

## **All in Fun** by Jerry Oltion

As the holiday season approaches, Jerry Oltion offers us glad tidings from the Pacific Northwest.

Toby always makes a wish for Christmas. It almost always comes true. The only time it doesn't is when he wishes for too much, and even then he always gets at least a part of it.

The gift only seems to work at Christmastime. The rest of the year he can wish all he wants, but he has to work just as hard as everyone else to make anything happen. At Christmas, though, he only needs to make his wish, go to sleep on the night of the twenty-fourth, and by New Year's he gets what he asked for.

It has worked like that ever since he was a kid. The candy truck that crashed in the front yard; the house fire that didn't kill Bobby Dorton, the school bully, but did make his family move away; the exhibitionist who moved in next door when he was a little bit older—all were manifestations of Toby's peculiar gift.

None of his wishes are ever delivered in a package under the tree, but Toby has always thought it must be Santa Claus who grants them just the same. Who else could it be? Certainly not Jesus, unless the Son of God is going through a rebellious phase. Toby doesn't ask for anyone's death anymore, but he doesn't use his wishes on goody-goody stuff, either. He tried that a couple of times, and once had the great joy of watching Anwar Sadat and Menachem Begin sign a peace treaty brokered by President Carter, but it had taken nine months to happen and it hadn't lasted. And the other time, when the Berlin Wall came down, hadn't exactly turned out rosy for the Russians, either.

He doesn't muck around with world politics anymore, but he doesn't waste his gift, either. He spends the entire year mulling over his next wish. He has notebooks full of possibilities, but he's always open to new ideas. In fact it has become a bit of an obsession. With only one wish a year, he wants to make the most of them.

Except this year he can't decide. He doesn't have everything a man could wish for, but he's comfortable. He has money, a nice house, a wife whom he loves and who loves him, popularity, talent, and good looks. What he doesn't have, despite all that, is much fun.

So he goes to bed thinking, “I want to have fun.” It’s a bit nebulous, and therefore a bit dangerous, but that only adds to his excitement. What will the universe come up with?

When he wakes up, nothing obvious has changed. Sonya doesn’t have an extra pair of boobs or anything, which is a relief. He doesn’t think his gift would do something like that to her, if only because his happiness pretty much depends on hers, but he had worried just a little.

He checks his penis in the shower. It’s not any bigger.

The first hint comes when he opens the cupboard for his breakfast cereal and discovers that the box of Cheerios has become a box of Chocolate Frosted Sugar Bombs. Never mind that those haven’t existed outside of a Calvin and Hobbes cartoon until this morning; he has some in his cupboard.

They aren’t bad. Certainly sweet, but if he dilutes them with enough milk ... hmm. Wow, “caffeine” is certainly high on the ingredient list, isn’t it?

He opens the paper and reads while he’s eating his cereal, and sees that there will be a Christmas concert in the bandshell today featuring 100 tubas—and nothing else. He can’t imagine what that would sound like ... but then he doesn’t have to imagine it, does he? In a couple of hours, he can find out.

Sonya is surprised when he suggests it, surprised and pleased. That’s not usually the sort of thing he likes to do.

“Maybe we should go see a movie, too,” he says.

“Which one?”

He feels a little stab of irritation, just the tiniest twinge of tarnish to his perfect morning. He hates poring over the movie listings to figure out which one is least likely to suck, and then they have to figure out what time to see it, and whether they’ll eat first or eat afterward. It’s more trouble than a movie is usually worth. So today he says, “Let’s just go to the theater when we’re ready to watch something, and pick whatever is showing next.”

Sonya raises an eyebrow. “What if it’s a Spielberg flick?”

“Then we’ll sit in back and make out.”

She considers this, then smiles and turns away to get ready for their day on the town.

It's raining out, a soft drizzle that Toby has come to call Northwest photons. He wished for sunnier weather once, but after the worst drought in Oregon history he learned not to mess with the weather. He and Sonya put on their jackets and gloves without complaint.

On their way to the tuba concert, Toby at the wheel of their hybrid Toyota, a big white Ford Excursion roars past them in the right lane, then cuts them off and turns left in front of them, but the driver is apparently blind because he turns into the path of an approaching Humvee, and the impact is like the irresistible force meeting the immovable object. The sound is nothing like car-chase movies have led Toby to expect. For one thing, the whole event happens in less than a second. The initial impact is like a box being flattened all at once, then there's a grinding squeal that rises quickly in pitch, mixed with the pop of window glass shattering, and finally another deep thud as the two vehicles' engines meet. Toby has to swerve hard to avoid tail-ending the Excursion, but he clears the bumper just as the Excursion rolls onto its side with the Humvee astride it, and then they're past. A rearview mirror bounces alongside Toby's car for a few feet, then smacks into the grille of an oncoming pickup truck.

"Should we stop?" asks Sonya.

Toby pulls into a parking lot and looks back at the accident. The driver of the Humvee opens his door and climbs down—why is it always weaselly short guys driving those things, Toby wonders?—where he is angrily accosted by the driver of the Excursion, who climbs out the back of his destroyed vehicle and begins shouting at the Humvee driver as if everything were his fault. There were apparently no passengers in either vehicle, because the two drivers get right down to pushing and shoving, and soon fists are flying.

"I don't think we're needed here," Toby says, and he pulls out onto the street again.

The scene is repeated ten blocks later with a Chevy Suburban and a Dodge Ram. And five blocks after that, a Trooper runs a red light and tears the back end right off a minivan. The van's gas tank rips open and bursts into flame, but both drivers have time to get away before the tangle of wreckage becomes a burning pyre to the gods of excess. Of course there were no passengers in either of those vehicles, either.

