

Long Tailed Gifts

“That’s it for the freebies, you little ghosts and ghoulies,” Willard declared and flicked off the porch lights.

The eighth chime of the pendulum clock faded from the hall. He scooped the few remaining candy corns from Marge’s pumpkin-shaped Waterford crystal bowl, her latest find, made possible by a miraculous credit extension on her Pottery Barn Visa card; this one granted at a justifiable 29.9% APR.

Willard returned to the living room chewing on the last of the candies, feeling somewhat mollified by his spot-on Halloween consumption forecast. He plunked down in his olive drab Barcalounger. Marge was still on the phone with Mother, urging her to reconsider.

“Oh nonsense, Susan! What sort of Christmas would it be without you? You must come!” Marge bent forward in her chair and rested her fingers on her lips. Willard worked his tongue at a sugary lump wedged between his molars. She pointed at the receiver and nodded at him with a smile.

“Oh, Susan, that is so wonderful!”

Mother may have agreed to Christmas, but her actuarial model suggested otherwise. It was a regrettable computation, made some time ago in a moment of weakness that he vowed never to revisit. And though he'd thankfully botched the logarithm, his back-of-the-envelope application of Monte Carlo methodology indicated that Mother was well into the long tail of her life span probability distribution.

He listened, rolling the liberated, sweet kernel along the roof of his mouth.

"... Right, so we'll see you in just a few weeks then – what's that?"

Marge rolled her eyes and directed the receiver his way.

"I *said*, that's eight weeks by my count, Margaret..." Mother's voice, poorly reconstructed on the overseas line, crossed the distance like wildfire.

Marge returned the phone to her ear, "I stand corrected, Susan, a couple short months then. We can't wait!"

#

On the Wednesday afternoon before Thanksgiving, Mother piloted a leased single-prop from St. Martin to St. Barth's. According to eyewitness reports from Tom Beach, the airplane skipped off the stony Caribbean mountain plateau that precedes the landing strip, dipped a wing and cartwheeled down the tarmac on its points before bursting into flames.

The holidays continued to bless the hell out of them, including another foul winter. Obligatory cocktail parties and tangled wires and vacuums clogged with pine needles and all the other joyful wonders buzzed throughout their frozen neighborhood. Snow piled up on the sidewalks, splattered black and beige with soot from the plows.

"Looks like giant seagull droppings," Mother had once observed.

She always had flown solo.

#

On Christmas Eve Willard and Marge sat reading *The Times* in the living room when Greg came in the front door. He stamped his boots in the foyer.

“Hello? Mom?” he called.

“Greg! You’re home!” Marge cried.

She tossed her section at Willard’s feet, slipped on her fuzzy, baby blue slippers and popped up from her armchair. She steadied herself with slow, deep breaths, clearly woozy from her morning Xanax. She should know better. Willard lowered the Science section and reached for her arm.

“Easy, Marge,” he said.

“Oh, Willard, it’s just a little lightheadedness!” She dismissed and beckoned him with a single, looping gesture. He followed her across the new, hand-knotted, mauve rug she’d somehow procured on layaway.

“Hi, Mom!” Greg set down his duffle bag on the chilly tiles in the front hall. Marge hugged him. Greg stuck his hand out behind her, “Merry Christmas, Will.”

Willard shook Greg’s hand and smiled. Her boy looked good. Shaven, hair combed, Greg was growing up inside and out. Marge had done a fine job.

“We weren’t expecting you ‘till later,” Marge said with delight.

“I know, but I have a little Christmas surprise for you that can’t wait.”

“You do?” Marge squealed.

“It’s in the car,” he said, his hands resting on her shoulders.

“For me?”

“Here, wait, one sec.” Greg jogged back out the door.

Marge raised her eyebrows at Willard. They waited in the hall.

Greg returned with a little bundle of pristine white fur cupped in his hands.

“Merry Christmas, Mom! She’s a Persian. I’ve been calling her Whiskers, but she’s yours to name.”

