

Two Xmas Carols

by Scott Swentek

I

The swivel chair creaked as Carol stuffed the last of her papers into her satchel.

"Now we can go to the beach and mountains," she continued. "And it gets really good mileage." She scanned a notepad on her desk. "Did you know that twelve doctors can be trained for what one B-52 bomber costs?"

"I don't care," Lester said pointedly. "What difference does that make to me?"

"Why Lester, everyone should concern themselves with the issues."

"Bullshit; everyone should concern themselves with themselves. If you're so concerned with the issues, why did you buy that polluting chunk of steel?"

Carol held her satchel firmly in front of her.

"It's far more economical and ecological for Jim and I to get one car instead of one each. We got a foreign car only after assessing all the socioeconomic considerations. Good grief, Lester, you've known me long enough to know how much time I spend considering things."

"You could have gotten bicycles." Lester turned back to his overtime paperwork. He had a family Xmas to support.

"You're being obtuse on purpose." Carol patted his back as she walked out. "Hope you're in a better mood after the holidays. Merry Xmas."

"Merry damn Xmas," Lester growled. The car was waiting by the curb.

"More work," Jim moaned as she got in. "Can't you leave it here once in a while." He put the car in gear.

"If I did we'd still be riding the bus."

"At least we had time to talk." Jim paused. "How'd it go?"

"New report to work on and Lester was a bit grouchy."

"He puts up with a lot."

"That's mean," Carol pouted.

"Well, what was it about?"

"He thinks our getting the car is bourgeois."

"He's right." Jim turned his eyes from the road to meet Carol's glare. "Seriously though, don't you think now that we've started on the

communal property we should continue to the connubial." He pulled the car in the apartment driveway and killed the engine.

"Jim, we've been over this."

They got out of the car.

"We each need our own space." Carol opened her door and indicated her cluttered kitchen table as she took off her scarf. "If we lived together we wouldn't know where one of your reports began and where one of mine left off."

"I'm not as messy as you are and if we lived together we wouldn't have to keep hustling to keep up two apartments." Jim kissed her exposed neck and Carol broke away into the kitchen. "We might even consider raising a couple of monsters," he called.

"Jim, you know I'm not into the maternal trip." She poured two cups of instant coffee and paused. "Think of all those poor Cambodian babies." Tears formed and she shook them away. "God, Jim, this world's too hellish." She handed him his cup.

"I decline any resemblance to Faust."

"Oh, Jim."

Carol looked at the half-decorated tree dominating the room. "Let's finish the tree and exchange gifts. You can put me on your shoulders so I can put on the star, just like daddy used to."

With a moderate amount of horseplay they finished the tree and Carol, hunched on Jim's shoulders, put the star on top. Jim tumbled them onto the couch.

"Jim, stop." Carol punched him in the chest and bounced to a kneeling position. "Now what'd you get me?"

Jim pulled a small jeweler's box from his pocket. "You first."

"Tease." Carol handed him an envelope from the sidetable and watched him open it. "Remember how upset you got when the pill screwed up my hormones and I was crying all the time. Well, I decided to do something to keep our relationship meaningful."

"From me to you and you to me your very own vasectomy," Jim read incredulously and held up the coupon from Planned Parenthood. "Uh huh, now we'll be able to relax. I did it for you."

Jim stared woodenly at her as he tore the coupon to tatters.

"Ho, ho, ho," he said.

II

The customer's swing knocked Carol's Santa cap awry. She stepped back, smiled and readjusted it over her bandana.

"These are great," the man said, twirling the flashlight equipped baton. "What'd you say they were for?"

"They're light swords; the kids use them to beat on each other."

"Great." The man lowered his baton and squinted at her. "Why you wearing a bandana under that? You hafta wear it?"

Carol tugged at a wisp of hair. "No, just the Santa cap. The bandana's 'cause I got cancer." The man grimaced. "It all fall out?"

"No, they cut it."

"Why'd you let yourself get cancer?"

"God did it to me," Carol said indignantly, "I didn't do it to myself."

"Whyn't you go to Fiji and eat coconuts. Get healthy and stop beating yourself." He examined the baton judiciously. "I'll take three of these; can't leave out anyone."

Carol nodded and collected three boxes. "Batteries included?"

"Batteries included," she confirmed.

A frigid wind blew in through the door with Carol; she kicked it closed and put down her bags. In the living room the TV set was still on.

"You kids 're supposed to be in bed," she yelled. "Turn that off and get your tails under the sheets." She put her coat on the peg and her Santa cap on her chair. Scuffling noises and childish cries came from the living room.

"Christ, Jim." Carol walked into the room. "Can't you get them to bed on time." She sat in her armchair. "You had your baths?"

"Yes."

"Hah."

"Loisey didn't take hers."

Louise poked Jamie. "I did too."

The younger kids tussled until Jim grabbed each other by the rear of their pajamas. "Cut it out," he ordered. "You heard Mom, get your tails upstairs." He rushed them up the worn staircase.

Carol sighed and leaned her head on the grimy fabric. The heat wasn't working right again. The air was hot and sticky with the damp smell of little children and old clothes. The wall that had been bare that morning was covered with smudged crayon pictures of rotund Santas and anemic reindeer. She didn't want to go into the kitchen. The pain in her abdomen increased sharply and she groaned. When she opened her eyes there was a joint before them.

"Where'd you get that?"

"Pete next door," Jim supplied.

"I told you not to take things from him.

Christ, you use more drugs than I do."

Behind her was an invisible smile.

"Yeah, yeah," Jim said.

"Yeah, yeah," Carol mimicked. "Well what do you want me to do with it, stuff it up my nose?"

Jim moved to the front of the armchair, he was wearing her Santa cap.

"Don't get it dirty, I gotta wear it tomorrow."

Carol closed her eyes as Jim puffed the joint alight. "That bastard your father send the check today?"

"Nope, I turned in some bottles though; we're all right." He passed his mother the joint.

"Long as the kids get fed." Carol puffed at the joint. Jim rose and walked away.

"Yeah, yeah."

The pain subsided as much as it ever did, Carol smiled then frowned. "And don't take any more grass from Pete." She glared around the chair back.

Jim paused at the stairs and pulled the Santa cap over his eyes.

"Ho, ho, ho," he said.

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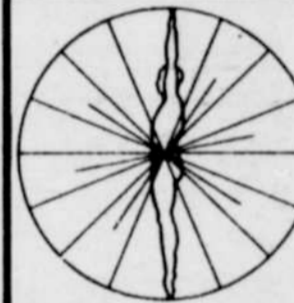
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