Christmas in Cicero

John Schupe

Grand Valley State University

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Recommended Citation
Available at: http://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/amaranthus/vol1980/iss1/19
"Twas the night before Christmas, and all through the house not a creature was stirring... except me. I was mixing up my third fifth of hot, mulled Ripple, well on my way to a jolly holiday drunk. There's nothing harder on a gregarious person like myself, than spending the year-end holidays alone. Except, maybe, spending them alone and drunk. I was lamenting the fact that my family—Father, Mother, brothers, sisters, assorted siblings in-law, and miscellaneous nephews and nieces—were all, probably, sitting around the fireplace, singing Christmas carols and roasting chestnuts on the open fire. No, I can't tell a lie like that. Fact is, about this time each year, our family did have a big-to-do. It usually ended up with my old man getting falling down drunk, and punching out one of my brothers for some seemingly innocuous remark. The nephews and nieces, swept away with the joy and spirit of the season, always managed to lift a bottle or two of booze, consuming them at their leisure behind my parent's garage. It was family tradition. Not much to get all homesick and nostalgiac for, so I stuck with the Christmas card image.

I was a reporter for the Cicero Gazette, a weekly newspaper originating from, naturally enough, Cicero, Illinois. Being a reporter for the Gazette is only about two notches above being a delivery boy for the paper, prestige-wise. The pay isn't much better either. The issue of money was the reason I was celebrating the holidays alone. What with the rent, and the ever higher cost of victuals, I couldn't raise the bus fare to make the trip home. The bus fare problem notwithstanding, I'm still a determined person. I'd had my eye on a desk in the cityroom of the Tribune, thus my reason for staying in Cicero. I wanted to be close to Chicago, just in case they called. I never got the job, but that's another story.

I'd just sat myself down in my favorite, my only, armchair with my wine. I was trying to adjust my posterior portions around a sprung spring, when I heard a loud thump, and a muffled cry. I arose to investigate, wobbling a little, due to the cumulative effects of the Ripple. It seemed the sounds were issuing from the hot air duct. I bent over the metal grate, listening intently.

"Schmo, schmo, schmo..." it said. I knew it couldn't be the ductwork expanding and contracting with the heat because the damn thing hadn't worked for the past two months. A tendril of smoke drifted from the grill work. It floated to the middle of the room, and hovered there. It began to swirl and turn in upon itself.

"My God!" I thought, "Only twenty-four years old, and I'm getting the D.T.'s already." The wisp of smoke kept on convoluting. Colors gradually became discernable. Red, white, black. The smoke began to solidify. Then, right before my bloodshot eyes, there stood a man.
He wasn’t an ordinary man, not be a long shot. He stood about three feet tall. He had short legs, and a round belly. He was dressed in a red suit with white fur trim. Black, shiny boots came half way up his shins. They were slightly reminiscent of Nazi jackboots, the kind the S.S. wore during W.W.II. The most amazing thing about him was his head. It comprised almost a quarter of his height. He had a wide, pudgy face, surrounded by a snow-grey beard (That’s the color of snow, here in Cicero.). He also had pointed ears. To top everything off, he wore a cap. It was tapered, like the ones that were all the rage when I was a kid. It, too, was red, and trimmed in fur.

I was too indignant to be frightened. There I was, trying to spend a peaceful evening at home, when some little gnomelillusion invades my privacy. I took a forceful stance. Summoning up my authoritative voice, I said, “Who are you and what in sand hill are you going in my living room?” The little man looked up at me. He said, “You don’t know who I am. Why, I’m St. Nick.” No response from me. “Kris Kringle. Santa Claus, you idiot!”

He did resemble Santa Claus, in a peripheral sort of way, I have to admit. But I wasn’t convinced. I knew Santa didn’t enter houses in a puff of smoke. Besides, Santa was just a myth, conjured up by mothers with hyper-active children. A vague threat, like the bogeyman. I required more evidence before I’d be convinced. “If you’re Santa Claus,” I asked, “Then, where are your reindeer?” The gnarled little gnome laughed at that. He had a grin on his face a mile wide.

He said, “Boy, oh boy. Those legends sure do persist. What you drinking there, ethyl alcohol? Why don’t you give me a slug of that.” I walked to the cupboard, and took down a large mug. He was right on my heels. After filling it with the still warm Ripple, I handed it to him.

“Why don’t we sit down?” he said. “You look like you’ve got a lot of questions for me, and I might as well answer them. What time is it?” I checked my watch. “Twelve midnight.” I said. He sniffed at the steam rising from his wine. “Ah,” he said. “Ripple, nineteen eighty-one. A very good year. Well, we might as well get on with it. What do you want to know?”

