

The Best Christmas Ever

by James Patrick Kelly

Aunty Em's man was not doing well at all. He had been droopy and gray ever since the neighbor Mr. Kimura had died, shuffling around the house in nothing but socks and bathrobe. He had even lost interest in the model train layout that he and the neighbor were building in the garage. Sometimes he stayed in bed until eleven in the morning and had ancient Twinkies for lunch. He had a sour, vinegary smell. By midafternoon he'd be asking her to mix strange ethanol concoctions like Brave Little Toasters and Tin Honeymoons. After he had drunk five or six, he would stagger around the house mumbling about the big fires he'd fought with Ladder Company No. 3 or the wife he had lost in the Boston plague. Sometimes he would just cry.

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Begin Interaction 4022932

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"Do you want to watch *Annie Hall*?" Aunty Em asked.

The man perched on the edge of the Tyvola sofa in the living room, elbows propped on knees, head sunk into hands.

"*The General? Monty Python and the Holy Grail? Spaced Out?*"

"I hate that robot." He tugged at his thinning hair and snarled. "I hate robots."

Aunty Em did not take this personally—she was a biop, not a robot. "I could call Lola. She's been asking after you."

"I'll bet." Still, he looked up from damp hands. "I'd rather have Kathy."

This was a bad sign. Kathy was the lost wife. The girlfriend biop could certainly assume that body; she could look like anyone the man wanted. But while the girlfriend biop could pretend, she could never be the wife that the man missed. His reactions to the Kathy body were always erratic and sometimes dangerous.

"I'll nose around town," said Aunty Em. "I heard Kathy was off on a business trip, but maybe she's

back."

"Nose around," he said and then reached for the glass on the original Noguchi coffee table with spread fingers, as if he thought it might try to leap from his grasp. "You do that." He captured it on the second attempt.

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End Interaction 4022932

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The man was fifty-six years old and in good health, considering. His name was Albert Paul Hopkins, but none of the biops called him that. Aunty Em called him Bertie. The girlfriend called him sweetie or Al. The pal biops called him Al or Hoppy or Sport. The stranger biops called him Mr. Hopkins or sir. The animal biops didn't speak much, but the dog called him Buddy and the cat called him Mario.

When Aunty Em beamed a summary of the interaction to the girlfriend biop, the girlfriend immediately volunteered to try the Kathy body again. The girlfriend had been desperate of late, since the man didn't want anything to do with her. His slump had been hard on her, hard on Aunty Em too. Taking care of the man had changed the biops. They were all so much more emotional than they had been when they were first budded.

But Aunty Em told the girlfriend to hold off. Instead she decided to throw a Christmas. She hadn't done Christmas in almost eight months. She'd given him a *Gone With The Wind* Halloween and a Fourth of July with whistling busters, panoramas, phantom balls, and double-break shells, but those were only stopgaps. The man needed cookies, he needed presents, he was absolutely aching for a sleigh filled with Christmas cheer. So she beamed an alert to all of her biops and assigned roles. She warned them that if this wasn't the best Christmas ever, they might lose the last man on earth.

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Aunty Em spent three days baking cookies. She dumped eight sticks of fatty acid triglycerides, four cups of $C_{12}H_{22}O_{11}$, four vat-grown ova, four teaspoons of flavor potentiator, twelve cups of milled grain endosperm, and five teaspoons each of $NaHCO_3$ and $KHC_4H_4O_6$ into the bathtub and then trod on the mixture with her best baking boots. She rolled the dough and then pulled cookie cutters off the top shelf of the pantry: the mitten and the dollar sign and the snake and the double-bladed ax. She dusted the cookies with red nutraceutical sprinkles, baked them at $190^{\circ}C$, and brought a plate to the man while they were still warm.

The poor thing was melting into the recliner in the television room. He clutched a half-full tumbler of Sins-of-the-Mother, as if it were the anchor that was keeping him from floating out of the window. He had done nothing but watch classic commercials with the sound off since he had fallen out of bed. The cat was curled on the man's lap, pretending to be asleep.

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Begin Interaction 4022947

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"Cookies, Bertie," said Aunty Em. "Fresh from the oven, oven fresh." She set the plate down on the end table next to the Waterford lead crystal vase filled with silk daffodils.

"Not hungry," he said. On the mint-condition 34-inch Sony Hi-Scan television Ronald McDonald was dancing with some kids.

Aunty Em stepped in front of the screen, blocking his view. "Have you decided what you want for Christmas, dear?"

