

JERRY OLTION

THE PLIGHT BEFORE CHRISTMAS

MIKE WAS SCANNING THE morning newsnet for Christmas ads, checking the competition as usual but also hoping to find a present for Sarah, when the phone rang. Sarah had been cleaning the house last night, so she had set the ringer to "air raid," and apparently forgot to lower it again when she was done. The sudden clamor made Mike flinch hard enough to nudge his bowl of cereal over the edge of the table. It hit the floor with a thump, not breaking the bowl but still spraying milk and Moonie Bits outward in a white fan of drenching destruction -- most of which wound up in Mike's open briefcase.

"Christ!" he shouted, jumping up and upsetting his chair, which in turn upset the shelf of African violets beneath the window. One of the violets also fell into his briefcase.

The phone shrieked a second time.

He stood over his ruined briefcase-- and the mined Bundy artwork, over which he had sweated for two long days to come up with a new concept and clenched his fists while the phone rang again. The morning had started so well . . .

"Do you want me to get it?" Sarah asked from the bedroom.

Hmm. No reason why the morning couldn't keep going well, actually. All it required was the right attitude. "No," Mike said, unclenching his hands. "No, that's all right. I'll get it." Slowly, deliberately, he reached out and picked up the flatscreen from the kitchen countertop, set it upright on the table, and flicked it on. With a fiendish grin he shouted, "What do you want?"

He heard an in drawn breath before the picture formed, then Greg Penzley, one of the advertising firm's two senior partners, peered out of the phone at him with wide eyes. "Michael?"

Mike grinned wider. "No, it's the tooth fairy. Who'd you expect, idiot? You dialed my number, didn't you?"

"Michael, what in the world has gotten into --" Penzley suddenly laughed. "Oh, so that's how it is, eh? Well same to you, then. I'd rather talk to the tooth fairy than your whiny little carcass." He leaned back in his padded office chair, giving Mike a view past his bald head and rounded shoulders through the fiftieth-floor window overlooking downtown Portland. Penzley crossed his arms over his chest and said, "Your miserable attempts to come up with a new Bundy campaign are the laughingstock of the company. We've got a betting pool here at the office on when you finally come up with something and I've picked December 31st. Five years from now."

Mike snorted. "Ha! Well you lose, then, jerk-face. The new Bundy ads are done

and sitting in a pool of spilt milk in my briefcase."

Penzley laughed even louder. "Ah, so that's it! Well maybe you should just throw the whole damned mess out the window, along with your washed-up career."

"I think that's just what I'll do."

"Good. Fuck you."

"Fuck you too." Mike slammed the phone screen-first onto the table, but Penzley had beat him to the switch; his own image blanked out a fraction of a second before Michael's screen fell.

"Aaarrrrrggghhhhh!" Mike's growl was an animalistic, primal-scream-therapy-style exhalation of pent-up fury. He picked up the phone and hurled it through the window. The glass shattered wonderfully, and Mike's briefcase, still dripping milk and potting soil, widened the hole in the phone's wake.

Sarah leaned out from the bedroom, dressed in only a light blue towel. "Hey, why don't you make some noise while you're at it?"

Mike was breathing hard now, and grinning like an idiot. "Noise? You want noise? All right, I'll give you noise!" He grabbed the edge of the table and heaved it over, scattering to the floor the pile of books, magazines, and newsdisks, plus their scanner and the vase full of roses he had brought home for Sarah last night. The reading material merely thumped, but the vase hit the edge of a chair and shattered with a satisfying crunch, and the floor shook when the table struck it. Mike shoved it on over into the Christmas tree, which went down in a shower of tinkling ornaments.

Sarah applauded. "Feel better now?"

"Yeah." Mike straightened, laughed, and stepped toward her, but his foot caught one of the shards of vase.

"Ow!" He raised his foot and pulled out a long sliver of glass. Blood dripped to the carpet. "Oh, son of a bitch that hurts."

Sarah winced in sympathetic agony. "Fun's over."

"Yeah. Guess so." He limped down the hallway into the spare bedroom, where they kept the backspacer, leaving a trail of blood spots behind him.

"Don't go back too far, okay?" she said, batting her eyelashes and leaning out for a kiss as he passed.

He blushed. "I won't." He gave her a quick kiss-- his foot hurt too much to

put
any real feeling into it -- stepped into the closet-sized booth in the spare
bedroom, set the single dial in the waist-high control panel for twenty
minutes,
and said, "See you in another life, sexy."

Sarah nodded. "Bye."

He closed the door and pushed the "go" button.

