deter her. I looked into the kitchen at my wife, now looking more like the reaper, and I began to whistle.

Deck the halls. That is what I whistled. That is what I did. I took the long strand of garland, blue and sparkly, and I began to drape it over the door frame. I placed it carefully to make sure it was centered. There was the same amount of garland hanging down each side of the door. It would surely trigger her

OCD's if it was not so.

Fa la la la la . . . la la . . . la . . . . . laaa.

“The living room looks beautiful, honey. I thought we should do the rest of the house before your mom comes so she can just rest and enjoy the holidays.”

I saw the horns recede back into her skull. Her breath cleared and the growl ceased. The black aura that hung about her like a cloak disappeared and she laid the knife softly on the counter top. I had succeeded. I had cast out the evil spirits and returned peace to our home. The garland over the doorway had performed its glittery exorcism to perfection.

“I’m sorry, sweetheart. I picked the wrong time to try and be a funny man. I should not have made jokes at your mother's expense.”

She turned toward me slowly, in that melodramatic slow-mo-movie-star sorta way. The smile on her face seemed more seductive now than sadistic and the smell of gingerbread seemed more the promise of a tasty treat than a lure into a death-trap. I took a deep breath and shook the edginess off of my nerves.

My wife, my beautiful wife. She looked normal again. I could stop living in fear. She looked me in the eyes and smiled. She opened her mouth to say something and stopped, certainly an attempt to not say the wrong thing. Then her eyes slowly drifted south. She was checking me out. My apology had been better than I thought. Thank you Bernie Mac! Thank you for your guidance!!! Her eyes did not stop at chest level. They kept drifting down and down. Her gaze landed at home plate and I was going to get lucky. There was nothing in the world like make-up sex and I would even get a fresh baked cookie after. She was looking at my package and I was certain she was thinking about unwrapping it.

(NOW, BOYS. IT COULD GO MANY DIRECTIONS FROM HERE, BUT YOU KNOW IT WON'T GO THE WAY WE WANT IT TO. WHY? BECAUSE WE ARE STUPID. WE ACT. WE DON'T THINK. WE ACT. THE PROBLEM IS THAT WE ALWAYS FORGET THE DETAILS AND THAT IS WHAT GETS US IN TROUBLE. IT WAS A SIMPLE DETAIL I FORGOT THAT TURNED THIS MOMENT SOUR.)

Her smile faded. The dark aura returned but this time she looked less like Grim and more like Lucifer himself. I always thought that Satan was a woman and I was being proven correct. She grew fangs and snarled and one gingerbread man after another began to fly past my head like hell's winged army.

“Is that all you think about?!” She roared in a deep and not so womanly voice. “If you think I am

kissing that little thing . . . you're crazy!"

(YES. YOU WOULD BE CORRECT. I FORGOT ABOUT THE MISTLETOE. I HAD HUNG IT OVER MY BELT SO I WOULD NOT DROP IT WHILE HANGING THE GARLAND ON THE DOOR FRAME. IN MOST CASES, THE FACT THAT I LEFT THAT LITTLE SPRIG OF KISS-INDUCING PLANT HANGING OVER MY GENITALIA MAY HAVE BEEN INTENTIONAL, FUNNY AND POSSIBLY EFFECTIVE. THIS, HOWEVER, WAS NOT ONE OF THOSE CASES.)

She blew past me like the wind across an arctic tundra. The cold air that was left in her wake chilled me to the bone. I shivered from the frigidity and grabbed at my chest, trying to remove the ice dagger that had impaled my heart. I removed the mistletoe from my belt and hung it, dead center, in the doorway to the kitchen. No, this was not an attempt to seduce her. I knew that would be futile. However, in her state of mind, it would work like garlic on a vampire. So, I stepped in to the kitchen, leaving a plastic plant to form a shield in its only entrance. I heard the bedroom door slam. I heard her scream. My eardrums shattered and I collapsed to my knees. I knew the hourglass had been flipped and the sand was timing my inevitable doom.

