

## SWEET AND SOUR SNICKERS

### Remembrance Day

*They shall not grow old, as we who are left grow old.  
Age shall not weary them, nor the years condemn...*

“God damn Remembrance Day!” The octogenarian shook her liver-spotted fist at the television. “It’s eleven o’clock in the morning. I should be watching ‘The Price is Right!’”

“Don’t worry, Aunt Coco,” said her companion without looking up from her knitting. “It’ll be on again tomorrow.”

“That’s easy for you to say, Hazel,” Aunt Coco leaned toward her, dangling precariously out of her wheelchair. “As long as you’re knitting you’d be happy to see the grass grow on TV. But at my age I think I’m entitled to say how I feel when I’m missing one of my favourite things.”

“After I finish turning this heel I’ll make some tea,” answered Hazel.

*At the going down of the sun and in the morning  
We will remember them.*

“I’ll bet the American channels are showing ‘The Price is Right,’” said Aunt Coco. “They call November 11<sup>th</sup> Veterans Day there, instead of Remembrance Day like we do, and they celebrate the survivors instead of crying over the victims. Sounds sensible to me. And that’s the difference between Americans and Canadians. The Americans arrange these things so they don’t have to interrupt their important television programs for bagpipes, cannons and morbid poetry. God bless Veterans Day. And God damn Silver Suites for only letting us watch Canadian TV!”

“Well,” said Hazel, “All of the veterans of the First World War must be dead by now, so whatever the day is called, it amounts to the same thing.” Hazel continued guiltily with her handiwork. The sock she was knitting was to become a Christmas present for one of her sons. Out of respect for the military sacrifices of the world, she wished she could have started her Christmas labours of love after the solemnities of Remembrance Day were over. But there was just too much knitting to be done for it to be postponed any longer. Hazel had been making socks for her sons Wally and Chester every Christmas since they were born over thirty years ago. And when Chester had married Amanda and her grandson Philbert had come along, her knitting workload had doubled. And now that Wally had a serious girlfriend, another woollen project was required to acknowledge her potential daughter-in-law status - even if she was a Japanese girl named Hikari. And of course Aunt Coco, who had no one else, must have a gift. Hazel didn’t make socks for the ladies. She gave them scarves. And as she never saw anyone of her family wear any of the apparel she knitted for them, she happily assumed they were always in need of fresh replacements every year.

“Is that sock becoming your life’s work?” demanded Aunt Coco. “I’m getting thirsty.”

Hazel reflected silently that knitting socks and scarves was in a way her life’s work, as a continuing exhibition of her love for her family. “It may take a lot of my time, but every year on Christmas Day it’s totally worthwhile,” she beamed.

“So I suppose your whole brood is going to descend upon your place as usual?” asked Aunt Coco.

“Of course!” said Hazel. “It wouldn’t be Christmas if the family didn’t get together.”

“Then I want to be there too. I’ve decided to get out more, even if I’m in this blasted wheelchair.”

“The kids would love to see you!” gushed Hazel.

“I also want to make an announcement,” said Aunt Coco. “And I’d like everyone to be present. I’m changing my will. You don’t need my money, Hazel. Your only extravagance is the odd skein of angora wool. So I want to keep things in the family, but make sure that the people who get my loot will actually use it.”

“I see,” replied Hazel.

“So I’m counting on you to round everyone up for Christmas dinner,” she continued. “And if they don’t come, you’d better knit me something useful for a change. A nice heavy sweater with raglan sleeves to keep out the winter chills. Silver Suites never keeps it warm enough in here. Cheap government-subsidized bastards.”

Having just been disinherited, Hazel pondered how her aunt could expect to retain her right to restitution for any future errors or omissions she might commit. But instead of arguing, she just nodded and said, “But we always get together for Christmas...”

“Good,” said Aunt Coco. “Now all of this weeping and moaning on TV has worn me out. Make me some tea and then put me to bed for a nap. After that you can leave.”

With a sense of relief, Hazel folded up her needles and did as she was told.

