

My Nightmare before Christmas

By David Ryan
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To understand the holiday season, I think it's best to look at scientific experiments on rats. Particularly the experiments where an enormous quantity of rats are packed into a small space and are observed to see what kind of changes they undergo.

Actually, there were experiments like that — so a television once told me — and the rats ended up nibbling on each other for a snack.

Alas, it doesn't seem to me that during the holiday season human beings are much more civilized than a bunch of rats crammed into close quarters. Witness the American cultural phenomena called "The Day After Thanksgiving."

It's a day when otherwise independently thinking people cram themselves into stores to buy, buy, buy in preparation for their holiday of choice.

Marvel at the wonders it produces:

- The sticky, oozing hatred of the fellow "holiday shopper" that emerges when a person becomes trapped in line after agonizingly slow-moving line.
- The formation of men stationed outside Victoria's Secrets everywhere, kicking invisible pebbles while they wait for loved ones — or at least ones that will be loved once they exit the store.

- Credit card debts.

Ah, yes.

The day after Thanksgiving is exhibit A of the dark side of the holiday season, and on Nov. 27 I had the right mixture of stupidity, materialism, boredom, money and curiosity to witness it firsthand. At the time I called my excursion "running errands."

My first stop ended up being Borders. They sell books and CDs. I like CDs. I love books. One thing led to another.

The mass of automobiles parked outside should have chased me away, but as I mentioned, I was being stupid. I was stuck on the idea that I was just going to browse around. There were a few Christmas decorations, and a man sang Irish songs near the entrance to the walking mall.

I was physically able to browse the store at first.

I walked to a section of books and poked around. I walked around to different sections of the store and poked around some more. The music section sucked. I decided I had seen enough. I decided to buy a book I had seen on the other side of the store. The plan was to just walk over to it, grab it, buy it and leave. I would have just left if I hadn't

wanted the book so much. Again, I was being stupid.

En route to my book, I realized it was becoming more and more difficult to move through the store.

Holiday shoppers were streaming in.

There were lines forming inside the store to get from one area to another.

Among the holiday shoppers were couples and the little kids they had brought with them — little kids who tended to wander around aimlessly completely free of parental supervision. Back home in Los Angeles, these are the kinds of kids that end up on the back of a milk carton.

As I stood looking down on one little girl, perhaps 5 years old, meandering in zig-zags from one side of the main aisle to the next and then back again, she abruptly turned and crashed into my leg.

"Whoops," I said as she staggered over to one side of the aisle and sat down. She left a space for me and the many people behind me to walk through.

This allowed me to steer off to where my book was, grab it and get back in the line to get to the line which would take me to the line at the cash register, no joke.

Just like rats, something happens to us humans when we're packed into close quarters. We get irritable.

In a tributary line off to my left, there was a woman standing next to her teenage son.

"This sucks, Mom," he whined. "The line's a thousand miles long. It's almost 3 o'clock."

"Let me just put this book on hold, then we can leave," the woman said.

"Come on, Mom!"

"I'm just going to put this book on hold, then we can leave."

"Oh, Come on!"

"No, damn it! I'm putting this book on hold!"

Their anger produced a visible series of ef-

fects in the people in front of me. As soon as the yelling started, many people began to shift their weight from one foot onto another. Then the scratching began, myself included. Heads, shoulders, ankles, and in my case knees began to itch. There were five of us who scratched ourselves at pretty much the same moment.

The line moved along. The man in front of me twitched the left side of his face. Little by little I moved along to the point where I could say that I was definitively in the cash register line.

I was almost done.

But the line to the cash register was the slowest. Or maybe it just seemed that way with my goal in site. Everybody who stepped up to the cash registers had an armload of purchases they wanted to pay for on credit cards.

Still shifting their weight every minute or so, still scratching little itches, the people in front of me stared off in different directions.

The man behind me thought I was worth staring at. Now, I'm an odd-looking guy, but not quite odd-looking enough to warrant a staring session.

I turned my head around. When I turned my head, he looked another way. When I turned around, I saw him turn back around. I turned my head in response and caught him again. He casually looked another way. I turned back around. In the corner of my eye, I saw him turn his head again. I decided to look at the cookbooks to my left.

I scratched my head. I shifted my weight. The line had gotten to me.

The man singing Irish songs was singing about getting drunk and brawling. It was completely out of character for a bookstore during the holidays. It was just the kind of holiday music I wanted to hear.