"It isn't Christmas." He waved her away from the set, but she didn't budge. He did succeed in disturbing the cat, which stood, arched its back, and then dropped to the floor.

"No, of course it isn't." She laughed. "Christmas isn't until next week."

He aimed the remote at the set and turned up the sound. A man was talking very fast. "Two all beef patties, special sauce, lettuce, cheese ..."

Aunty Em pressed the off button with her knee. "I'm talking to you, Bertie."

The man lowered the remote. "What's today?"

"Today is Friday." She considered. "Yes, Friday."

"No, I mean the date."

"The date is ... let me see. The twenty-first."

His skin temperature had risen from 33°C to 37°. "The twenty-first of what?" he said.

She stepped away from the screen. "Have another cookie, Bertie."

"All right." He turned the television on and muted it. "You win." A morose Maytag repairman slouched at his desk, waiting for the phone to ring. "I know what I want," said the man. "I want a Glock 17."

"And what is that, dear?"

"It's a nine millimeter handgun."

"A handgun, oh my." Aunty Em was so flustered that she ate one of her own cookies, even though she had extinguished her digestive track for the day. "For shooting? What would you shoot?"

"I don't know." He broke the head off a gingerbread man. "A reindeer. The TV. Maybe one of you."

"Us? Oh, Bertie—one of us?"

He made a gun out of his thumb and forefinger and aimed. "Maybe just the cat." His thumb came down.

The cat twitched. "Mario," it said and nudged the man's bare foot with its head. "No, Mario."

On the screen the Jolly Green Giant rained peas down on capering elves.

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End Interaction 4022947

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Begin Interaction 4023013

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The man stepped onto the front porch of his house and squinted at the sky, blinking. It was late spring and the daffodils were nodding in a warm breeze. Aunty Em pulled the sleigh to the bottom of the steps and honked the horn. It played the first three notes of "Jingle Bells." The man turned to go back into the house but the girlfriend biop took him by the arm. "Come on now, sweetie," she said and steered him toward the steps.

The girlfriend had assumed the Donna Reed body the day before, but unlike previous Christmases, the man had taken no sexual interest in her. She was wearing the severe black dress with the white lace collar from the last scene of *It's A Wonderful Life*. The girlfriend looked as worried about the man as Mary had been about despairing George Bailey. All the biops were worried, thought Aunty Em. They would be just devastated if anything happened to him. She waved gaily and hit the horn again. *Beep-beep-BEEP!*

The dog and the cat had transformed themselves into reindeer for the outing. The cat got the red nose.

Three of the animal biops had assumed reindeer bodies too. They were all harnessed to the sleigh, which hovered about a foot off the ground. As the man stumped down the steps, Aunty Em discouraged the antigrav, and the runners crunched against gravel. The girlfriend bundled the man aboard.

"Do you see who we have guiding the way?" said Aunty Em. She beamed the cat and it lit up its nose. "See?"

"Is that the fake cop?" The man coughed. "Or the fake pizza guy? I can't keep them straight."

"On Dasher, now Dancer, now Comet and Nixon," cried Aunty Em as she encouraged the antigrav. "To the mall, Rudolf, and don't bother to slow down for yellow lights!" She cracked the whip and away they went, down the driveway and out into the world.

The man lived at the edge of the biop compound, away from the bustle of the spaceport and the accumulatorium with its bulging galleries of authentic human artifacts and the vat where new biops were budded off the master template. They drove along the perimeter road. The biops were letting the forest take over here, and saplings of birch and hemlock sprouted from the ruins of the town.

The sleigh floated across a bridge and Aunty Em started to sing. "Over the river and through the woods ... " But when she glanced over her shoulder and saw the look on the man's face, she stopped. "Is something wrong, Bertie dear?"

"Where are you taking me?" he said. "I don't recognize this road."

"It's a secret," said Aunty Em. "A Christmas secret."

His blood pressure had dropped to 93/60. "Have I been there before?"

"I wouldn't think so. No."

The girlfriend clutched the man's shoulder. "Look," she said. "Sheep."

Four ewes had gathered at the river's edge to drink, their stumpy tails twitching. They were big animals; their long, tawny fleeces made them look like walking couches. A brown man on a dromedary camel watched over them. He was wearing a satin robe in royal purple with gold trim at the neck. When Aunty Em beamed him the signal, he tapped the line attached to the camel's nose peg and the animal turned to face the road.

