



The Christmas Spirit

Glenn Slade Clark, Jr.

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The Christmas Spirit

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The Christmas Spirit

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He'd been driving for countless hours now. Even *trying* to count them caused him to swoon, he'd become so groggy. It was late on Christmas Eve, and he was travelling all the way from Dallas, Texas to San Diego, California to spend Christmas with his brother, his sister-in-law, and their two young sons. He'd bought toys and DVDs for the boys that he couldn't wait to watch them unwrap. He had them in the back seat, in fact. He hadn't put them in the trunk, because he'd been so sure he'd make the drive this time in a single night. But, as his burning eyes and foggy

brain now let him know quite plainly, that had been a foolish notion, and a dangerous one.

The traveler began to think about how nice it would feel to find a cozy little room somewhere and lose himself in the softness of a pillow for a few hours. He'd still make it there by Christmas. Having driven all day long, he'd already covered more than half of the journey. As his mind drifted, from the dreamy notion of the longed for motel, on to Christmas Day with his nephews, he began to wake up just a bit, excited to see his family again. "I suppose it would be better if I weren't dead when I arrived." He chuckled to himself and began looking for an exit on the quiet freeway.

As he drove on, the traveler saw no indication of a rest stop anywhere. Every exit was devoid of signs of any kind, and it was so dark that he feared he would miss them even if they were there. He began to feel a little panicked, as exhaustion took hold of him. He began to wonder if he'd fall asleep at the wheel long before he came to an exit near a motel. He was far too stubborn to stop on the side of the road, convinced that if he did there would be a motel at the very next exit. At last, he made the decision, talking to himself to keep himself awake, "I'm getting off at the next exit, whether it says I should or not. There's got to be a place to stop out there. It just makes too much business sense for no one to have opened a motel out here in the middle of nowhere."

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His tires were screeching in the next instant, as he was suddenly compelled to make a very sharp turn. His headlights had just barely showed him the next exit before he'd driven past. God only knew how long it would have been before he'd found the next one, had he missed it. He turned off of the freeway and began to look for signs. In the pitch darkness of the late night, however, all he could see were trees and the occasional silhouette of a barn or distant mountain in the starlight.

He was beginning to wonder if he'd made a terrible mistake, not sure where he'd find a decent place to turn around, or if he had the stamina to get back on the freeway if he did turn. It was at that moment that his headlights showed him a rusty old sign. He squinted his eyes to be sure that he was reading it correctly. The aged lettering was scratched almost completely through by the undeniable weathering of the years. Fortunately, his squinted, desperate eyes could make out the single word that must at one time have been clearly written on the sign. "Motel. Thank you, baby Jesus!"

The traveler followed the signs through an endless jungle of shadows, as the road wound and turned, hopefully leading him to sanctuary for the night. At last, a pale light glowed dimly through the darkness ahead, illuminating a small motel, shrouded in a mist he'd not noticed at all without the additional light.

He saw not a single car in the parking lot, as he pulled in. "Good. Not only are they sure to have a room for me, but it's

going to be a quiet one.” He parked and put the presents and his laptop in the trunk, just to be sure they were safe as he slept. He made his way to the front window and rang the bell.

He pulled out his cell phone and looked at the time, as he waited. The lights were on, but no one was coming. He went to the door and walked into the front office. “Hello? I need a room, if anyone’s here!” He looked around, then checked his cell phone again. It was almost eleven, and the battery was on its last bar. He sighed with weary frustration.

“Just one bed?”

The voice startled him, and he turned to see a faint old woman standing beside him, holding a stack of freshly folded towels. Faint was the best word he could use to describe her, for she looked as weary as he felt and lacked color of almost any kind in her pale skin, silver hair, and faded blue dress. From the style of the old dress and the round, white beads around her neck, she looked as if she hadn’t altered her appearance in decades. “Yes. Just one. I’m on the way to San Diego. Just need it for a few hours, then I’ll be off.” He considered and offered apologetically, “Unless it’s too late.”

“Too late.” She looked at him sadly. “I’d say you’re right on time...and perhaps too late as well, but I’ll give you a room.” She took his debit card and walked around the counter, running it through the sort of imprint mechanism he’d watched department store clerks use when he was a child, before everything had been

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done on computers. He noticed a familiar smell, like his grandmother's kitchen, and heard the sound of the percolating coffee that went with it.

He commented, as she reached for a key in the cabinet behind her, "This place is very out of the way. I guess you don't have much need for...I mean, well, it seems frozen in time."

She stared at him, almost questioning, perhaps offended.

"Well, I like it, though," he quickly continued. "It reminds me of my grandparents' house, when I was little. In fact, with the coffee percolating in the middle of the night, the smells, the sounds from outside, it's like it was when I used to go and see them for Christmas back in the seventies. They once told me Santa liked coffee with his cookies better than milk, because it kept him warm. It's just the right image to send me off to sleep on Christmas Eve."