The shower was still running when he opened the door again. He heard Sarah and
himself giggling softly as they made love and thought briefly about joining
them
for a quick threesome, but the morning had really been going just about
perfect
without modification. Besides, his foot hurt like hell. Better just take care
of
business and get it over with.

He padded down the hallway, then stopped. Blood trail. Christ, that'd be just
as
hard to clean up as the cereal would. Shrugging, he went on into the kitchen,
grabbed a wad of paper towels, and padded back to the backspacer. He wrapped
the
paper towels around his foot, set the timer for five minutes further back, and
pushed "go" again.

The shower was just starting up when he opened the door. The floor was clean.
Mike hobbled into the living room, set the telephone ringer to "gentle," and
turned back toward the backspacer, but as usual when he'd made a change that
created a paradox, he didn't have to climb all the way back in and push the
"return" button. The universe, ever tidy in such matters, took care of that
for
him. He didn't feel a thing when it edited him out of existence.

The phone rang while Mike was reading the morning newsnet for Christmas ads.
He
laid down the scanner, took a bite of cereal, and reached behind him to the
kitchen counter for the phone. Propping it up on the table, he swallowed and
switched it on after the third ring. "Wilson residence."

"Michael? Penzley here. Just calling to confirm that you've got the new Bundy
ads ready for us today."

Michael looked over to his briefcase lying on the floor beside the table.
Hmmm,
that bowl of cereal looked awfully close to the edge. He nudged it farther
inward while he said, "No problem, sir. They're sitting in my briefcase, ready
to go."

"Good. I knew we could count on you. See you at nine."

"See you then." Mike switched off the phone and turned back to the newsscreen.
Nine o'clock. That left him just under an hour to find a present for Sarah
before he went to the office. Plenty of time, if he just knew what to buy her.
That was always the rob, though, wasn't it? When he asked her what she wanted,
she just smiled coyly and said, "Oh, I already have everything I want," which
was very flattering but no help at all. After Christmas, of course, she would
go
out and buy whatever it was she'd been hoping for all along, but she never

told

him what it was ahead of time. No, she evidently thought it was his job to figure that out on his own.

He didn't have to get a present this morning, of course. He still had this evening, and two more shopping days left after that before Christmas. He just wanted to get it taken care of early, so he could relax about it and concentrate

on the last-minute ads for this afternoon's and tomorrow's electronic newsnet editions. The agency was swamped with clients this year, all of whom claimed that sales were way down and who wanted Mike and his co-workers to design completely new ad campaigns for them overnight.

Mike recognized the irony in an advertising art director who didn't know what to

buy for his wife, but despite all the hype he spread about his clients' products, he hadn't yet found anything that Sarah might want.

He considered asking one of the women at the office what they thought, but he didn't want to resort to that. A present was supposed to be from the giver, not

from his co-workers. And besides, they were all advertisers. They would just try

to push their own product lines on him.

Sarah stepped into the dining room with just a fluffy blue towel wrapped around

her body. Her red hair dripped water from the ends, and a few drops landed on Mike's briefcase as she bent over to kiss him on the cheek. He glanced down to see if she'd hit the artwork, but she'd just missed it, so he nudged the briefcase aside with his toe and kissed her more enthusiastically, inhaling the

aroma of soap and fresh-washed skin that he loved so much in the mornings. He slipped a hand under the towel, and she giggled. "You silly, you'll be late for

work if you start that again."

"I could always loop back," he said, tugging playfully on the towel.

"And I could invite the neighbors in to watch," she said, backing away and re-wrapping herself in the towel.

It was an old argument, reduced by now to those two lines. Sarah saw no point in

doing something that would obviously be edited out when the people involved backspaced into their normal lives, while Mike felt that any pleasant experience

was worth exploring, no matter how illusory it might turn out to be. It wasn't just an argument over fooling around, either. The fallout from their different philosophies spread through their entire marriage. Sarah didn't like going to movies that might gross her out or bore her, while Mike felt that he should try

everything that came along, and just edit out later the ones he thought were a waste of time. Sarah didn't like experimenting with food, while Mike would eat practically anything short of live bugs-- and he may have even tried that once or twice, but if so then he'd definitely backspaced over the experience because

he didn't remember it.

That was Sarah's point. If you didn't remember it, if in the final version of

reality you had never even done it, then why bother to do it in the first place?

