

First Place – Short Story

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O' Fishmas Tree

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Short Story

THE BOY

The boy grinned a crooked grin that cinched upward towards his left ear as he closed one eye and stared at the unblinking red eyes of the fish. The spider-web like veins of the fish was illumined from within by the red Christmas tree light, in the darkened den.

Slipping a fish head on to a blue Christmas bulb this time, the boy giggled softly, delighting in the way the different colored light intensified the blue already present in the fish's eyes and scaly skin. At first, the boy found it difficult to hold the slippery fish heads with his tiny hands, as he lifted them from the paper sack. He found that he could hold the head easily, if he grabbed them with his thumb and forefinger by the lip, just like he'd seen his father do with a whole fish.

The boy deftly inserted one colored light after the other from the stringer of colored lights into the fish heads his father had left in a sack on the floor next to the kitchen sink. The bulbs shone through the fishes' open mouths and it seemed (to him) as though they had swallowed stars.

Once the boy got the hang of it, he quickly managed to decorate the backside of the Christmas tree. The fish eyes, no longer dull and lifeless, shone vibrant with color.

The boy, giggled, clapped his hands, and rocked on the balls of his feet, pleased with his handiwork. Hidden behind the tree, he felt this was his own secret Christmas.

His quiet celebration was interrupted by his mother calling from the back bedroom. "Boys, time for bed."

The boy scuttled from behind the tree, shot across the den and down the hall to the bedroom he shared with his two brothers. "There you are!" the boy's mom exclaimed. He slipped quickly under the covers, arms at his side, not moving. She tucked them in, smoothing the soft blanket under each of their chins and bent to kiss each strawberry nose.

The boy blinked his drooping eyes, resisting sleep. He wanted to stay awake all night, hoping to hear sleigh bells and reindeer hooves on his roof. Maybe he would even get a glimpse of Santa. He imagined Santa's admiration for his secret contribution to the Christmas tree. After all, he knew there were no secrets from Santa. His parents had been reminding him of that for months. He had to be reminded several times just in the past few weeks that Santa is always watching and he better mind his P's and Q's. The boy had been mostly successful. He was, however, convinced that Santa, once he sets his eyes on the tree, would forget all about him getting into his mother's lipstick and painting his younger brother's face with war paint, and clobbering his older brother with the lid of a double boiler. He laid there, eyes closed and pictured the tree aglow with fish heads. A tune settled on his lips and he hummed at first, then began to sing quietly, "Oh fishmas tree, oh fishmas tree..."

THE BOY'S FATHER

The boy's father knew that he was treading on thin ice, ever since returning home from his fishing excursion with his buddies, smelling like bourbon and fish. Adding insult to injury, he had missed supper with the family. His assumption was supported by the fact that his wife, upon his entrance and announcing he was home, had not come out to greet him, immediately, as was her habit.

With him was a nice stringer of crappie he had promptly set about cleaning and slicing into pinkish-white fillets. The heads of the fish, he dropped into a triple bagged paper sack on the floor next to the sink. The boy's father had hoped this fish offering, with the added bonus that he would fry 'em up on Christmas Day, would get him out of the doghouse with his wife. Fried crappie was her favorite.

His wife had finally entered the kitchen with boys in tow, as he was drying off after washing his hands. She grabbed a plate from the fridge with ham, sweet potatoes, and green beans and practically tossed it on to the table, which upon landing had left all the food askew on the plate and a few stray beans on the floor. The boys huddled behind their mother's legs saying nothing until the youngest spoke, breaking the silence and said, "Hi daddy."

"Hi sweetheart."

His wife turned quickly and left the room. The boys followed behind like baby ducks towards the bathroom, to brush their teeth. The boy's father dutifully ate all of the food on his plate, despite having stopped at a diner with the guys on the way home from fishing.

Shortly, his wife returned to the kitchen and he shrank down in his chair. He wanted to say "good supper," but that was too obvious, and would only anger her further, so he said nothing. She quickly glanced around the room and said, "I've done all I'm doing in here, you put things right." He nodded sheepishly. Then she pointed at the bag on the floor, and before she could speak, the boy's father assured her, "No worries honey, I will take it to the garbage." It's not that he was a liar; he fully intended to keep his promise, but with the added, unsaid, addendum of, "as soon as I get out of these clothes and shower." His wife frowned, but said nothing. She then left the kitchen to go back to their bedroom, where the oldest and youngest boys were already waiting for their mother to read to them, as was their habit.

The boy, preferred a different routine and he had already made his way to the den, switched on a lamp, and perched himself on the couch, a picture book in his lap, with his heels bouncing off the front of the divan. His left arm was sheathed in one of his mother's silky nylon stockings which he rubbed against his cheek. He sucked the two middle fingers of his right hand, removing them from his mouth only to turn the pages of the book. This had been his bedtime ritual since he was old enough to crawl.