#### A Few Weeks Later

*Canadian peacekeeping troops are celebrating victory today. Assisted by local national forces, they completely annihilated a cell of enemy insurgents in an overnight raid. It’s estimated that at least fifty rebel soldiers were killed in the operation. Four allied national guards sacrificed their lives, and several more were injured. There were no Canadian casualties.*

Hazel sat knitting in her living room, aimlessly humming ‘O Little Town of Bethlehem’, with the news in the background. She was working on a sock for her grandson Philbert, and had chosen a pastel green shade of wool. She optimistically hoped that this colour, which was a favourite of hers, would be acceptable to a twelve year old boy. When the doorbell sounded she expected it to be some unsolicited door-to-door campaign, but she still turned down the radio and carefully tucked away her Christmas-gift-in-progress before rising to answer.

“Hi Mom!”

“Hey Grandma!”

Her son Chester, with his wife Amanda and son Philbert crowded into the hall.

“Sorry we didn’t call ahead,” said Amanda, “But we’ve given up our cell phones. All those nasty electronic waves in our ears! Bad for the brain, you know. Especially for youngsters like Philbert. Right, Chester?”

“Yes dear,” agreed Chester.

“Can I get you something to drink?” Hazel asked.

“No thanks,” replied Amanda. “We’re not staying. Philbert’s bowling league is having its annual bowl-a-thon fundraiser this afternoon. Can you come with us?”

“Well,” said Hazel. “I’m getting my hair done at two thirty, and I wanted to pick up a pot roast for tomorrow night. Wally and Hikari are coming to dinner.”

“No problem,” chuckled Amanda. “Beauty appointments are special. Gotta keep lookin’ good. Right, Chester?”

“Yes, dear,” agreed Chester.

“Perhaps...” said Hazel.

“We’ll give you more notice next time,” waved Amanda.

“Grandma,” Philbert piped up, “Can you give me twenty bucks?”

“Yes... Of course, dear. Would you like a cookie too?” asked Hazel.

“It’s got to be nut-free!” interjected Amanda, her voice sounding shrill. “You know I never let Philbert eat nuts. In case he’s allergic to them. They could be fatal.”

“Yes, yes, nuts, I know,” said Hazel, handing over a twenty dollar bill and a bag containing several cookies. “They’re chocolate chip. I baked them yesterday.”

When they had gone, Hazel returned to her knitting, wondering to herself how anyone could go through his entire childhood without tasting nuts. She also tried to imagine what kinds of things a bowling league might need to raise money for.

#### Immediately Later

*In Warner’s Corners traffic, there’s been a serious crash on Millburn Street at the Cameron Bridge, involving at least four automobiles and an intercity bus. Police are at the scene and have confirmed there are fatalities.*

Amanda turned off the car radio. “Great,” she said. “An accident between us and the bowling alley. Now we’ll have to take a detour, and we’re already running late because you wanted to stop at your mother’s. And didn’t I tell you she’d have some lame excuse, Chester?”

“Yes, dear.” Chester kept his eyes on the road and his hands on the steering wheel.

With the day’s events seeming to conspire against her, Amanda seethed with indignation. “We offered her a chance to spend some quality time with her grandson, and she decided her hair was more important. Her god damned hair! Unbelievable! That just shows exactly where her priorities are. PHILBERT! – don’t you touch those cookies until I’ve checked them first! So if your mother doesn’t want to spend time with us, we’re not going to spend time with her. We’ll find something else to do for Christmas this year. Right, Chester?”

“uh...”

”RIGHT, Chester?”

“...yes, dear.”

Taking the cookie bag from Philbert, Amanda held it to her nose and inhaled a series of short sniffs. Then with an assenting bob of her head she handed it back to her son.