I also knew I would be spending the night in my chair. All of the blankets were upstairs so I would also be cold. Tomorrow, her mother would arrive and hear the story of my insensitivity. Then my life would be over. Together, they would eviscerate me with their eyes as they sat over tea and laughed. The only thing worse than a girl-plus-girl man hating tag team was a mother-plus-daughter man hating tag team. Yes, I would have to endure every moment of it. To disappear into a dark corner of the house while the execution of my manhood ensued would only make matters worse. I was done.

It was a few hours later when I made my way from the kitchen to the chair. I stepped slowly, cautiously. Every shadow could be the one who grabbed me and drug me through hell's gates. Some of the shadows seemed to have eyes. The lamp stood like a sentinel at the doorway, warning me to stay away. Still, I made it to my recliner and sat. Even though it hadn't been chewed as of yet, my ass already hurt with the anticipation of things to come.

I tried to sleep. I tossed and turned. I flipped and flopped. I stood up and paced the room. I laid back in my chair and I froze. The thermostat was set at seventy-five so I knew the chill was still coming from upstairs. I grabbed the box of Christmas decor and covered myself with garland of all colors. My nose and still-cold skin tingled from the touch of tiny tinsel fingers and I threw the holiday serpents to the floor. I

looked up and there he was.

He seemed to smile now from his post in front of my television. This master of elves, this maker of toys was taunting me from ten feet away. I had nowhere to go. It was winter outside. My bedroom had become the dragon's lair. Should she wake up to start baking, the kitchen was a viper pit. My chair was my prison. I was bound by leather and metal, doomed to reside with my own misery until the beast was sated.

I stared at Santa.

Santa stared at me.

I must have dozed off for I began to imagine running through a dark labyrinth:

Its halls of eternal night were an endless maze leading nowhere. Something was behind me, pursuing me through the hellish chambers. Every turn I took led to more turns, more halls cloaked in blackness. I stopped and listened. Maybe the hiss of a breeze would give me direction. Alas, it was not wind I heard but a taunting laugh.

"Ho, Ho, Ho." whispered the night. "Ha. Ha. Ha."

I heard the pitter-patter of small feet in the corridors behind me. I heard 'ticka-ticka-ticka' as tiny black boots smacked the cold concrete. I heard the jangle of the metal buckles and the jingle of the bells on his sleeves. I thought I saw a faint glow, like a candle's flame, chasing shadows on the stone walls of the tunnel. I ran. Aimlessly. Making turn after turn without knowing where I was headed.

I stumbled into a vast chamber lined with fiery sconces on all sides. There was no way out. On the far side was a wall of fire that reached high towards the vaulted dome ceiling. Behind the dancing flames . . . something moved. I heard a growl, a roar, and the flames shot higher. Behind me, 'ho ho ho'. In front of me a dragon reared its ugly head. Something entered the chamber to my back. I turned and saw a little gnome dressed in red and white with a billowy beard and mustache. In one hand a candle, in the other a butcher's knife. From the corridors behind the demented old elf, a miniature army paraded in. Like little rats, thousands of gingerbread men holding sewing needles crowded the chamber. With Santa at their lead, they blocked my only way out. A shadow loomed over me and I turned to see the dragon.

Her green and scaled body was only feet away resting on muscular legs and taloned feet. Her long neck arched into the air where it met with a large, horned head. Her mouth was gaped open revealing long and pointed icicles for teeth. The giant creature drooled from high above and the acidic saliva landed on my shoe, melting the laces in a burst of smoke. The dragon roared and shook the chamber like an earthquake, causing dust and soot to shower like black rain all around me. From behind I heard 'ho ho ho'

and the tapping of thousands of little feet. I knew it was over. My fate was sealed. As the gaping, salivating mouth of the dragon swooped down to clutch me in her jaws I screamed . . .

I awoke in my chair, staring at the dark ceiling. Sweat was beading from my brow despite the chill in the room. I shivered though I felt I was on fire. I brushed at my clothes, knocking away imaginary dust and cinders. I sat straight up in my recliner and screamed again when I saw the little Christmas demon only a couple of feet from my chair. I screamed again and lashed out with my feet, trying to keep him away from me. His eyes glowed that iridescent green. His hips swayed from side to side. The candle in his hand was now turned upside down, being held like a dagger waiting to gut its adversary. I heard 'ho ho ho' and then 'ho ho heee' as the possessed elf came to a screeching halt. I screamed like a schoolgirl in a Wes Craven horror classic.

