

Fast & Festive  
Fiction Writing Contest Winner  
December 2006

# The Naughty List



Dan  
Strohschein

The Naughty List  
*by Dan Strohschein*

**Echelon Press**

[www.echelonpress.com](http://www.echelonpress.com)

Copyright ©2006 by Echelon Press Publishing

First published in 2006

The Naughty List  
*by Dan Strohschein*

## **THE NAUGHTY LIST**

By Dan Strohschein

-

Fast & Festive Fiction Contest

**Winner**

The Naughty List  
*by Dan Strohschein*

## **THE NAUGHTY LIST**

Fast & Festive Fiction Writing Contest Winner

An Echelon Press Download

-

First Echelon Press publication / December 2006

-

All rights Reserved.

Copyright © 2006 by Dan Strohschein

Cover illustration © Karen L. Syed

-

Echelon Press

9735 Country Meadows Lane 1-D

Laurel, MD 20723

[www.echelonpress.com](http://www.echelonpress.com)

The Naughty List  
*by Dan Strohschein*

-

All rights reserved. No part of this work may be used or reproduced in any manner whatsoever without written permission, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles and reviews. For information address Echelon Press.

-

ISBN 1-59080-528-3

Produced in the United States of America

The Naughty List  
*by Dan Strohschein*

\* \* \* \*

Jack pulled the covers up to his daughter's chin and kissed her forehead. She giggled, her smile showing two missing front teeth.

"When's Santa coming, daddy?"

"As soon as you and your sister are asleep."

"But Natalie always stays up late. Santa will never come," Layla said.

"Well, when you are sixteen you can stay up late too."

"But I don't want her to stay up late. I want her to go to bed so Santa can come. How come he waits until everyone is asleep?"

"So he can put the presents under the tree without anyone seeing him."

"But why doesn't he want anyone to see him?"

Jack sighed. "Remember when we talked about how Santa is able to work his magic?"

"Uh huh. Cuz we believe in him."

"Yes. But if you saw him, would you have to believe as hard as you do?"

Layla frowned, deep in thought. "I guess not, cuz I would know he was there."

"Exactly, and then his magic wouldn't be quite as good. Now, you need to get to sleep munchkin, or Santa will never come and no one will get any presents here."

"Okay, Daddy. Tell Natalie to go to bed too, cuz if she stays up and Santa doesn't come I'll be really mad."

The Naughty List  
*by Dan Strohschein*

Jack smiled and kissed her again before walking to the door. He turned around, his hand on the light switch. "Sweet dreams, munchkin. Let visions of sugar plums dance in your head."

"I don't know what sugar plums are, but okay."

Jack turned out the light and gently closed the door to her room.

"She hard to get to bed?" Jack crossed the second story landing to the door of his bedroom, and kissed his wife.

"Not as bad as last year. She seems to have outgrown the sneaking out of bed thing."

"It'll be a good Christmas, won't it?" Her blue eyes locked on his.

He reached up and played with one of her golden curls. "The best yet. With that promotion at work and the bonus we have more money to play with."

She moved closer to him and laid her head against his chest, wrapping her arms around him.

"It's so sad, what happened to Joe. I hope Jenny will be okay for the holidays. Maybe we should invite her over for Christmas dinner or something. I hate the thought of her being alone on Christmas."

Jack swallowed-his throat clicked, but his wife didn't seem to notice. "Yeah, we could do that."

"I can't imagine what I would do if you had a heart attack. One day here, the next day ... just gone. It's so horrible. He was a good guy too."

Jack kissed the top of her head. "Let's not talk about that tonight sweetheart. It's Christmas Eve-there is magic in the

air tonight. Santa has to work his skills while the little one is snoozin'"

"Yeah, well there's the other one to worry about now, cowboy."

"Eww gross, get a room you two," Natalie said as she came up the stairs. She went to her room, demarked by various posters on the door.

"Hey, get some sleep or Santa won't come and visit you."

"Dad, seriously, I'm way too old for that Santa sh—"

"Watch your mouth young lady."

"Sorry."

"Get to bed anyway, okay?"

"Whatever." Natalie closed the door to her room.

"Was that a yes or a no?" Jack asked his wife.

She shook her head. "I don't know. I don't think anyone over the age of eighteen can translate her language into English."

Jack let go of his wife and closed the door. She disrobed into her satiny pajamas and gave him a sly smile.

"I think Mrs. Claus has an early Christmas gift for her husband," she said, and pulled back the covers.

Jack smiled and walked up to the bed, the incident with Joe as far from his mind as it could get.

\* \* \* \*

He jerked awake and checked the clock. The digital readout said 3:14 a.m., and his daughter was screaming like a banshee. His wife rolled over and moaned.

"Another nightmare?"