### The Next Evening

“Would you like another cookie with your coffee?” Hazel was passing her chocolate chip cookies to Wally and Hikari, who were relaxing after dinner. Wally was glancing through the newspaper, his feet stretched on the coffee table. The news story facing outward from the front page before him read:

*AFRICANS STARVE AS FOOD ROTS. Sub-Saharan victims of the world's latest natural disaster are being denied food and other aid by the uncooperative governments of their own countries. With relief efforts blocked, food supplies from around the globe are spoiling in the heat, causing tens of thousands to die of starvation. This second man-made calamity threatens to cause even more deaths than the original catastrophe.*

“That was a wonderful dinner, Mrs...” Hikari began.

“Oh, please dear, just call me Hazel.”

“Mom’s always been a great cook,” said Wally, dropping down his paper, “Except for one infamous lunch when we were kids.” He grinned at Hikari. “Mom made sandwiches for Chester and me using some tainted tuna she didn’t realize was bad. And even though we complained about how awful it tasted, she made us finish them up before we could leave the table. Then we went back to school and got totally sick. We’ve never let her live that one down.”

“I was so embarrassed,” blushed Hazel. “Even the cat wouldn’t eat the fish that was left over.”

Wally laughed. “Chester and I still use ‘Witch Hazel’s Curse’ to describe any disagreeable reaction to questionable food,” he joked.

Hikari took Wally’s hand in hers. “Mrs... Hazel, Wally is always telling me stories of the trouble he got into when he was growing up. But I think you raised him very well.”

“We had a great childhood,” said Wally, “And once a year we get to relive those times on Christmas Day. Chester brings his wife and kid, and we’re all one big happy family, together again.”

“You are lucky to have such a fine family,” Hikari told Hazel. “My parents and all of my brothers and sisters are still in Japan. I miss them so much.”

“It will be wonderful to have you with us this Christmas,” said Hazel.

“Thank you,” responded Hikari, “You are very kind.”

“Aunt Coco wants to come for the day too,” said Hazel.

“Great,” said Wally. “She’ll keep us on our toes. And Hikari, I like to stay overnight on Christmas Eve, to be with Mom first thing for breakfast, and then we do presents afterwards. So this year, you and I can sleep here together, which will make Christmas morning perfect.”

“But there’s only one extra bed,” reminded Hazel.

“That’s OK. It’s big enough for two,” said Wally, giving Hikari a squeeze.

“But you’re not married,” blurted Hazel, her mind in a turmoil.

“Don’t worry Mom, we’ll bring our jammies,” assured Wally, “After all, we’ve got to behave ourselves. It’s Christmas Eve.” He winked at Hikari.

“Still,” said his mother, “My home would be like a... a... brothel!”

“Hmmm. Then we’ll act like... brother and sister.”

“That would be even worse!” cried Hazel, unable to prevent the incestuous images that were leaping through her head.

“Seriously, Mom, we’re both over thirty and we don’t need a piece of paper to make us respectable. What could you possibly be worried about?”

“It’s just not the way I was brought up,” sighed Hazel. She knew that in today’s world her point of view could never be explained or understood, but she couldn’t help herself from clinging to it. Beliefs like these were the things that made her the person she was.

“We’ve got a month until Christmas to work it all out,” said Wally, folding up the newspaper as he and Hikari rose to leave.

“I’ll pack you some cookies,” said Hazel, hurrying to the kitchen.

#### Immediately Later

“Mothers!” exclaimed Hikari as Wally was driving home, munching on a cookie. “I thought I’d left mine half way around the world, but now I find everywhere they are all the same.”

“I can’t understand why she was going on like that,” answered Wally.

“That is because you have never been a mother,” said Hikari. “Until you get married, your mother will always think that you are still her little baby boy. So when you want to bring your girlfriend to sleep over at her house, what do you expect? She freaks out!”

“She still knits socks for me and Chester every Christmas, you know,” said Wally, digging into the biscuit bag. “She’s been making them since we were kids. Horrible itchy things. I’ve always hated them, and I haven’t worn them in years. But I know she’d be devastated if I told her to stop.”

“In Japan we have a saying, ‘Rewards grow on the tree of persistence’,” said Hikari.

“You just made that up!” challenged Wally, feeding her a cookie.

