

'Twas the Night After Christmas

When you see a big fat guy with a bushy white beard, nursing a Heineken at the end of the bar on December 26th, you gotta figure he's just asking for it.

"Yo! Santa," I said, as jovially as my fourth Dewers Over could make me. "Christmas is a done deal. How come you're not out relaxing in the beach someplace, huh?" I raised my glass high, ice cubes clinking, as a salute, hoping he'd take it the right way. Although after four highballs, I'm never really quite sure what the right way is.

He smiled back. Not a big, jolly, Santa smile. A tired smile. His forehead's wrinkles curved like ocean waves. His thick fingertips were not manicured. His nose was red, all right, but he was drinking beer for as long as I had been in the bar. Maybe longer. Tired, I thought, that's what he was. Tired to the bone.

He looked back down into his glass, divining the liquid for some inspiration to life, I assumed. Not that I was going to let him get off that easy.

My fourth highball said, "No, really, Santa, baby, the Big Rush is over. You should grab the old lady and head for the heat."

"Give it a rest, Roger," Alex, the bartender said, as he mechanically wiped the counter with a dirty washrag. Me and Santa were the only patrons at this late hour. I knew Alex's name because I had asked him when he served me my second Dewers. He knew my name because I was still wearing my Toys 'R' Us nametag.

"Just asking, just asking," I replied with hands held up. My wife has remarked, on more than one occasion, that the only thing worse than an angry drunk was a happy one.

Alex grunted and took his gaze upwards to the Rangers game. As soon as they

lost to the Sharks, in overtime, no less, he moved down to the end of the bar, poured himself a decaf, and turned the pages of the *Post* without much apparent interest.

I looked over at my Santa guy, sitting three stools down from me. His beard was definitely Santa material but he wore no red suit and his weather-beaten grey overcoat was the kind you might consider high-class at low-class thrift shops. Heavy-set, though not necessarily fat, his broad shoulders slumped over his chest like a failing porch roof. A pair of fur-lined gloves rested on the counter. He held his beer glass with two hands. I took another sip of my Scotch and felt happier. I moved over and sat next to him.

“So. What does Santa do in the off-season? Huh? Huh?” I laughed at my own wit.

He sighed and slowly shifted his gaze from his beer bottle to me. I grinned. I just love barroom conversations after a long, hard day of inventory control management.

“What does Santa do in the off-season?” he repeated. “That’s a laugh.”

“Oh, come on,” I said, encouraged. “You work one night a year, then it’s off to Bermuda. That’s one heck of an off-season. Am I right? Am I right?” Alex looked up from his paper at me. He shrugged and went back to his paper.

“I guess you have never heard of time-shift dilation coordinates.”

“Huh?”

“I thought so.” Santa returned back to his slouched posture. He raised his wrist to check his watch, frowned, then put his arm back on the counter.

I was a bit puzzled but certainly intrigued. “Time-shift *elations*? You’re putting me on, right? Because I *know* about time, ah, shit, ah, elations.”

“*You* know about ‘time-shift *elations*?’” His blue eyes seemed to twinkle.

“Oh, sure, sure,” I waved my glass-free hand expansively. “It has to do with

cosmic strings and, ah, molecule predictions and stuff like that there.”

“Really?”

“Oh, yeah,” I said, warming to a subject that I had not a clue about. “With that time-shit stuff, we’ll be able to, oh, extract oil from dust bunnies. Or travel the world in a single night.” I giggled. Sometimes, I cracked myself up.

Santa smiled. He didn’t look tired, now. “Where’d you hear that?”

“Around.” A good comic never reveals his sources.

Santa stared long and hard at me. He picked up his glass and drained it. He called over to Alex for another one, then, after a moment, said to refill my glass, too.

“Hey, thanks.” Five scotches were three too many but why insult Santa? And I had had a busy day. The day after Christmas is never an easy one for us Toys ‘R’ Us inventory control managers. Too many blamed merchandise returns. Those Baby Buddy dolls fell apart quicker than quicksand. The Jumpstart board games were missing page five of the rule book. And don’t get me started on those “upscale” GPS key chains! And, of course, all day long, Old Man Ferguson seemed to think it was *my* fault that China had no quality control.

So I accepted the drink from Santa graciously. I even left a dollar tip for Alex this time. He picked it up, grunted again and returned to his post with the *Post*.

“Travel the world in one night,” he said after a second. “That’s the book on Santa Claus, isn’t it?”

“Well. Yeah.”

Santa shook his head. “So how could that be possible, huh?”

“I don’t know. You tell me, Santa.”

“I prefer Kris. With a ‘K.’”

“Okay. Kris. With a ‘K.’ I’m Roger, by the way. With an ‘R.’” I giggled.

“I know. I can read nametags.”

I laughed. I don’t recognize sarcasm when drunk until long after the fact. “So. Kris. You don’t fly around the world in one night?”

“Not even.”

“Not even *what?*” I also don’t recognize much slang talk when drunk, either.

“There’s no physical way that Santa Claus can visit 3.87 billion homes in one night. Especially when driving a team of flying reindeer.

I considered that solemnly. “Well, Yeah.”

