



Christmas

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“I wonder what Christmas was like for our great, great, great grandparents,” I said to her. “I mean, did they pack themselves into little neon-lit general stores falling over themselves to buy this thing for Teddy or that thing for Sue?”

“Something tells me they didn’t have neon back then,” she replied.

“I’m serious.”

“I really don’t know. Probably not. What do you think I should get Terry?”

“You mean Terrance?”

“His name’s Terry,” she responded.

“Actually, it’s Terrance and either way what he really needs is a new name. Something with more flair. I mean, Terry is what towels and blue hair tracksuits are made of. Maybe his new name could be Zeke or Rod. Yes, Rod, I like it. Rod... it has a certain something Terry just lacks.”

She stopped amid the bustling mall traffic, locking her Christmas green eyes on me. It was a look I was very used to getting. I met her less than amused glare with a smile that was just a bit south of sincere. After engaging in a silent stare down for a few more seconds her eyes grew less fierce and her lips loosened enough to form a fledgling smile.

“You have to admit ...”

“I’d stop there if I were you,” she warned.

“Fair enough.”

We continued walking, often dodging, in and out of the mass of other shoppers cramming the seemingly narrow walkways of the mall just three short nights before Christmas. As we came near the food court, the unique aroma of all things greasy began to fill the air around us. I turned to read the sign stretched across the top of the food stall belonging to “Szechuan Nirvana” that had caught my attention. It was a big green sign featuring a picture of a fat smiling Buddha wearing a Santa hat. Next to the Christmas Buddha, the denture white lettering read, “CHRISTMAS EGG ROLLS: 2 FOR \$3.00” and below that, “CONFUCIUS’ HOLIDAY FRIED RICE: \$3.99 A BOWL”.

Two boys came walking away from “Szechuan Nirvana” and crossed our path, each with a small paper basket containing two egg rolls, one green and one red. We stopped for a second, looked at each other, and began laughing simultaneously.

“That looks appetizing,” she said. “I’d hate to see what Confucius’ Holiday Fried Rice looks like.”

“At this point, I may actually be hungry enough to eat one of those.”

“That’s really disgusting.”

“I agree, but I’m close to starvation.”

“We’re almost done, I promise.”

“You made that same promise an hour ago,” I replied.

“This time I really mean it. I have gifts for everyone but Terry. Help me pick something out for him and I’ll buy you a real dinner somewhere else.”

“Alright, but if we’re still here in an hour I’m coming back for the Christmas egg rolls and blaming you for whatever the after effects may be.”

On that note, we continued past the food court and took the escalator to the second level of the mall. A few steps after we got off the escalator, something in the window of one of those environmentally friendly gadgets stores caught her eye and she needled her way through the oncoming cross traffic to check it out. I made my way to an open spot on the railing just outside the music store. The music store, to my surprise, wasn’t blasting more Christmas music, but was playing Edith Piaf’s “La Vie En Rose”. From where I stood, I could just take in the lyrics as they danced above the fray of Christmas shoppers.

I watched her as she looked at the various recycled items in the store window, apparently giving substantial thought to each item's potential as Terrance's Christmas gift. She'd only been dating him for six months. Just two days earlier she was even going to break it off for whatever reason. But, when I had met her at the mall that night she told me she didn't do it, and there she was searching intently for the perfect Christmas gift for him.

She gently flipped her hair out of her eyes time and again and made that exceptionally cute expression she makes when she's focused on something, a slight squint and gently pursed lips. Damn, she was beautiful, I thought. The truth was I'd thought she was beautiful each and every day since she had come into my sixth grade homeroom that Monday morning in early September ten years earlier. Going to school never really excited me before that morning, but knowing she was going to be there and that I'd get to see her face, with those green eyes, every morning in homeroom turned me into a perfect attendance kid.

Ms. Piaf's enchanting voice blocked out the chorus of shoppers, allowing me to drift away for a moment and I envisioned us together on the snow covered Ponts des Arts in Paris, the Seine gently flowing beneath us in the dark. The snowflakes were dancing playfully around and amid her dark hair. Just a hint of the sweet scent of wine was on our breath. Every light in the City of Lights was reflected in her eyes as she took it all in. I stood behind her, my hands around her waist, my breath just barely on the back of her neck. Without thinking, I brushed her hair to one side and my lips made their way to the nape of her neck, just over her right shoulder. She turned abruptly, but my hands were back around her waist and I pulled her tightly into me. For a second, that seemed like a lifetime, our lips sat within a few inches of each other, our breath visible and heavy against the falling snow. Then, I kissed her and to my surprise, she didn't recoil. Instead, her lips softened and pressed firmly against my own. Amid the cold night air there was heat rushing through my entire body, which was finally pressed into hers. I felt the curves of her chest and hips through her sweater and open coat. I tasted the wine on her tongue.

"I just don't know," she said.

I stammered unwillingly back into reality. "What?"

"I still don't know what to get Terry."

“What do you get the guy who has everything?”

“Don’t be a smartass right now. I’m running out of time and I need your help. You’re a guy, what would be a good gift?”

“A trip to Paris with you.”

“That sounds delightful, but let’s keep it within the realm of something I can actually afford. Besides, we’ve only been dating for six months. It may be a bit early for a trip.”

“Why don’t we walk down to the sporting goods store? He likes sports doesn’t he?”