The old woman smiled sadly, an odd gleam in her eyes. "I'm glad it comforts you. Here's your key. Room seven."

The traveler regarded her with a puzzled look. It seemed an unusual number when he was the only one there. What happened to rooms one through six? Or maybe the old woman had simply grabbed a key at random. Or, even still, maybe he was thinking too much, as he often found himself doing when he was extremely tired. He decided accordingly to let the matter go without question. "Thank you." He took one last deep breath of the

coffee-scented air and bid her good night, finding his way to room seven.

Not surprising, the décor of the room was vintage 1977. The blinds, the bed spread, the wall paper in the bathroom all reminded him of his childhood. “I love this place.” He took off his shirt and shoes, pulling back the sheets and crawling into bed with his pants and socks still on, seeking only the minimal comfort that would carry him off to sleep. He hugged the pillow, thought about Christmas as a child, and how he was going to share that joy with his nephews the very next day, then fell immediately asleep.

He’d been so tired that he hadn’t dreamed at all, he realized, as he woke to the sound of a gentle knocking at his door. He sat up slowly, pulling the cell phone out of his pocket to see how long he’d been asleep. It was 12:30am, and the phone was blinking LOW BATTERY. He’d forgotten to charge it up as he’d slept. “I only slept an hour.” He groaned, as the knock repeated. He slipped on his shirt and shuffled to the door. Without thinking, he opened it. “What’s wrong?”

“I’m sorry to wake you, sir. It’s just, you’re the only one here tonight.” Not the voice of the old woman he’d expected.

He shifted his gaze and squinted, allowing his sleep torn eyes to focus on the young man, maybe just a kid, standing before him. “Oh, yeah.” He started to wake up. “Well, are you in trouble?”

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The young man looked sheepishly away. “I just need to talk to someone.” He looked up to meet the weary traveler’s eyes. “I guess I *am* in trouble.”

As his eyes adjusted, the traveler realized that this young man couldn’t have been older than sixteen or seventeen years old. “Where are you parents?”

“I’m here alone. Again, sorry I woke you. But...since you’re up...”

“Wait a minute. You’re not gonna rob me or anything are you?”

The young man laughed. “No. I’ve no use for a dying mobile phone, or the toys in your trunk. I just need someone to talk to. I have a tradition. A Christmas tradition. Sort of a...an offering.” He proffered a hand as he introduced himself. “I’m Andy. Andy Tombs.”

The traveler took his hand and shook it, disarmed by the young man’s warm demeanor, which, he noted, wasn’t matched at all by the icy coldness of his hand. “Jeez, kid. Don’t you have a room? You’re freezing cold.”

“No. I don’t have a room. I’ve just been waiting to tell someone my story this year. I do it every Christmas.”

The traveler shook his head. “Come on in, kid. Warm up at least. In fact, I’ve got a Christmas tradition myself that might help, assuming this place stocks certain things for the holidays.” He made his way to the room’s little kitchen area, finding a tea

kettle, some mugs, and, after much rummaging around in the cabinets, exactly what he was searching for. “Hot chocolate! You up for it?”

The young man nodded his head, as he entered the room, closing the door behind him. “Thank you.”

As the man warmed up the water, he watched as the teenager took a seat in the chair next to his bed, patiently waiting for his undivided attention. He wondered at himself for what he was doing, but he couldn’t shake the strange feeling of needing to hear what this young man had to say, needing to know about this Christmas tradition, this offering. It was irrational, but he felt unnaturally compelled. He started to feel a little uneasy, waiting for the water to boil, as the boy waited, watching him in stony silence. He was relieved when the tea kettle whistled, and he mixed the hot chocolate, taking a mug to the boy, who thanked him again and set it down beside him on the night stand, looking anxious.

The traveler sat on the bed, legs stretched out comfortably before him, as he leaned against the wall, sipping his hot chocolate, now blissful again, but still wondering at the young that he’d let into his room. “So, this offering—what is it? And do your parents know where you are?”

The boy smiled. “My parents are gone. That’s sort of what it’s all about. Ever since they died, I’ve been compelled to tell at least one person my story on Christmas morning. It’s my offering

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to them, I suppose. I make my confession each year on the day my mother died. I let someone know the trouble I brought them. The kind of life I'd led up until that day.”

“So, it's like a religious thing then.”

“Oh, absolutely. And I apologize again. Most people I tell don't get why I had to come knocking at their door at just after midnight. Some people in the past have been quite rude, in fact. But if they were like me, they'd know. It's just something that I have to do.”

The traveler started thinking. “Andy, surely you're not older than seventeen.”

“Fifteen.”

“Fifteen then. So someone has to be wondering where you are.”

