

ANOTHER CHRISTMAS CAROL

Many stories, poems, films, and TV shows have been written about Christmas Eve. I am introducing a new one. The characters in this piece are real or at least used to be real. Much of this short story is true and some is constructed from my drug induced imagination. I will leave you to cypher the difference.

The tale begins in my bedroom on Christmas Eve. I am lamenting, tossing and turning in mental agony. Earlier in the day I lost \$500 betting on the Browns to beat the Houston Texans. Cleveland lost the game, I lost my money, and playoff hopes were becoming unattainable. Over and over, I see C.J. Stroud float the game winning touchdown pass over Denzel Ward's outstretched reach in the corner of the end zone, pounding the nail in Cleveland's once promising season and ruining Christmas for me and my family.

"Why? Why do you pick on me, God?" I cry out repeatedly. "I've been a loser all my life. A whipping boy for golfers, bookies, and politicians to dig deep in my pockets and extract most of my hard work earnings. Does my lack of success humor You?"

Too much Crown Royal and a burned-out body finally allowed me to fall asleep. Not for long. I awoke to the eerie sound of someone calling my name. "Fraaank!...Fraaank!...Fraaank!" Who in the hell is calling me at this time of night? My eyes focus on a frail spirit, skinny as a telephone pole. I know this figure but, initially, could not put the pieces together. He drank a huge gulp of Seven and Seven then puffed on his cigarette.

"Welby?" I shouted. "It can't be you. You've been dead for years."

"I am your ghost of Christmas past," he said in a strong voice.

He took another sip of his Seven and Seven and another puff on his cigarette.

"There is no smoking inside buildings now-a-days," I bluntly emphasized.

"I have been sent to remind you of your past," he scowled.

He repeated once more his forever-remembered habit of drinking his Seven and Seven and smoking his cigarette.

“Come with me,” Welby ordered.

“Can I pour me a drink first?” I asked.

He looked at me and shook his head as if to call me an asshole without saying a word. I rolled out of bed in my pajamas and men’s nightcap. Welby disappeared through my bedroom window. I followed but was abruptly stopped by the glass. Welby reappeared.

“I forgot,” he said. “You are still human. I am not used to associating with mortals anymore.”

He opened the window and we exited. It was not my yard we entered. It was Room 12 at Pera’s Motel. The first thing I saw was Ralph DiCarolus. It was obvious he was not happy. Steam blew from his nostrils and ears. He was a pressure cooker about to blow his top. His right foot scraped the floor like a bull ready to charge. Jim Centorbi stood next to Ralph, and he did not look pleased either. Behind them was Don Jander making loud hyenas sounds. I do not remember the scene, but I know the event. I reluctantly turned my head, and the broken table came into view, a product of my drunken, doobie infested condition. I glanced back at Welby. Giving me time to recollect, he swallowed more of his drink and took a drag from his smoke.

“You were lucky that night,” he said. “You drank enough to have died from alcohol poison, or your crash into the table could have seriously hurt you.”

He hurried me from the room before Ralph attacked. I saw the pumps servicing cars at the old Shell station on I-71 and Rt. 18. The time was the early 1980’s. Jerry Graves and I were on our way to Geneva from Columbus. We stopped to pee and fuel. I almost did not recognize Jerry. He was 40 years younger and 40 pounds lighter. It was him alright, all of 4’10” tall, working like a sanitation engineer, disposing of 12 empty Michelob beer cans that decorated the back floorboard of his custom designed Cutlas. I saw myself grab the half empty can that I absurdly placed on the car’s hood while I made my potty break. Standing close by, observing the cleanup operation was a Deputy Sheriff of Medina County. I suppose it was that can that tipped the officer. Why he allowed us to continue is still a mystery. I looked like a hippie with my Robert Plant haircut. It was a different time back then. The cops were more compassionate and

understanding. He told us not to advertise and sent us on our way. Following us until we crossed the Medina County line, he kept an eye on Jerry's driving. I remember the relief when he turned back. We still had 12 more Michelob's in the cooler, and we immediately proceeded to consume them so not to leave any evidence of breaking the law.

I peeked at Welby. He gulped another swallow of his Seven and Seven and followed with a puff from his cigarette. He just looked forward.

"You were lucky," he emphasized. "Lucky you were not arrested and lucky you made it to Geneva alive."

"Apparently I used up all my luck," I smirked. "If you give me \$500, I promise I'll never gamble again."

"I am a ghost not a genie," he informed me.

His habit of a drink then a drag followed his words. You would think the longer I spent with Welby, the more comfortable I would become. That was not the case. I sure could use a drink. He exhaled the smoke in my face.