The Naughty List  
*by Dan Strohschein*

"Probably. You go back to sleep, I'll check on her," Jack said, pulling his red bathrobe over his pajamas. He opened the door, which amplified the noise, and walked out into the landing. He sniffed-the giant pine Christmas tree filled the entire house with its scent, something that reminded Jack of cleaning chemicals.

He opened Layla's door and charged in.

She lay there, asleep, her blankets wadded up at her feet. She was an active sleeper, just like he was. He walked in; his eyebrows knit together in confusion, and pulled the blankets back up to her chin. As he stepped back out, he looked around. The moonlight streamed into the window from outside, showing nothing in the room. He left her room and went to Natalie's.

His elder daughter was also asleep, her iPod headphones still stuck in her ears. She snored in soft grunts. Boy if she knew that she snored she would be devastated, he thought, and smiled to himself. He missed the times they used to spend joking around with each other, but she was growing up now, and spending time with parents was totally 'uncool'.

He closed the door to her room and returned to his own. He closed the door with a soft push, disrobed again, and got back into bed. His wife stirred.

"Scary rabbit man again?"

"No, it was nothing. She's sleeping again."

"Okay, good."

He closed his eyes, and drifted back off to sleep.

\* \* \* \*

The screaming woke him up again. This time the clock read 3:45 a.m. His wife didn't stir this time, and he decided it best to let her sleep. He had all day to nap tomorrow, and probably would after the turkey anyway. Once again, he put his robe on and left his room. The scent of pine suffocated the air, and Jack coughed. Was it stronger? Or was that his imagination?

He opened Layla's room and rushed in.

She lay as before, quietly sleeping. The screaming was gone.

"What the hell?" he whispered to the dark. The sound of her breathing answered him.

"Maybe I'm the one having nightmares." Jack wiped his hand over his face and left her room.

As he crossed the landing back toward his room, Jack stopped, his head snapping toward the foyer and the living room just visible over the banister. In the light cast on the white tile by the Christmas lights in the tree was a shadow.

The shadow of a man. His heart burst into panicked pumps and suddenly his temperature rose. He'd heard of people getting robbed of their gifts on Christmas before, but how on earth did they get in without setting off the alarm? He swallowed hard. He had protection in the house, an entire collection of guns. But they were locked in a cabinet. Downstairs. Katy wouldn't allow one in the bedroom with them.

In slow, soft steps, Jack moved closer to the banister, trying desperately to remember if there were any squeaky boards on this part of the landing or not. His hyper-aware

ears picked up every little noise, making him sure the sound of his quick and heavy breathing would give him away. But even at the landing, he couldn't see who cast the shadow. He glanced around the small area of the landing, looking for anything he could use as a weapon.

When he glanced back, the shadow was gone.

Jack stood there for a moment, unsure of what to do. He could go back into the bedroom and call the police. That was a good plan. A great plan.

Except ... No, I don't want the police to even know I exist, he thought.

With the same slow steps, his back against the wall, Jack descended the stairs, his eyes on the living room. Sweat dripped between his shoulder blades and down his back.

He arrived at the bottom of the stairs without seeing anyone. The door to his office was just off of the foyer, and he inched toward it, not taking his eyes from the living room. When he reached the office, he peaked through the open crack between the pocket door and the frame. Light from the window, even filtered by the blinds, showed it devoid of movement. He pushed the door open and slid inside. His gun cabinet sat behind his desk and contained four weapons-two shotguns and two rifles.

He opened the cabinet and grabbed the pump. Having the cabinet open was a sin, he knew, but he'd taught his daughters at a young age to have respect for a firearm. He'd even taken each of them shooting on a regular basis for the past few years. Jack never worried about them hurting themselves with one. He reached on top of the seven-foot

The Naughty List  
by Dan Strohschein

cabinet and grabbed a box of orange shells, quietly loading them in one in at a time.

With the weapon ready, Jack moved back out of the office, and into the living room. His heart hammered his chest wall. At any moment he expected to see someone. Would he shoot first, ask questions later? Or would he give them a chance to live?

*What if it's your wife or one of the kids?* his mind asked.

That's ridiculous; I just left them all upstairs.

What if it's ... him?

Jesus Christ, don't start thinking that way. No fat red men in suits are climbing down chimneys in this neighborhood. Besides, I don't even have a chimney.

Jack searched meticulously through the house, and found no one. After a second check to make sure that the gifts were still under the tree, he chocked it up to imagination and sleep deprivation. Ever since Joe's death, he'd been busy at work. Putting in the long hours, making the impressions on the right people. In the end, it paid off. The senior executives named him regional manager. Joe would have been proud. Or maybe not. Jack shook his head, rubbed his neck, and headed back up the stairs.

He took his gun with him. Just in case.