“Well, custody was awarded to my current guardians after my mom died, but they understand. They know exactly where I am and what I'm doing. It was their idea in fact, that I do this. That I share my story at the very hour of her death, to honor her, and to face my sins.” He laughed out loud and met the traveler's eyes. “I know it sounds insane. Not the usual sort of neighborly visit one might expect from a stranger in the dead of night.”

The traveler joined him in laughter, happy for the break in tension. “I have to admit, it's weird. But, what the heck? You're here, I'm listening, and we've got nothing better to do. Long as

your guardians know where you are. What about the desk clerk? She's not gonna get any weird ideas, is she?"

"No, no! She knows me very well. Like I said, I do this every year. She knows my story." Andy Tombs stared into the traveler's eyes intensely, even frighteningly, for just a fraction of a moment, then he began. "You see, I was a very troublesome son. Never what anyone would have chosen for their child. Always in trouble. Always *causing* trouble. I think my parents feared me. No, I know they did. But my father always defended me."

The traveler offered a sympathetic comment, "What kid your age *isn't* in trouble? Hell, I know I was. That doesn't mean you have to offer this confession every year to apologize to them." He worried he might have offended the boy. "I mean, I get why you would want to. It's a very sincere tradition. I just meant I'm not going to judge you, if that's what you thought."

"Oh, I don't care if you do. I was judged and sentenced years ago. That part's behind me. All that's left is my yearly confession."

"I didn't mean to interrupt, Andy. Please, go on. I'm listening. What kind of trouble were you in?"

"I killed my mom's cat with a hammer, when I was six years old."

"Wow!"

"I'd heard my mom telling Dad how Smitten was getting too old and sick, and the kind thing would be to put him down. I was

six. I wanted to help. My dad thought it would be cheaper to let Smitten go naturally. I devised a compromise. It was quick. I simply brought Smitten into my room and said, ‘It’s time to make it all stop, Smitten. You’re too old to go on.’ I got him comfortable and purring, and I cracked his skull with one swift blow. My mom was horrified. She was inconsolable. I wanted to feel guilty, but I didn’t. Dad defended me. He saw what I’d been trying to do. He knew that I’d been trying to save him some money, to help Mom’s cat end the pain.”

The boy looked confused, and he leaned back, brushing the shiny brown, chin-length hair out of his face and combing it behind his ear with his fingers. He leaned back and seemed to ponder his own words.

As the boy leaned back, the traveler noticed his T-shirt for the first time and sought to break the tension, not sure at all what to say to that story without sounding completely freaked out. “Hey! Vintage *Star Wars*. I love your T-shirt, man. Had one just like it when I was a kid. Smaller.” He shrugged. “I’d been ogling those vintage Ts on StarWars.com. Thought about ordering one, but decided I needed to save some money for presents and all.”

Andy looked down at his shirt and then back to the traveler with a puzzled expression.

The traveler apologized. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to sound like I wasn’t listening. I was. Just...it always gets me how your generation loves *Star Wars* as much as mine did.”

“My generation.” He laughed shortly, seeming to consider the phrase. “Right.”

“Go on, Andy. I didn’t mean to stop you.”

Andy smiled. “Thanks.” He leaned forward and continued his confession. “Sadly, that’s not where the Christmas confession ends. It’s just an example. I was a horrible child. I did things like that all the time.”

The traveler paled, but Andy went on without seeing to notice.

“My mother always wanted to punish me. There was one Christmas, the last one, actually, when I did something so horrible that my dad had a heart attack. An actual heart attack. He defended me to my mother with his dying breath, telling her to try to be understanding. She wouldn’t. She wanted to send me away. To put me somewhere. You see, my dad’s boss had come over for a Christmas party at our house. And he’d brought his son along.

“His son hadn’t talked to me in months, even though we’d always been friends growing up. He was mad at me for raping his sister.”

“You...*did* you?” the traveler asked, trying to keep the judgment from his voice. This kid was sorry for all he’d done, after all, otherwise he wouldn’t feel so compelled to confess every year.

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“Oh, I did. And it was a laugh. She liked it. She just wouldn’t say. She wanted to pretend she was into dating, not kissing on the first date, and all that. But I knew she was a whore. I knew what she feared. It was me. She was afraid she would enjoy it. So I made her face it, and she couldn’t deal with it, I guess. But she loved it, even if she only recognized it for an instant, while I was...well, you know. I didn’t let off her until I was good and ready, and she just cried. Sobbed like a baby, because she was horrified at having been given what she really wanted. She felt ruined, because I’d seen the whore inside and brought her to the surface.

“I just laughed at her, told her she was pathetic. She never told anyone except her brother. He told their dad and got a beating when his sister denied it. She was too embarrassed to confess. Even gave herself an abortion with a coat hanger so no one would find out. I found that out later though. Remember, judged and sentenced.