The boy's father looked in on the boy, and satisfied that he was settled in, looked down at his river clothes, and picked off a shiny scale from one sleeve of his shirt. 'Ugh,' he thought, 'time for a shower.'

He strode over to where the boy sat and leaned down. The boy looked up just long enough to be kissed on the forehead before his attention returned to the book.

The boy's father exited the den, walking down the hallway towards the bathroom. At the end of the hall he could just make out a quiet voice on the other side of the bedroom door. He walked past the bathroom towards the sound. He paused outside their room and could hear his wife reading about the little rabbit with the red wings. It was the boys' favorite, his too. He placed a hand against the door, grateful for his family, but also regretting his selfishness, then he turned and made his way back to the bathroom and shut the door.

After getting out of the shower, the father dried himself off. He opened the bathroom door, towel around his waist, and stuck his head into the boy's room. All three boys were in bed and accounted for. He pulled their door shut and caught a faint smell of fish, reminding him of his promise.

He hurried to the kitchen, and rounding the corner from the hallway, he discovered to his dismay, the sack was missing.

'Dang,' he thought, 'busted!'

Of all the nights to mess up, it had to be Christmas Eve. He imagined his wife sitting on their bed, angrily muttering to herself how she should have known not to count on him. 'She was right,' he thought.

After all he had an almost unbroken record of broken promises. 'Well no use in putting it off. I might as well get it over with.'

Putting on the appropriate hang-dog look, he readied himself for the expected cold shoulder, followed by a possible tongue lashing.

As he reached to turn off the kitchen light, he heard the cat meow from outside. He had put her out while cleaning the fish so she wouldn't drive him crazy by weaving in and out between his ankles or standing on hind legs to get into the discarded fish parts. He opened the door and she zipped in, making a beeline for the den. He turned off the light and slunk down a very long hallway.

From the hall, he saw their bedroom door was ajar and he heard his wife humming a familiar tune, and then she sang softly, "O Christmas Tree, O' Christmas Tree, how lovely are thy branches." Ah, he reasoned, she has forgiven me. He smiled and quickened his steps.

THE BOY'S MOTHER

The boy's mother heard her husband in the shower as she was leaving the children's bedroom. She thought, 'finally I have a moment to myself to wrap some last minute Christmas packages.' She turned

towards her bedroom, and then catching a whiff of fish, she stopped. 'For pete's sake,' she thought, 'he didn't take the fish heads to the garbage. He was just pacifying me when he said he would take care of it, all sweet like. Now I'm going to have to deal with it.' She turned sharply on her heels and headed back towards the kitchen already with a surplus of "pieces of her mind" ready to hurl at her husband.

Landing in the entrance to the kitchen, squared off with hands on her hips, she was surprised to find the sack with the fish heads and entrails gone. With this discovery, all the pieces of her mind that just seconds ago, fit so nicely, went tumbling leaving her no place to go. Deflated, arms and hands at her side, she shook her head in disbelief. 'That rascal kept his promise,' she thought. She couldn't quite accept it, so she scanned the kitchen one more time, but the sack was nowhere to be seen. It occurred to her that fish often have a lingering odor. Still that didn't excuse his missing dinner with the family, but it is Christmas Eve, after all, and she wasn't going to let this ruin it.

Christmas was her favorite season, with all the pretty colored packages, bows and ribbons, and the beautifully decorated Christmas trees, and the lights that skirted the rooftops of the concrete block houses on their street. She loved the food: turkey, ham, or maybe a roast if you could afford it, and the pies, and Christmas cookies. She especially loved the homemade egg nog. Her favorite thing of all was the Christmas carols and hymns. All of this was what the boy's mother was thinking when she sat on the bed with scissors and scotch tape to finish wrapping packages.

She had all three of her boys stockings lined up on the bed to fill them with goodies. There was even a fourth one in the box next to her with her husband's name on it. She snatched it out, shaking off the

glitter that had spilled on it. She placed it on the bed spread and smoothed out the creases and thought, well maybe you will get something special after all. Then she began to hum her favorite Christmas carol, "O' Christmas Tree, O' Christmas Tree..."

THE BOY'S FATHER

Her husband bounded into the bedroom, throwing his arms out wide, in a "ta, da" motion still wearing only a towel. His wife, looking up, smiled, and raised an eyebrow. She stifled a laugh, but could contain it no longer when he flexed his biceps for her. He wasn't a slouch, but by no means would he be considered athletic, so this caused her to break out in laughter. Her husband then launched himself on to the bed propelling the cardboard box into the air, which held the ribbons, bows and spilled glitter, and all of it rained down on them.

Settled on the bed, her head on his belly, this was just the kind of release they both needed, after a stressful week of preparations. He stroked her hair, pushed a loose strand behind her ear, and she playfully tugged at the hair on his chest.

They drifted towards each other, about to kiss, when, at the same time, they wrinkled up their noses and said, "What's that smell?"