"One of the wise men," said Aunty Em.

"The king of the shepherds," said the girlfriend.

As the sleigh drove by, the wise man tipped his crown to them. The sheep looked up from the river and bleated, "Happy holidays."

"They're so cute," said the girlfriend. "I wish we had sheep."

The man sighed. "I could use a drink."

"Not just yet, Bertie," said Aunty Em. "But I bet Mary packed your candy."

The girlfriend pulled a plastic pumpkin from underneath the seat. It was filled with leftovers from the Easter they'd had last month. She held it out to the man and shook it. It was filled with peeps and candy corn and squirtgum and chocolate crosses. He pulled a peep from the pumpkin and sniffed it suspiciously.

"It's safe, sweetie," said the girlfriend. "I irradiated everything just before we left."

There were no cars parked in the crumbling lot of the Wal-Mart. They pulled up to the entrance where a Salvation Army Santa stood over a black plastic pot holding a bell. The man didn't move.

"We're here, Al." The girlfriend nudged him. "Let's go."

"What is this?" said the man.

"Christmas shopping," said Aunty Em. "Time to shop."

"Who the hell am I supposed to shop for?"

"Whoever you want," said Aunty Em. "You could shop for us. You could shop for yourself. You could shop for Kathy."

"Aunty Em!" said the girlfriend.

"No," said the man. "Not Kathy."

"Then how about Mrs. Marelli?"

The man froze. "Is that what this is about?"

"It's about Christmas, Al," said the girlfriend. "It's about getting out of the god-damned sleigh and going into the store." She climbed over him and jumped down to the pavement before Aunty Em could discourage the antigrav. She stalked by the Santa and through the entrance without looking back. Aunty Em beamed her a request to come back but she went dark.

"All right," said the man. "You win."

The Santa rang his bell at them as they approached. The man stopped and grasped Aunty Em's arm. "Just a minute," he said and ran back to the sleigh to fetch the plastic pumpkin. He emptied the candy into the Santa's pot.

"God bless you, young man." The Santa knelt and sifted the candy through his red suede gloves as if it were gold.

"Yeah," said the man. "Merry Christmas."

Aunty Em twinkled at the two of them. She thought the man might finally be getting into the spirit of the season.

The store was full of biops, transformed into shoppers. They had stocked the shelves with artifacts authenticated by the accumulator: Barbies and Sonys and Goodyears and Dockers; patio furniture and towels and microwave ovens and watches. At the front of the store was an array of polyvinyl chloride spruce trees predecorated with bubble lights and topped with glass penguins. Some of the merchandise was new, some used, some broken. The man paid attention to none of it, not even the array of genuine Lionel "O" Scale locomotives and freight cars Aunty Em had ordered specially for this interaction. He passed methodically down the aisles, eyes bright, searching. He strode right by the girlfriend, who was sulking in Cosmetics.

Aunty Em paused to touch her shoulder and beam an encouragement, but the girlfriend shook her off. Aunty Em thought she would have to do something about the girlfriend, but she didn't know what exactly. If she sent her back to the vat and replaced her with a new biop, the man would surely notice. The

girlfriend and the man had been quite close before the man had slipped into his funk. She knew things about him that even Aunty Em didn't know.

The man found Mrs. Marelli sitting on the floor in the hardware section. She was opening packages of GE Soft White 100-watt light bulbs and then smashing them with a Stanley Workmaster claw hammer. The biop shoppers paid no attention. Only the lead biop of her team, Dr. Watson, seemed to worry about her. He waited with a broom, and whenever she tore into a new box of light bulbs he swept the shards of glass away.

Aunty Em was shocked at the waste. How many pre-extinction light bulbs were left on this world? Twenty thousand? Ten? She wanted to beam a rebuke to Dr. Watson, but she knew he was doing a difficult job as best he could.

"Hello, Ellen." The man knelt next to the woman. "How are you doing?"

She glanced at him, hammer raised. "Dad?" She blinked. "Is that you, Dad?"

"No, it's Albert Hopkins. Al—you know, your neighbor. We've met before. These . . . people introduced us. Remember the picnic? The trip to the spaceport?"

"Picnic?" She shook her head as if to clear it. Ellen Theresa Marelli was eleven years older than the man. She was wearing Bruno Magli black leather flats and a crinkly light blue Land's End dress with a pattern of small dark blue and white flowers. Her hair was gray and a little thin but was nicely cut and permed into tight curls. She was much better groomed than the man, but that was because she couldn't take care of herself anymore and so her biops did everything for her. "I like picnics."

