

DAVID BISCHOFF

SANTA RITUAL ABUSE

The day after Thanksgiving, the specials at Fat Chung Wo's restaurant by Larry's Loft featured turkey to mein, turkey chop suey and turkey fuk yew. In the lobby, there was a sprig of evergreen coming out of Buddha's head, and a little manger scene with Salvation Army stickers still on Joseph and Mary. Christmastime was coming to Eugene, Oregon.

I walked into the Loft, went to the bar and ordered a cup of coffee and a bowl of hot and sour from the bartender. He stuck the order for the soup through the window into the Chinese restaurant that makes like a Siamese twin to the bar, and then he got me my coffee. Caffeinated mud, as usual. Professor's coffee. I'm a professor. I like the stuff.

"Pete," said Jurgen the bartender as I poured some milk into my steaming cup. "Check out the dude at the other end."

I casually glanced up at the mirror past the garden of colored bottle spouts behind him. At the opposite end of the old-fashioned worn wood bar, feet hooked in the slats of his stool as though they were stirrups, was an old wizened guy with a brown roadster cap, a pint of Widmer Hefewizen beer at one elbow, a shot glass of whiskey in front of him. He regarded the whiskey glumly for a moment, then picked it up, drained it, and followed that with a chug of Hef. He pulled out an unfiltered Chesterfield from a cellophaned pack, and lit it with an orange Bic lighter. Burning Virginia fields. Alcohol-preserved Americana.

I sipped at my coffee. "So?"

"It's Santa."

Jurgen was an erstwhile grad student at the University of Oregon who stayed on. His accent stayed on too, and he spoke with an exaggerated sibilance about his 's's and 'z's, especially when he was excited, as he clearly was now.

"Zanta? Zanta who?"

"Santa Claus." As in Klaus von Bulow. "He's been here all day, drinking hard."

Oh, I thought. The traditional drunken department store Santa, taking the afternoon off from dandling kiddies on his knee to get soused.

"I didn't know Eugene had a Macy's," I said.

Jurgen looked at me in his constipated Hitler youth grimace, and whispered. "Nein. No. That is really Santa Claus. He lives in Pleasant Hill in the summer. He's usually up at the North Pole by now. Something's wrong." Jurgen shook his head, looking glum.

Hey. I had my own problems. Lost my girlfriend to a New Age Bullshitter. Still deep in California-style credit-card debt. And my goddamned cats had starting turning their noses up at the food I was feeding them. They were taking longer alley jaunts, too, so I figured they must be getting nutrition elsewhere.

The last time I'd talked to Becky, she'd been unsympathetic. "Sounds just like you. Why not feed them something else for a change?"

"They were strays. They were perfectly happy with generic food until you started bringing over that Iams crap."

"You know, cats have feelings too. One of these days they just might decide their stray life was better and not come back! Don't take them for granted like you did me, Ted. You know you're nuts about them!"

The conversation went downhill from there.

Something wrong . . .

I was about to say something like "No presents under O Tannenbaum this year, Jurg?" but I bit my tongue. I've only been here for six months, but I've already realized that things are a bit off kilter in Eugene, Oregon, and reality sometimes gets a little unstuck. I don't know, maybe it's all the rain and gloom.

"You talk to him about it yet?"

"No. He seems too morose."

A bell dinged, snapping Jurgen out of contemplation. He brought my soup to me, then went to wash some glasses as I set to the tangy stuff. Munching on peppery tiger lilies reflectively, I looked over to the guy at the other end of the bar. Jurgen had already set him up with another shot, but the guy was just staring at it, not drinking. He just puffed on his Chesterfield from time to time, wrinkled face squinting through the smoke.

The dissertation was going nowhere, and I didn't have a class to teach until the next afternoon. I didn't feel like going to a movie or reading a book. I had some time to kill, so I thought, hell. Why not give it a try?

I grunted up at the TV screen hanging in the corner from chains. "Blazers not doing so well this year, huh?"

The old man grunted.

"Don't like basketball?"

"Nope."

I tapped a sign off to my left, displaying a Budweiser ad.

"Drinks are cheap here during Blazers games."

"Yeah, if you drink piss-water. No way, Jose."