“But, if Santa Claus gets a move on, he just might be able to visit all those homes in almost a year, 365 days. With those, ah, *elations*. And without the damn reindeer.”

“In one year? You mean, not all on Christmas Eve?”

“Yes, Roger, not all on one night. All through the flipping year.”

That didn’t make any sense. “But all the Christmas trees are down. And no stockings are hung by the chimney with care.”

Kris grimaced. “Please. Don’t remind me of that poem?”

“I said a poem?” I never remember no poems.

“‘Hung by the chimney with care.’ By Clement Fucking Moore.”

“Who?”

“You don’t know who Clement Moore is?” I shook my head. Kris cleared his throat. “*’Twas the night before Christmas, and all through the house . . .*”

“Oh, *that* ‘Night Before Christmas.’” Funny, I never really thought of it as a poem

before. More like a holiday tradition with rhyming words.

“Yes, *that* ‘Night Before Christmas.’ Man, you let a guy buy you one hot buttered rum and suddenly, you’re a Jolly Old Elf.”

He almost spat out those last words. That made me shut up. Up to now, I was just teasing the old guy. But, now, he seemed to be taking himself a mite too serious

As in loony-serious. I checked my watch.

“Going someplace, Roger?” His eyes still twinkled, though.

“No, no, ah, Kris. It’s just that I told the old ball and chain that I’d be coming home on the 9:17.” Actually, I had told Anna I’d be terribly late and not to wait up. After going head to head for *hours* with Mattel over their return policy, I decided I’d have some end-of-the-holiday-season celebratory highballs with myself.

“‘The old ball and chain.’ Somehow, I figured you’d be saying that.” As I tried to figure out if I had been insulted or not, he sighed.

“Did you ever think *why* the whole Santa legend got started?”

“No.” I never really gave that much thought, to be honest. Christmas without Santa was like breakfast without toast. Or something. I tried not to think too much at bars. Some people became philosophers after a few drinks. I usually tried to avoid them. It seemed Kris was becoming one of those but, heck, he *had* bought me a drink.

“Couldn’t tell you, Kris,” I said. I paused, something I don’t normally do even after one drink.

“Who knows how Santa started?” I said, slowly. “Maybe people just wanted to put a face on that Christmas feeling?”

Kris nodded in agreement. I felt like someone had just patted me on the back.

“Well put, Roger. ‘A face to the feeling.’” He sipped at his beer. “I’ll think I’ll use that someday.” The news came on the TV. A bombing had happened somewhere. We both ignored it.

“Christmas-type legends go back for hundreds of years, actually,” Kris said. “I won’t bore you with the details.”

“Thanks.”

Kris laughed. Not the booming *ho-ho-ho*, like you’d expect from a guy now pretending he’s Santa, but a deep, throaty chuckle that made me chuckle along with him.

“People always look for a reason to feel good about themselves.”

“Ah-huh.” I sneaked a peek up at the TV and saw that Marsha Cummings had attended a premiere or something. I loved her in *Hot Island Romance*.

“But, in the depths of winter, when you’re cold and hungry and in the dark, in most countries, anyway, wouldn’t that be the least likely time you’d want to celebrate?”

“Ah-huh.” Marsha was laughing at something. Or someone, couldn’t hear exactly.

Kris followed my eyes. “Forget it.”

Marsha had replaced by a burning building in Detroit. I gave Kris my full attention again. “Celebrate. Have a party. Nice feeling to have.”

“It is. But why do people have that Christmas feeling, that ‘Peace On Earth, Goodwill Toward Men’ feeling in December instead of any other time of the year?”

“I don’t know,” I said, honestly. “Did Buddhists have that Christmas feeling? Or Arabs? Or all those Chinese?” A bit of a non sequitur but, hey, I was drunk.

“Good question, Roger. No, they didn’t. They do now, for the most part, thanks to mass communication. So Santa feels obligated to go to those countries, too. Where,

before, he'd just run up and down Europe and North America and call it a night."

"I suppose." I was getting a little bored with all this philosophical talk. Happy drunks have short attention spans.

Kris must have felt my interest slipping because he started wrapping it up.

"So, in a nutshell, do we feel good about Christmas because of those goodwill feelings, or do we like the goodwill feelings because of Christmas?"

"Beats me." I looked up at a Folger's commercial.

"Maybe Santa helps encourage that feeling. Puts a face on that feeling."

"Ah- huh." I liked the way the lady was holding the coffee cup with both hands and sniffing the aroma with her eyes closed.

"Forget it."

"No, really," I protested. I motioned to Alex. Took awhile to catch Alex's eye but eventually he nodded, glumly, came down the bar, and refilled our glasses.

"What do you think about Santa Claus, Alex?"

He stared back at me with an expression of bored politeness. "He's okay, I guess." He favored us with a weary grin. "I got a couple of kids who keep hoping he'll be coming back tomorrow."

"Mario and Lucille," Kris said.

"How's that? How'd you know my kids' names?"

I stared over at Kris. Had he been checking their names and checking them twice?

"You got a photo of them up there on the mirror." Kris pointed to a picture over the cash register. I had barely noticed it. There was some writing underneath which I assumed must be their names.