The fuzzy snowball mewed and Marge melted right there in the hall.

“Oh, Greg, she’s the most precious little thing!” Marge reached for it.

Greg placed the kitten in her shaking hands.

“Whiskers is perfect, just perfect!” She held the kitten up for Willard to see. He nodded and smiled. She cuddled it to her chest. The kitten dug its claws into the blue quilting of her housecoat.

Willard sniffed and rubbed a tickle from his nose.

Oh, the joys of the season.

#

Whiskers entertained them in the living room, romping on the papers and pouncing on Willard’s shoelaces. Willard’s eyes itched. He pinched his nose but sneezed again.

“Are you allergic?” Greg asked.

“Oh no, really?” Marge bit her lip.

“I’m sorry, Will. I didn’t know,” Greg said.

“Neither did I,” Willard said as he bent over and stuck his finger out to the kitten. “I’ll be fine, right Whiskers?” Whiskers batted at it.

Willard held his breath.

The doorbell rang.

Willard returned to the living room with a thin accordion folder, the lid sealed with red wax.

“What’s that?”

“It’s from Meyers and Lefkowitz,” Willard replied and sat in his chair.

“Oh, for goodness sakes! Must they do this on Christmas Eve?” Marge grumbled. “What could possibly be so—”

“Are you going to open it?” Greg pocketed his phone and sat up on the couch.

“Don’t see why not,” Willard said. He held the folder in his hands. Marge stroked Whiskers from head to tail. Fine, white fur gathered on her fingertips like wisps of cotton candy. On each pass Whiskers pressed her hind legs into Marge’s lap, raising her haunches in a feline ecstasy that struck Willard as somehow obscene.

“Willard?”

“Yes?”

“Are you going to open it?”

Whiskers mewed.

“Yes, yes.”

“You don’t have to, dear.”

“No, no, let’s see what we have.”

He unwound the tie-string, collecting the bits of broken wax and carefully placed them in the crease of the Science section. He peered inside, removed the lawyer’s cover letter, a handwritten note from Mother, and three envelopes, one green, one white and one red. Whiskers and the season notwithstanding, Willard was not accustomed nor enamored by surprises. He scanned the cover letter and read Mother’s words. He shook his head.

“Well?”

“Apparently, Mother had another safe deposit box. There’s a gift here for each of us.”

Greg and Marge looked at one another.

“The white one’s for you, Greg, and green for you, Marge.”

The three sat holding their bequeathments. Marge fanned her rosy cheeks with her envelope. Greg held his up to the bay window. The light captured his thumb in a nacreous frame.

Willard closed his eyes and took a deep breath. His clogged sinuses required him to top off his alveoli with an open mouth.

“Well, who’s gonna make the first move?” Greg blurted.

“How about on the count of three?” Marge suggested.

“Okay,” Willard sighed.

“One... Two... Three!”

Willard dug his thumb under the flap. The glue was stiff with age. He lifted the edge of a cashier’s check and counted the zeros. He fought back his nausea with repeated swallowing.

“Holy shit!” Greg blurted.

“Greg!” Marge reproached.

“Ten grand! Will, your mom left me ten grand! That’s, that’s... That’s so cool!” Greg stared at his check, holding it in both hands.

“Oh, honey!” Marge exclaimed. She removed her check and gasped. “Oh my!” Whiskers pawed at the envelope that fell atop her tiny head. “Oh my.”

“Well?” Greg urged.

“It’s, it’s one hundred...”

“One hundred?” Greg leaned toward his mother.

“One-hundred-thousand-dollars!” Marge held the check for Greg to see.

“A hundred grand? a hundred large? Holy shit! Merry Christmas, *Mom!*” Greg laughed and put up a hand for a high five.

Smack.

They looked at Willard. Marge blushed and peeked down at Whiskers.

Willard’s insides were tumbling, cartwheeling and on fire. Marge may have apologized, he wasn’t sure.

