

Apa L
SFPA

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Pelz for Director. Chuck Crayne
for Senior Committeeman. Ken
Rudolph for ~~Treasurer~~/ Treas-
urer. Sally Crayne for Secre-
tary. JOIN THE FUNCON!!!!!!

"....Old, Familiar Carols Play"

"I'm keeping my word, gentlemen," said Bracey Winstead as he pushed himself to his feet. "Five dollars is enough to lose. The cards just don't like me tonite."

As the next deal began, a ragged chorus of good-byes followed Bracey to the door. He waved a farewell and slipped into the cold nite. A dark wind instantly wrapped him in chill, so he trotted to his car to be sooner rid of the coldness.

The cards hadn't seemed to like him overly frequently these past couple of months. Too many hands that had to be folded right after a fair-sized investment. Too many concealed hands springing like panthers. And... a few unfortunate bluffs. The bad luck had settled like a plague. It was nibbling away at the back of his mind, but he refused to let himself recognize it. He would not turn and futilely chase it into the dark regions.

He had, after all, won a dollar twelve at LASFS this Thursday. A little bad luck was nothing -- he was winning overall. He felt a warm certainty that he must be far ahead for the year. Subtly, he made this feeling into a fact and set it in a prominent spot in his mind, so that he easily examine it from time to time and thereby know that he was truly invincible.

Bracey guided his car up the ramp onto the freeway. It was a long drive back to his apartment, but in this wind he intended to take it easy, as tired as he was. No speeding tonite. These past few years his fatigue threshold had been creeping closer. He was gracefully sliding past middle-age into that nebulous period before Senior Citizenship. The years flew by. Here it was, bleak December already, and tomorrow would be Christmas Eve. Hell, it was already Christmas Eve. Midnite had passed unnoticed almost an hour ago.

Much to Bracey's surprise this sudden intrusion of Christmas into his thoughts triggered a desire for the sounds of Christmas, and he proceeded to hum and sing a rag-tag medley of carols. It was probably more than thirty years, he thought, since he had bothered with this sort of idiocy. But he hummed on.

A box of nostalgia had been opened, and he began to bring out childhood memories. This he rarely did, for there were too many painful times folded in with the good ones. Bracey would usually reject such chance memories with a smooth redirection of thought, for the jeers and rebuffs of yesterday could reach thru the thick walls of self-judged infallibility he had built around his ego. The hurts could

probe and pinch the soft inside and shake the walls as if trying to demolish them. When this happened, all the vague unnamed terrors that the walls would fall bayed thru the fortress like vicious hounds. The memories could be expelled quickly, but it sometimes took Bracey hours to chain all the hounds. And so he did not often think of early years.

But now he hung the walls of his castle with tapestries of youthful Christmas and found them a quiet, intense new-old joy as he drove the forty miles to bed and sleep and dreams.

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Bracey awoke with an uneasy stirring in his brain and a painfully full bladder. Noon sun was transfixing the curtains. By the time he had reached the point called "breakfast" in his morning ritual, Bracey was ready to deal with the uneasy stirring, which was sorting itself out into the memory of a most ridiculous dream.

Doubtless triggered by last nite's lapse, he had dreamed he was a kid again, sneaking in early Christmas morning to peek at Santa's bounty before the grown-ups were up to witness. The house had been startlingly real -- was now in recall -- and filled with the almost sacred aura it had at dawn before the household was up and about. He had crept into the living-room, expecting toys, and there had been none. Instead, there beside the tree, was a card table with Santa sitting at it. How ridiculous!

Bracey snorted and shoveled a huge mouthful of cereal in. He didn't like dreams of this sort -- they meant nothing. But there he had been watching Santa shuffle a deck of Bicycles. He had tip-toed up to the edge to watch, when Santa noticed him and grinned in expansive merriment. Santa said: "Ante up! Ante up! Don't you want to play?"

Bracey could see nothing on the table except Santa's big hands shuffling the cards, but he felt positive there must be tokens of value somewhere unseen. He had somehow changed back into his adult self, so he reached for his wallet haltingly. Money wasn't going to get him into this game, whatever it was, and yet he wanted to play more than anything else.

As expected, Santa shook his head gently "no" at the sight of the wallet. Bracey could see pity beginning to overlay the jolly fat man's face. Thru the terrible yearning to participate was piercing a tip of desperation, as Bracey began to realize that he had nothing, absolutely nothing, that was of any value in this game. He could not ante up.

Santa saw it too. His face sorrowful, he quickly vanished the cards and folded the table. Bracey was a puddle of agony. He felt that something of paramount importance was about to pass him by, but he did not know what it was. Then Santa was gone up the chimney, leaving nothing, and Bracey was alone again.

A spoon of cereal sagged as the dream mood caught Bracey again. He shook his mental shoulders and gave a snort of forced scorn. Simply ridiculous! How could he let such tripe bother him? And as he put the bowl and spoon into the sink, he began to run over his SAPS mcs.

