

The girl in the CHRISTMAS ELF costume

“I can’t help you. Mr. Wise.” Mr. Downs said.

He didn’t feel like Mr. Wise. He felt more like Mr. Not so Wise.

Smile he told himself as he stood. He stretched his hand out. Don’t let anyone suspect what is really on his mind. He had read an article on holiday suicides in the local news paper as he waited to see the last mortgage manager. He could understand now, how somebody could do such a thing. His stomach hurt like he’d eaten something bad. That wasn’t it. He took Mr. Downs soft hand in his over work hardened hand.

“I wish we could help you, but the bank has depositors. I could take you application to the board but they’ll just turn it down.” Mr Downs said. He sounded sincere.

“Thank you. Mr. Downs. I’ve got a few options.” He tried to sound convincing, actually this was his last hope. He had been to more banks today then he cared to count. What was at stake. The family farm. He reached in the collar of his shirt with his finger. He felt for the chain. It was still there.

He wanted out of the office. He wanted out of the building. He wanted fresh air.

He remember how proud his dad was when they put the Centennial Farm sign in the yard. Jay was just a boy “Here’s two the next hundred years.” Dad had said. Jay swallowed, or tried.

“Merry Christmas.”

“Same to you.” He couldn’t bring himself to say it. He felt no miss givings to Mr Downs. It wasn’t Mr. Downs fault the farm was lost. It was his fault and he knew it. Smile pretend everything is OK. Ignore that stomach cramp. It felt something like a flu bug. Maybe some fresh air. He turned around and limped out of the office. He looked straight at the exit door on the far side of the lobby.

“Merry Christmas, Jay.” A pretty woman with auburn hair stuffed under an elf stocking hat said. Her name was Della. She was a short woman, maybe four and a half feet tall. She wore a pine green outfit. Long sleeves and a turtle neck trimmed in red. Her green skirt was very short. She wore green panty hose and heels with a curl up on the toes.

Dells always dressed for the holidays. Halloween black with a black high pointed hat and short skirt. Thanksgiving she wore feathers and every man drooled over the drumsticks. When she dressed for Easter, she dressed as a bunny.

Where did she come from. He really wanted to get outside, to be alone. What if she wanted to talk. What if she could see the tears in his eyes.

Della had light blue green eyes and a cute nose with freckles. Her nose wrinkled in almost a wink when she smiled. She could charm any one. She had only worked at the bank less than a year, still everyone knew by name if not at least by costume.

“Merry Christmas, Della.” Wow he had said it. It was a lie but he’d said it. “Last minute shopping, You know how it is.” He lied again. He had no one to shop for.

“Well It’s good to see you, too.” She said as if he had said it first. She was like that, always friendly. She dropped one of the folders she had been carrying. She and Jay bent over to pick it up at the same time. His head almost bumped hers. He smelt her perfume. He stood to walk away. She reached out and touched his sleeve. “How is the leg?”

“It’s fine.” He snapped out a little faster than he should have. He limped away.

She put her hand over her mouth. “I’m sorry.” He didn’t look back as he hurried out. He took a deep breath pulling in a few snow flakes. It had just started to snow. Some Christmas music was being played in the street. “Joy to the World” Yea.

Two years ago he was part of the celebration wishing every one a Merry Christmas. He had been filled with the holiday spirit. Last Christmas he was in intensive care. Old Man Carter had over celebrated and crossed the center line. Joanne died instantly. He didn’t even find out she didn’t make it until sometime into the new year. Old Carter got time. In a year or so he will be out. He can drink and drive again. Lucky him.

Snow was beginning to powder the ground. Snow is nice for Christmas some say. But this snow is suppose to come in a blast. We could be snowed in by morning. Maybe no one will find me for at least a week. He’d stop at the hardware store for a length of rope.

When he got home the house was cold. It didn’t matter anymore. He had run out of oil a few weeks ago. He heated the house with an old cast iron pot belly parlor stove. The fire had gone out since he left earlier this morning. The fire often went out if unattended regularly. He walked into the kitchen. He looked up at the ceiling fan.

Joanne had wanted the ceiling fan. It was hot that summer. Joanne was canning straw berry jam. He could almost still see her standing before the sink in the sunlight. He remembered how he could make out her figure through yellow and white sun dress. That I LOVE YOU smile. How she wiped her brow and said. We need a ceiling fan. She was right. She always was.