“Maybe I did,” retorted Hikari. “But children grow up while parents grow old. So the younger generation must somehow keep trying to smash their ancestors’ worn out traditions without breaking their hearts too.”

“We could tell my mother we went to City Hall and got married,” offered Wally.

“No! No! No!” cried Hikari, wagging her finger. “Then I would become the daughter she never had and she would start knitting a... a... trousseau for me. Ugh. And she would want us to come and stay with her all the time. No. Everything will be much better as long as she keeps her make-believe brothel in her mind.”

“So I guess you’re not going there for Christmas,” said Wally.

“We’ve got a month until then to work it out,” smiled Hikari.

Wally reached once more into the package of cookies, only to find they were all gone.

### One Week Before Christmas

*In London tonight, suicide bombers descended upon a Prayer-for-Peace candlelight vigil held in Trafalgar Square. There were several blasts with widespread casualties, and the death toll is still mounting. No organization has yet claimed responsibility...*

While the evening news played on, Hazel toiled by the Christmas tree, diligently applying the fringe to a vivid pink scarf which lay across her lap. This was her final piece of Christmas knitting and she hoped Amanda would like it. With all of her gifts now complete, she felt a sense of tranquility, and was even starting to look forward to Christmas itself. Then the telephone rang.

“... Oh hello Amanda, I was just thinking of you...”

“...Yes, Hazel... Chester and I have talked it over, and we’ve decided that we have to change our plans for Christmas this year. Whenever Wally sees Philbert, especially at Christmas time, he nearly always offers him a chocolate bar. And you know that all chocolate bars may contain nuts. It says so on the packaging. And of course quite a lot of them actually do. I’ve spoken to Wally time and again and he just doesn’t appreciate how serious a threat nuts can be. And Philbert is getting to an age when even if he does know better, he doesn’t always do what’s right for himself. Which means it’s up to Chester and me to protect him from the dangers of chocolate bars in general and nuts in particular. So unfortunately we won’t be coming for Christmas. For Philbert’s sake we’re going to be where it’s safe.”

“... Well, I hope something happens to change your mind... It won’t feel like Christmas without you here... Yes, goodbye Amanda...”

Hazel sat and shook her head in bewilderment and dismay. She had never expected her plans to take a turn like this. She couldn’t conceive how her family Christmas gathering presented a perilous environment for a child. And it was impossible for her to comprehend why the unproven risk of potential peanut fragments in a chocolate bar that might never even materialize should ruin Christmas for everyone.

*At a Christian college in the Midwestern United States this afternoon, a resident in his junior year opened fire with a semi-automatic weapon, killing at least three divinity students, a stray beagle and a passing grey nun. Observers claim that when he noticed the dead dog, he turned the rifle on himself. Countless more people suffered injuries, some of them life-threatening. Surviving students who knew the gunman say he was a dropout from the Wicca Club and had warned that he was going to make this winter solstice one that no one would ever forget – or remember.*

Hazel considered making a call to Wally to discuss Amanda's concerns about Philbert. But she was reluctant to meddle between her sons over something that wasn't directly her affair. She was still puzzling over her dilemma when the telephone rang again.

"... Wally! I'm so glad you called..."

"... Hi Mom. Just wanted to let you know that Hikari and I made a spur of the moment decision."

"You're getting married?" Hazel jumped in.

"No. Not that, Mom," he replied. "But Hikari's really been missing her family lately. So we're going to Japan for the holidays. Too bad we won't be able to see you for Christmas, but trips like this don't come along very often. We'll be thinking about you though."

"That sounds wonderful for both of you," said Hazel, "I'll be looking forward to your pictures when you get back in January."

"Uhh... yeah Mom, I guess we'll have some great shots," Wally replied. "So merry Christmas. And Hikari says hello too... G'bye!"

"... Bye Wally. I love you..."

Hazel put down the telephone and wondered if the news she had just heard was good or bad or neither. She was having a hard time figuring out the difference right now. Distractedly she switched to a different television channel.

