

## SMOKE SCREEN SANTA

*“A Story by aka Bernie Birney”*

### Part I

Christmas Eve at the Super-Save Mall. With only two shopping-hours left till closing. The selling season had been slow, and already the stores were piling their Boxing Day bargains in the aisles outside their doors. Everyone looked tired. In the rotunda by the Sears department store a Salvation Army band was playing eleventh-hour Christmas carols. God rest ye merry, Gentlemen. Everything for half price or less. Oh tidings of discounts and joy.

In front of the book shop three men were lingering over a table of sell-offs. Christmas shopping renegades for sure. Delaying their holiday purchases down to the wire by combing through obscure volumes no one wanted to buy. Who else would affect an interest in such meagre titles as “The Roaring Twenties” by Beulah Buehler, “Birds of Prey – Vol. II” by Robin Robbins, or “The Seduction” by May May and Will Will? All selections ninety-nine cents a pound. All sales final.

Three strangers reading in silence to the tune of “God rest ye merry, Gentlemen”. When the band finally stopped playing, they looked up together, sharing a momentary glance of relief. A brief pause in which their bond of procrastination was mutually acknowledged. And their solitude was dispelled.

“God, I wish they’d give it a rest with those carols. They’re driving me nuts.” The man with the book by Robin Robbins was the first to speak.

The band responded by brazenly proclaiming “Joy to the World”.

“Tell me about it.” The reader of the novel by May and Will shouted over the noise. “Christmas shopping’s even worse when they set it to music.”

“I’d gladly give up Christmas completely. Cold turkey.” The third man waved Beulah Buehler’s lifetime achievement at the others to emphasize his point.

“This year’s especially rotten for me,” said the first man, who could whimsically be named Robin Robbins, after the author of his chosen book. “I lost my job the other day. Real estate. You know how shaky the housing market’s been. Agents like me are a dime a dozen. So Christmas is the last thing I need right now.”

“I know how you feel,” said the fellow most aptly called Will Will, based on his reading material. “I had my entire savings invested in Jackpot Sulphur. Some hot tip. You heard about the scandal? Well, they called my margin last week. Lost everything. I don’t even have a roof left to hang my stocking under.”

“My wife just left me,” said the unfortunate man who must go by the alias Beulah Buehler. “After fifteen years. For some zipper salesman across town. Believe me, between phone calls and meetings with lawyers, I haven’t had time to get into the Christmas spirit.”

During their outpourings, a fourth person had wandered up to the book table. An old man in a heavy red suit with a matching hat. Looking pale and too thin under his fake gray beard. A worn-out Super-Save Santa, taking one last coffee break before ten months of oblivion. He picked up a copy of “The Christmas Tree Pop-Up Book” by Bruce Bruce.

“I lost my pipe today,” he said, turning slowly through the pages.

Robin, Will and Beulah stared at him for what seemed like a long time. Had they heard him right? What was he doing here? And how dared he interrupt their lamentations with such an insignificant

complaint of his own?

“What did you say?” Robin finally asked.

“I lost my pipe today,” repeated Santa. “It doesn’t seem like Christmas Eve without it.”

“What do you expect us to do?” asked Will.

They stared at him some more. Three men with real problems confronting a nuisance.

At last Beulah spoke. “Listen guys, maybe there is something we can do. I know I can’t save anyone’s job, or replace anyone’s investments. And you fellows can’t bring my wife back to me. But this is something we can fix.” He fished into his pocket. “Twenty bucks should buy a decent pipe to keep an old man happy.”

“Yeah, you’re right,” said Robin. “Santa Claus wouldn’t be Santa Claus without his pipe. My severance pay will last a few more weeks. And real estate always picks up in the new year. It’s about time I gave something back to Old Saint Nick. Here’s twenty more bucks. That should buy a damn good pipe. Maybe even a meerschaum.”