“This is getting eerie,” Sonya says as they creep around the accident in the farthest lane.

“A bit monotonous, too,” Toby says, and that realization is apparently enough to reset the universal “fun” control. They get all the way to the tuba concert without witnessing another accident, but they do see a meter maid putting a ticket on a double-parked BMW.

The concert is amusing, and surprisingly good, but one person right up front keeps talking on a cell phone. Toby is about to ask her to put it away when a gust of wind catches her hat, and when she throws her arm upward to grab it, her cell phone slips free and continues along a high arc into the bell of a tuba. The audience’s laughter brings “O Little Town of Bethlehem” to a halt, and there’s a great deal of confusion before the band director figures out what has happened. He retrieves the cell phone and hands it back to its owner, who slinks away, her cheeks redder than the band director’s Santa hat.

The rest of the concert goes smoothly. Despite the caffeine jitters that have kept Toby quivering like a plucked string all through it, he and Sonya are both cold by the time it’s over, so they decide to have lunch next and go to the movie afterward. Sonya surprises him by suggesting they go to Hooters.

“You’re kidding,” he says.

“Merry Christmas,” she says. “Besides, I’ve never eaten there before. What if the food is actually good, and I’ve been missing out all this time?”

The food *is* good, they discover, although Toby has a hard time paying attention to it. Their waitress is flirting with a table full of college kids, and she’s very good at it. The college kids are clearly embarrassed and trying not to show it, but the waitress is merciless.

“Hey,” she says in a voice that fills the restaurant, “did you hear we’re gonna open up a home-delivery service? We’re gonna call it Knockers.” Sonya laughs, and the waitress winks at her. Toby is suddenly certain that they’re in collusion, that Sonya has arranged something with her. He has fantasized about just that sort of thing before, but it has always been just fantasy, and that’s how he likes it. The idea of it actually happening scares the daylights out of him, and not just because of performance anxiety. He isn’t the world’s most sensitive man, but he does actually use the word “relationship” once in a while, and he doesn’t think a roll in the hay with a Hooters waitress will improve his and Sonya’s any.

He's trying to figure out how to say this to her when she waves a hand in front of his face and says, "Earth to Toby. Man, you dropped out like a hippie on acid. I didn't think anything could take your eyes off her boobs, but you were gone."

"I think I just saw my life flash before my eyes," he says.

"That's an interesting reaction to a pair of antigravity chest nodules."

"Yes," he says. "And that's about all the fun I think I can stand here. Let's go see a movie."

On the drive to the theater, they see someone blowing leaves into the street with a backpack blower. As they approach, the engine belches a blue cloud of smoke and the cylinder head or the piston or something flies straight into the air, to come down on top of the astonished operator's head, knocking him to the ground. Toby slows the car, thinking he'd better stop and help if the guy is injured, but when the man rolls to his feet and begins cursing a blue streak, Toby drives on by.

A little farther on, a boomcar roars past, its subwoofers turned up to 11. The windows on Toby's car rattle, but the windows on the boomcar do them one better: they shatter in a spectacular spray of glistening fragments. The boomcar pulls to the curb and goes silent.

Toby didn't realize that his idea of fun was quite so sadistic. Not that people who force their noise on everyone else don't deserve some comeuppance, but this seems a little extreme. He has to admit, though, that he enjoys their misfortune.

The movie is *Ringworld*, and it stars a bunch of actors that Toby has never heard of before, but he expects he'll see them everywhere after this. It's a blowout production, the first science fiction film to live up to the book. The special effects are so seamless he can't tell where they start or stop; everything seems so real, it's two hours of total immersion in an alien world without a single false step. When the titles start to roll, Toby is surprised to find himself in a theater, and he has to unlock his fingers from their grip on the arms of his chair.

He and Sonya recount their favorite scenes on the drive home. As they pass Wal-Mart, Toby notices a big banner hanging from the top of the building: "Going Out of Business Sale." A couple blocks beyond, the windows of Emile's Eclectic Emporium glitter with renewed luster.

At home, the neighbor's cocker spaniel is barking, as it always does when they drive in, but Toby and Sonya are barely inside the house when they hear a yowl and a screech and yips of mortal terror, then silence. Toby looks out the window to see a mountain lion leap the fence with the dog in its jaws.

He should be shocked. He wants to be shocked, and he wants to feel at least a little sympathy for the neighbor, who will no doubt feel terrible when he finds out what happened to his dog—and on Christmas day, to boot—but he can't suppress his wild grin. A mountain lion ate the neighbor's yappy dog!

He catches Sonya grinning, too, and suddenly they're laughing out loud. The strangeness of the day can't be held back any longer, and they fall into each other's arms, laughing so hard the tears run down their cheeks. They wind up pulling each other's clothes off and making love right there in the living room, and when Sonya asks him if he's thinking about the Hooters waitress, he laughs again and says, "Well, if I wasn't before, I am now." But in truth, he can't even remember what she looks like.

They spend the evening puttering around the house, playing the new music that they have given each other and preparing dinner. They usually fix a big meal on Christmas, but by mutual consent they decide just to make soup and sandwiches this time. They read during dinner, and for a while afterward. Toby would have sworn he'd read every book Robert Heinlein had ever published, including the awful ones he'd written near the end of his life, but Sonya has given him one he's never seen before, and it's from the early days. It's as good as his memories of the other ones, which means it's at least an order of magnitude better than they really were.

When they go to bed, he discovers that his toothpaste tastes like chocolate. They crawl under the covers and turn out the light, and he snuggles in against Sonya, marveling as he often does at how well they fit together.

As he drifts off to sleep, he wonders what the morning will bring. What if his "fun" was just for a day?

He shivers. What if it lasts all year?