*At the infirmary of the San Diego Zoo, the last known female copper-headed condor died this morning. It's believed three males still exist in the wild, but no sightings of other females have occurred in over five years. The death of the bird today effectively signifies the extinction of the species, which once scavenged the western deserts from Oregon to Central America.*

With a heave of her shoulders, Hazel again picked up the telephone.

"... Amanda? ...Yes, I'm just letting you know that Wally won't be coming here for Christmas. He called to say that he and Hikari are going to Japan to visit her family. So the coast will be clear and safe for Philbert after all."

"... Sorry Mom, but... uh...we've already made arrangements to spend the day with friends. If we'd only known earlier..."

"... Of course, dear..."

Hazel laid down the phone and sat dejectedly, her face in her hands.

*In Eastern Europe, the world-famous Cathedral of Saint Sebastian which dates back to the middle ages has been destroyed by fire. The blaze, which left the building along with its contents of priceless medieval artworks a charred ruin, is presumed to have resulted from a mishap with a votive candle, which quickly caused flames to spread through the ancient tapestries on the walls. Two priests who re-entered the burning building to rescue the historic arrow relics of Saint Sebastian were killed in the disaster. Miraculously the arrows survived intact.*

Eventually Hazel turned off the television and began sorting through her knitting cupboard. After pulling out a dozen skeins of sturdy battleship grey yarn and a couple of large needles, with a sigh she started casting on stitches.

#### A Few Days Later

“The little brats!” Aunt Coco thumped her fist on her book. “And to think I was going to give them all my money!”

“I suppose you can’t blame Hikari for wanting to see her family,” said Hazel.

“Of course you can if she wrecks your plans,” replied Aunt Coco. “Hazel, you’re always too nice.”

“I can’t imagine what I’ll do for Christmas now,” said Hazel. “It’s been the same thing for me for nearly forty years.”

“Then you and I will go out for dinner together,” declared Aunt Coco. “Only we’ll find a place where it doesn’t seem like Christmas at all. At my euchre club the other afternoon I heard that the Pearl Gate Restaurant down the block is having a Chinese buffet. And it’s got wheelchair access. So we’ll go there.” She compressed her lips, tight and smug. “Now that’s decided I want to get back to my book.”

“What are you reading?” asked Hazel.

“The Diary of Anne Frank.” Aunt Coco waved her paperback in the air. “I’m fed up with TV at this time of year. Except for ‘The Price is Right’. The rest of the shows are soppy Christmas specials and syrupy movies and I can’t stand them. I needed tragic relief, so I chose something that couldn’t possibly have a happy ending.”

“I always cry when Ingrid Bergman says good-bye in ‘The Bells of St. Mary’s,’” confessed Hazel, concentrating on her cable stitches.

Aunt Coco gave her an exasperated look. Then she adjusted her glasses and peered more closely. “Tell me, Hazel,” she said, “What exactly is that god-awful grey mess you’re knitting? It looks like there’s a thundercloud billowing in your lap.”

“It’s the sweater you wanted, seeing as though the family’s not doing Christmas,” answered Hazel. “I knew you’d be disappointed, so making this sweater was the least I could do.”

“Hazel, just because you always mean what you say doesn’t mean that everybody else does,” admonished Aunt Coco. “I need another sweater like you need another hole in your head. Now rip it all out and mix it with some steel wool and turn it into a Volkswagen.”

“Maybe I could wear it instead?” Hazel held it up quizzically.

"I forbid it," said Aunt Coco. "You'd look like you were dressed in a trash can. If you've got to keep yourself busy, go and make some tea while I read. I'm just coming to the sexy part."

### Christmas Day

*Unfortunately at this joyous time of year, it's believed that the notorious pink ribbon bomber has struck again. An Illinois widow in Peoria received a package decorated like a Christmas gift through the mail. When she opened the box it exploded, killing her instantly. Police are searching through the remnants of the blast to establish the location where the package was mailed, and to find any possible clues leading to the perpetrator of the crime. No other motive except the random act of the pink ribbon bomber has been determined at this point.*

"Somebody's taken my choppers!" cried Aunt Coco. "Those Silver Suites snoops come in here day and night and things go missing. Now it's my teeth! How am I supposed to go to Christmas dinner without my teeth?"