The second the atmosphere cleared, I saw myself in the back of my car looking frantically for my briefcase. I had searched every inch of my hotel room and found nothing. I hoped it was in my car. It was not on the seats, and it was not under the seats. I had to find it. Knowing what I was thinking, Welby repeated his ritual of a drink from his glass and a puff from his cigarette. That demon alcohol. This was a morning after a Commissioner's Dinner, held that year at the Pickled Pepper. When the banquet finished, I took residency at the bar and parked the briefcase at my feet. That flexible, leather case was a lock box for Sunday's green fees and purses for the Best Ball Tournament and the Gavin Cup, nearly \$4,000 cash. I watched as I rummaged through my car. If I left that briefcase at the bar, I could kiss that money, my ass, and my marriage good-bye. The relief when I opened the trunk and saw the bag. You would have thought I found Blackbeard's Treasure.

"You were damn lucky again," Welby repeated.

"Yeah, like you never got drunk and blacked out," I rebutted.

This was not about Welby, it was about me. He drank and smoked then guided me back through my window. Damn, the room was cold. Welby left the window open and on December 24, the wind had a bite that would smolder the fire of hell. I thought it unthoughtful for a ghost. I jumped back into bed and covered myself with the comforter. He finished his Seven and Seven and took one last drag from his nicotine stick. He put the butt inside the glass and set the glass on the end table.

“You will have another visitor in an hour,” he smirked.

He started to slide out the window.

“Shut the window on your way out,” I ordered. “Were you born in a barn?”

The hour passed and I awoke to a familiar sound. “Ho! Ho! Ho!” came from the kitchen. There was Santa Claus. He stood by the table eating a pizzelle and drinking a tumbler of bourbon. He was in his element.

“These are good,” he declared. “I am tired of Chocolate Chip Cookies. Did you make these?”

I nodded. He washed down his treat with the bourbon.

“Don’t tell Mrs. Claus,” he requested. “She hates when I come home drunk. Come on. We have work to do.”

He led me to the fireplace. Up the chimney he shot like one of the tubes in a bank’s drive-thru window. He hollered for me to do the same. After squatting and scrunching to climb into the fire pit, I ascended towards the roof. My fat belly prevented me from reaching my destination.

“I’m stuck,” I screamed.

“HO! HO! HO!” Santa giggled.

I heard him mumble something about a porn queen not getting her massage oil this Christmas and that is what he poured on me. Smooth and lubricated like a Trojan, I finished my journey up the stack covered in oil and soot. Before I could bitch, I was enamored by the beautiful red sleigh and the nine reindeer who motored the vehicle. I may have stood there all night admiring the

scene if Santa Claus had not ordered me into his sleigh. He shook on the reigns and into the night we flew.

“Now Dasher! Now Dancer! Now Prancer and Vixen! On Comet! On Cupid! On Donner and Blitzen!” he bellowed.

“On Rudolph!” I yelled.

Santa looked disgusted.

“That’s not part of the poem,” he scolded.

I never flew in an F-14 Tomcat but those reindeers flew at warp speed. In a New York minute we landed on the hill behind the 9th green at the Geneva-on-the-Lake golf course. We were out of place in a sleigh and nine reindeers while the other 32 guys sat in golf carts sipping on their favorite beverage. Nobody noticed, however. They were all having a good time heckling oncoming golfers as if they were Democrats at a Republican gathering. I realized it was the Scramble Tournament during the Geneva Open.

“HO! HO! HO!” Santa laughed. “Look what you created. You should be proud.”

Santa was wrong. I did not create this. The 36 golfers make this such a fun event. I just structure the outing giving them a chance to make it special. But! If Santa wants to give me a pat on the back, then I will vaunt his praises.

The last foursome was on the 9th tee. They were one shot off the lead. A birdie was a must to force a playoff. Bob Rutherford teed first. The ball popped high in the air like a Texas Leaguer in baseball. The tune from the gallery sounded like the scales in music climbing higher as the ball rose then dropping as it fell. “oh-Oh-OH-Oh-oh!” Splash. Drowned in a watery grave at the bottom of the creek.

“I hope you brought your swimsuit,” Jay Green hollered.

Alex Ballard hit next. The crowd sounded like the train that can as they chugged trying to push the ball along but it stopped ten feet short of the green. Tim Black’s tee ball was shaped like a banana and he sliced into the greenside bunker bringing a chorus of boos that would make Bronx residents proud. Leave it

to Nick Boggess to turn those boo's into loud thunderous cheers as his shot rolled pin high just 13 feet from the hole.

Santa turned me towards the shelter house. Those same 36 golfers were chomping on Mel Voll's perfectly grilled steaks and sides of potatoes, salad, and Italian bread. Whether they played well or not, it no longer mattered. Women learned long ago one of the two best routes to a man's heart is through his stomach. The Commissioner's Dinner is living proof. I saw myself standing before the group holding an envelope full of cash and announcing the winning Scramble team.