That is when I noticed the large shadow hovering behind him. I hadn't seen her when I woke from my nightmare. I hadn't even seen her flip the switch to turn off the Santa. My wife stood before me, grinning.

“Having a bad dream were we? I thought maybe I would move the Santa somewhere else. He doesn't seem quite visible enough on the floor. What do you think?”

(YES, MEN, I COULD HAVE SAID MANY THINGS. AT THIS MOMENT, HOWEVER, SHE HAD ME BY THE BALLS. I WOULD HAVE LIKED TO TELL HER EXACTLY WHERE TO STICK THAT SANTA BUT IT WOULD NOT END WELL. SO, I PLAYED MY HAND CAREFULLY, HOPING TO LIVE AND FIGHT ANOTHER DAY.)

“Whatever you want, Dear.” I stammered. “Maybe the dining room. He would be a great center piece for the table.”

“Well, now. I think that is a great idea. It is so nice to see you getting into the Christmas spirit, Charles. After all, 'tis the season.”

I sunk back into my chair and sighed deeply as she hoisted the demonic elf into her arms and escorted him, proudly, to the dining room. She began to hum “Wassail, Wassail” as she waltzed her way across the floor. I heard the clank as she placed Santa onto our glass table. I did not even have to look to know that she faced him in the direction of my chair. My place at the head of the table was now under the close observation of a yule-tide ghoul.

It was not the wisest suggestion I had ever made, still, my view of the television was now uninhibited.

I would deal with my inability to eat while being glared at by a possessed Kris Kringle later. It had been a long night. I was exhausted. So, I picked up the remote and readied to turn on the morning news. Before I could even get my thumb to the 'on' button, she reappeared in front of me.

"I was thinking . . ." she started.

(NOW, WE ALL KNOW THAT THIS IS NOT GOOD. WHEN A WOMAN IS THINKING, SOMEWHERE IN THE WORLD A MAN IS IN TROUBLE. THE WORDS 'I WAS THINKING' ARE ALMOST ALWAYS GOING TO BE FOLLOWED BY SOMETHING THAT NO GUY IS GOING TO LIKE. PIECE OF ADVICE . . . WHEN SHE SAYS 'I WAS THINKING . . .', DO NOT INTERRUPT WITH THE PHRASE 'UH-OH'.)

". . . that, since today was supposed to be nice, maybe you could decorate the outside of the house for me while the snow has stopped." She finished.

This did not have a damn thing to do with wanting the outdoors decorated. This was pure feminine spite at work. If I wanted to survive the rest of this holiday season, I was going to have to go out into the freezing weather, set up a ladder and climb my ass all over a slippery ice covered roof to prove how much I loved her and that I would do anything for her.

What's worse, is that by making me go outdoors, she was forcing me to announce to the entire neighborhood that I had screwed up and was now doing everything I could to kiss her ass and make it right. The women would be staring out of their windows and watching with proud eyes as another man succumbed to the power and authority of womanly might. They would be sending estrogen filled telepathic signals back and forth to each other, claiming victory over the world. If I, even once, muttered anything negative towards my wife or women in general as I balanced precariously on the frozen shingles of my house, they would immediately pick up the phone and let Bonnie know so she could jerk on that ball and chain, pulling me right off of that damned roof.

The husbands, well, would all want to come to my rescue, but, they knew better. They would be inside, cowering. Afraid. Even one slight breath that reeked of sympathy would put them in the same predicament I was in. So, in reluctant resignation, they would sit in their chairs and keep their mouths shut and I . . . I bundled my ass up, gathered the materials from the garage and climbed onto the top of her house.