Bracey's desk faced out a generous window onto the street, and tho he did not often open the drapes (he disliked the glare), he did so now. The day was brilliant -- the kind which welcomes you with extended blue sky and friendly crackling sunbeams. Such days usually made Bracey a bit comfortably secure, but this one engendered only a vague whispery apprehension. It was a demanding day of some sort.

A stencil was easily guided into the Selectric and Bracey began to cut a heading. The very feel of the typer keys was a soothing relief. He waded into the SAPS mailing and cut stencils almost without interruption for two hours. Then he snacked briefly and began again. The stack of uncommented-upon zines dwindled as the sun fell, and when Bracey looked up from the typer for the last time that day, there was a gold and pink display in the west.

Such beauty in the sunset captured Bracey's gaze, while his mind wove a dual pattern of observation of nature and review of the fresh-minted mailing comments. Two hues: one almost gold and the other pink -- a rather interesting sunset. Lucid expository prose -- showing a mind clearly in command of its environment.

But somehow the prose came off the lesser. Polished pretense held up to a whole world of rich, warm reality. The sky, the clouds, the silhouetted palms all cried out beseechingly: "Ante up! Ante up!"

Bracey stood up amidst swirling memories of the dream face, the wrinkled, regretful elfin visage vanishing up the chimney. Savagely he drew the drapes shut.

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Ramon and Tina Mendez had been throwing a Christmas Eve party for the LASFS and associated demons for these past twelve years. Tina welcomed Bracey in with a brief kiss and Ramon pressed a Scotch-on-the-rocks into his hand. Two cocktails before dinner had not helped Bracey's strange mood any, so he looked on the new drink as needed reinforcements.

Bracey made a slow circuit of the spacious living room, greeting friends and ignoring ignorables. After a brief dash into the kitchen for still another reinforcement, Bracey leaned against the wall beside a discussion group consisting of Don Fitch, Bruce Pelz, Rube Steiner and Sam Williams (whom Bracey would have picked as his "best friend" had he been pressed to pick such an individual).

Rube was holding forth on the stand-offishness of certain LASFS in-groups. As a talented new-comer he had succeeded well in a fading Apa L, but he had not been "around" long enough to be totally accepted in person by some LASFans, and this irritated him. Don was listening with tolerant concern and Bruce with tolerate amusement, while Sam was obviously bored but too lazy to give up a comfortable easy chair. Bracey assessed the situation and guided the conversation onto a fan-history tangent, where Rube would be happy to respectfully listen and Sam would join the anecdote swapping.

Old times were laced with Scotch-on-the-rocks, both enjoyed, and suddenly Bracey was astonished to notice that he was feeling the liquor. Not drunk, he said to himself, just high. But sounds were softening and edges blurring.

He and Sam were alone now in the corner near the TV. Bracey realized that he was telling Sam about the dream; telling it for the ridiculous thing it was. Sam was smiling at Bracey's account.

Bracey suddenly wished he could stop talking, but the words kept pouring out. "So there was Santa Claus sitting on his duff shuffling. And I came up and he said: 'Ante up! Ante!' Like he wanted me to play poker with him."

Sam commented: "Funny. Santa's supposed to give stuff."

Bracey reflected. "Yeah.... It seemed like he was trying to get me to give something instead of him. Or maybe he wanted me to match him. But what would he have wanted me to give?"

Sam grinned. "Hell, Santa may not be in business for free. Maybe he wanted your soul."

"...My ...soul." Bracey felt himself drawing up inside as if some deep nerve had been touched. The silly notion was somehow terrifyingly close to the truth.

Bracey could see that Sam was surprised and curious at this serious reaction to a humorous quip. Their eyes locked, and Bracey felt that Sam's gaze was probing thru the crystal spheres of his eyes into the luminous depths of his skull. But the final wall barred Sam's gaze from Bracey's inner self, and now for the first time Bracey's consciousness became fully aware of the entirety of the wall. Every stone was known in its place.

In that moment Bracey realized what it was that he could not ante. And why. A fortress under siege is a prison. Sam's eyes reflected the knowing. They also shone with friendship and sympathy.

The tableau held while Bracey tried to speak. There were so many things he needed to say, so much he needed to discover. But he could only gasp, "I'm out of Scotch!" He bolted in sudden terror for the kitchen bar.

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Bracey crawled into dim consciousness. Inside his skull a thickly furred hangover was trying to claw its way out. The sun was painfully bright thru the curtains.

By the time he had recovered sufficiently to try thinking, Bracey found that he could not remember much of last nite. Gauging by his hangover, tho, it must have been a good party.

His eyes strayed to the desk. He half-remembered being displeased with his SAPS mc's, but when he reread them now they seemed as lucid and authoritative as his mc's usually were. Now he needed a natter editorial. Suddenly he recalled that sometime recently (he wasn't sure exactly when, but that didn't matter) he had calculated that he was far ahead for the year at poker. A summary of his year at cards, coupled with a few anecdotes, would serve admirably.

Bracey rolled in a stencil and began to type. The rapid touch of his fingers on the keys was, to him, like the rythmn of an old and cherished hymn.