Jay took the newly purchased rope and tied a slip knot loop in one end. He slipped the loop over his left wrist. He jerked the other end of the rope tight with his right hand. The loop closed quickly. It was difficult to remove from his wrist. Satisfied he pushed the kitchen table over to one side of the room. He placed a chair under the fan.

Jay had fastened the fan stoutly between two 2x8 floor joists when he installed it. It would hold. He climbed up on to the chair. He held the rope end in one hand. He examined the neck of the fan.

KNOCK KNOCK KNOCK

“What the ...” He jumped down from the chair. Who would be calling on him now? He looked toward and out the window in the front door. He saw nothing, no one. He stepped back up on to the chair.

KNOCK KNOCK KNOCK

He jumped down again. He went to the door. He opened it.

“What are you doing here?” He said. Della stood in the door way in the costume she had worn at the bank. She looked shorter though, much shorter. Everything was the same except for the heels, now she wore slippers with the toes curled in a hook.

“I didn’t know you lived here.” She peered inside the house. It looks like a man lives here. This place needs a woman’s touch to make a house a home.

“I slid off the road. Could you help me?” She asked.

“Come on inside. I’ll get a phone book.”

“It’s cold in here. Don’t you have any heat?” Della asked. She looked around. Her eyes stopped at the kitchen doorway.

“I’ve been gone all day. I just got home.”

“I’ll start one.” Della turned and stepped toward the cast iron heat stove.

“No No That’s OK. I’ll ... I’ll do it later.” What is it with her? It’s Christmas eve. Doesn’t she have some place else to go? Someplace else to be. Why doesn’t she just go away.

“All the tow trucks are out they said they’ll be out as soon as they can but it might be tomorrow at the best.”

“OH No, oh no no no.” Della turned in circles a couple times.

“Why don’t you let me get my keys. I’ll drive you home.” Jay said. He walked into the kitchen. He had emptied his pockets earlier putting his keys on the counter. He tried to block the view of the kitchen.

“Della.” He called out. “Where do you live anyway?” He walked into the living room and looked around. He didn’t see her. “Della? Della?” He walked back into the kitchen. That was strange. Where did she go? He placed his keys back on the counter. Where was I? He leaned over and picked up the rope. She really was here right? I haven’t eaten all day. That’s it. My imagination. Why in the world would she come way out here? Knock on my door. He dropped the rope. He sat down on the chair.

I live at the end of a dirt road. Maybe she got lost. Maybe she can't find her way back. No one ever drives out here unless they are coming to see me. Della. Little Della. Why in the world would she come out here I know who she is that's all. How would she know who I was. Why would she care. The costume girl.

You're scared that's all. You made this up to postpone things. Think about it. Della coming way out here in that little sexy elf costume.

"But she was here I saw her." He said softly. He talked quietly as if he didn't want anyone other than himself to hear him thinking, or did he say that to reassure himself. He got up and went back into the living room.

"Look," He said as if someone was with him. "Look right here. If she was here the floor might be wet right here from the snow on her feet."

"The floor is wet."

"Yea, That's wet from my shoes." He continued to talk to himself. "It doesn't mean a thing."

"Look outside there should be tracks in the snow."

"You look out side."

"No, You."

"I will if you will."

"She's gone now. It doesn't matter."

"I'm looking outside." He went to the door and opened it.

"See I told ya. No tracks. I knew it."

"I don't care. She's out there. I'm going to go find her. I'm going to make sure she is safe." He went into the bed room and pulled a blanket off the bed and wrapped it around his left arm. He pulled his hat over his head. He walked out into the blowing snow. It was getting dark fast. He got in the old farm truck he had been driving lately. He headed down the road.

The farm truck was old. His grandfather bought it new forty or fifty years ago. It was used mostly to haul grain to the market. Jay was afraid to drive in his car. He had driven the truck a lot in the last year. He felt safer being in the truck, the big guy on the road.

The wipers chased the snow from the windshield with an werer were noise. The old grain truck made it's way through the blowing snow. It was getting dark now. The head lights tried to light the roadway. Jay crested a hill. The head lights came down from the abyss and on to a school bus on the side of the road.

The back door was open. Someone was carrying a box or package out of the bus. It was difficult for Jay to see clearly. As he got closer he could see children's sleds on the ground. Sleds stacked high with packages. Jay stopped. Had anyone seen a girl in a elf costume? Another package came out of the back of the bus. All jay could see was the elf shoes and the green legs.