“This twenty dollar bill is all I’ve got,” said Will. “But it might as well go up in smoke like all the rest. I’ll do my Christmas shopping on credit, and let American Express sue me into bankruptcy come January.” He winked at Santa. “If there’s any change left from your new pipe, buy yourself a few good cigars on me. Merry Christmas.”

They pressed their money into Santa’s palm and then dispersed into the crowd. Three men with nowhere to go helping another on his way. As they went in their separate directions, to face their personal Christmas shopping ordeals, the band broke into “O Come All Ye Faithful”. Strangely enough, Robin, Will and Beulah found themselves humming along. Joyful and triumphant.

## Part II

Christmas Eve at the Super-Save Mall. One year later. With just one shopping hour till closing. A brisk year for sales, and the stores still have their best remaining merchandise lined up outside. No early Boxing Day bargains here. As always, the Salvation Army band is going strong. Blasting out “Silent Night”. Save a soul. Save a dollar. Shop in Heavenly Peace.

The book store is displaying an array of popular cookbooks, and three men stop to browse through titles such as “Land-Lubbers’ Lunches”, by Dinah Shore, “Post-Diet Delights”, by Mustapha Donat. And “French Toast Favourites”, by Bonnie Petite. Wait a minute. Three grown men reading recipes? Not likely! How about three desperate men practising Christmas shopping avoidance?

That’s the real story. Dollars to donuts.

They suffer through “Silent Night” until the band stops playing. Then they look around at each other.

“Why am I doing this?” says Mustapha Donat, tossing his book aside. “I don’t have time for cookbooks.”

“Me neither,” agrees Dinah Shore, as the band begins “We Three Kings”. “I’m in real estate. And it’s been one crazy year. Made a lot of money. But there’s been no chance to spend it. I’m still expecting to close a deal before midnight.” He shows off his portable telephone as if it might ring at any moment. “Christmas Eve. Can you believe it?”

“I’ve had one of those years too,” says Bonnie Petite. “Got into coffee futures just as they were heating up. You heard about the frost in Brazil? Bought low. Sold high. Did quite well, thank you.

For once I've got some spare cash to buy Christmas presents. But I still hate Christmas shopping as much as always."

Mustapha nods in sympathy. "I'm with you there, Pal. But at least I know what I'm going to buy for a change. I met this wonderful lady last spring. A real class act. So I'm heading for the jewellery store to get an engagement ring." He smiles smugly. "This is going to be my best Christmas. Ever."

Super-Save Santa Claus walks over to the book display and selects "North Pole Kitchen Classics" by Ginger Breadman. Under his false finery he looks very gaunt and frail.

"I broke my pipe today," he tells the others.

Mustapha, Dinah and Bonnie regard him in cool silence. Resenting his interruption. Three busy gentlemen with plans and prospects acknowledging a derelict.

I sat on it by mistake. It broke into half a dozen pieces," Santa explains.

The trio exchange knowing looks amongst themselves.

"I'll tell you what," says Mustapha. "Here's five bucks. Buy yourself a drink and forget your troubles."

"Here's five more," says Dinah. "Buy yourself a bottle. Share it with the elves."

"Merry Christmas. And Bottoms Up!" Bonnie slaps a matching third bill into Santa's hand.

The band bursts into "Hark, the Herald Angels Sing!", and the three men leave the scene. Going grimly to execute their Yuletide chores. Shaking their heads at the floor. And totally oblivious to the cheery music. God and sinners unreconciled.

Santa puts his book away and heads back to his Super-Save sleigh. On the way, he stops by the Salvation Army band and deposits the money from Mustapha, Dinah and Bonnie in the plastic Christmas kettle. The lady with the bow on her bonnet smiles and says "God bless you", as she does every Christmas Eve. And still the band plays on. Verse after verse. Blatant. Blaring.

*Born to raise the sons of Earth,  
Born to give them second birth,  
Hark, the herald angels sing,  
Glory to the newborn King!  
Amen.*

And never judge a book by its cover.

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