\* \* \* \*

His eyes had barely closed when the scratching noises started. They came from the bedroom door, toward the bottom. Jack snapped awake and sat up, his hand on the barrel of the gun. The noises reminded him of his cat Bonkers

The Naughty List  
by Dan Strohschein

when he'd been a kid. If he closed his door at night, the stupid cat would sit there and scratch at it until he opened it. The feline would turn away then, nose up in the air, never coming in. But Jack didn't have any animals now.

He got out of bed and picked the gun up, pointing it at the door. His wife was still asleep-she could sleep like the dead. That thought unnerved him.

Not taking his eyes from the door, he reached out and turned the door handle. The scratching noises stopped just as Jack ripped open the door. On the floor, where he expected some deranged serial killer to be lying in wait was a teddy bear. Its blank eyes staring up at him.

"What the hell is going on here," Jack whispered as he bent over to pick up the toy. It didn't look like one of his daughters'-Natalie was too old for that and Layla was into stuffed dogs. Yet the toy looked familiar somehow.

"Ho ho ho," Jack whispered, looking at the toy.

"Ho ho ho," said a whisper from Jack's stairway. He started so hard that the gun fell from his hands, landing with a huge *CLUNK* on the carpeted floor.

On the stairs, floating downwards toward the foyer in the dark, he saw the back of someone's head. It didn't move normally-no bobbing or jerky up and down motion. Jack's mouth went dry and he stood there, paralyzed, crouched against his doorframe, watching the scenario.

It took him a few seconds to snap out of it and grab the gun. Just enough time for the rational part of his mind to take over and tell the rest of his body that *Someone-is-in-the-*

*house!* The thought broke his fear, and he pounded down the stairs, gun pointed forward.

"Hey!"

But no one was in the foyer at the bottom of the stairs, or in the living room. Jack kept the gun level and moved into the kitchen, turning the corner to look into the family room, where four sets of French doors let the moonlight in.

There, in front of his fireplace, stood a man, his hands on his hips. The intruder's back was to Jack, giving Jack the element of surprise, or so he thought. He took a step forward, his bare feet not making any sound on the kitchen tile, and the man spoke.

"Hello, Jack." The voice was a whisper, high pitched, almost sinister.

Jack pumped the gun and adjusted his aim. "Get out of my house. I called the cops, you know."

"You lie a lot, Jack. Soon your web of lies is going to tighten."

"Get out of my house or I'll shoot!"

The intruder put his head down and took a deep breath, before turning around.

Standing there, in front of the fireplace of Jack's house, was the very definition of Santa Claus. Right down to the white beard.

"I know what you did, Jack."

"Who the hell are you?"

Santa took a moment to answer, a broad smile on his lips as he did. "I'm the spirit of Christmas, and I'm here to collect my debt."

The Naughty List  
*by Dan Strohschein*

"I don't know what you're talking about, but if you don't think I'll shoot you, just test me."

"Do what you have to do, Jack. That's always the way it is, isn't it, Jack? You did what you had to do to Joe, didn't you?" Santa took a step forward as he spoke. The voice didn't fit-it wasn't jolly or deep with loving warmth. This was cold and thin.

"What?"

"The cops might not know, your wife might not know, but I do."

"I'm..." Jack swallowed. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"You lie, even now," Santa said, taking another step forward. "And Santa doesn't bring presents to people that lie, Jack. No, not at all."

Jack's hands were shaking so hard his aim was bobbing all over the place. He no longer knew if he could shoot and hit the red target. "I said stay where you are! I'll shoot!"

"You're a murderer, Jack."

"Shut up!"

"A killer."

"I swear to God I'll—"

"God has no place here-You're with Santa now, and you're on Santa's naughty list!" Santa hissed and took another step. At the same time, Jack decided to fire, Santa burst into what looked like a moving wave of black tar. As Jack's finger depressed the trigger, the mass of black liquid went from thirty feet away, to right in Jack's face. A disappear and re-

appear act that knocked Jack's gun completely off, targeting the blast of fire and pellets uselessly into the kitchen wall.

Up close, the tar formed a face, but this wasn't of a bearded Santa, but rather a dark gray round face with glowing white pupil-less eyes. It laughed at Jack's scream.

"Come on, Jack! It's your old buddy Joe. Let's take a walk, shall we? Let's go and see Christmas Past!"

The tar formed into the older, fatter visage of Joe Mason and gestured with his hand to the kitchen table. Jack stared, wide eyed, his mouth open in an empty scream, at a light blue coffee cup that said *Sales Rep of the month: December 1985!* on the side. Next to it stood a small clear bottle with an eyedropper in it. Jack recognized the bottle as the same one he used to drop the potassium into Joe's coffee. Tasteless, odorless, and 98% absorbent by the body as a natural chemical-the perfect poison.