"What are you doing here, Ellen?"

She stared at the hammer as if she were surprised to see it. "Practicing."

"Practicing for what?" He held out his hand for the hammer and she gave it to him.

"Just practicing." She gave him a sly look. "What are *you* doing here?"

"I was hoping to do a little Christmas shopping."

"Oh, is it Christmas?" Her eyes went wide.

"In a couple of days," said the man. "Do you want to tag along?"

She turned to Dr. Watson. "Can I?"

"By all means." Dr. Watson swept the space in front of her.

"Oh goody!" She clapped her hands. "This is just the best." She tried to get up but couldn't until the man and Dr. Watson helped her to her feet. "We'll need a shopping cart," she said.

She tottered to the fashion aisles and tried on sweaters. The man helped her pick out a Ralph Lauren blue cable cardigan that matched her dress. In the housewares section, she decided that she needed a Zyliss garlic press. She spent the most time in the toy aisle, lingering at the Barbies. She didn't care much for the late models, still in their packaging. Instead she made straight for the vintage Barbies and Kens and Francies and Skippers posed around the Barbie Dream House and the Barbie Motor Home. Dr. Watson watched her nervously.

"Look, they even have talking Barbies," she said, picking up a doll in an orange flowered dress. "I had

one just like this. With all the blond hair and everything. See the little necklace? You press the button and ..."

But the Barbie didn't speak. The woman's mouth set in a grim line and she smashed it against the shelf.

"Ellie," said Dr. Watson. "I wish you wouldn't ..."

The woman threw the doll at him and picked up another. This was a brunette that was wearing only the top of her hot pink bathing suit. The woman jabbed at the button.

"It's time to get ready for my date with Ken," said the doll in a raspy voice.

"That's better," said the woman.

She pressed the button again and the doll said, "Let's invite the gang over!"

The woman turned to the man and the two biops, clearly excited. "Here." She thrust the doll at Aunty Em, who was nearest to her. "You try." Aunty Em pressed the button.

"I can't wait to meet my friends," said the doll.

"What a lovely toy!" Aunty Em smiled. "She certainly has the Christmas spirit, don't you think, Bertie?"

The man frowned and Aunty Em could tell from the slump of his shoulders that his good mood was slipping away. His heart rate jumped and his eyes were distant, a little misty. The woman must have noticed the change too, because she pointed a finger at Aunty Em.

"You," she said. "You ruin everything."

"Now Mrs. Marelli," she said, "I ..."

"You're following us." The woman snatched the Barbie away from her. "Who are you?"

"You know me, Mrs. Marelli. I'm Aunty Em."

"That's crazy." The woman's laugh was like a growl. "I'm not crazy."

Dr. Watson beamed a general warning that he was terminating the interaction; seeing the man always upset the woman. "That's enough, Ellen." He grasped her forearm, and Aunty Em was relieved to see him paint relaxant onto her skin with his med finger. "I think it's time to go."

The woman shivered. "Wait," she said. "He said it was Christmas." She pointed at the man. "Daddy said."

"We'll talk about that when we get home, Ellen."

"Daddy." She shook herself free and flung herself at the man.

The man shook his head. "This isn't ..."

"*Ssh*. It's okay." The woman hugged him. "Just pretend. That's all we can do, isn't it?" Reluctantly, he returned her embrace. "Daddy." She spoke into his chest. "What are you getting me for Christmas?"

"Can't tell," he said. "It's a secret."

"A Barbie?" She giggled and pulled away from him.

"You'll just have to wait."

"I already know that's what it is."

"But you might forget." The man held out his hand and she gave him the doll. "Now close your eyes."

She shut them so tight that Aunty Em could see her *orbicularis oculi* muscles tremble.

The man touched her forehead. "Daddy says forget." He handed the doll to Dr. Watson, who mouthed *Thank you*. Dr. Watson beamed a request for Aunty Em to hide, and she sidled behind the bicycles where the woman couldn't see her. "Okay, Ellen," said the man. "Daddy says open your eyes."

She blinked at him. "Daddy," she said softly, "when are you coming home?"

The man was clearly taken aback; there was a beta wave spike in his EEG. "I ... ah ..." He scratched the back of his neck. "I don't know," he said. "Our friends here keep me pretty busy."

"I'm so lonely, Daddy." The last woman on earth began to cry.