He said, to himself, as much to her, "Oh, I left my dirty clothes in the bathroom floor, that's probably the cause. I will put them in the hamper." Then he leaned towards her and said, "Now, where were we?" She, pushed him away gently, and cut her eyes towards the door. He understood completely and nearly leapt off the mattress, not wanting to chance spoiling the moment. Walking down the hall, he began to sing, "O' Christmas Tree, O' Christmas tree, a lucky man I'm going to be..." When he reached the bathroom door, there was an unmistakable stench of fish.

THE BOY'S CAT

The boy's cat had been bored all day. Each time she attempted to break the monotony, by batting a paw at a bell hanging off a tree, or wrestling with a sticky bow across the carpet, or toppling a pile of boxes, she had been scatted away, always accompanied by clapping hands, which even she knew was not meant as an approval of her actions.

Normally they would laugh at her attempts to entertain herself, but today had been different, and it seemed there was nothing she could do to please the one who feeds her. Even the little ones, who nearly every day dedicated a fair amount of time to chasing her through the house, had been pre-occupied. The mate of the one who feeds her had been gone all day and when he returned, carrying a scent that excited her, she followed him into the kitchen and once again, she was met with a quick "shoo" out the kitchen door. Outside in the cold, there was nothing to do, no mice, nothing to eat,

stupid dog on the other side of fence barking incessantly, nothing to eat, nothing to chase, nothing to eat; all these thoughts repeated through her head until she decided to curl up on the warm hood of the car that only moments ago had arrived.

Suddenly, her nap was interrupted by a gash of light across the drive and the familiar smell of fish. She zipped through the crack of the doorway, following her nose. Once in the den, she stood on her back paws, as she stretched her neck high in to the air, and tipped her head back, so that her nose was the highest point on her body. Coming back down on all fours, she stepped lightly across the carpet. Her head scanned side to side in an attempt to detect the location of the scent.

It did not take her long before she was picking her way stealthily between unfamiliar boxes underneath the tree. In full stalking mode, she crept ever closer to the object of her desire, tail twitching, until suddenly, she came face to face with a red-eyed fish, mouth wide open. The cat was so startled, she jumped straight up and locked her claws around a limb to haul her body up and out of harm's way. No sooner had she settled on that limb, than she tilted her head to the left and was again confronted with another hideous fish creature, this time with blue light escaping from every opening that would allow light to emanate. The cat again climbed upward, and with each limb she was frightened into climbing ever higher, until at last there were no more of these scary floating heads from which to retreat. Still she instinctively inched up one more limb.

It was at that point that the tree, unlike the many trees she had climbed in the backyard (always without knowing how to get down) began to bend, and lean under her weight until it crashed to the floor of the

den, sending packages scattering. The cat, upon landing on her back on the carpet, (contrary to popular belief, cats do not always land on their feet) with the tree on top of her, let out a howl, and sprang from the piney pile and skittered over the jumble of packages. A red Christmas ornament had managed to attach itself to her collar and was slapping against the side of her face, adding to her terror. The cat met the mate to the one who feeds her as he was entering the den. She nearly sent him to the ground, as she shot between his legs. The only thing saving him was that he was standing in the doorway and grasped hold of the door frame. The cat bulletted down the hall and pushed the door to the boy's room open and disappeared under the bed.

MERRY CHRISTMAS

With all the commotion, the three boys were startled, and in various stages of wakefulness. The oldest brother bounded out of bed, and raced into the hall to see his father, with his back to him, steadying himself in the door frame. The "boy," confused at first, quickly shook off his sleep, convinced that the sounds he heard and all the excitement had to have something to do with Santa, and the youngest brother whined, and called for their mother. The mother barreled down the hallway towards all of them with a look of complete horror.

"What on God's green earth was that?" she bellowed.

The father, still getting his feet underneath him, and not quite sure what was happening, didn't know how to reply. They all huddled at the entrance to the den, staring at the Christmas carnage. Packages were dispersed across the floor, some with their wrappings torn, revealing, to the pleasure of the boys, what was inside. Ornaments, too, had come loose from the tree, the round ones, rolling to all corners of the room.

The boy squatted and picked up a shiny blue ornament at his feet, and held it up to his face looking at his distorted reflection. It made him grin.

The father, made his way to the toppled tree, and could clearly see the source of the foul odor. There, amongst the pine needles were half a dozen fish heads, cooked to the lights.

Inching forward, the rest of the family joined him in a semi-circle as they took in the wreckage. The boy's parents looked at one another suspiciously, trying to work it out. Like tumblers on a lock, the pieces gradually fell in place, until the door opened and they realized what had taken place. All eyes turned to the boy, still holding his ornament, as he began to sing, "O' fishmas, tree, o' fishmas tree!"

All of them began to laugh, heartily, and as the laughter died down, the boy continued to sing, and one after another, they all joined in.