And Mike's answer was always "Why not?" Lots of people did invite the neighbors over for orgies. Mike had heard of stranger things than that, too; murder mystery parties with authentic murders, religious mass-suicides that were undone when the day of judgment failed to arrive, even full-scale wars between nations had apparently been fought to find out what concessions to make at the bargaining table before hostilities began for real. Mike suspected he had volunteered to fight in at least one such war, and though he had no evidence to prove it, the thrill of knowing he would have done it was still his.

But not Sarah's. If she hadn't really done something it didn't matter to her, and hence she didn't waste her time -- even imaginary time -- on things that wouldn't remain real.

It was possible to loop around and not create paradoxes, but to do that you had to make sure you didn't meet yourself or change anything you or anyone else would have done, and unfortunately this wasn't one of those situations.

"Poor baby," Sarah said. She kissed him on the cheek before she turned away toward the bedroom again to get dressed. "Don't forget your umbrella," she reminded him as she walked down the hallway. "It's going to rain this afternoon." Her implication was clear; she didn't want him backspacing for something that trivial.

He looked out the window at the city skyline beyond, and felt a brief impulse to pick up the phone and throw it right through the glass. That would be reason enough to backspace, he supposed, but he knew what happened to people who gave in to every impulse that came along. Backspacing was cheap, but it wasn't free; eventually the poor buggers had to accept whatever life they wound up with and damn their rotten luck. No, Sarah was perhaps overcautious, but she did have a point.

THERE WERE THREE murders on the subway, and a bombing that took out half the station just as Mike's train pulled in. The murderers were simply edited out before they got on the train, but in order to keep as much evidence as possible the police apprehended the bomber only moments before he set off the explosive, so Mike got to watch them lead him away in handcuffs. He was a normal-enough looking high-school kid, maybe early college age, dressed in a Santa suit to hide the dynamite taped to his waist, and he was grinning as he explained to the police how he'd built the detonator from paperclips and an old chemical battery. "I just wanted to see if it'd work," he told them. "I guess it must have, huh?"

"Must have," one of the cops said. He wore the puzzled look of someone trying to see through a paradox, but he finally just shrugged and said, "I don't usually get wild hunches like the one that made me check you for explosives without a

pretty good reason."

The kid nodded, a slow frown replacing his own grin. "Why didn't you go back and stop me from building it?" he asked.

"Got to have a deterrent," another cop said. "You could have killed people. Probably did. If we let everybody do that whenever they wanted without fining them, we'd be so busy backspacing we'd never get past this afternoon."

"So what's the fine, anyway?"

They passed out of sight and hearing before Mike could learn the kid's punishment. It was pretty steep, he knew. A public backspace affected thousands of people, and though nobody had proved that it was any tougher to rebuild an entire city's day than it was one person's, people like Sarah hated the thought of having the job forced on them, even if they didn't know it had happened.

Mike didn't care, particularly, though it did bother him just a little that he had probably died in the explosion. The kid had just been goofing around, sure, and the police had fixed it all before the fact, but it was still pretty bad manners to kill people without their permission.

He browsed the jewelry and knick-knack shops on his way toward the elevator, but his mind wasn't really on it and he saw nothing that screamed out "Sarah!" to him. Hmm. Well, then, he would try again this evening. He had plenty of time.

J.P. Bundy was a wiry, frenetic, balding man who had no doubt been called a yuppie back when he was young and the term had been coined. He'd made a fortune selling men's cotton briefs at a nickel a pair below his competitors' price, but that had been years ago. Now Bundies Undies was just another clothing company, and J.P. was merely an uppie. And by the looks of the sales chart at the head of the meeting room, he was rapidly becoming a downie.

"December sales are as flat as July!" he shouted in his high-pitched voice, slapping his palm on the table for emphasis. "Three days before Christmas and we haven't even seen a blip in the curve. What kind of an ad campaign are you people running that can't sell product at Christmas?"

Mike wanted to tell old J.P. that his particular brand of underwear wasn't exactly a perfect Christmas gift. He made mostly boxers and jockeys --perfectly good ones, Mike admitted -- but not the sort of thing a person bought for a gift unless they were desperate. And even then, if Mike were desperate enough to buy underwear for a gift, he would at least get something from Fredericks or Heidi's.

But he would never tell J.P. that. In fact, as long as J.P. paid him to do it, he would tell J.P. that his underwear was the best damned Christmas gift in the

known universe. He would even tell other people that, in tonight's and tomorrow's editions of the newsnet. He pulled the printouts from his briefcase and marched up to the front of the room, where he laid the first of them on the projector. It showed a sexy woman -- Sarah, in fact -- wearing a Santa hat and little else, and smiling invitingly as she twirled a pair of Bundy's briefs by their elastic band. Underneath the picture was the line, "Bundy's fit better under the tree."