"You like the micro-brew, huh?"

"I guess."

"Hefewizen from the look of it. Wheat beer." I felt like the Saturday Night Live character by the copy machine. "Hey Santa. It's the Santerminator. It's the Klaus-meister." But I had to keep the conversation going in order to draw him out. "Jurgen's from Heidelberg." I mimicked the bartender's accent. "Hefewizen! Dis iss nott Hefewizen!"

The guy took the whiskey down in one gulp, turned and looked at me. Dead eyes with just a hint of a glare.

"Ja. Das Hefewizen ist fer dumbkopfs," he said. "Believe me, my talkative bar companion, I know my Hefewizen. Part of me is German."

"Really? Your sense of humor?"

That got a lemon twist of a smile. "Nein. Mein noodle, I think." He tapped his head.

I took a sip of my coffee. It had gone cold.

Some other time, some other place I would have just let the whole matter drop. But the outside was cold and dim, and the lights inside were warm and friendly, and I sensed a good story here in this old addle-brained barfly.

"Would a drink buy a few words from you?"

"How come you want some words from me?"

"Jurgen says you're Santa Claus."

"Jurgen has a big mouth." However, he shrugged. "No big secret though. You look close enough around this town, you find things out." He pushed his glass forward. "Dickel. George Dickel. Good stuff. Why don't you have some?"

"I'd like to. I'd like to have some Hefewizen too. Can't. I did a lifetime's worth of drinking in about ten years, so I figured I'd see what the rest of my life would be like sober."

Santa grunted. "Good for you, chum."

I waved to Jurgen, got Santa another Dickel, another Her, and myself another cuppa. I took the liberty of sitting down close to him. He smelled of the alcohol and cigarettes, but there were also more scents in the not-unpleasant miasma. Couldn't quite put my finger on their identity. There was also just a hint of rosy cheeks on his face. His skin hung on him as though he once had considerable weight. Most startlingly, from time to time his eyes would suddenly twinkle, like an Industrial Light and Magic effect.

"Does this mean I get an extra gift in my stocking?" I said to start things off.

"Hell," said Santa. "I don't feel like flinging the shit this year." He shook his head, his shoulders drooping as though they carried the weight of centuries upon them. "Year in, year out, same old, same old." He tapped out another cigarette. "Man, this year Santa's pulling the plug. Santa's got the blues, and Santa's just not going to put out."

"You'd think they'd give you a year off once in a while."

"You'd think."

"What about the elves?"

"Elves?" He looked at me as though I were the biggest rube in the universe. "What, you buy that nonsense?" He tapped his chest. "Let me tell you, this guy ain't got no long-eared fairies dancing with bells on their toes. And he ain't got no goddamned old hag making gingerbread cookies in the kitchen. This is 1994, you dork. We're through with that Victorian schmaltz!" He took a noisy slurp of his brew, and belched.

"What about the reindeer?"

His eyes became slits. "Let 'em go a long time ago. I think I saw one the other day on Route 5. Roadkill." He seemed to find that amusing. A little pre-cancerous chuckle gurgled in his throat. Nothing whatsoever of that fabled bowlful of jelly. A twinkle again, and then he settled down about his drink, like a surly black cloud.

I could see why Jurgen was depressed. Santa or no, this fellow was spreading poison, not cheer. I took a moment to fend off some of the blackness myself. I could almost feel it in the air, a palpable extension of this ornery bag of bone and skin, gristle, nicotine and alcohol before me.

Twelve-steps time.

Higher Power, I thought. I don't want a drink this time, just a little sunshine.

And Higher Power said, Make this poor old sod a little more cheerful, and you'll get yours, Bozo.

Higher Power tends to get a tad abusive when I ask dumb questions, but she always delivers.

I thought for a moment about taking Santa for a ride. Show him the Fifth Street Market, all decked with holly and light and brightness. Point to the huge PEACE ON EARTH sign glowing against Skinner's Butte. Ride him along the Willamette or McKenzie river and point out all the gaily decorated houses.

Take him to Handel's Messiah at the Hult Center. Show him some sort of charity

effort. The usual folderol and fa-la-la that jumpstarts feeble seasons' spirit.