“Willard?”

“One million,” he mumbled.

“What?” Marge jolted forward in her seat. Whiskers scrambled from her lap and dropped to the rug.

Greg’s face resembled a Venn diagram, three ovals with no commonality.

“One million dollars,” Willard said.

“What... What in the world will we do with all *that?*” Marge exclaimed.

Willard pinched at the tickle in his nostrils. What will we do indeed?

#

Willard sneezed and woke to sharp, tiny claws stuck to his bald crown like pins in a cushion. Willard separated the kitten from his head. Marge shifted beside him. She pressed her rump against his hip. She breathed through her mouth in long, steady breaths separated by wet clicks from her throat. He held Whiskers aloft in both hands as if in offering to the gods.

“Merry Christmas, Whiskers,” Willard whispered. He set the kitten down on Marge’s hip and got up for the john.

Steam rose from the basin. He sneezed in rapid succession and then adjusted the water to a tolerable heat. He scrubbed his face. Water dripped from his stubbled chin as he searched his reflection for cat hair. He splashed his face again, this time with his bloodshot eyes open. The slap of the water against his corneas doused the itch. He blotted his face dry and shuffled back to bed.

“Dear?” Marge stirred.

“Nightmare,” Willard whispered.

“No nightmares,” she mumbled and nestled her hip against his thigh.

“No nightmares,” Willard repeated.

He dreamt; he stood at his toilet, staring at a monstrous bowel movement the length and girth of a tiger’s tail. It protruded from the clogged toilet and drooped over the rim of the seat. Willard stood confounded, pj bottoms at his ankles, hands on his hips.

It was his mess to clean.

He stepped out of his pjs and ventured a guess at the turd’s ultimate tensile strength. He slipped one flannel leg up the length of the hanging turd. His b.m. showed no signs of tearing or breakage at the fulcrum. He lifted it gingerly off the seat, cradling the warm, rounded butt-end in his right hand. He slid his pj leg up the shaft and over the curl of the joint, like a naked Prince Charming armed with a knee sock instead of a slipper. He took hold of the turd with both hands. It conformed to his grip. He pulled.

It tugged back.

Willard stumbled backward and woke to the smack of his hand against the wooden headboard. He shook the pain from his hand and sneezed.

Marge slept on. Whiskers stared down from the crest of her hip, her oblong green pupils shining.

They would call him rash, impulsive, perhaps even cruel; they would hate him. It couldn't be helped. It was for the greater good. He must establish a basis for understanding, a reference point. He sat up and lifted up Whiskers from her perch.

“How about a little treat?” Willard whispered.

He eased out of bed and tiptoed with Whiskers to the bathroom. He pulled open the mirror and surveyed Marge's prescription bottles along the bottom shelf of the medicine cabinet. He shrugged, settled on Xanax, and adjusted his grip on the kitten while he removed a pill. Whiskers struggled and mewed. He sneezed.

“Sorry about that. It's okay. This won't hurt a bit,” he promised.

He peeled Whiskers off his shoulder and estimated her weight in one hand. He bit the pill in half and gnawed at the bitter remains. He pinched Whisker's little jaw open, deposited a crumb and held her mouth shut.

“I know, I know, bitter, right?” he cooed and stroked the soft, white fur under her throat.

#

“Willard!”

He blinked up at the ceiling.

“Willard!” Marge called from downstairs.

Dust hovered in the sun beaming through their window. Willard sat up, bare-chested and disoriented. He'd discarded his furry pajama top. Marge must have noticed. He lay back down, and pulled the faded crimson wool blanket to his chin. She creaked up the stairs. He closed his eyes.

“How could you?” she demanded at their door.

He lay still.

“You pick today of all days to sleep in?” Marge chided, hands on her hips and a bit out of breath. “I’m in the middle of Christmas breakfast, there’s dirty dessert dishes from last night, we have a living room full of presents to open, and if that weren’t enough, Whiskers is off hiding somewhere! So, up and Adam mister! You can help Greg look.”