There was a tense silence as every ad executive in the room waited for some clue how to react. Mike obligingly told them. "J.P.," he said as he brought the lights down. "This ad will sell underwear, and here's why. Because your underwear is the best damned Christmas gift in the known universe, that's why."

It was a long afternoon. Bundy wasn't the only client who needed reassurance. Sales were down all across the board, from fifty-cent stocking stuffers all the way up to new cars and diamond jewelry. Mike and the rest of the staff at Penzley's Advertising spent the entire day scrambling to jump-start the usual Christmas buying frenzy, but the atmosphere in their offices was that of a submarine crew in a sea full of depth charges. There might be a safe path through the next two days, but none of them knew what it was. In all likelihood, unless one of them had a brainstorm, they would lose every contract they had by New Year's.

The only consolation was the knowledge that nobody else's ads were working any better. People just weren't buying this year. The shops were full of browsers, but their wallets were staying firmly in their pockets.

Mike dug through sales figures from last year. They had been down, too, but then the reason was obvious. Backspace technology had just been legalized for the public in November, and every family that could afford one had a single, telephone-booth sized present beside the tree on Christmas morning. That no doubt accounted for some of the drop in traditional sales this year, too, as latecomers to the fad picked up their units, but damn it, most people already had their Backspacer. They should be buying gloves and hats and overshoes for each other again. And underwear.

Mike stared out his window as the sun dropped behind the western horizon. It would be great if some future version of himself would leave him a clue. God knew, he certainly would do it if he had a clue to give, but if his future self figured it out beyond the Backspacer's two-week return limit, then he was screwed. And the fact that nobody in the entire agency had shouted "Eureka" all day didn't bode well.

He was too tired to shop for Sarah's present on the way home. He probably should have, he thought when a wild-eyed street preacher in a dirty brown trench coat stood up at the head of his subway car and began shouting about the evils of backspacing, but the sudden decrease in riders as people looped back to take another car at least gave him room to stretch out. The preacher focused his attention on the few remaining riders -- the only riders to get on, from everyone's revised point of view -- but Mike tuned him out with practiced

ease.

He had bigger problems to occupy his mind.

Sarah was gone when he got home. Working late at the bank, no doubt handling another insurance company's bankruptcy papers. That meant it was Mike's job to cook dinner, but he just wasn't up to it yet. He flipped on the TV and settled into the couch for a bad movie first. He could loop around in an hour or so and

start dinner a few minutes from now, and if he was careful not to interrupt himself in either the living room or the kitchen, he wouldn't create a paradox.

Beyond the window, the city lights were coming on as night fell. Inside, just to

the left of the window, the Christmas tree was dark in its corner. Mike aimed the remote at it and turned on its lights, then watched them twinkle in counterpoint to the city outside. His gaze slid downward to the packages beneath

it-- including one that hadn't been there this morning. Bright green wrapping, with red ribbon and a red bow. About the size of a bread box. Had Sarah put something for him there after he'd left for work?

He got up to see, but when he read the tag he felt a shiver of excitement run down his spine. To Sarah, it read. Merry Christmas from your eternal lover, Michael.

From him? But he hadn't bought her anything. . .yet.

He looked at the package, picked it up, shook it. It didn't rattle, but it had some mass. It could be anything, though, in a box that size.

Mike smiled, there beneath the glowing Christmas tree. He had no doubt packed it

that way deliberately -- would no doubt pack it that way -- to fool himself as well as Sarah. There was no reason for him to know ahead of time what he had bought her. In fact, it heightened the mystery if he didn't.

He suddenly felt ten pounds lighter. The whole weight of the Present Problem had

just been lifted from his shoulders. Now he was free to concentrate on his other

problem, which was why the hell nobody was buying anything this year.

He looked down at the package, then out the window at the city, and he laughed.

He held the answer to that in his hand, too. It wouldn't enable him to sell a damned thing until after Christmas, and poor old J.P.'s Bundywear was just going

to have to get by on practical parents, but at least he knew why nobody was buying anything yet. After a year of growing used to the Backspacer, they weren't willing to accept anything less than absolute perfection in their lives,

and like him, they were all waiting to learn what the perfect gift would be before they went out and bought it.

At least he could point out to his clients one bright side to the situation: Nobody would be returning unwanted presents this year.

He shook Sarah's gift again. Did it shift a little bit? He held it up to his ear

and shook it once more. Suddenly he felt all the excitement of being a kid at Christmas again. Only two days until he and Sarah opened their presents. He couldn't wait to see what he'd bought her.