Jay stopped the truck and rolled down the window.

“Excuse me.” Jay said “Have you seen ... ?” The elf put down the package.

“What do you want?” It was Della.

“I had to make sure you were OK.”

“I’m OK. I’ve got a lot of work to do.” She said then disappeared into the bus. Jay followed. The bus was more than half full of packages. Della carried another out and threw it on a sled.

“What are you doing?” Jay asked.

“I’ve got to get all this stuff to Tall Grass by Midnight. If you don’t mind.” She pushed past him with another package.

“How are ...”

“I’ll walk if I have to. Now step aside. Go to your big Christmas party. Have a good time. I’ll manage.”

“You said you slipped in the ditch. I thought it was a car, not a bus.”

“What difference does it make. You didn’t want to help me, so go.”

“You’ll never make it.” He stared at her “You hear, never.” He turned back toward his truck. He took a few steps.

“OK, Will you help me?” She pulled air noisily through her nose. Her voice cracked. “PLEASE”

Truck loaded they climbed into the cab. She started to cry. “I’m sorry. I’m so sorry. I’m sure you had big plans. I spoiled everything for you.”

He wrapped the blanket around her shoulders. Yea, Big plans. “Here the heat doesn’t work very good. Well, there is always next year.” He said firmly. He pressed a spot on his chest through his shirt. He felt for the small circle. He found the lump on the circle and pressed into his skin. It was sharp. He felt it. “Midnight hua?”

“Yea.”

Wererrr Were ... Wererrr were The wipers motor hummed as the wipers fought the constant falling snow.

“There was no big party.” He looked over in her direction briefly.

“What?”

“There was no big party. I was just going to spend the night alone.” He said slowly and deeply. He pulled back the corners of his lips as he thought about his plans.

Wererrr were ... Wererrr were

“Do you know what I usually do?” She asked passively.

He stared out the windshield. The lights fought to find the path that was normally a black top highway as the snow fell sideways. The motor hummed and the wipers werered. He breathed in and out slowly.

“NO”

“No what?” She was lost in her own thoughts that she had forgotten she had asked a question.

“I don’t know. What do you usually do.”

“I’d get in my PJ’s. I’d be all alone. I’d put on a good old Christmas movie. I’d lay on my stomach with a children’s coloring book and some crayons. I’d color the pictures. Sounds like fun Hua?”

“You?” He couldn’t believe it. She was so pretty.

“Yea, Me.”

“I don’t know it doesn’t sound too bad. Except the alone part.”

“You know we haven’t passed another vehicle in quite a long time.”

“I’m glad you are with me, or me with you. I’d hate to be out here alone.”

“I’m glad to be here with you. I really didn’t want to be alone, tonight.” He took a deep breath. Did he say something suggestive. Did he go too far. Change the subject. “I used to do that too. What movies. What movies do you watch. Coloring, yea. I did that too.”

“My favorite. A CHRISTMAS CAROL. I don’t care which version.”

“OH, I do. My favorite is the one with Michael Cane and the Muppets. But they are all the same. He’s a scrooge. He thinks only of himself.” He said in a monotone way.

“A lot of people are like that, don’t you think.” She said. “I am, sometimes.” He stared out the front window and pretended the road needed his undivided attention.

“You know what I think. I think it happens all the time. The scrooge thing. Past present future. I mean anytime you want you can see a past Christmas you can, in your mind.” She snapped her fingers. “Just like that.” The present well you are in the present, all the time although it quietly moves into the past. The future you can’t see of course but that guy, that guy in the hood, he always scares me. I can’t watch that part.”

“Let me show you something.” He reached into his collar and fished out a chain. On the end of the chain was a diamond ring. “Look at this. My wife never got a fancy engagement ring. I was going to give this to my wife for Christmas. I had hid it well. I stored it in the tool box on the tractor. I didn’t tell any one. It was going to be a big surprise on Christmas morning.” He took deep breath. He stared forward. He let his breath out. “I didn’t even find it myself until spring. She never saw it. She never got to wear it. She never got to show it to her friends. I wear it. But I never showed it to anyone before this. Christmas past.”

“See what did I tell you? See you can see the past. That’s easy.” She snapped her fingers and tried to change the subject. “I’m sorry.”