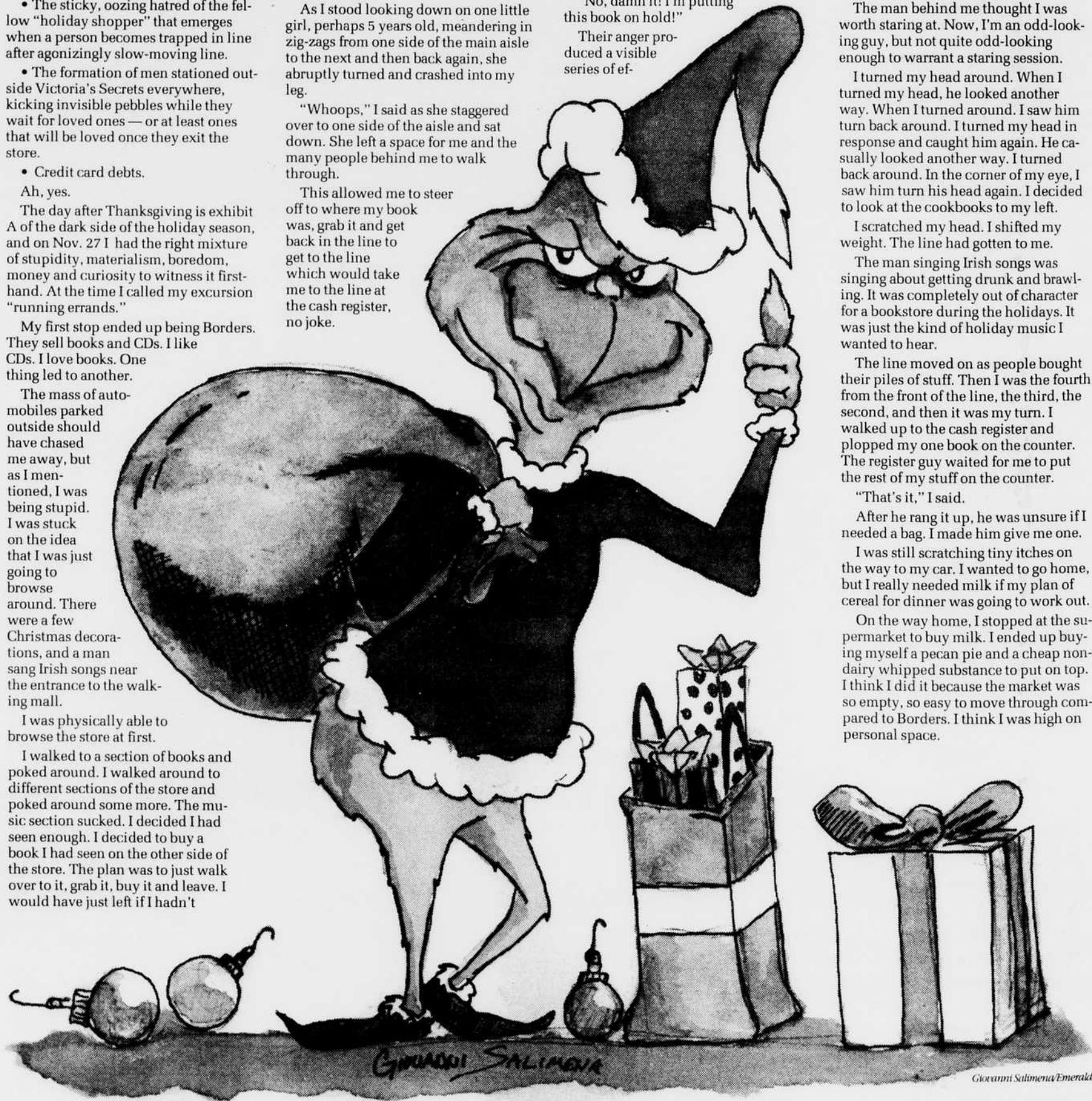
The line moved on as people bought their piles of stuff. Then I was the fourth from the front of the line, the third, the second, and then it was my turn. I walked up to the cash register and plopped my one book on the counter. The register guy waited for me to put the rest of my stuff on the counter.

"That's it," I said.

After he rang it up, he was unsure if I needed a bag. I made him give me one.

I was still scratching tiny itches on the way to my car. I wanted to go home, but I really needed milk if my plan of cereal for dinner was going to work out.

On the way home, I stopped at the supermarket to buy milk. I ended up buying myself a pecan pie and a cheap non-dairy whipped substance to put on top. I think I did it because the market was so empty, so easy to move through compared to Borders. I think I was high on personal space.



Giovanni Salimena/Emerald