"Here they are," said Hazel, handing her the sugar bowl.

"Ummphh, well then," said Aunt Coco, stuffing her dentures into her mouth. "Help me with my coat, and then we can go. But leave the radio on – loud - so they'll think I'm still here and won't try to come in and take anything else."

As they maneuvered through the door of the Pearl Gate Restaurant, Aunt Coco directed Hazel. "I want to sit close to the food!"

"Wait a minute," said Hazel. "It can't be! But it looks like Chester, with Amanda and Philbert sitting in that corner." She wheeled Aunt Coco over just to make sure.

"Uh... oh... Hi!.. Mom," said Chester. "And Aunt Coco too! Uh... Nice to see you. Right Philbert? Say Merry Christmas to your Grandma and Aunt Coco, Son"

"Dinner with our friends... got cancelled at short notice," Amanda cut in. "So we ended up here. Whodda thought we'd run into each other! ...Great that we did! This was the only place I called that guaranteed its food was uncontaminated with nuts, unless the dish specifically said so."

"That's because no one here is paid enough to care about what they promise," Aunt Coco muttered.

As soon as the tables had been repositioned to accommodate Aunt Coco's wheelchair, Hazel was astonished to see Wally and Hikari entering the restaurant. She ran to them and hugs ensued all around.

"... Uuhhh... Last minute airfares were too expensive over the holidays," Wally improvised. "...We just couldn't afford to go to Japan right now... And Hikari didn't feel like cooking... And... and... Warner's Corners doesn't have many places serving Asian food that are open today. So here we are! Merry Christmas everyone! Aunt Coco – so good you could come! Have you met Hikari?"

"I need a drink," said Aunt Coco, "What kind of wine goes with crap?"

While the seating was again rearranged, Hazel went to the buffet and returned with a platter laden with chicken balls dripping with sweet and sour sauce. She carried it aloft, as if it was a Dickensian

turkey with all the trimmings. Then she passed the plate around, giving everyone a chopstick to stab at the bits of battered chicken until they quickly disappeared. Showing her usual consideration, she made sure everyone had eaten at least one, before taking the last piece for herself.

With the ice more or less broken by Hazel's sweet and sour appetizers, dinner proceeded with reasonable civility. Amanda selected all of Philbert's meal from the buffet, smelling out each item for acceptability. And Hazel, with detailed instructions from Aunt Coco, attended to her wheelchair-bound food needs. When most of the plates were empty for the second or third time, Wally tossed a Snickers Bar at Philbert. "Here's some dessert. Merry Christmas, Kid," he said.

Immediately Amanda snatched the chocolate bar from Philbert's fingers and stood up, ashen faced. "Are you trying to kill my son?" she shrieked. "You're fully aware this bar has peanuts in it!"

Before Wally could reply, Chester grabbed the Snickers Bar from his wife, tore off the wrapper and shoved it into Philbert's gaping mouth. In a flash, Philbert devoured it whole, a smile lighting up his cheeks and gobs of melted chocolate mixed with drool rolling down his chin.

Amanda lunged at Chester like a cornered mother bear. Beating on his chest she wailed, "You're trying to murder your own flesh and blood! How dare you! Do you hate him as much as you hate me?"

"I'm just letting him be normal for once!" Chester yelled back, fending her off, "You're so scared about him being allergic to nuts - you won't even have him tested!"

"My son's life is too precious to allow it to be risked for peanuts!" cried Amanda, reaching for Chester's throat. "But obviously you have no respect for his safety or my devotion to him. Murderer!"

"You've never let him live in the real world," countered Chester, twisting out of her hold. "I just couldn't sit by and watch any longer! I've had enough of your crazy control! He's my son too!"