“Yes, but that doesn’t sound too inspired,” she replied.

“Terrance generally doesn’t sound too inspired, so it’s probably a good fit.”

“You’re not funny.”

“Actually, I am funny. I’m not many other things, but I am funny.”

“Okay, you’re a little funny.”

We continued through the mall, getting further and further beyond the reach of Edith Piaf’s bewitching voice until I could only hear her in my head. The crowd of people seemed to grow larger and busier. Most of them had more bags than they could comfortably carry, probably filled with stuff that would just get tossed aside for new stuff by next Christmas.

Shoppers encircled the various merchant carts that lined the middle of the main mall walkway. There was a clamoring crowd surrounding the two poor high school kids who were dripping in sweat working the “Put Your Picture on a Mug or T-Shirt” cart. The cart selling the trendy weird rubber slip on shoes that were all the rage was literally under siege. The “Mobile Accessories” cart, also known as the come waste a bunch of money on overpriced junk for your phone cart, had a long line of sighing, eye rolling holiday shoppers waiting for the cart attendants’ attention. Meanwhile, one of the shoppers who was actually being helped was busy talking to someone else on his cell phone while gesturing to various zebra striped phone cases.

As we came upon the “Popcorn Palace” cart, two women, carrying way too many shopping bags to move effectively through the crowd of other people carrying too many shopping bags, crashed into one another in a labored sprint for the last gigantic Christmas themed tin of Caramel Dream popcorn. After a skirmish, the lady wearing the red “Peace on

Earth” sweatshirt defeated the lady wearing the green “Joy to the World” sweatshirt, and emerged victoriously up to the cart register with the Caramel Dream popcorn tin. The “Joy to the World” lady had put up a good fight, but was left to gather her bags and settle on the substantially less popular Jalapeno Happiness popcorn tin.

“Did you see that?”

“Yeah,” she replied. “That was crazy. Although, I have heard that Caramel Dream is the perfect gift for your loved ones this Christmas season.”

“Then maybe that’s what you should get for Terrance.”

“Are you offering to fight Ms. Peace on Earth for it?”

“Sure, if it will get us out of here any sooner. I’m not afraid of her.”

“That’s a valiant and tempting offer, but let’s keep looking. Besides, Terry’s allergic to popcorn.”

“In that case, I’ll be right back. I’m going to kick some Peace on Earth ass, then we’ll be done with Terrance’s gift and we can go eat.”

“Excellent.”

“Is he seriously allergic to popcorn? What happens to him if he eats it?”

“He says he breaks out with these red lumps all over. I’ve obviously never seen it because he says he hasn’t had any popcorn since he was a kid.”

“That’s one of the strangest things I’ve ever heard. I mean, who’s allergic to popcorn?”

As we walked in the direction of the sporting goods store, “La Vie En Rose” kept repeating through my head and my imagination flew us back to Paris on that snow filled night. Our kiss over the Seine, our first kiss, had lasted forever, which still wasn’t long enough. Eventually, we reluctantly unlocked our lips and our embrace, and I took her hand as we left the Pont des Arts and strolled the barely lit streets of Paris back to our hotel. A fire was burning in the fireplace in our room. We opened another bottle of wine and sat in front of the fire looking out our window at the Eiffel Tower lighting the night. I kissed her again, and again, and again, until we reached the point where kisses no longer satisfied. The fire roared next to us, sweaters were tossed here and there, wine glasses were spilled, and, after years of anticipation, the warmth of my bare perspiring skin found its way to hers.

“That’s the perfect Christmas gift,” I said as we walked into the sporting goods store, without realizing I was saying it aloud.

“What is?”

“What?”

“What is the perfect Christmas gift?”

“Nothing. Never mind. Okay, what’s Terrance’s favorite sport?”

“Golf.”

“Why does that not surprise me?”

“What’s wrong with golf? He’s good at it.”

“No doubt,” I replied. “Okay, that makes this easy. Get him a few new golf shirts. Golfers always like golf shirts and they wear them everywhere.”

“That’s true. He does wear a lot of golf shirts. He even wears long sleeve ones in the winter.”

“So, there you go. And you can’t go wrong with the color or pattern because everything matches khakis, which are the only type of pants I’ve ever seen him wear.”

“He wears jeans too sometimes.”

“That must be when he’s feeling racy. Do you know what kind of golf balls he uses?”

“Seriously?”

“Let’s just stick with the shirts.”

“Are you sure about this? Are golf shirts really a good gift?”

“For Terrance, golf shirts are the perfect gift.”

“Better than Caramel Dream popcorn?”

“That’s a close one,” I replied. “But, yes, better than Caramel Dream popcorn.”

She left me to go look through the golf shirts, tossing her hair out of her face while squinting and gently pursing her lips again as she tried to decide which shirts to buy. I knew her thing with Terrance wouldn’t last. They never did. The boyfriends came and went, but I was a constant. One day, she’d realize what she really wanted, who she really wanted. Life came down to timing, and my time hadn’t come yet. But, it would.

I reached in my coat pocket, took the ticket envelope out, and removed the two airline tickets to Paris from the envelope. As I held them, I saw us walking together along a quiet side street through the falling Parisian snow. There was no Terrance. There was no one but us.

“Maybe next Christmas. Yes, definitely next Christmas.”