“So am I. Like you’ll never know.”

“Do you know what I want. It’s more like what I don’t want. I don’t want to sit and watch old movies and color alone anymore, but somethings don’t fit under the tree.”

The lights of the truck went from brilliant white beams to a dirty rusty yellow. They didn’t shine very far ahead. The wipers started and stopped. Started and stopped.

“Oh No.” Jay said. “There is something wrong.”

“Let’s see if we can find some place to stop. Maybe a house somewhere with the lights on.”

Jay turned off the heat and the wipers. The lights got a little better. They worked on dim but went out all together on bright. Jay and Della didn’t say anything to each other. They held their breath to try to keep the windows from fogging. Della crossed her fingers. The snow had stopped and the night sky cleared.

“There, Right there.” Della was pointing at a house. The tree lit the night with different colors. It stood out the most. It was inside a house. Jay actually saw it before Della pointed. Jay turned to drive in and the lights of the tree went out. Jay started to back out. The engine died. Jay opened the hood.

“Look right there. The wire from the generator is burned right off. If I had some wire I could fix it.”

Jay knocked on the door. The tree lights came back on. The light over the door came on. The door opened and a small child looked out then slammed the door closed. Jay turned to Della and Della turned to Jay. They stood and waited. A woman opened the door.

“I’m sorry the kids thought you were someone else.” She gasped.

“Jay. Jay Wise is that you?” The woman said.

“Jay Wise?” Della asked in a whisper. “Is that you?” She bounced her head and pushed her lips out as she tried to mimic speech.

“Yea,” He said inquisitively. He stood with the light shining in his face.

“It’s me. Margo Hayes. I mean Margo Dane. I was in third hour English with you. You sat in the second seat from the back with your friends Bill, Dan and Tom Ryeman. I had I had a awful crush on you. You probably didn’t even know I was on this planet.” Jay held his hand over his eyes to block the light. He only saw the silhouette of a woman.

“I ... I was a geek. That was the tenth grade. I ...” He started to say.

“Yea and I was that cool girl” She paused. “with brown haired and no top. Come on in. Come on in.” She stopped talking for a minute and took one look at Della. It was as if she couldn’t believe Della.

“Kids? Johnnie, Debby come here.”

A boy of about six and a girl of about four dragged into the light.

“Are you an elf?” The little girl quized. Della bent down to the girls ear and whispered.

“Yes I am. I’m on a secret mission for Santa. You won’t tell anybody will you?” The little girl slowly shook her head back and forth. The little girl’s head turned toward a waste basket. In the waste basket was the top half of a broken lamp. Della saw what the girl saw. Della put her finger to her lips. “If my friend could have that.” Della pointed. “I’ll make sure Santa doesn’t find out.” The little girl nodded.

“The kids were rough housing earlier. Accidents happen. They have been worried about that all night.” The woman said.

“I’m coloring Santa right now, Do you want to see it .”The little girl asked. The little girl reached for Della’s hand.

“I’m coloring Rudolf. Do you want to see that, too.” The little boy said. He reached for Della’s other hand. They walked in to the other room. The TV was on and coloring books and crayons were spread out on the floor. Soon Della was stretched out on the floor with a crayon in hand.

“They thought you were Gramma and Grandpa. Mom and dad won’t be coming this year. This storm has grounded all the planes. They have been coming every year since I threw that bum Marshal out. I was home with a baby. Can you believe it. He was seeing some one else. I heard about Joanne. I’m sorry. Give me a minute. I’ll put some coffee on.” She was working over the stove.

“Just look at them in there. Can’t you stay a while. Just look at them in there.”

Jay stood a minute. He fidgeted with the ring on his chest through his shirt. He looked at the broken lamp. He knelt and started pulling the wire out of it. He wrapped the wire around his hand as he went.

“We have an extra place ... “

Margo turned too quickly from the stove. She tripped over Jay. She lost her balance and stepped backward. Jay reached out and caught her in his arms. They were standing under a plastic mistletoe hanging from the ceiling.

Della walked into the room. She pulled the wire from Jays hand. “I guess I better go fix the truck.”

“I’ll help you.” Jay followed Della out.

“You were going to kiss her weren’t you?”

“What?”

“I said. You were going to kiss her weren’t you.”

“I ... Au ...”

