

Heavenly Peace

By Greg Lam

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It was the night before Christmas.

You understand me?

The fucking night before Christmas.

And it wasn't the happiest of holidays, to say the least. I was sitting in the Reno International Airport for the fifth hour in a row. My flight was supposed to have left on Friday, but an unexpected Nor'easter basically frozen all flights from getting to Logan. So we were all there waiting at the airport on the off chance it'll miraculously clear up.

The first white Christmas in years and I was stuck here, reading the box score from the Jazz/Clippers game for the fourth time and resisting the urge to pop in another quarter into the slot machines they have here in the airport terminals. Literally two steps off the plane and you can begin feeding your degenerate gambling habit anew.

She's going to kill me.

She didn't want me traveling so close to the holidays. It was a bad idea, I know. I could've pawned it off on someone else. But I just had to get away. It's not like the conference was that important. But with Marion and the glares and the silences and just the...

I had to get away.

So that's why I was here in Reno, Nevada, "America's Biggest Little Town". That's why I found myself watching CNN's meteorologist track the progress of Santa by radar and listening to Wayne Newton warble "O Little Town of Bethlehem". Again.

I asked myself, how the hell did it get this bad?

When it looked like the airline was getting ready to pack it in for another night, I picked up my cell and called into the office to let them know what was up. I thought I'd get the answering machine and their endless reel of Christmas tunes, but instead I got a human voice.

"Hello, Prevaxis Group. Carolyn speaking."

Well, almost human.

"Carolyn."

"Bill. Hi."

I had considered hanging up when I heard her voice. Then I wished I had.

"What are you doing answering phones?"

"I'm the only one around. And someone important might call."

"Oh."

By the way she intoned "someone important," I could tell she meant "someone other than you." I suppose that's the advantage of talking with your sister. You can always tell what it is she really means. So what if we haven't actually spoken in years. It's a skill that you never lose.

“Were you calling for a reason?”

“Oh. Just that I’m stuck in Reno still. Cause of the mess up there.”

“Oh, very well. Did you have a good time there?”

“No.”

“Well, there’s no need to be unpleasant, Bill. If you didn’t want to go I could’ve assigned it to someone else.”

See, back then it really bothered me that my sister was in charge of my scheduling. We were both in the sales force together, and we were fine together. But then she got the promotion and I didn’t. And it bugged me so much I requested a lateral transfer. I got it, and we didn’t have to see each other much at all after that.

Then she kept moving up, and I just stayed in place.

“Bill? Is there anything else? I’d like to keep this line open.”

“Nah, I’m just gonna hang out here. Maybe I’ll hit the video poker again.”

“Well, wouldn’t spend too much if I were you. Merry Christmas, and say ‘Hi’ to Marion for me.”

“Bye.”

“Take care.”

After I hung up, I thought about what Carolyn just said. I hit redial.

“Hello?”

“It’s me again. What did you mean by that?”

“By what?”

“‘Don’t spend too much.’ What did you mean?”

“Nothing. It’s just a joke.”

“I know you Carolyn. It doesn’t wash. What did you mean?”

“I can’t tell you?”

“I’m your brother.”

“It doesn’t matter.”

“Look. Tell me now or I’ll start saying to everyone that I’m hearing the company’s in trouble. Everything from ‘The top brass are preparing to leave a sinking ship’ to ‘Our retirement plan is about to go belly up.’ People will believe me, too, since I’m your brother.”

“You’re acting like a little bitch, Bill. You know that?”

“Well?”

“Fine. I could get fired for telling you this, but fine. We were going to hold this off until after the holidays, but you can’t wait, so here goes. There’s going to be a round of layoffs soon. And you’re one of the casualties.”

“What?”

“Merry Christmas.”

“What!”

'Twas the night before Christmas, and all through the terminal, not a creature was stirring, not even...

Nothing rhymes with 'terminal'.

So all flights were canceled for the night. I called Marion to tell her. She was furious, of course, but there was nothing either of us could do. And neither of us had the heart to say what was on our minds. I didn't tell her the other news.