(TO ALL YOU YOUNG MEN CONTEMPLATING MARRIAGE, REMEMBER THIS: WHEN YOU GET

MARRIED, YOU DON'T JUST MARRY THAT BEAUTIFUL WOMAN THAT YOU PROPOSED TO. YOU MARRY HER MOTHER, HER SISTERS, HER AUNT, HER BEST FRIENDS, HER ACQUAINTANCES AND EVERY OTHER WOMAN ON THE FACE OF THE EARTH. YOU MARRY AN ARMY. AN ARMY OF PREDATORS JUST WAITING FOR SOME POOR FOOL TO STEP ON THE WRONG SIDE OF THE LINE SO THEY CAN EAT HIM ALIVE. MARRIAGE IS A BATTLE . . . AND THE MAN ALWAYS LOSES IF HE KNOWS WHAT IS GOOD FOR HIM.)

Have you ever noticed how men and women greet each other? There is a reason for it. Women will run up to each other with screeches and squeals and hug and giggle and start talking a thousand words a minute. Guys . . . well, they just give a silent nod. Sure it says 'hello' well enough. But it is actually man-speak for "Man, don't say shit. She is right there . . . and she's listening."

The handshake is not a 'hello' at all. That is a lifeline. When one man extends his hand to another he is saying "Bro, if you can pull my ass outta this do it now." So, why do the hands shake? Well, the man in trouble won't let go so the would-be-hero is trying to shake him off before he gets his own ass in hot water. Being a man is complicated.

Being a man is so complicated that even when my nose began to turn blue I did not dare leave that roof. I took my time and carefully placed each prop, making sure it appeared that I was putting everything I had into it. A smile stayed plastered to my face the entire time.

I could see blinds being pulled to the side as the other dragons watched from their lairs. I heard doors slam shut up and down the street as men who had been outside tasting freedom ran back in before they got the urge to help me. My immediate neighbor was a foolish man. I looked down from my icy roost and saw him shoveling his sidewalk. He looked up at me and waved.

"She put you to work, eh Chuck?" He asked, the damned bastard.

"No!" I proclaimed with a smile that didn't budge. "I thought the house could use a little holiday cheer."

"Yeah, right." He mocked. "Looks like someone tightened the old leash."

Judging by his impudence, I was guessing that his wife was not home. I knew that was about to change when I saw blinds shaking as the neighborhood watch rushed to their phones. It seemed only a matter of seconds before his wife sped into the driveway with the trunk still open and groceries falling out of it, leaving a trail right back to where she had been shopping. I knew that he was done for. I looked down to avoid eye contact with his wife and listened closely for the sound of my own spouse's approach. She

never showed up. My charade must have fooled the wives as they kept watch over me. My neighbor had invited his own doom. Newlyweds!

When I was finished, I headed back inside. I could smell the cocoa and hear the television as soon as I opened the front door. I shook off my boots and hung my snowsuit on the rack. She was waiting for me in the living room with a steaming mug in her hand.

“You worked so long out there. I thought maybe you could use a warm up while you watched the game.”

“Thank you.” I said politely as I took the mug and slowly sat myself down.

(WE ALL KNOW DAMN WELL THAT THINGS DON'T WORK THIS WAY. SHE WASN'T GRATEFUL FOR WHAT I HAD DONE, AFTER ALL, I ONLY DID IT BECAUSE SHE MADE ME DO IT. HER OFFERING WAS A PLOY. IT WAS AN ATTEMPT AT TEMPORARY PACIFICATION. IN OTHER WORDS: HER MOTHER WAS ON HER WAY OVER!)

They were the Bengals, so, it was imminent that they would lose. Still, despite the reason, I was happy to sit and watch my boys in black and orange playing their version of football on my huge Hi-Def TV. I was one of only five Cincinnati fans in new England, perhaps in the world, and I was okay with that. I watched as Carson Palmer and the boys put up little fight as they were stomped by a team I refuse to name. I must have fallen asleep sometime during the third. When I awoke, it was with a start and another scream and not because Cinci scored.

“I thought you put that nasty troll in the dining room!” I ignorantly and spontaneously shouted.