"You and your brother are both conspiring to destroy me!" she ranted. "I want a divorce!" Hysterically she looked around the restaurant. "Is there a lawyer here? I need a lawyer! NOW!" Amanda was bellowing at the top of her lungs. "I'VE GOT TO GET A DIVORCE!"

"I'm a lawyer," said Hikari, taking Amanda's arm. "And it's my professional opinion that you should sit down and calm yourself. And if you really are worried about a medical emergency, my further advice is to call for a doctor, not a lawyer."

"Hey Mom, we don't need a doctor. It's no big deal," said Philbert, his mouth still oozing chocolate. "I've had peanut butter sandwiches at Dougie's place since grade two. He double-dog-dared me to try them. They're really awesome with bananas."

"WHAT? You've been eating peanuts all these years without telling me?" Amanda wheeled around and hissed at her son. "You're as evil as your father. From this moment you're grounded till...till... Easter."

"How could I tell you about it?" asked Philbert. "I was always too scared. I knew you'd go ballistic and ground me. Like you just did."

"This whole family's been against me from the very start," Amanda sobbed. "And now I've raised a monster who has turned into one of them."

Hikari guided Amanda down as she slumped into her seat, collapsing as the world she had meticulously created and manipulated lay shattered around her. In the lull that followed, Aunt Coco broke the silence and took the floor.

"I want to tell you all something," she started in her raspy voice. "I invited myself to Hazel's for Christmas this year because I had an announcement to make. Plans didn't work out the way your mother and I expected, but by strange coincidence we're all here together for Christmas dinner anyway. I was going to tell you that I was changing my will, to leave my money to Wally and Chester instead of Hazel, who doesn't seem to have much need for it. But after seeing how you've all treated her and behaved to each other, I'm going to give everything to the Humane Society. Wild dogs deserve it more than you do."

"Aunt Coco," Wally spoke up, "Do you actually have a big enough nest egg under your mattress to worry about?"

"I've got enough money to bury me," she retorted, pointing her shaky finger at him.

"As long as it's not too deep a grave," quipped Wally. "But really Aunt Coco, the government wouldn't let you live at Silver Suites if you had any savings."

"You, young man are a saucebox!" Aunt Coco straightened up to her full wheelchair height. "But maybe your Hickory-dickory lawyer lady can draw up my new will."

"I'm not that type of lawyer," answered Hikari.

"What kind are you anyway?" asked Chester, "I never knew."

Hikari smiled. "In Japan we put it this way. 'If a person says they can't eat peanuts and no one proves otherwise, they can't eat peanuts. So if a person says they are a lawyer and no one proves otherwise, they are a lawyer'. That means I can be any kind I want to be. Or not."

"Oh," said Chester.

Amanda turned upon Hikari, her eyes smouldering. "So you lied to me about being a lawyer? Is this all just a game to you?"

"Not exactly," said Hikari, "I may be a lawyer. I just haven't been tested. Yet."

"That's ridiculous," scoffed Amanda with a classic sniff.

"She sounds like a lawyer to me," put in Wally. "Or at least the only kind of lawyer I'd go into partnership with." He pulled Hikari to his side. "You're all invited to our wedding, whenever we decide to go through with it."

"In Kyoto!" Hikari gave him an elbow in the ribs.

"What a plan!" Wally grinned.

"Watch out for Plan B," prophesized Amanda, under her breath.

"Wherever the wedding is, I'll be there!" cried Hazel, lifting her knitting satchel onto the table. "This calls for a celebration! I brought the Christmas presents I made for everyone so I could show Aunt Coco." Eagerly she started pulling out her prize collection of woollens. "But now I can just give them to each of you instead!"

As Hazel distributed her handiwork, it was received with gracious non-enthusiasm, until Philbert was given his pair of green socks. "Yuk," he said, "I hate socks. Especially pukey green socks. Grandma, why don't you ever give me good presents? Like candy. Or money."

Hazel clutched her knitting bag to her bosom and looked aghast at her cheeky grandson.

"Boy, you should be ashamed of yourself," exclaimed Aunt Coco. "I would have been sent to my room for talking to my elders like that when I was a child. If I had the strength I'd box your ears!"