No, I thought.

He's seen all that. Maybe that's part of what's depressing him. What had he said? Same old, same old. The monotony of repetition.

Maybe good old-fashioned guilt-pudding would work.

"Well, we seem to have a problem this year," I said lightly. "Seems to me, a lot of people get blue this time of the year. And if Mr. Source of Cheer and Presents and Glad Tidings gets down, a lot of people are going to have a really rotten Christmas. You want that on your shoulders?"

He raised an eyebrow at me. "Fuck 'em."

Boy, that got me. I'm no innocent, and when the old toe gets stubbed, I guess it triggers some profanity in me. But Santa Claus? That was almost too much.

I remember back when I used to work at a magazine in New York. The cartoon editor wanted to print a picture of Santa Claus wielding a hatchet amongst a room of blood-spattered dead people. "Merry Ax-mas" was the caption. The art director freaked out. She was a tough, no-nonsense feminist who ate frijoles con cojones at Mexican dinners, but you didn't mess with Santa, no ma'am.

I didn't get angry. I stayed cool. After all there had to be a good reason for all this.

I asked.

He glared. "Look, bub. First of all, how would you like to be an archetype?"

"Oh. You mean as in Jungian theory?"

"Jungian Fungian. I'm a goddamned literalization! I mean, you know, legend and myth and superstition and millions of bleating little childish minds and adult ritual through film and art and literature and heaven knows what else. There's a lot of power in all that. Things happen. Things like me happen."

I live in Eugene, home of the smug and the weird. I'm not sure I entirely accept the evidence of the bizarre that makes this town of the river valley such a nexus for the strangest part of Truth, but neither do I discount it.

"Hey. Come on," I said, not really knowing what I was saying, just going for a ride on the galloping words. "Look, whether you're really Santa or not, you know there's help available. You got AA for the drinking, you got churches for spiritual woes, you got shrinks and hospitals for mental wounds . . ." I looked at my watch. "And most are still open."

"Right. Maybe I should just call the Santa Hotline. The Archetype Suicide Aid. Look, just bug off, Mister. What the hell do you know about being trapped

inside

a paradigm of goofy custom and pagan practices by nominal Christians who work themselves into a goony commercial frenzy each year in the hope of goosing their pathetic economies so they can buy fancy coffins for themselves when they croak."

You know, I thought, the old guy had a point there.

And you know, that glass of Hefewizen was looking awful good.

I reached out for it.

"What the hell are you doing, buddy?"

I put it under my nose.

Sniffed it.

Lemon and barley, a tingle of effervescence. Feathery hops, under tranquil autumn skies, bursting still with summer's sun.

Ah.

I put the glass down.

"I can't drink it anymore," I said. "I like to smell it, though."

"Shit. And people say I'm strange."

It was a start. I'd gotten him interested. I told him some of my story. University assistant prof, working part time on a book. Tired of the usual American academic hustle, broken up with a girlfriend decides to escape to the Great American Northwest, land of good coffee, delicious grunge rock, fresh air, and wonderful smelling beer.

I'd just ordered another coffee when the woman walked in wearing the elf costume.

I hadn't cheered the guy up, but he'd stopped ordering shots of George Dickel and looked a bit less dead. However, when that sexy elf walked in, the temperature at Larry's Loft warmed considerably.

She was one of those blondes with long legs and frilly hair they sign up all the time for the Dallas Cowboy Cheerleaders. Pretty and busty, but sweet and wholesome. She was in one of those classic Playboy Santa's Helper's outfits they put on seasonal mall workers to keep the daddies' interest. She wore more makeup than the entire city of Eugene on a work day.

As she walked past me, I got a whiff of flowery perfume and mistletoe. The wolf in me leaped, but propriety kept it on its leash.

She wasn't interested in me, though.

Her objective: Santa Claus.

She draped a bare arm around his shoulder.

"Hi there, big guy. Buy a girl a drink?"

Santa shrugged indifferently.

She turned to me and winked. Suddenly I recognized her. It was Kimberly, a cute weekend waitress here who usually dressed in baggy jeans and loose flannel. Jurgen must have called her. The idea of a morose Santa was likely not appealing to him, and he had taken extreme measures.