The man opened his arms to her and they clung to each other, rocking back and forth. "I know," said the man, over and over. "I know."

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End Interaction 4023013

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Aunty Em, the dog, and the cat gathered in the living room of the house, waiting for the man to wake up. She had scheduled the pals, Jeff and Bill, to drop by around noon for sugar cookies and eggnog. The girlfriend was upstairs fuming. She had been Katie Couric, Anna Kournikova, and Jacqueline Kennedy since the Wal-Mart trip but the man had never even blinked at her.

The music box was playing "Blue Christmas." The tree was decorated with strings of pinlights and colored packing peanuts. Baseball cards and silver glass balls and plastic army men hung from the branches. Beneath the tree was a modest pile of presents. Aunty Em had picked out one each for the inner circle of biops and signed the man's name to the cards. The rest were gifts for him from them.

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Begin Interaction 4023064

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"Morning, Mario," said the cat.

Aunty Em was surprised; it was only eight-thirty. But there was the man propped in the doorway, yawning.

"Merry Christmas, Bertie!" she said.

The dog scabbled across the room to him. "Buddy, open now, Buddy, open, Buddy, open, open!" It went up on hind legs and pawed his knee.

"Later." The man pushed it away. "What's for breakfast?" he said. "I feel like waffles."

"You want waffles?" said Aunty Em. "Waffles you get."

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End Interaction 4023064

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She bustled into the kitchen as the man closed the bathroom door behind him. A few minutes later she heard the pipes clang as he turned on the shower. She beamed a revised schedule to the pals, calling for them to arrive within the hour.

Aunty Em could not help but be pleased. This Christmas was already a great success. The man's attitude had changed dramatically after the shopping trip. He was keeping regular hours and drinking much less. He had stopped by the train layout in the garage, although all he had done was look at it. Instead he had taken an interest in the garden in the backyard and had spent yesterday weeding the flowerbeds and digging a new vegetable patch. He had sent the pal Jeff to find seeds he could plant. The biops reported that they had found some peas and corn and string beans—but they were possibly contaminated and might not germinate. She had already warned some of the lesser animal biops that they might have to assume the form of corn stalks and pea vines if the crop failed.

Now if only he would pay attention to the girlfriend.

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Begin Interaction 4023066

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The doorbell gonged the first eight notes of "Silent Night." "Would you get that, Bertie dear?" Aunty Em was pouring freshly-budded ova into a pitcher filled with Pet Evaporated Milk.

"It's the pals," the man called from the front hall. "Jeff and ... I'm sorry, I've forgotten your name."

"Bill."

"Bill, of course. Come in, come in."

A few minutes later, Aunty Em found them sitting on the sofa in the living room. Each of the pals balanced a present on his lap, wrapped in identical green and red paper. They were listening uncomfortably as the cat recited "'Twas the Night Before Christmas." The man was busy playing Madden NFL 2007 on his Game Boy.

"It's time for sweets and presents, Bertie." Aunty Em set the pitcher of eggnog next to the platter of cookies. She was disturbed that the girlfriend hadn't joined the party yet. She beamed a query but the girlfriend was dark. "Presents and sweets."

The man opened Jeff's present first. It was filled with hand tools for his new garden: a dibbler and a trowel and a claw hoe and a genuine Felco10 Professional Pruner. The dog gave the man a chewable rubber fire hydrant that squeaked when squeezed. The cat gave him an "O" Scale Western Pacific Steam Locomotive that had belonged to the dead neighbor, Mr. Kimura. The man and the cat exchanged looks briefly and then the cat yawned. The dog nudged his head under all the discarded wrapping paper and the man reached down with the claw hoe and scratched its back. Everyone but the cat laughed.

Next came Bill's present. In keeping with the garden theme of this Christmas, it was a painting of a balding old farmer and a middle-aged woman standing in front of a white house with an odd gothic window. Aunty Em could tell the man was a farmer because he was holding a pitchfork. The farmer stared out of the painting with a glum intensity; the woman looked at him askance. The curator biop claimed that it was one of the most copied images in the inventory, so Aunty Em was not surprised that the man seemed to recognize it.

"This looks like real paint," he said.

"Yes," said Bill. "Oil on beaverboard."

"What's beaverboard?" said the cat.

"A light, semirigid building material of compressed wood pulp," Bill said. "I looked it up."

The man turned the painting over and brushed his finger across the back. "Where did you get this?" His face was pale.

"From the accumulatorium."

"No, I mean where before then?"