“Oh,” Alex turned and looked at the picture. He had a puzzled look on his face when he turned back to us. “Yeah. Mario and Lucille. 6 and 4. Great ages for Christmas.”

“Yes, they are,” Kris said.

“Yeah,” Alex agreed. Then, as if realizing he might be drawn into a conversation, he said, “Last call, guys,” and returned to his end of the bar.

I checked my watch. I could just make the last train to New Rochelle.

“So, Kris, you think Santa is responsible for making people feel all Christmas-y?”

“Yes, I do.”

“Because of your big North Pole factory and all those elves and such.”

Kris shook his head. “Don’t you think Google Earth would have discovered any big toy factory in the middle of the frozen tundra by now?”

“Ah?” This was a new thought. “Google Earth didn’t locate Hogwarts, you know. So maybe, you know, a little bit of magic trumps technology.” That seemed smart.

“Well, now, Roger,” Kris said, slowly. “I’d agree with your argument . . . if Hogwarts was *real!*”

“Well, really, I was just saying . . .”

“Again, Mister Clement Fucking Moore strikes again. Any good deed needs a solid commercial base behind it. I mean, if Santa Claus *did* have a factory, wouldn’t he have built it close to, oh, I don’t know, *resources?* Distributions networks? *Roads?*”

“Isn’t that why you have reindeer?” I felt like egging him on.

“Don’t get me started on why Santa needs *reindeer*, for Christ’s sake.”

“Jesus, Kris, lighten up, already.” Here, I was going along with him and he’s getting all worked up.

“You’re right, Roger, you’re right, I’m getting huffy.” Kris smiled. Damned if there weren’t dimples in his cheeks. “The point I’m trying to make, after a shit load of Heinekens and knowing I go to go back to work at midnight, is that the Santa legend has gotten all twisted around. He doesn’t drop off presents to good little boys and girls, and fill up their stockings, and eat tons of stale cookies.”

“Well, yeah,” I said, although I must admit I felt a little disappointed to hear him say that. “So, what good is Santa?”

“What good is he? Well, he *does* travel the globe, he does do that, but he doesn’t bring presents. He brings hope.”

“Hope.”

“He senses goodness, Roger, and he encourages it. Gives it just a little bit of a mental nudge. So people who want to feel good about Christmas get an extra boost. A boost that can help carry them through the rest of the year.”

“That’s it?”

“Isn’t hope enough?” Kris leaned backwards against his stool’s backrest.

“Well,” I admitted. “It’s nice. But a new bicycle would be even better.”

“Like they’ve said, no good deed goes unpunished. Santa just wanted to give what he could, travelling the world, via time-shift dilation coordinates, which, by the way, allows the traveler to bend and alter real-time into cause-shifters, so it would appear that, after travelling a full year, to people’s homes, that it would all be done in just one night.”

“Isn’t that what I said?” Actually, I had no flipping idea of what I said. Or what he said. Like I said, two Dewers Over is really my limit.

“Yes, it was, Roger, yes, it was.” He looked down at watch, frowned, then

snatched his gloves off the counter. “Gotta run. The whole thing starts all over again at the stroke of midnight. Without elves or sleighs or eight tiny reindeer. Nine, if you have to count that newcomer, Rudolph.”

“I like Rudolph.”

Kris pulled his left glove on tight with his right hand. “Not a bad addition to the Christmas tradition. The overlooked waif filled with hope that overcomes ridicule and personal tragedy.”

“Yeah, I guess so.” I brightened. “Sort of like a Toys ‘R’ Us inventory control manager. Never appreciated but just does his job.”

Kris snorted a bit, in a weary manner. “And like the poor guy who accepts his fate as a goodwill spreader for all time.”

“Seems like a thankless job. Why would anyone agree to that?”

Kris laughed. This time, his laugh was Santa-like and his body shook like a bowlful of jelly. Alex looked up, smiled, and went back to his paper.

“Let’s just say he’s paying off an election bet.”

Kris put on his other glove. “Merry Christmas, Roger. Give my best to Anna and your little one, Jack.”

“And a Happy New Year to you, Kris.”

Kris gave a little nod to Alex as he passed him. As he walked out the door, Kris started singing, tonelessly, “Hi, Ho, Hi, Ho, it’s off to work I go. . .”

I stood up, stretching a bit. I put on my coat and checked my watch. Just a few minutes to catch the train. I nodded to Alex, who gave me back a curt nod of his own.

I stepped out onto W. 114th Street and turned toward the station. There was no

wind but the air was brisk so I wrapped myself up in my coat. The night sky was clear, no snow was forecast for the next three days. I looked up, almost expecting to see a sleigh and reindeer and a friendly wave from a Heineken-soaked weirdo.

I took a deep breath, inhaling air that didn't seem laden with soot and car exhaust. "Maybe that's what hope smells like," I said to myself. Then, I stopped walking.

Did I mention to Kris that I had a little one? Much less give his name? And Anna's name, for that matter? I just called her my "old ball and chain."

A slight breeze swirled around my head and shoulders. I smiled, gave a short barking laugh, and started singing.

"You better watch out/ You better not cry . . ."