“I want to know who you are. Don’t try to tell me you’re Santa Claus, either. You can’t be. Your entrance was all wrong, and there wasn’t any tapping of tiny hooves on the roof.” My voice was a little shakey, but the rest of me felt calm. It was as if he had an anti-nervousness aura around him.

“Ah, more legends. Listen, er... What’s your name anyway?”

“Eric, Eric Thorogood.” I said.

“Well, listen Eric. I’m going to make you the most priviledged man on this planet. This is my last Christmas on this world, and at least one human should know the truth. I picked you because you were all alone, and you had a big batch of that wine brewed up. I get so sick of cookies and milk. What do you want to drink?”

“Mel”
I’m not of this planet. I’m from a world many, um... what’s your unit of measure? Ah, yes, many light years from here. I’m also a criminal. Don’t look so shocked. If you only knew how many of your myths and legends had a basis in fact, it’d stagger you. The Easter Bunny, the Tooth Fairy, gnomes, elves, all kinds of creatures. Every one of them, crooks. The world I’m from, and many others, is a part of what we call the Sentient Confederation. Your world is a de facto member too, though, at the present, you’re the only member of your race that’s aware of it. Your people aren’t considered mature enough for Full Awareness membership, yet. The Confederation has a complicated code of laws. It operates on the same principle as many of your religious governments do. It’s an Eye-for-an-Eye type system. However, we have no crimes of passion or greed. All our needs are fulfilled from the moment of birth, cost free. The perfect socialist state, you might say. Since we lack no material goods, the only crimes that can be committed are ones that deprive others of happiness or joy.

“I committed one of these crimes. I won’t go into detail, let it suffice to say that it was serious enough to warrant banishment. I was sentenced to Earth, to provide happiness to her denizens. At the same time I was deprived of my total freedom, idom quod; happiness.” He cocked his head in my direction, trying to gauge my reaction, I guess. I didn’t know what to think. I was still half convinced I was hallucinating the whole thing. Suddenly, I was hit with an inspiration. I had a question that would prove this little man a liar.

“What you mean, ‘merely myths’? I walked and talked on two feet. After all, I’m St. Nick!”

“Not a lot of people know who I am, is it?” I sat back, feeling smug. Let’s see him talk his way out of that! He’d been taking a drink of his wine when I’d asked. He started snorting, and making convulsive movements with his shoulders. Thinking he was choking, I leaped to his side of the table. Visions of the Heimlich Maneuver were dancing through my head. He waved me off. He was laughing.

“Surely, you have a big potent when it’s warmed up like that.” I was thinking he was choking, I leaped to his side of the table. His logic was right, but you were working from insufficient data. It’s just like the ‘coming down the chimney’ trick. Dramatic effect, nothing more. The elves, though, they’re real. Criminals to the core, each and every one of them.” He was rambling, I think the wine was going to his head.

“Yeah, I noticed that. Ethanol’ll do it to me every time. I suppose I should get going now. It’s my last night, I want to get done and go home. You have any more questions?”
“Yes, yes I do,” I said. “Two questions. One; How do you get all the presents delivered in one night, and two; Why are you leaving?”

“I’ll answer your second question first. It seems my gifts don’t bring as much happiness as they used to. There was a time when a kid was tickled to death if he got an orange or a pair of warm socks. Now, the little brats aren’t satisfied with anything. Electronic games, motorcycles, semi-intelligent toy trucks, they get harder and harder to please every year.” He straightened his cap on his head, and gulped down the rest of his drink. “As for your first question, take a look at your watch.” I looked. It read twelve midnight. I looked up at him. His outline was growing fuzzy, he was reversing the process he had used to enter my home.

“How?” I said, totally confused. “How did you stop my watch?” He was growing less solid, turning to smoke before my eyes.

“A stasis field,” he said. “It stops the passage of time for anything within its sphere of influence. Goodbye, Eric. Here’s a little present.” A small package, wrapped in bright red and green paper, appeared on the table in front of me. I looked at his image floating in the center of the room. His face was still fairly sharp resolve.

He winked at me. “Merry Christmas to all, and to all, a good night!” The puff of smoke swirled into the heating duct, and Santa was gone.

I’ve never told this story to anyone before. People would think I was bonkers. I’d probably tend to disbelieve it myself, except for that package. I opened it Christmas morning. Inside the wrapping was a small box, covered with alien scribbles. Handwritten across the top in English, was a message. It said, DEAR ERIC, A SMALL GIFT FOR A GOOD FRIEND. HOPE YOU CAN USE THIS. YOUR BUDDY, SANTA.

His last gift to man certainly created happiness. Inside the box was a multitude of small tablets. They were anti-hangover pills.