The look I received from my mother-in-law as she stood before me was as equally unpleasant as the one Bonnie shot from over her shoulder. I had woken up too quickly to engage that pause button. However, I awakened enough to know that it would be another night in my chair. . . alone. This in itself was not a bad thing since her mother would be staying over until the day after Christmas. The last time she stayed the night, I had a very traumatizing and life-altering experience:

Her mother stayed overnight once this past summer. I was not in the doghouse, so, I was upstairs sleeping with my beautiful wife, blanketed by the comfort of her good graces. Her mother insisted that her bed be the couch even after I spent five hours cleaning out the guest room and making a bed for her. Personally, I think she chose the couch because I had spent all that time readying a room for her. What can

I say, she is a vindictive bitch. But, that is normal behavior and not the bad experience.

It had to have been about two in the morning when, after a few hours of sleeping with my wife, I was dying of thirst. I put on my boxers and ventured downstairs towards the kitchen. As I turned to leave the living room and enter the dining room, something caught my eye. There was her mother, completely bare except for a pair of saggy underwear. Her mother is in her early sixties and not holding up so well. I screamed. She screamed. Bonnie came running down the stairs bare-ass naked with a baseball bat in her hand. Now, I love my wife's body, but at that particular moment, between fits of gagging and vomit suppression, I was hoping like hell that the vision of loveliness standing on deck maintained a better form over the years than the Sasquatch that was rearing its ugly head in my living room. She made Chewbacca look like a Rogaine candidate. She looked like she had stayed in a bathtub so long that her whole body pruned and forgot to straighten itself out. If she went for a check-up, the doctor could check her toes and give her a mammogram at the same time.

It was the single most disturbing thing I have ever seen. When I went back to bed, I could not even touch Bonnie. Every time our flesh met my mind went to a dark place. I cringed and curled up into a little ball in fear of my life. I couldn't eat breakfast for weeks. Every time my wife made eggs, all I could think of were the two malformed breasts I saw trying to give their owner a foot massage.

(NOW, GENTLEMAN, I KNOW YOU ARE WONDERING WHY SHE WAS STANDING HALF NUDE IN THE MIDDLE OF MY HOUSE. DOES IT REALLY MATTER? I DIDN'T ASK. I COVERED MY EYES AND, ONCE I KNEW MY BRAVE BONNIE HAD THE BEAST AT BAY, I RAN UPSTAIRS TO THE BATHROOM COMPLETELY BLIND. ONCE THERE, I SANITIZED MY EYES WITH EVERY AVAILABLE CHEMICAL: PURELL, MOUTHWASH AND EVEN WINDEX. I WAS HORRIFIED. KNOWING THE REASON I HAD TO UNDERGO THOSE AGONIZING MINUTES OF MY LIFE COULD DO NOTHING BUT MAKE THE PAIN MORE UNBEARABLE.)

So, in trouble yet again, I was quite content in my chair. I knew that Nagatha, the witch-in-law, would eventually claw her way upstairs and I could stroll about the lower portion of my house in safety. Perhaps this would allow me an opportunity to engineer the death of evil Santa. It was a situation that needed serious attention and while they plotted my doom upstairs, I could plot his while keeping a watchful eye on him.

After my (purely unintentional) insult of my mom-in-law, both women stormed out and made their way to the dining room. I saw them take seats at the far end of the table where they could chitter away at

each other while watching my every move. There in the middle of the table stood the sadistic centerpiece like a doorman protecting the room's patrons. I shuddered when I thought of hell's triad conspiring against me.

In a feeble attempt to redirect my thoughts as I awaited their departure from the dining room, I turned on my big screen, muted the sound and turned on the closed captioning. One of my favorite channels was animal planet. The current show was a special on hyenas.

The hyena is a pack animal. They are scavengers that feed off of whatever they can find. A wounded antelope, a rotting carcass, whatever it took to sustain themselves. I was only fifteen minutes into the show before I had to change the channel. For every move that the hyenas made on my TV set, a hideous, bone-curdling cackle came from the dining room. Mother and daughter were yipping away and laughing like a soundtrack to the circle of life that animal planet was demonstrating. The similarities were too close for me to bear. By their third fit of shrill laughter, I pictured both mother and offspring with hideous fangs and drool oozing down their chins. Time for a different show.