I was alone. On Christmas Eve.

In Reno.

With an expense account.

From a company that was about to fire me.

Score.

I went back to the casino and found a friendly craps table. Craps is the most social of the gambling games. This is because while you're playing with other people, you're not competing against them. You can actually root for them if you felt like it.

I bought a round drinks for everyone at the table, which made me instantly popular. I didn't mention it was courtesy of my soon to be ex-employer. I won my first few rounds, which was more luck than anything else. That and the round of drinks probably made it seem like I was something of a high roller. Which is why I soon found a shapely blonde in a strapless dress perched behind my right shoulder. Go figure. She called herself "Cassandra".

It never occurred to me before to wonder what kind of people would spend their Christmas Eve playing craps in Reno.

There was Cheryl, an 80-year-old former Jazz singer. Her husband and kids have all died, so now the casino is pretty much her life. With a lifetime cigarette habit, her voice sounds like Donald Duck with a roll of gauze stuffed down his throat.

Ari claims to be a small business owner from Bend, Oregon. Reno is a holiday tradition for him and his wife, Thelma. He's had a glass of cheap whiskey he's touched once in the last three hours.

Ho-Yun is a young Asian guy. From what I can tell, he's from Hong Kong. His big sunglasses, permed hair, and fancy jacket makes him look disconcertingly like a mid-80's Michael Jackson.

Fred is just weird.

And then there's me. About to be laid off (by my own sister no less), marriage crumbling, stuck a long way from home on Christmas Eve, my most interesting aspect at this point a persistent shoplifting habit. Half of everything at home was originally from the office. When I get back to work, I'm gonna clean out the office supply closet. There won't be a ream of paper or a box of paper clips left when I go back.

If I go back.

As it approached midnight, Christmas Eve it hit me for the first time. What am I going to do?

What the hell am I supposed to do?

"Lucky seven!"

“Go, baby!”

Why the god of gaming should smile down upon me now when my life was actively crumbling was a mystery. My little white stack of chips had grown and diversified. Exciting new colors like red and blue and even purple. Cheryl cheered me on. (At least I think that’s what she’s doing. That voice.) Ari punched me in my shoulder whenever I won. Fred offered me his lucky Hummel figurine to aid in my luck. I decline.

And that girl behind me.

She’s very good. I didn’t even notice when she first sidled up behind me. I didn’t feel her hand first touch my shoulder, it felt so natural. I didn’t notice any of her advances but now she’s almost wrapped around me in her Christmas themed red strapless dress with fake-fur trim and matching hat. Santa’s hottest little elf.

“Look,” I finally say. “What’s your name sweetheart?”

“Cassandra, darling.”

“You tell the future, then?”

“A man of culture. I like that.”

“What’s in my future, then?”

“Lucky seven, of course. And nothing but.”

“Care to make a side wager?”

“Depends on the stakes.”

“The stakes are these. I roll a seven, then I pick up all my chips and we go out and have a nice dinner. And we sit and we eat and we talk like two adults that don’t have any expectations towards each other.”

The crowd liked that. They thought I had guts, but really, I just had nothing to lose.

“Take the bet, sweetheart!” blurted Fred.

Cassandra was a pro. She shot right back without even blinking.

“Why would you think I’d have any expectations towards you?”

“Well, what would you say if I told you that I’m just a poor schlub with a wife that hates me, that my chief thrill in life is stealing office supplies, and that I just got fired from my dead end job? And the prospect of being hit on by a beautiful woman who thinks I might be rich both excites and terrifies me. What would you say if I told you that?”

“You’re a salesman, aren’t you?”

“Used to be.”

“Well, if you were to say something like that, I’d be forced to admit to you that my name is not, in fact, ‘Cassandra’ but ‘Betty’, which is the last name in the world I would have chosen for myself. And that my plan for the night was to find some poor schmoe who was flashing around money, tease him with my smile and my low cut dress, take him for all he’s worth and then cut out before it was time to close the deal.”