"I'm springing for Santa's drinks tonight," I said gaily. "Got to cheer him up somehow. What are you having.7"

"Eggnog. Punch. Christmas cheer of some sort. And bring the crestfallen saint some as well."

"You two know each other?"

Santa grunted.

"I've served him a drink or two. So come on, Santa." She did a very good model's pirouette.

"I've lost five pounds this year. How does the outfit look ?"

"Cold," said Santa.

She pouted. "Look, I'm a Women's Studies major, dammit. This is costing a lot. I just can't stand to see you get like this."

Santa swung an ancient, heavy-lidded gaze our way. "What do you people know? What do you know of despair? A few clouds. A few drizzles. You lucky jerks are young, grow old and die, often with admirable quickness. A brief pathetic flicker. Me, I just grow old and don't die, dragging my sorry butt from Christmas to Christmas, crucified upon boughs of holly, blood weeping from a forehead pierced by thorns of mistletoe."

The Christmas cheer came, mine appropriately Virgin.

Kimberly climbed up on a stool beside me and addressed hers. "Well, I tried."

"Say, Kim. I think you've inspired a sonnet from me. Can I take you out to dinner and read it to you sometime?"

She gave me a frosty look. "Sorry, guy. This is my charity work for the year."

Oh well. I tried.

I'd just started to suck up some nog and was thinking about maybe just abandoning the good ship Cheer Up Santa, when three new customers walked into the room.

"Uh oh," said Kimberly. She twirled around in her seat. "Jurgen, I told you not

to call them."

Jurgen shrugged. "I've got to do something! 'Stille Nacht' is going to stick in my throat this year otherwise!"

The new arrivals went immediately behind Santa, who made every effort to ignore them.

One was a fat fellow in a huge robe.

One was a Victorian style Father Christmas, equally large and jolly.

The final was a slight fellow in hooded monk's robe.

The huge-robed guy tapped Santa on the back.

"We are the Ghosts of Christmas Past, Present, Future. We come --"

Santa wheeled around. He pulled something up from under his shirt and belt, brandished it.

A small service revolver.

Santa Claus was packing heat!

His eyes were fired with indignation. "Look, you pests. Get it through your skulls. I want to be miserable. I need to be miserable. Does every liberal-assed Jack and Jane have to go around in this knee-jerk town with a smile on their face? I tell you, it makes me want to puke!"

The Ghosts held up their hands and wandered off to the end of the bar, muttering. Jurgen got them something to drink, presumably strong.

Santa huffed, put his gun back in his belt and lifted his glass of Hef. He drained it, put it back down, and belched fruitily. He stubbed out his cigarette in a tray and turned to face me, pointing a nicotine-stained finger my way.

"And you, buddy -- your world ain't sweetness and light and neither is mine. At least I park my butt down long enough in one place to realize that."

Without a word of thanks or farewell, not even a breath of "And to all a good night," the dour, sour Santa glowered out of Larry's Loft.

I went back to the Ghosts and Jurgen.

"I tried."

"He gets like this some years," said the Ghost of Christmas Present, pulling his hat back to reveal the bar's burly bouncer.

"I've never seen him this bad," said the Ghost of Christmas Past, whom I'd already recognized as a member of a local rock band.

The Ghost of Christmas Future was gone, apparently through the labyrinthine



halls to seek a leak.

"Thanks for coming, guys," said Jurgen, "Nice try, but --"

The phone rang and Kimberly picked it up, talked for a minute.

"It was Jerry," she said after hanging up. "He says he can't make it."

Jurgen and the others did double-takes.

"But if that was Jerry, who was the Ghost of Christmas Future?" said Jurgen.

"And where is he?" said Kimberly.

"I think," I said, "He's out doing something rather disrespectful on my grave."

When I got back to my apartment it was bleak and cold. Thank God I didn't have a door knocker; it would have turned to Marley's Ghost for sure. I was that rattled, that affected. Eugene looked mottled and grimy in the early evening beneath cheap and occasional streetlights, the Christmas displays looking like paste jewelry draped on a once pretty whore. Gone were the golden halcyon days of summer and color-streaked fall, smells all bright and fresh. Here was darkness and death and potholes, tattered lawns and a wet winter fitting over the town like an old musty sock.