The next show was a replay of 'It's A Wonderful Life', that shit was not happening. Number one: my current situation was anything but wonderful. Number two: little Satan Clause was not exactly making me feel the Christmas spirit. I wanted to run down the street screaming, no doubt about that, but only for the first cab that could drive my ass to a place where sanity and normality still existed.

(click) next channel.

Frosty. . . (click)

Rudolph. . . (click)

The Grinch . . . or George W. (I couldn't distinguish). . . (click)

To hell with it. There was not a damn thing worth watching. It was Christmas, commercials or bullshit. I had a twelve-hundred dollar HDTV, almost one thousand channels including the pay-per-views, and there was nothing on. So, off went the TV.

I spent the next ten minutes creatively trying to angle the TV remote towards the dining room while pressing various buttons. Off. Stop. Mute. Pause. All-purpose remote my ass! No matter what button I pushed, they were still there, yammering away about shoes or cyanide, something to that effect. Whether it directly involved me or not, I knew it was not good.

I turned my head slightly, eyed the dining room with as much peripheral vision as I could muster without fully turning, and they stopped . . . and looked right at me. Both of them. I diverted my eyes away

quickly before I was turned to stone. When I took a quick, cautionary glance back over . . . I found they had slid their miniscule guardian to the edge of the table closest to me. His beady little eyes glowered at me with malicious intent. I sunk in to my chair as deep as the plush leather cushion would allow. Within a few moments, I heard the stream of a faint and vile hissing as their conversation resumed.

The remaining weeks till Christmas passed slowly. My time was spent following the two women around, carrying whatever they tossed into my arms as they tried to test the limits of their credit cards. At home, my time was spent outside shoveling or in my chair hunkering. No matter where I was, or what I did . . . my time was spent in silence. A smart man knows just what to say, but a wise man knows when to say nothing at all!

My silence and obedience were rewarded with peace and quiet. The women went about the gossiping, or planning the Armageddon of the male race, whatever it was women did together. I answered when called, spoke only when I was spoken to, and I made good use of the three key phrases for male survival . . . 'yes, dear', 'you're right, dear' and 'anything you say, dear'.

Christmas morning arrived in the usual fashion. I awoke to the smell of roasted turkey, pumpkin pie, turnips and many other savory scents. My wife had risen early to put the bird in the oven, and would be waiting for me to carve it around noon. Her mother was likely right by her side in the kitchen with a hot spiced wine in hand and a sharp lookout for my arrival.

"Merry Christmas, Son." she would say as I entered the dining room. She would say it even though she knew damn well that all of the merry was erased from my Christmas the moment her impending arrival had been announced. She reveled in this. She took great pleasure in knowing that the man her daughter married was miserable . . . and too whipped to do anything about it.

Other family members began to arrive, filling my house with the holiday cheer. Her great uncle arrived with his pipe and the smell of cheap tobacco filled my living room. Her two older brothers walked in and began to talk about their incredibly boring and successful careers. Their wives took their place in the kitchen/command-center with Bonnie and her mother. A handful of kids were running around the house, jeopardizing the safety of my prize TV at least once every five minutes.

As I contemplated lacing the eggnog with NyQuil, I heard the call from my wife. The dining room table had been set with our finest dishes and the buffet of food was placed around the table's inner sanctum. It was time to carve the turkey and, to make room for the giant bird, I casually reached to move psycho-Santa out of the way. Surely with so many people over for dinner, it would be best to move him to

the floor and out of the way. Right?

(BOYS, I AM SURE YOU HAVE HEARD OF THOSE INVISIBLE FENCES. YOU KNOW, THE ONES YOU INSTALL TO KEEP YOUR PETS FROM GOING WHERE THEY ARE NOT SUPPOSED TO? WELL, IF YOU HAVEN'T FIGURED IT OUT YET, A WOMAN'S GAZE IS EXACTLY LIKE AN INVISIBLE FENCE. YOU DON'T NEED TO SEE IT TO KNOW WHEN YOU'VE SMACKED INTO IT. THE FORCE OF A WOMAN'S CONDEMNING STARE CAN SEND YOU ANKLES-OVER-ASS FROM ACROSS A CROWDED ARENA.)