“Really?”

“Yes.”

“How would you cut out?”

“I’ve devised certain methods.”

“And why are you telling me this?”

“I’ve always been a sucker for men who speak with candor. It gets me into trouble sometimes.”

“So you’ll come to dinner with me?”

“I thought it was a chance proposition. Six out of the thirty-six dice combinations will get you to... lucky seven.”

“And if I don’t make it?”

“Then this little elf will have to find another Santa. You can’t play poker with someone after you’ve shown him all your cards.”

“C’mon Bill.”

“Roll ‘em.”

“You got it in the bag.”

The crowd wanted to see me crash. My hands were all sweaty now. I closed my eyes and threw the dice.

“Lucky seven! The gentleman scores again.”

I scooped up my chips, tipped the dealer, and thanked the table for a lovely evening. They nodded and winked, and gave me a round of applause. “Mary Clistmas” said Ho-Yun in broken English. I took Betty’s hand and led her out of the pit.

It was a Merry Christmas. It was every gambler’s dream, right? Waltz into the casino poor and downtrodden and alone, walk out with a nice stack of chips and a gorgeous girl on your arm. I could feel the jealousy coming from all the old latches glaring at us.

But Lady Luck had a few more curves to throw at me.

“Mommy! Mommy!”

Betty’s face melted when she heard that.

“Sweetie?”

A little dark-haired boy came running up to Betty, who bent down to pick him up. He was around eight or nine.

“I thought you were going to stay in the video game room. Did you run out of quarters?”

“I went out to go to the bathroom. And then I got lost and I got scared. And you said you’d be here, so I came to find you. Are you mad at me?”

“Of course I’m not mad.”

I, of course, was dumbstruck.

“Bill, I’d like for you to meet my little Georgie. George, this is Bill. He’s a nice man who has a stack of chips, and a set of stones.”

“Hi George.”

“He’s tall.”

“He’s your kid? But he’s... How old are you?”

“I had him when I was 16 years old. I have trouble resisting men who speak with candor, remember?”

“Right.”

“I hope you don’t mind, Bill, if the dinner is for three.”

Of course I didn’t mind. We cashed in a few chips and had steak and lobster (a hot dog for the kid), asparagus with hollandaise sauce (which the kid snarfed down like French fries, and a better-than-average crème brulee. Betty ordered a terrific white wine from Argentina.

We talked about my deal, and we talked about her deal. She’s working her way through the graduate anthropology program at UC-Davis by waitressing in Reno on weekends. The money is good, better than anything she could get locally, but not great. There are of course ways an attractive woman can make ungodly amounts of money in Nevada, but none that would allow her to retain much dignity. It’s not the easiest life, but it gets her by. If she gets really desperate, she’ll try to scam someone like she tried to do to me.

As the kid downed his second brownie sundae, we talked about his father. He didn’t lie to her. He never promised to be there forever, or even next week. But she was young and he... spoke with total candor.

It was very late at the end of dinner. I asked her if she had anywhere to go.

“You know the old story,” she said. “Christmas Eve, no room at the Inn. It’s OK, I’ll just head back to Davis.”

“It’s one a.m., and you have half a bottle in you. And Christmas Eve, who knows what’s on the road right now? Come back to my room. You guys can have the bed. I’ll take the chair.”

“You’re not trying to take advantage of my Christmas spirit, are you?” She was smiling when she said this, so I could tell she wasn’t really worried about me.

“Just don’t mind all the mistletoe strung about the room.”

I was good to my word. The lady went to sleep first, giving me a goodnight kiss on the cheek before taking off her clothes and crawling into bed. She didn’t bother to ask me to look away or anything. My Christmas gift I guess.

“I want to thank you, Bill. When I go out and try this stunt, I never know how it’ll go and it’s not always good. I had a good time tonight. A very nice time. Thank you.”

“No problem. The pleasure was all mine.”

“Good luck with your job and your wife and your life and all. You’re a good man, after all.”