I opened a can of generic cat food for Fred and Ethel outside on the balcony, but got no takers. I wondered if they'd abandoned me.

I tried to work on my book, but nothing seemed to come out of my head.

TV was after-sweeps week re-runs.

Santa was right.

Maybe this was a year we could do without Christmas. What would it hurt?

I went to bed and, tossing and turning in the tar pits of insomnia, plotted a new TV series.

Santa Claus, P.I.

I think the sun became depressed as well -- it went into immediate hiding.

The sky went through cycles of damp and drizzle and gray, to damp and drizzle and dark. When I'd moved to Eugene, people had warned me about the Northwest Weather. Hey, I'd said, no problem. I'm a cerebral person, there's so much to do inside beneath the comfort of artificial lighting.

The darkness seemed to seep through the curtains, though, curling chill and somber around my guts. Once only touched by slight melancholy, my heart became a sodden cloud. I didn't know if that guy at Larry's Loft was really S. Claus or not, but he certainly had a valid point, a thought that would always come to me right after Thanksgiving, come to a lot of people.

Christmas came far too soon. Christmas came far too often. Christmas was

wearing  
out its welcome in its weary repetition, its asinine customs and its wretched commercialism and pointlessness.

I made a self-satisfied note of that and filed it in my brain, bought more Brand X kibble for the cats, and by God, the slaves broke down and ate it like I knew they would. I made them rub my legs and beg a little first.

Still, even though I'd buried the whole Christmas issue in its vault, and life returned to its chores of lectures and grading papers and chipping away at my book, the dark and the clouds still lingered, along with that sense of dullness and joylessness of life, like a good rock song turned down low on a cheap transistor radio.

I was walking out of the central post office one day, a wad of bills clenched in my hand, disappointed that my New Yorker magazine was late, when I thought I saw him again. Santa. Coming out of the pastry shop down the block. The facade of the store was twinkling with lights and artificial snow and evergreen and Santa had a shopping bag in one hand and was munching away at a big Napoleon with the other. It was kind of far away and I don't have the best vision, but he looked, I thought; a little fleshier. I was about to run up and get a better look when a familiar voice called my name.

I turned around and there was Becky, on her way into the Post Office. I knew it was inevitable that I'd run into her eventually, in fact I was surprised I hadn't seen her yet. Nonetheless, I felt a little tentative, a little nervous, pain and regret uncoiling from their hibernation.

"Hello," I said.

"How's it going?" she said. "I was going to call you. Been putting it off." The cold had given her face color and life. "I wasn't very nice to you last time we talked. Maybe that's the way I deal with that kind of thing."

"Cauterization?"

"Something like that."

I nodded. "Thanks. Oh well."

There was a moment of awkward silence. Our breaths misted and I shoved my cold hands in the pockets of my coat. The smell of car exhaust hovered, obliterating the smell of evergreen.

"I thought maybe you'd like to come to my Christmas party."

"Mr. Buddha going to be there?"

"Yes."

I shrugged. "I don't think so."

"Okay."

"See you around."

"Merry Christmas."

"Yeah. You too."

I went to my car. There was a parking ticket sticking up from the windshield.

And a Happy New Year.

Classes were over, papers were graded, students were gone.

Mid-December.

I walked from my apartment to get some Middle Eastern take-out. Somehow I thought hummus and babba ghonouj would invoke some Semitic sun in my heart.

Outside it was still wet from the most recent rain, and the world seemed muffled, dying. There was the smell of rotting leaves in the gutter, the sour stench of Springfield wood pulp factories drifting in with the fog.

The universe seemed leached of joy, as though someone had sucked out all the serotonin from the Cosmic Mind.

Tomorrow and tomorrow . . .

The ways to dusty death . . .

Full of sound and fury . . .

Signifying nothing.

For the first time in my life, I wanted something more than a drink. I wanted a fistful of Prozac.

God, what had I done? Why had I come to this place? Even now, in Southern California they may be breathing smog and shooting each other, but at least they had some passion down there. The cold and the dark had frozen my spirit inside of me like crystallized sap, and I could feel nothing but a dull ache.