Willard rubbed his face.

“Come on, Scrooge, out of bed! It’s Christmas!”

#

“I love it,” Willard insisted. He held up the periwinkle paisley tie; the silk felt smooth and expensive between his fingers and he despised it.

“You hate it. That’s okay, dear; you can exchange it for something you like. They’re very good about returns,” Marge reassured him from her traditional spot on the rug beside the tree. She loved to hand out the presents.

“No really, I like it. It’s just a bit of a departure, you know,” Willard protested.

“Well, you can think about it.”

“Hey, Mom, look!” Greg pointed to a wad of purple tissue paper creeping out from beneath the tree.

“Ah-ha! There you are! We’ve been looking all over for you!” Marge laughed and reached for the tissue.

Willard replaced the tie in its fine Brooks Brothers box. He closed the lid and Marge gasped.

“What the? what the! what the *devil!*” Marge scooped up Whiskers. Horror stretched her face into a gaping singularity.

“Whoa,” Greg mumbled.

“I... I... I...” Marge stammered as she inspected Whiskers. From the neck down, Whiskers was pink and furless. Concerned for the kitten’s safety, Willard hadn’t attempted to defur her little head.

“What did you do? What did you do?” Marge clutched the shivering kitten to her chest.

“Whaaaat?” Greg’s voice raised an octave. His eyes fixed on the bald kitten. “Whoa, this is, like, beyond the beyond,” he stifled his chuckle with both hands.

Willard cleared his throat, lifted a finger, opened his mouth and then shut it. He scratched his head; there was no good place to start. He should have prepared his explanation or, at the very least, some soothing words of reassurance.

“Now, now, hold on, Marge. You see it’s like this... A gift, you know, any gift great or small—”

“Excuse me?” Marge choked.

“Any gift, great or small comes with the weight of responsibility—”

“Responsibility? What are you talking about? Why are you talking nonsense?” Marge shrieked.

“A burden commensurate with its perceived value,” Willard continued, but his logic wasn’t tracking as smoothly in the daylight.

“Willard, you shaved my kitten!” Marge was hysterical, though now was not the time to inquire about her medication.

“If I was wrong, I am sorry,” he shrugged.

“If? *If?* You shaved my—”

“No, no! not shave! Nair, Marge, I used your *Nair*. And, really, Whiskers didn’t seem to mind, really.”

“Didn’t seem to *mind?*” Marge clutched Whiskers to her chest and struggled to her feet.

“The fur, dear, it was her fur... my allergies you see. It was unbearable—”

“Have you lost your mind? Willard - you *shaved* Whiskers! You *shaved* my kitty!”

“It was Nair, dear, we used Nair! Perfectly harmless,” he pointed to Whiskers. “Look, you see? I kept well away from her head.”

“Seriously, Will, shaving Mom’s... that’s like, whoa,” Greg’s voice trailed off.

Marge bent down until she was nose-to-nose with him. “Willard, how dare you! What gives you the right? How dare you!”

“You shaved it without even *asking?* You crazy monkey!” Greg chuckled. He dug into his pants pocket.

“Well, you see dear, I simply presumed,” Willard started.

Greg snapped a shot with his cell phone.

“You presumed! You presumed? Willard, you had no right to presume!” Marge cried, “Whiskers is mine! You had no right! How could you?” she turned her back on him and stormed out of the room.

He shrugged at Greg but the kid didn’t notice; he was typing furiously on his phone.

Willard stood up, a despot, wielding his logic on behalf of the greater good. And Christmas Day carried on, relentless with its million blessings. He hurried after her.

“Marge? You’re right! I’m so sorry, dear. I’m so very sorry! Do you hear me? You’re right! You’re absolutely right. I had no right, no right whatsoever! It was not my decision to make! Whiskers is *your* kitten! Greg gave Whiskers to *you*. ...”

THE END