"Congratulations to Blaise Plageman, Richie Heskett, Shawn Dorn, and Craig Marshall for winning the Scramble," I declared.

I turned to Santa. He read my mind.

"No, Nick did not make the putt," he informed me. "His frustration has long passed with every savory bite and pints of beer. Ho! Ho! Ho! It is time to go."

He patted my back before he grabbed the reigns. The sleigh lifted. Before we returned home, we hovered over Lumpy's Hideaway. Doctor Hate served Jack Berger another Manhattan. In 71 years, the three days of Geneva is the longest stretch of time that Doc smiles continuously. Sitting around the table on the patio was Fritz Ford, Pat Dorn, Ron Szymczak, Dick Plageman and me sharing stories over Doc's cocktails and having a grand time. The sleigh departed and I got Santa's message.

"Damn! It is cold up here," I complained. "Don't you have a coat in one of those bags I could wear?"

"You wouldn't want to take a wrap from poor Billy Simpson, would you?" Santa paraphrased. "He hadn't had winter gear for two years."

Santa's lessons were hitting home. I toughened the cold. We could not have slid down the chimney into my living room fast enough. Santa made his way to the plate of pizzelles and stuffed a handful into his pocket. He gulped another tumbler of bourbon then made his way back to the fireplace.

"Hey! What about my gifts?" I inquired.

“Ho! Ho! Ho!” he laughed. “I just gave you the most wonderful gift of all.”

He laid “his finger aside of his nose, and giving a nod, up the chimney he rose.” The bells on his sleigh jingled. I heard him laugh, “Ho! Ho! Ho!” and Santa was gone.

I started to walk towards my room. What just happened here? I turned back and there was no fireplace. The house never had a fireplace. The living room was back in its original architectural composition. I read Charles Dicken’s book, and I knew another chapter was coming. Instead of returning to bed, I parked my ass on the recliner.

This time when I awoke, I stood on smoke, but it did not smell like smoke. Standing beside me was an old man, bald on top but hair hanging down, covering his ears and draping over his shoulders. His beard and moustache were egg white. The gown he donned hung to his sandal covered feet. I am not a total idiot. I surmised he was from a different era. Behind him were pearly gates, locked so no one could enter.

“St. Peter?” I winced.

I touched my arms, my chest, my stomach, my legs. I was still too fat to touch my toes. I felt alive.

“You are not dead yet, Frank,” he assured me. “You are here to see the future.”

A hole in the cloud developed. I looked down at a lush piece of real estate. The grass was Kelly green peeking through the multitude of old trees that framed the wide walkways of lawn. White dots of sand periodically and strategically placed away from the creeks and ponds flowing throughout the acreage. Bright colored marigolds, petunias, and snap dragons dotted several of the tee boxes.

“Is that...?” I started to ask.

The old man nodded. Geneva-on-the-Lake Municipal Golf Course never looked so plush. If I did not know better, I might think I am looking at Augusta National. Understanding my curiosity, St. Peter explained.

"After you give up and pass on, Blaise will make several changes," he said. "The field will grow to 144 golfers yearly. Many companies will donate prizes for participation gifts. Commissioner Blaise will nail Cadillac as its main sponsor. They committed to give away a flying Escalade to anyone who scores a hole in one on No. 3."

"Who are all those people standing around?" I ask.

"That is a gallery," he answered.

"Oh! Come on Pete," I refused to believe.

"St. Peter," he scoffed. "How dare you doubt me. It is the money from the patrons that financed the improvements on the course."

"What's going on there?" I pointed.

"The golfers no longer bring coolers on the course," St. Peter replied. "The gallery supplies the players food, drink, gummies, whatever and whenever desired. Blaise will create a most wonderful bond among people. Giving and sharing will become a common practice at the Geneva Open, a more pleasant atmosphere than the strife and tension of your days."

"Wait a minute, Pete...uh...St. Peter," I rebutted. "You didn't quite live in the Garden of Eden. According to the Bible you got your head chopped off. The doctors must be pretty good up here. You don't even have a scar."

I was not gaining any points. Like my gambling reputation, my comments were costly. I redirected my attention to Geneva and quickly changed the subject.

"Flying golf carts," I said. "Will those be around before I...you know?"

"No," he shook his head.

"I guess it is a good thing," I commented. "With guys like the Doobie Brothers and Vince Gatto piloting, it would look like a World War II battle."

I gazed at the shelter house.

"Do they still have the Commissioner's Dinner?" I inquired.

"Yes, Saturday night before the final round," St. Peter responded.

“What are all those boxes?” I asked.