Aunty Em eavesdropped as the pal beamed the query. "It was salvaged from the Chicago Art Institute."

"You're giving me the original *American Gothic*?" His voice fell into a hole.

"Is something the matter, Bertie?"

He fell silent for a moment. "No, I suppose not." He shook his head. "It's a very thoughtful gift." He propped the painting on the mantle, next to his scuffed leather fireman's helmet that the biops had retrieved from the ruins of the Ladder Company No. 3 Firehouse two Christmases ago.

Aunty Em wanted the man to open his big present, but the girlfriend had yet to make her entrance. So instead, she gave the pals their presents from the man. Jeff got the October 1937 issue of *Spicy Adventure Stories*. On the cover a brutish sailor carried a terrified woman in a shredded red dress out of the surf as their ship sank in the background. Aunty Em pretended to be shocked and the man actually chuckled. Bill got a chrome Model 1B14 Toastmaster two-slice toaster. The man took it from him and traced the triple loop logo etched in the side. "My mom had one of these."

Finally there was nothing left to open but the present wrapped in the blue paper with the Santa-in-space print. The man took the Glock 17 out of the box cautiously, as if he were afraid it might go off. It was black with a polymer grip and a four-and-a-half-inch steel barrel. Aunty Em had taken a calculated risk with the pistol. She always tried to give him whatever he asked for, as long as it wasn't too dangerous. He wasn't their captive after all. He was their master.

"Don't worry," she said. "It's not loaded. I looked but couldn't find the right bullets."

"But I did," said the girlfriend, sweeping into the room in the Kathy body. "I looked harder and found hundreds of thousands of bullets."

"Kathy," said Aunty Em, as she beamed a request for her to terminate this unauthorized interaction. "What a nice surprise."

"9 millimeter Parabellum," said the girlfriend. Ten rounds clattered onto the glass top of the Noguchi coffee table. "115 grain. Full metal jacket."

"What are you doing?" said the man.

"You want to shoot someone?" The girlfriend glared at the man and swung her arms wide.

"Kathy," said Aunty Em. "You sound upset, dear. Maybe you should go lie down."

The man returned the girlfriend's stare. "You're not Kathy."

"No," said the girlfriend. "I'm nobody you know."

"Kathy's dead," said the man. "Everybody's dead except for me and poor Ellen Marelli. That's right, isn't it?"

The girlfriend sank to her knees, rested her head on the coffee table, and began to cry. Only biops didn't

cry, or at least no biop that Aunty Em had ever heard of. The man glanced around the room for an answer. The pals looked at their shoes and said nothing. "Jingle Bell Rock" tinkled on the music box. Aunty Em felt something swell inside of her and climb her throat until she thought she might burst. If this was what the man felt all the time, it was no wonder he was tempted to drink himself into insensibility.

"Well?" he said.

"Yes," Aunty Em blurted. "Yes, dead, Bertie. All dead."

The man took a deep breath. "Thank you," he said. "Sometimes I can't believe that it really happened. Or else I forget. You make it easy to forget. Maybe you think that's good for me. But I need to know who I am."

"Buddy," said the dog, brushing against him. "Buddy, my Buddy."

The man patted the dog absently. "I could give up. But I won't. I've had a bad spell the last couple of weeks, I know. That's not your fault." He heaved himself off the couch, came around the coffee table and knelt beside the girlfriend. "I really appreciate that you trust me with this gun. And these bullets too. That's got to be scary, after what I said." The girlfriend watched him scoop up the bullets. "Kathy, I don't need these just now. Would you please keep them for me?"

She nodded.

"Do you know the movie, *Miracle On 34th Street*?" He poured the bullets into her cupped hands. "Not the remakes. The first one, with Maureen O'Hara?"

She nodded again.

He leaned close and whispered into her ear. His pulse soared to 93.

She sniffed and then giggled.

"You go ahead," he said to her. "I'll come up in a little while." He gave her a pat on the rear and stood up. The other biops watched him nervously.

"What's with all the long faces?" He tucked the Glock into the waistband of his pants. "You look like them." He waved at the painting of the somber farm folk, whose mood would never, ever change. "It's Christmas Day, people. Let's live it up!"

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End Interaction 4023066

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Over the years, Aunty Em gave the man many more Christmases, not to mention Thanksgivings, Easters, Halloweens, April Fools, and Valentine Days. But she always said—and no one contradicted her: not the man, not even the girlfriend—that this Christmas was the best ever.

The End