“I don’t want to talk about.” The truck was repaired and they were on the road again. They drove on.

“You were really going to kiss her weren’t you. I don’t want to talk about it.” There are times in a man’s life when he knows the best thing to do is to do nothing, say nothing.

“You’re a Heightist aren’t you?”

“A what?”

“Heightist, You know Racist Sexist Heightest. You have a problem with short people.”

“I do not. I don’t know . I never thought about it. OK I’ll kiss you if that’s what you want. Show me a mistletoe.”

“I don’t want to talk about it.” She crossed her arms over her chest. “Do you need a mistletoe to kiss a woman. No. I don’t want to talk about it.”

”It’s a good thing I walked in when I did. You were just about to kiss her weren’t you? Well kiss her I don’t care. I just don’t want to talk about it.” She turned her head toward the window. She made a face. “Marrrrggggoooo.” She whispered.

“Turn here. Turn here.”

“What. You said we were going to Tall Grass.”

“This is as far as you go. See that farm over there. Pull in.” She said in a firm no nonsense way. The drive way was lined trees. Between the house and barn a yard light lit the area. Jay drove until he was under the light.

Before Jay even stopped the truck two men in army camo stepped out of one from behind the trees.

“You better stop. I’ll talk to them. You better just walk away. Get out of the truck and walk away.”

“But ... “

“I’m not going to talk about it.” She said so firmly. It frightened Jay. “Just go in the house and warm up.” Jay walked toward the house. One of the men got into his truck and drove it into the barn. Someone opened and closed the big barn door behind it. Jay could no longer see his truck. He walked toward the back door of the house.

A tall thin bearded figure walked with authority met Della under the light of the yard light.

“How much does he know?”

“He doesn’t know a thing, honest. He didn’t ask.”

“Other than that, how did it go?”

“Fine, I’ve got him right where I want him. Do we have too, you know. I mean this was my first assignment.”

“No, I think you did well. As matter of fact, you did a marvelous job. I may have another assignment for you next year. I can’t slip every gift under the tree, but we will see. I better see if the boys got it loaded.”

Jay climbed the steps to the back of the house. The door wasn't locked. He turned the handle and tried to push the door open. It hit something solidly. It opened far enough for him to slip his hand in and find a light switch. The light came on. A table blocked the door from opening any further. A chair lay on its side. Jay saw the figure of a man dangling from the ceiling fan. Jay jerked his hand back. He reached back in and shut off the light. He backed down the stairs slowly and carefully. He ran down the drive way and towards the road.

He heard a swish and someone calling out names. He looked back, No one was following. His truck was under the light. He wasn't going back. The swish and name calling came from the sky. "ON Dasher, On ...He couldn't believe his eyes. A flying slay. He turned back toward the road. He was out of breath and collapsed face first into the snow.

Jay woke up and rubbed his eye. The sun light filled the room. He slide out of bed. He wore pajama bottoms and the chain. The PJ's were inside out. First things first, He hurried through the living room to the bathroom. The house was warm. A fresh fire crackled in the old pot belly. There in the corner was a tree, lit and decorated. He scratched his head. His coat lay in the chair. An envelope was half falling out of the pocket.

Dear Jay the geek

I enjoyed seeing you

I'd love to see you again.

Christmas dinner is at 12:30

Margo

PS Somethings don't fit under the tree.

Jay went back into his room. He removed the chain from his neck for the first time ever. He opened the drawer beside his bed. He dropped the chain in the drawer. He closed it. He dialed the number on the note.

The couple walked hand in hand to the receptionist window. The receptionist was sitting facing away from them. She was talking to one of the nurses. The point of her black hat pointed at their faces. The large brim covered most of the rest of her. She stopped talking. She started to turn.

“Hi. My wife and I have an appointment Doctor Brown. We ...”

“Hi. I’m Mrs. Wise, Margo Wise. I’m pretty sure, I mean it’s not my first. I’ve done this before but my husband Jay, it is his first, He’s so excited.”

The woman in a witch costume looked up. She looked right into their faces. Her eyes were a light blue green. She had freckles on her nose that seemed to wink as she smiled.

“I’ll tell the doctor you are here.” She stood. She couldn’t have been more than 4 1/2 foot tall. She wore a black dress.

“You are new here aren’t you?” Margo asked.

“No. I’ve been here almost ten months. My name is Kitty.”

THE END