

Earl's Christmas

Slouched in his easy chair, Earl gazed out the window of his row home at the falling snow, wondering why and when he became such a miserable prick. Maybe his recent stroke was the final touch, but he was no charmer before that. He was lucky to get away with just constant numbness in his left side and a slur that sounded like the Novocain hadn't fully worn off. Luckily, he was right-handed and too old to do much physical work anyway. It was the end of his construction career and he felt useless long before the lock-down. That only made things worse.

The TV blasted his favorite news channel that reminded him over and over how the country is going to shit and suddenly becoming much less American. Now, this virus will be the great eraser to help our bold, proud hero bring things back to order- no matter how many feathers he has to ruffle. If we lose a few old farts along the way, so be it. Earl, for one, was ready. No matter what else he'd done wrong, at least he'd be on the right side of history this time.

He pondered if his drinking problem was the beginning, or just his way of coping with the misery. It drove Sharon to distraction until she finally lost it, took the kids, and left. A year later he started going to the meetings and his life was slowly healing, one day at a time. Things were looking promising until ironically, she was killed by a drunk driver. This shattered his already frail existence as he tried unsuccessfully to raise the two boys, while he was determined to stay clean. That did nothing to sweeten his disposition.

Jacky, the oldest, was his pride and joy despite trying his hardest to be a defiant bad ass. He quit high school at seventeen and bought an old chopper. He kept the worst company, and although he denied it, was budding drug addict. Yet for all his problems, the kid was everything Earl fantasized about when he was a teenager. Every now and then Jacky would bring some strung-out crack whore and offer his dad and brother a go. Earl pitched in a few bucks and went through the motions, but Tom wanted no parts of it. He was completely different and tried to set an example for his older brother. He was always puzzled why his father sided with Jacky every time. Jacky was the punk and yet somehow, Tom was the one that didn't measure up.

Both kids sensed that their Dad was in over his head. It was obvious from his rants that he hated single parenthood, and eventually the boys realized they were on their own. Looking back, Earl relived just how poorly that all went. A few months after losing a leg in a cycle crash, Jacky offed himself with a shot in the head using Earl's bedroom pistol. He shook his head as he chastised himself. *"It should have been locked up."*

For some twisted reason, Earl resented his youngest son as if he had something to do with Jacky's violent end. By the time Tom finished high school it became unbearable. They were hardly speaking and one night he just left home, never to speak to his father again. Earl held the grudge and made no attempt to save the relationship. Just last year, he had heard that Tom was married, had a daughter and moved back to the next town. Things were just too far gone to even think about a reconciliation. Now he nodded to himself and with a crooked smile, admitted the term "miserable prick" was far too kind.

The few friends he had were in pandemic lock-down too, and Earl realized that he couldn't face this depressing solo Christmas without first facing himself. There was no place to hide. He re-played how things could have gone and should have been as he absent-mindedly carried several boxes of

decorations out of the attic. He had not bothered with them since Sharon left, but hoped this just might at least slow his deepening funk.

As he did a half-hearted and half-assed job of decorating the browning white plastic Christmas tree, he had the sudden urge to find Tom. Although he resisted for a long time, he finally bought a smart phone and learned enough to Google search. Within a few seconds he found the number, but put the phone away, deciding it was a bad idea.

Next, he unpacked Sharon's treasure. She was so proud of her Christmas Village collection. The platform he built was trashed long ago. He decided to set it up on the dining room table that hadn't been used in years and was just the right size. As he plugged in the power strip, he was amazed that the ten stores and cottages lit up without a single dead bulb. Even the clock in the town hall tower began to chime. He carefully placed the kidney shaped mirror and positioned the ice skaters, remembering how mesmerized the boys once were with that mini world. Sharon's stories breathed life into the villagers lining Main Street and sitting on the park benches. The warmth of the living room fireplace that burnt so long ago, now magically filled his dining room.

As he sprinkled artificial snow over the Village, Earl realized those were some of the happiest times of his life- well before things turned ugly. Although it had been ages since his 'final' drink, he opened the one last bottle of Scotch that sat defiantly on the hutch to remind him of his addiction. After two long pulls, his stomach lit up with that familiar fire and he embraced the long-dreaded buzz. After two more, he found himself vacantly staring at the group of people in the middle of the park.

Before he could stop himself, he was dialing Tom's number. When he heard his son's voice he was about to hang up, but it was only a message. He awkwardly began to ramble at the beep. "Tom, it's your old man- still in the same place." He decided to lay on some guilt. "You probably don't know I had a stroke, but I'm mostly recovered. Anyway, I was just looking at Mom's Christmas Village and thought about you." His voice trailed off. "Merry Christmas." He quickly hung up before he lost it and began sobbing.

The fifth was now half gone. He closed his eyes and imagined himself in the park. The couple sitting on a bench on the other side of the green, looked strangely familiar. He walked towards them to get a better look and halfway there, froze in his tracks. Sharon was in her favorite red winter coat and Jacky sat looking at his mom with an uncharacteristic soft, loving expression. This was the newly wed version of his wife, complete with her beguiling dimples and infectious smile. Jacky looked as he did just before the accident and had his arm around Sharon's shoulder. They ignored him as if he were invisible. Although he desperately wanted to speak to them, he couldn't move and could only guess what they might be talking about. They looked far too happy to be talking about him.

He wondered back to the mirrored pond and took in his reflection. *".... Jesus you lazy fuck ! At least you could shave once and a while."* Just then he noticed them standing behind him behind him. Sharon had that mischievous expression. "Oh, it's the pandemic. Besides , it's a good look for you."

Jacky gently placed his hand on Earl's shoulder. "So, you think you messed up? I guess I showed you how it's done." Earl suddenly felt ashamed but appreciated the gesture. Now what he needed was to set things right with Tom. He was feeling bone-tired but strangely relieved. The weight had been suddenly lifted from his heart.

The next morning was Christmas. Tom gently rapped on the wide-open front door and called out “It’s your long-lost son.” Nobody answered.

Last night’s cold chilled the house and the living room smelled from booze and smoke. There was Earl, wearing a stained white T-shirt, sitting in his easy chair, oblivious to the cold. On the stand next to him, a two-inch ash sat in the dirty dinner plate where the butt had burned out. His dad’s head was bowed, and he didn’t flinch when Tom called out again. He watched Earl intensely for a few minutes, hoping for signs of life. Tearing up, he knelt by the chair, dropped a picture of his family in his dad’s lap and held his father’s cold hand. Earl’s heavy eyebrows and four-day stubble were covered in fake snow. Tom could have sworn he felt his dad’s hand tighten on his but knew that was impossible.

It was finally time for forgiveness. “Merry Christmas to you too, Dad.”