“Times are different than back in your day,” he explained. “Immediately after you leave, Blaise abandons the culinary choice of steaks, potatoes, and salads and institutes a much simpler recipe of catered pizza. Eventually, he adds tacos, more preferred with this generation than steak and lobster.”

“You’re kidding,” I remarked digging a deeper hole.

“What’s that sticking up behind the 18th green?” I questioned. “That’s gotta stand over 6’ tall.”

“6 feet, 7 inches to be precise,” St. Peter smirked. “That is the trophy that replaced the Gavin Cup. All the winners are engraved on it from the first champions, Gary Glanzman and Jeff Graessle to the last winner.”

“How in the hell do they get that thing home?” I asked.

“We do not talk that way here,” he scolded.

“I’m sorry,” I apologized.

“The trophy remains where it is,” St. Peter lectured. “It is permanently cast in stone. No longer is it called the Gavin Cup. It will be known by these individuals as The Blaise Plageman Iron Men Trophy. Sr. Gavin is not happy about it.”

“You mean that bitty...excuse me St. Peter. You mean Sr. Gavin is here?” I remarked knowing the answer. “She was mean.”

I turned my attention to the Summertime Inn, all spruced and lit like it belonged in Las Vegas. The veranda was filled with golfers chatting just as we do today. Others took dips in the pool to refresh after a challenging day on the links. I did not recognize any of them.

“Where’s Blaise?” I delved.

“You are looking at the year 2075,” St. Peter explained. “Blaise has not been Commissioner for 25 years. There is a triumphant in charge of the Geneva Open, Crosby, Beck, and Cameron Marshall.”

“Craig’s sons?” I smiled. “I knew those boys would make something of themselves. Are the rest of my buddies inside your gate?”

“No, not yet,” he murmured. “You are still alive. A few are here, Joe Casa, Gary Miller, Mark Spangler, Tom Jech, Steve Hoffman, Welby...”

“Yeah, I saw Welby earlier,” I acknowledged. “I hope I do not look as skinny and frail as he does after I get here. Don’t you feed him?”

“Who says you will enter through those gates?” making more of a statement than a question.

“What have you heard?” I panicked. “Is Kitty talking?”

“Your wife does not need reveal the secrets in your closet,” St. Peter reminded me.

“Look Sainty,” I started to say.

His glance was more devilish than saintly.

“I mean St. Peter,” I corrected myself. “If Steve Hoffman can make it then I should make it.”

He handed me two stoned tablets inscribed with the Ten Commandments. He made his point. I was no longer lighter than air. I fell through the clouds. My descent picked up speed with each mile I traveled. The earth looked beautiful from another Galaxy. Within minutes, the landscape became familiar. A blanket of snow-covered Geneva-on-the-Lake Golf Course. Lake Erie roared like an angry lion. The Terminal Tower, lit in red and green lights, sticks upright firm like a teenage boy scoping through the pages of Playboy Magazine. I reach for my rip cord. Panic sets. I do not have a parachute. I am a real UFO.

“Owwwwwwwww!” I yeled.

My legs kicked wildly. I flapped my arms trying to slow my speed and gain control. A condor I was not. I fell more like an unregulated asteroid. I bounced on my bed, up and down for many seconds like my Titleist hopping along the cart path after one of my errant drives.

“Wow! I drank more than I thought,” I said the following morning.

I stopped dead in my tracks after climbing from bed. Sitting on the end table was an empty glass incorporating the cigarette butt. I was still in disbelief. I stumbled to the kitchen to brew coffee and the plate once filled with pizzelles was

devoid of cookies. A tumbler smelling of bourbon stood next to an uncorked bottle missing six fingers worth.

“Holy shit! It was true,” I shrieked.

I hurriedly dressed and scampered to 9:00 AM Christmas Mass. The choir sang “Oh Come All Ye’ Faithful,” and “Silent Night.” Never had they sounded so angelic. Father Joe proclaimed the Gospel then gave an inspiring, 10-minute homily. It was as listening to Christ himself. I knew I was blessed with a gift unmatched except in Charles Dicken’s mind. I returned to my pew after Communion and thanked God. The Holy Spirit was inside me. This renewed confidence and glory lifted me to heights unsoared by eagles. I made up my mind right then to chase my losses. How could I lose? I was going to put a dime on the Philadelphia Eagles, a 9 ½ favorite over the New York Football Giants. God was on my side.

“The Mass has ended. Go in Peace,” Father Joe said.

I sang loud and clear with the choir “Hark! The Herald Angels Sing” until the last note was reached. I raced to my car not caring what the parishioners thought of me. I shouted along the way.

Merry Christmas! Merry Christmas, everybody! Merry Christmas!”