I found myself heading for Larry's Loft instead of the take-out joint. I hurried past the Salvation Army guy outside the Kiva Grocery Store along the way. His bell rang mournfully in the dusk.

Larry's wasn't busy yet, so I sat at the bar, ordered a coffee, stared up at the TV. What was the name of that old Roxy Music album? Champagne and Novocaine. Tell me about it. Kimberly came up with a big drink order.

"Hey guy. You look like somebody just ran over your cat."

"That would be good news. Least I wouldn't have to feed them then."

"Whoa. Hey, is this the same cheerful summer soul who danced into our lives this year?" She was wearing her usual flannel and jeans, but her hair was still nicely shaped, with a few sprigs of Christmas laced through it, offset by holly earrings.

"In case you hadn't noticed, it's winter," I said. "You know, it being the Yuletide season, I don't think a few beers would hurt me."

I'd already checked in with my Higher Power, but she was out Christmas shopping.

Kimberly looked at me crossly. "You don't want to do that, guy. Look, you just have the Winter Blues, that's all."

"I tell you, that run-in with that guy who said he was Santa didn't help much."

She laughed, made a dismissing motion with her hand. "Oh, that happens just about every year here. And it's part of the tradition that we try and cheer him

up. This year was just particularly grim. He always bounces back, though. Look!"

She pointed up at the TV, and there, sure enough, was Santa, looking fat and jolly as ever, one hand waving at the universe, one hand on Vanna White's backside.

I shook my head. "No. Nonsense."

"Look. Come on, oh dweller of the south. You think you're the first person to get depressed this time of year? You don't think lots of European Dark Agers shivered in their huts, standing on the brink of a long cold winter without electricity . . . You don't think that maybe they decided, hey . . . we'd better

do something to cheer ourselves up. Voila. Winter solstice. Yuletide. Christmas."

Her drink order was up, and she hauled it away.

I sat and thought about this a moment. I noticed they were serving hot mulled cider, so I ordered the non-alcoholic version. Santa was off the TV screen, but

a guy came in the bar wearing a tie that twinkled with tiny Christmas lights who looked a little like him.

I was staring at the Christmas tree, all tinsel and sparkling ornaments against the bar mirror, when I caught a glimpse of myself.

Hell. I looked like the guy who'd called himself Santa Claus. And this Santa was a real asshole.

I finished the spiced cider, a warmth in my stomach, a tang in my mouth. I pulled out my billfold and paid for the drink. After a dollar tip, that left

me  
with a twenty dollar bill and a five.

"Hey, where you going?" said Kimberly. "I'm going to put some mistletoe in my hair in a minute."

"Can I have a rain check?"

"What -- in this town, that wouldn't be good until spring."

I smiled and waved good-bye.

Outside, fog was static in the streets, and the sound of traffic, the squelch of tires was almost comforting. The tinkle of the Salvation Army bell drifted directionless and invisible, like the ghost of zombie reindeer sleighbells.

As I walked up to the man in uniform, I bunched up the two bills, and reached over to drop them in the kettle.

A thought struck me, and I stopped.

I separated the five from the twenty, and then slipped Andrew Jackson through the slot.

"Thank you, sir, and a Merry Christmas, sir."

"Same to you, soldier," I said.

As I pulled up my collar against the cold, I was wondering if I'd turn into Jimmy Stewart and run around embracing people. I was relieved when I didn't. I didn't feel that much better, but then . . . so what?

Some recovering drunks say that if a Higher Power really doesn't exist, then it's their job to create that Higher Power in themselves; or at the very least, act as though that Higher Power was there. When Faith fails you, when Will can't get off its perverse butt, and there's a bottle of smooth distilled hell on your table with a clean tumbler beside it and a bucket of cracked ice and you've got a hole in your soul that can only be chilled and numbed away . . . The only thing left, I guess, is Imagination.

My Higher Power may have been out shopping, but that was because she'd already given me my gift. I just hadn't opened it until I'd looked into the mirror at Larry's Loft.

I went into the grocery store to buy my animals a few cans of name brand cat chow with the five I'd saved for them.