She was dead asleep five minutes later, which left me alone with the kid. We shouldn’t have let him have that second sundae. Too much sugar. We were up for hours.

“Are you her boyfriend?”

“No. I don’t think I am.”

“Do you like her?”

“She’s very nice. I don’t I’m her type, though.”

“She likes you.”

“How do you know?”

“She told me.”

“When?”

“When mom leaves a table with a guy, that’s when I go up and find her and start crying. And if she picks me up and tells me you’re a ‘nice man’, I should stop crying. If she just says you’re a ‘man’, I cry louder.”

“Your mom told you to do that?”

“Yeah. That’s what we always do.”

“Pay attention to your mom, kid. You’ll learn a lot.”

“You smell better than her other boyfriends.”

Eventually, George fell asleep next to his mom. They looked beautiful and peaceful lying next to each other. It was like Madonna and child. That was really what popped into my head right then. And for a moment, I wanted nothing more than to stay; to remain in their lives, to remain in this night forever. I wanted to throw my life away and go with them; to roll the dice and wake Betty up and tell her all of this.

But I didn’t. Why ruin a perfect night? I wrapped the itchy hotel blanket around me and went to sleep in the hotel chair.

In the morning I woke up dead.

Betty found me. She had gotten up, woken George and got him into the bath. She was due at work in a little bit. She tried to wake me up, but I was already gone. I’m not sure what it was. My heart? A stroke? They don’t tell you anything. All I know is I died.

I found the transition between life and death to be surprisingly seamless, like changing channels on a TV. One minute, I’m in my body, snoring. The next I feel like I’m standing off to the side, aware of everything. I knew I was dead, but all I could think was “Wow, this is odd.”

Betty’s panicking, now. She still doesn’t have any clothes on. Now that I’m dead, I don’t have to be embarrassed and look away. My God, is she built nice, and I can look as close as I want.

She has me on the floor now. She’s stronger than she looks. She’s pressing on my chest, giving me mouth-to-mouth. All I can think is “forget it hon, I’m gone.” She knows this. I can hear her whisper “he’s cold.”

George is out of the bath. And Betty’s crying and she gives him a hug. It’s touching. I’m touched and I’m a corpse. She picks up the phone, and then puts it down. I think she realizes that if she’s going to call for an ambulance she shouldn’t be naked. She’s scrambling around for her clothing when she finds the bag of casino chips. Around \$5,000 worth. Man I had a good night last night, aside from the dying.

“Take it!” I scream at her, but of course she can’t hear me. “Take the money and go, beautiful. You both deserve it, and I don’t need it.”

George is poking at me. Bless his heart, he doesn’t know anything. If I could smile, I would.

Betty puts down the bag of chips. She rifles through my clothes until she finds my wallet. She wants that too?

All she says, over and over, is “I’m gonna be late, I’m gonna be late.” What is she doing anyway?

She opens the wallet and flips around until she finds my business cards, which were going to be obsolete anyway before I died. She calling my office? She's not thinking straight. It's Christmas. She should've taken the money and left. I died of natural causes. She didn't need this, poor thing.

She's waiting on the phone. I'm everywhere in the room now. I hear the automated answering system in the phone receiver. I see George opening and closing my eyelids. Betty's still whispering "I'm gonna be late." It's a wonderfully absurd way to go out and for some reason I'm pleased. The automated phone system has Betty on hold. I guess she'll tell them what happened and my sister will hear and they'll tell my wife and I don't give a damn about any of them right now.

The phone system is playing a song while Betty is on hold. It's Perry Como singing "Silent Night". Betty starts crying when he starts singing "Sleep in heavenly peace." And Perry's dead so maybe I'm going to meet him soon. George finds his mother's crying more interesting than my body, and he goes to her, lays his head in her lap. Madonna and child. Sleep in heavenly peace. You hardly knew me, you should've just taken the money. Sleep in heavenly peace.

And that's the last thing I remember. Merry Christmas, Betty. I hope I gave you something as good as you gave me.

The End