"Seriously, Aunt Coco," inquired Wally, holding up her scarf, "Are you ever going to wear this woolly thing around your neck? No fibbing. We've all done too much of that."

"Silver Suites has a lost-and-found bin," the old woman stared Wally in the eye so she didn't have to look at Hazel. "Every winter I put my scarf in there. I expect it goes to a worthy cause eventually."

Wally stuck out his tongue at Aunt Coco in triumph, and then turned to his nephew. "Congratulations, Kid. You did good today. Hope you like this present better than your funky socks." Wally threw another Snickers Bar Philbert's way. "You've just told your grandmother the exact words I should have said to her when I was your age. If I had done what you did, it would have saved us all a lot of itchy grief."

"Gee, thanks Uncle Wally," said Philbert, unwrapping his treat. "You're the best." He held up the chunk of chocolate and looked at it in awe. "Am I still grounded?" he asked before chewing off a bite.

"Your mother says no," interjected Chester, "RIGHT, Amanda?"

"Well," said Amanda, "Perhaps for those rude remarks you made to your grandmother..."

"Please don't punish Philbert because of me," requested Hazel. "When I think of all the knitting I no longer have to do, I feel so... free!" She gave an exhilarated laugh. "I might join a pottery class!"

"NO!" everyone called out in unison.

"But we really love you, Mom," Chester assured Hazel, getting up to give her a kiss.

"Yeah," said Wally. "You may kill us with kindness, but you're the only one who's ever been completely honest all the time." He bent to fold his arms around her.

Spontaneously everyone joined the hugging group. Aunt Coco reached for Hazel's hand from her wheelchair, making a grimace that showed vestiges of a smile. Hikari moved to Hazel's side and softly squeezed her shoulder. And even Amanda embraced Philbert and gripped Chester's arm. From the centre of the circle of love, Hazel looked up at her family. "Merry Christmas, everyone," she sighed contentedly. "We'll never have another one like this!"

"That prediction had better hold true," remarked Chester.

“Hey folks, speaking of predictions, let’s read our Christmas fortunes!” cried Wally, breaking apart a cookie. “Hikari, listen to what mine says. ‘You will go on an unexpected journey.’ So we might get to Japan after all!”

“Interesting. All my troubles will soon be over...”

“Aunt Coco, you look tired...”

“This silly paper promises a once-in-a-lifetime reward. Poppycock! All I want right now is a glass of cold water...”

“Mom, it’s awfully hot in here...”

“I’m supposed to fulfill all my wishes today and not wait till tomorrow. Oh dear. That seems so rushed. And my only wish at the moment is to crawl into bed...”

“Philbert, come outside with me for some fresh air...”

“I’m going to find inner peace. Too bad my stomach feels like a war zone...”

“Seems like we’ve all got ‘Witch Hazel’s Curse’...”

“Hazel, I don’t feel right. I want you to take me home this minute! Hazel? Answer me! HAZEL! What’s wrong with you?”

“SOMEBODY CALL 911!”

### The Day After Christmas

*Health Department officials have quarantined a popular Chinese food restaurant located in downtown Warner’s Corners, to investigate an outbreak of acute gastric illness suffered by many of the patrons who ate Christmas dinner there. The source of the disease is thought to be a highly toxic strain of salmonella virus, possibly typhoid. The food poisoning was most likely transmitted through infected chicken, which was kept inadequately refrigerated over the holiday period, and subsequently served undercooked. The allegedly contaminated poultry has caused multiple fatalities. Particularly tragic to report during this festive season are the deaths of seven members of the same family spanning four generations. Dead are Hazel McNutt, her aunt Coco and her son Wally McNutt and his partner Hikari. Also deceased are her son Chester McNutt, his wife Amanda and their twelve year old son Philbert...*

In Aunt Coco’s empty Silver Suites apartment, her radio continued to blare, chattering away to the impenetrable walls.

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**THANKS FOR READING SWEET AND SOUR SNICKERS.**

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