The sound of my wife clearing her throat told me that I was wrong and I pulled my hands back as if they had just reached for hot coals. A slight smirk appeared at the corner of my mom-in-law's mouth and the other two women present giggled with pride knowing that one of their sisters-in-marriage had just put her foot down.

The men, caught in their own silent prisons, avoided my eyes as I looked their way for a sign of brotherhood. I knew then that I was alone. I took the carving knife in my hand and began to cut up the sacrificial fowl that rested in peace on a silver platter. With each piece of flesh I removed from the carcass I could feel Santa's eyes upon me.

He sees you when you're sleeping, he knows when you're awake.

I tried to clear the song from my head but it only got louder. I distributed plates of Holiday bird to our house guests as Saint Nick kept his evil gaze trained on me. I could hear the children at the kiddie table singing . . .

He knows if you've been bad or good . . .

His stare pierced my ego. He had laid claim to my table. I thought of a happy place. Warm weather, no snow, no Christmas. No Santas or Mother-In-Laws. I thought of my beautiful wife, sunbathing on a beach. She rested on her belly with her bikini top untied, baring the full field of soft, bronzed skin that was her back. I imagined her blue eyes looking my way, inviting me to rub lotion on her from head to toe. I thought of is running along the wave caressed beach until she leapt into my arms. I then carried her up to our room and gently laid her on the bed whose blankets were already pulled back. I kissed every inch of her body until I could hear her moan . . .

Ho Ho Ho. Ho Ho Heeeeeee

I was pulled from my fantasy by an all-too-familiar sound of tyranny. I began swinging the carving

knife, trying desperately to fend off my assailant. I made contact but the flesh of my attacker was hard, impenetrable. I screamed a battle cry like no other as I jumped on to the table and sent Satan Clause flying across the room as if his eight flying hell hounds had begun their take-off. I followed him through the air and landed in him, legs straddling either side of his little elf body. I began my best Randy Couture ground-and-pound, putting all I had into the elimination of my foe. When I felt it was safe, when I thought he was finished. I ran for the front door and sprinted down the street. I wished nothing more than to be as far away from the gates of hell as I could be. I was so intent on escape, so bust looking over my shoulder for signs of pursuit that I did not see the large tree getting nearer and nearer . . .

'Oh, you better watch out. You better not cry. You better not . . .'

The familiar tune sounded as if it were coming from cheap, squelchy speakers. Surprisingly, it did not irritate me. In fact, it was almost soothing. This simple little fact terrified me. I should be frantic. I ignored the song for a moment and tried to open my eyes. My eyelids had that heavy, didn't sleep enough so I am not ready to wake up feel to them. My body felt numb, tingly and seemed to be sinking in to the softness of my resting place. Had I died and gone to Heaven? Was it possible that I slayed the anti-Christ and was given the ultimate reward? I had saved mankind from a horrendous fate and now I was at peace on a bed of clouds with no Satan Clause, no mother-in-law. It is true. After all these years of doubt , could it be possible I have learned that there truly is a kind and merciful God? Is it true that Heaven . . . smelled like peppermint?

No, It is not possible at all.

Heaven did not smell like peppermint.

God did not play Christmas carols over squelchy elevator speakers.

I must have hit the tree harder than I thought. I suddenly felt a chill coarse through my body. I must be laying in the snow at the foot of the tree that went Mike Tyson on me. The Christmas music was coming from some saps crappy home stereo system and polluting the whole neighborhood. The peppermint had to be the smell of someone actually enjoying their Holidays. But, that peaceful feeling. That I could not explain away at all.

I tried to open my groggy eyes again but could not. Something was poking me in my left arm and I tried to feel for it with my right hand. I slowly slid my fingers over my wrist, up my forearm until I stopped just below the elbow. Something was stuck . . .

"Charles, you don't want to play with that." The voice was Angelic. It soothed me and I immediately

stopped touching whatever was stabbing my arm. I didn't know who the voice belonged to, could not see a face. But my entire being said that I should obey her every wish.

