

A Twistmas Carol

by John Varley

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Marley is dead, to begin with. There is no doubt whatever about that. Old Marley is as dead as a doornail.

Things just haven't been the same around the small fiction-writing firm of Scrooge, Marley, and Varley since old Ebenezer went off his rocker and started giving all his money away. Eb is broke now, languishing in one of the union workhouses. Now I am left here alone to huddle by my meager fire and stir the cold gruel in my bowl, searching for that odd bit of beef, that blot of mustard, crumb of cheese, or fragment of an underdone potato which might give me the

slight disorder of the stomach that would allow old Jacob Marley's ghost to bedevil me for another Christmas Eve. There is more of gravy than the grave about him.

Thus do I fight off the first specter, but it isn't so easy with that nagging harpy, the Spirit of Christmas Past. She's apt to show up anyway. I've got my cane here, as my osteoarthritis of the knees is acting up again in this damp weather, and I would wallop the dickens out of her if she were a tad more substantial. But it would all be to little effect. Once more I must endure the guided tour....

Ah, yes, here she is now. And off we go. A cold wind blows calendar pages before us as we fly...

...1959 ...1958 ...1957 ...1956...

No children could have enjoyed Christmas more than my sisters and myself. We were middle-class, but our granddaddy in Corsicana, Texas, was the manager of a Duke & Ayres store. (Think Woolworth, or Newberry's.) It was a dark, narrow little 5&10 selling just about anything, so long as it was cheap. There was a candy counter (and I can't imagine why I didn't weigh 300 pounds by the time I was 12), and best of all, a toy department. At Christmas time we got deep discounts. If stuff got damaged, we could usually keep it. I always had plenty of toys, even if I had to break them myself.

...1962 ...1963 ...1967...

Christmas dinner at St. Anthony's free soup kitchen in San Francisco. A lot better than you'd expect, too, heaping plates of real turkey, not that crap cut off a turkey roll, and dressing, and cranberry sauce. ...1968 ... 1969...

...1980 ...1981... Y'all wouldn't be interested in any of these.

Just normal, everyday Christmases, then gradually I slowed down and stopped celebrating Christmas at all.

...1995... One Christmas I wrote a little thing patterned after a feature series that used to run in Fantasy & Science Fiction magazine: Ferdinand Feghoot . These were always very short shaggy dog stories that ended in a terrible pun. The punch line of my story was, "Wee Vishnu, a merry crushed moose, and a hopy Jew near." Imagine my surprise when it bounced back to me a year later! Now, I don't mind that, I sent it out over the Internet without any copyright protection so it was free to go where it wanted. But it was rewritten! Somebody, who probably didn't know what a Feghoot was, had taken old FF out of it.

Another year I suggested we ought to ban three Christmas carols each December, sort of like retiring their jerseys, only this wouldn't have been an honor. I suggested "The 12 Days of Christmas," "The Little Drummer Boy," and "The Chipmunk Christmas." Several people took me to task for that, saying they still enjoyed the (to me) wretched excess we indulge each holiday season. That was cool, too, I knew how you felt, I used to get deeply into Christmas, more often than not, before I was finally bludgeoned into my present hermit-like torpor.

Oh, there she goes. The Spirit of Christmas Past doesn't care to listen to me whining about so-called "holiday" music. And here comes that big, fat slob, the Spirit of Christmas Present. (When I was a

kid, I thought he was the Spirit of Christmas PRESENTS. My kind of Spirit!) Well, YOU'LL just have to listen to the rest of the music rant, Spirit

It is NOT, usually, the song, per se (except for the Chipmunk atrocity; playing THAT song should be a felony, and hearing it grounds for an insanity defense in court), it's the incredible squalor of the ARRANGEMENTS, of the PERFORMANCES that really makes me want to jab a sharp instrument into my eardrums.

My Christmas music season these days would begin with "The Nutcracker" and end with "The Messiah." And that's IT! So far nobody's managed to really contaminate those two. That, and one playing of Stan Freburg's classic "Green Chri\$tm\$ \$"...

Hey! You! Spirit of Christmas Present! Wake up! Put you to sleep again, did I? Bored you to tears with my carping and complaining, right? All right, do your thing, and get the hell out of here!

And the Spirit opens his robe like a subway flasher, and there between the boxer shorts with little wreaths on them and the garters holding up his tube sox are two children, wretched, abject, frightful, hideous. And the Spirit says, This boy is Ignorance, and this girl is Want. Beware of them both, and all—

Oh, stuff it up your figgy pudding, I say. The girl is Greed and the boy is Excess, and you know it.

Have it your own way, says the Spirit, and stalks off in a pout.

And now here comes the skeleton dude. I ask, Am I in the presence of the Spirit of Christmas Yet to Come? He doesn't answer. The fughead never does. I go on, You are about to show me shadows of the things

that have not happened, but will happen in the time before us, is

that so, Spirit? I don't know why I bother. In this recurring

nightmare, the Spirit in Black never speaks....

Christmas Yet to Come? Well, through a series of misadventures including a blown transmission and the snow and ice descending on the mountain passes south of Medford and north of Redding, Lee and I were not able to get this god-dang trailer moved down to California like we'd planned. Looks like we'll be spending the winter right here... and why is it that when I write that: "Looks like we'll be spending the winter right here," ... I am always reminded of the Donner Party?

This Christmas I'm going to Las Vegas to see my mother, both sisters, and brother-in-law.

Christmas in Vegas. I can't quite picture it. Do you figure the casinos put up Christmas lights? How would you know?

But wait, the Spirit is showing me a vision. There I am, hobbling through the casino in... in the... it's the Bellagio, I see it now.

High roller city! I pull up a stool at the new Yuletide Progressive slots. I drop in my 5 silver dollars—

Ka-CHUNK

Ka-CHUNK

Ka-CHUNK

Ka-CHUNK

Ka-CHUNK

I pull the handle.... rickety- tickety-rickety-tickety-

rickety- tickety-rickety-tickety-rickety- tickety-rickety-tickety—

CLUNK! Santa Claus!

CLUNK! Santa Claus!!!

CLUNK! Santa Claus!!!! I win, I win! I'm rich!

...No, wait. Tell me, Spirit! Is this the shadow of something that

WILL be, or is it the shadow of a thing that MAY be only?

The Spirit just shrugs, and trudges off to torment another Bah

Humbucker.

Oh, well. Meeeeeeeerrrry Christmas everybody! By golly, NOW I know

howto keep Christmas well, if any man alive possesses the

knowledge!

And as Tiny Tim observed, God bless us, every one!

John Varley is the author of seven novels and three volumes of short stories, and the recipient of numerous awards, including (at last count) three Hugos , two Nebulas, the Tiptree , and the Prometheus Award.He lives in semi-solitary splendor in the wilds ofOregon . A newnovel, Red Thunder, will appear in the summer of 2002.

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