"Oh yes, see, I told you I knew. Santa knows all!"

"Get away from me!" Jack turned and ran from the kitchen. He reached the stairs and pounded up them, tripping himself midway. He looked back, and Joe was right there, on the stairs with him.

"Oh you want to skip ahead, Jack? Okay, let's do that. How about straight to Christmas Present?" The Joe-Santa-tar thing laughed as Jack clawed his way to the top of the stairs and across the landing. He opened the bedroom door, and immediately something wet and warm splashed across his chest. Jack looked down at a dark red stain on his robe, and put his hands up, confused. They came back red. A gurgling sound brought his attention back to his bedroom. His wife

knelt on the floor, blood spurting in streams from her neck as she reached out to him.

"Katy! No!" Jack made to run in, but the door slammed in his face, knocking him back. He got back up, and rammed the door when he heard simultaneous screams from both Natalie and Layla's bedrooms. He stopped mid-step and spun around toward them.

The doors burst open of their own free will, and a wave of blood crashed out of each, soaking Jack and knocking him back down. He got to his knees again, trying to yell, crying, unable to see where he was going or what he was doing. The sound of sloshing steps announced that the Joe thing stood by him again.

"Are you starting to understand now? Do you see the predicament you're in?"

"You killed my family."

"It's not over yet, Jack. Remember, we still have Christmas Future!"

Something crashed into a door somewhere. Jack couldn't tell what door, but it came along with the sound of cracking wood and people yelling. He realized what was happening as the sound of boots making their way up to the landing filled his ears.

"Thank God, please, help me!"

"Put your hands up and lay on the carpet," a strong male voice yelled at him.

"What?" Jack said putting his hands forward to try to block the light that shone into his face. Someone came up behind him and grabbed his hands, forcing them behind his back.

The Naughty List  
*by Dan Strohschein*

"You're under arrest for the murder of Joe Mason. You have the right to remain silent—"

"Sergeant, call an ambulance. The bastard got his own family too," someone interrupted the cop cuffing him.

"No ... No it wasn't me! It was him! It was Joe! I mean, Santa!"

"Get this fruitcake out of here," someone else said, and Jack felt himself lifted painfully from the sticky carpet. He stumbled most of the way down the stairs, causing the officers to hold him. They pushed him toward the remnants of his front door, the headlights from the cruisers on his front lawn making him squint. As he got closer, the light got brighter and brighter, until finally it filled all of his vision.

\* \* \* \*

Jack blinked and shook his head. It was daylight-not night time, and he wasn't home. He looked around, disorientation lifting like a fog from his mind. Jack stood in the break room of his office, and in his hand he held Joe's blue coffee mug. He set it down and looked around, feeling his clothes. No longer was he in his bathrobe. It must have been some sort of dream. Then he felt it-the bottle of potassium in his coat pocket. He knew where he was.

"Is that my coffee cup?" Joe Mason said, walking in. Jack started and almost dropped it, looking at Joe with wide eyes.

"Huh?"

"Wow Jack, you must have had a good time last night. I asked if that was my coffee cup. I've been looking for the damn thing all morning."

"Oh yeah, I uh—"

"You were getting me a refill? You don't have to start kissing my ass; I don't have the promotion yet buddy." Joe slapped Jack's arm and held out his hand. Jack watched as Joe took the cup away from him and started to walk away.

"Hey Joe, wait a second. I saw this ... fly kamikaze straight into that thing, man. I was going to rinse it out and get you a new batch," Jack said, grabbing the cup away from Joe.

"Oh well, hey, thanks, buddy."

"Sure. No problem," Jack said and turned away, dumping the coffee in the sink.

"I'll bring it over to your desk."

"Ok, whatever you say. Just don't poison it," Joe said laughing, and walked away.

Jack laughed with him, half-heartedly, as the voice sang in his head again...

*"You better not shout ... you better not cry.... You betting not kill ... I'm telling you ... "* a quiet whisper rang in his mind, then laughed.

Jack removed his hand from his pocket. Maybe it wasn't a dream. Maybe it was a Christmas miracle.

The Naughty List  
*by Dan Strohschein*

Dan Strohschein was born in Los Angeles, CA, and as such was witness to a great many horrors. He wrote them down, added some extra blood for effect, and has been creating terror in prose ever since. His current residence, with his beautiful, artistic wife and four mangy cats, is in Orlando, FL where the deep gothic swamps make for a perfect writing atmosphere. Check out his blog at **[yahorror.blogspot.com](http://yahorror.blogspot.com)**.

---

If you are connected to the Internet, take a moment to rate this eBook by going back to your bookshelf at [www.fictionwise.com](http://www.fictionwise.com).