"That mean old tree gave you quite a beating. You've been out for a while." the voice spoke again.

"Who . . . who are you?" I inquired.

"I am the Ghost of Christmas present."

"Ummm . . . didn't we skip a spirit? I mean, I must be dreaming, but surely even there I would get the spirits in the right order."

"You're silly, Charles. I like you. Did you know that you talk in your sleep?"

"No. Did I say anything intelligent?"

The voice giggled. It was a happy . . . intriguing kind of giggle. It was even kind of playful. I wanted desperately to open my eyes, see the face that owned the voice that was keeping me at ease.

"Well, Charley, you are definitely not dreaming. You can call me Marie. I am all yours for the next eight hours."

I smiled. How could I not? I was in the presence of an angel. I focused all my will into opening my eyes. I rubbed them gently with my hand until the voice spoke again.

"Let me help you with that." the voice was a whisper by my ear now.

She caressed my eyes with a warm, damp cloth. She was so gentle it felt as if I my eyes were being massaged by the wings of butterflies. This had to be Heaven. I was certain of it . . . again.

"There, that should help. Open them slowly." I heard her but she wasn't speaking. Marie was simply breathing words onto my skin and I only thought I could hear her. I knew that I had never heard the whispering of sweet nothings until this moment.

I did exactly as she said. As slowly as I could, I eased my eyes open. It took a minute for them to adjust even though the lighting was barely brighter than a candle. I kept my eyes trained forward until the weariness, the aching had finally left them.

"Well, hello, Handsome."

I turned to face Marie who was on my left. I blinked twice as I became captivated by the vision of loveliness who sat before me in her nurse's scrubs. Blonde hair, slightly wavy and just past her shoulders. Blue eyes, like pools of clear tropical water. An inviting smile that curled into a mischievous smirk.

The peppermint.

I watched as she took another taste of the red and white candy cane that she held. She took her

time, savoring the cool flavor of the holiday treat. She seemed to enjoy it so much that I was getting a sweet tooth. Oh how I desired just one taste of candy.

“Well, I wasn't counting on you waking up, so I hope you don't mind that I snuck in here for a quick treat. We aren't supposed to have these out on the floor.”

I didn't mind. I didn't mind in the slightest. Suddenly I was feeling the Christmas spirit. I felt the joy of the season filling me from within. The jubilation and merriment of yuletide delight was overwhelming me. I felt dizzy. Marie, sweet Marie, spoke to me again with her heavenly voice.

“Well, maybe I better put this away for now. We don't need the blood rushing to all the wrong places just now, do we? Are you smuggling your own candy cane or are you just happy to see me?”

She began to laugh as I quickly took the pillow from under my head and placed it across my nether regions. Apparently many parts of me were beginning to awaken.

A hospital. Of all the places to find peace during the holiday season. I saw the IV drip and my serenity was explained. It was not the yuletide spirit after all, it was a good dose of medication being pumped into my veins to keep me at bay. I knew that the happiness was not normal.

Dear, dear, Marie. Twas not sugar plums that were dancing through my head and the type of dancing being done was not for young eyes. I tried to change my thoughts, tried desperately. However, this vision of loveliness who had been designated as my caretaker had definitely caught my attention. I became even more attentive as she stood and walked toward the room's only door. The backside was just as appealing as the front. I adjusted the pillow once again.

“Well, Charles. I would love to stay here and keep you all to myself, but I have a note that I am supposed to make a phone call when you are awake. From what I see, you are most certainly awake! So, phone call it is.”

She stepped slowly to the door, she stopped just before leaving and turned to blow me a kiss. With a wink, and a wiggle of her nose, she was gone. I breathed in and sighed out heavily. What a season this had turned out to be. I was startled when I heard Marie's soft voice again. The way the words floated from her lips was so soothing, so pleasing, I kept my eyes closed and savored every syllable.

“It looks like someone left a little Holiday cheer for you at my station. I am supposed to give it to you when you're alert. Let's see what this does.”

Ho. Ho. Ho., Ho. Ho. Heeeeeeeeeeee