“Anyway, her brother and I were forced to go off and play nice, while the adults had their party. We went to my room, and he just glared at me. He said that I knew what his problem was and he hoped I burned in hell for it. Now Arty was a strange kid. Way different from his sister. I knew it, but what took the fun out was so did he. I finally came out and said it. ‘You mean you’re mad as hell because I deflowered your whore sister?’ I laughed at that, at the very idea of it.

“He amended my statement with the word ‘rape.’ Said it had been against her will. I told him I thought he’d just been mad because he wanted me to rape him too.

“He said, ‘Kind of.’ And that’s all the opening I needed to get him outside. I pretended like I was going to give it to him, but like I said, the fun had been taken out of it by his willingness, by his sick attitude about the whole thing. I tricked him, got him to strip and bend over by the pool out back. Then I pushed his head under the water and just watched him flail. It was weird. He couldn’t scream. I mean, maybe he was, but it was just a muffled, underwater sound. No one inside, at the party, could hear him or anything. He just splashed. I wondered when he was gonna calm down, give up. Before I knew it, the all too interesting thrashing of his arms and pushing of his legs had stopped. He went completely limp. And I guess someone had noticed, because our dads and my mom ran out, along with several others at the party. There was a doctor there, and he did CPR, got Arty to throw up all the water and wake up coughing. No one asked me why he was stark naked, and to my surprise, his father wailed on him, accusing him of starting a fight with me and getting what he deserved.

“My mom freaked and told Dad I’d gone over the top that time. Dad was pale with the horror of it all. Something broke inside of him when he watched all that happen. I could tell. He didn’t argue. He just nodded, patted me on the shoulders, and

told me to go on to bed. I think his faith in me died that night. I know it did. He had to be rushed to the hospital a few hours after everyone had cleared out, and he had a heart attack. He told my Mom to look after me, because I didn't know what I was doing. But he was wrong. I did know what I was doing. I just didn't know why...or why it mattered to people so much."

Andy paused and looked to the traveler. "And you're upset now, I can tell. So what are your thoughts on my confession so far? I've been telling this story for years and years, and I always get a little different reaction from people. Sometimes a lot different, but I always wonder if someone's going to explain it to me. Judge me in a way that makes me feel true guilt."

"You...now...wait a minute..." The traveler was non-plused. He set down his hot chocolate, noticing it for the first time that he was shaking, ever so slightly. "I'm just having a little trouble with the math here, Andy. It couldn't have been *that* many years, if you were raping and impregnating girls. You're only fifteen years old *now*. Maybe you're having a laugh tonight. Right? You're messing with me. I mean, how old were you when all of this happened?"

"Fifteen."

"Right...so then...you did this, what, a few days ago then? You just needed to get it off your chest? Was this confession really your guardians' idea?"

“It was. And I haven’t been messing with you. Not in the way you think. I’m telling you the truth. I don’t have a choice. Just let me finish, because what happened next is the reason that I tell this story on Christmas, year after year.

“My mom came home from the hospital the next morning and wanted me gone. She said I’d killed my dad. I wouldn’t go. I slapped her hard across the face when she tried to push me out the door. She left. She didn’t come back.

“I got annoyed, as the days passed, staring at the barren Christmas tree night after night. Finally it was Christmas Eve, and no sign of Mom, so I went to find her.

“At about 11:30 that night, I saw her through a window at *this* motel. Room seven. I waited. I waited for about an hour. When the coast was clear, I climbed in through her window. I called out to her, and she woke with a start. She was terrified. I turned on the lights and told her she had to come home. She said she was calling the police. She said she never wanted to see me again; that I was a devil; that I needed help. I told her to come home for Christmas, or there’d be no Christmas at all. She told me to get out. At this point, someone started knocking at the door. I took out my dad’s gun that I’d stashed in my belt behind my back, and I told her not to move. I tore the sheets from her bed and took them over to the stove.” Andy stopped, noticing the man’s horror. “What’s the matter? I’m almost through.” He smiled.

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The traveler just stared at him. “You...room seven? I thought it was just that I was the only one here.”

“No, no. You being the only one here, that’s just a happy coincidence. Now see, I lit the sheets on fire, and I told her not to move. She was screaming and sobbing worse than Arty’s whore sister ever did. I tossed the sheets at her, and then the door broke down. I turned around and shot the man who came through. Killed him instantly. It felt good. Real good. So I turned around and shot my mom in the head and watched her burn. It was peaceful, just watching, as the fire spread, so striking that she’d been screaming and sobbing one second, and the next, gone. Dead. Never to make a sound again. I watched for a long time. Just sat down, right here, and marveled at the serenity of it all. Absolutely everyone in the motel died that night, because of me. They all burned to death in their sleep, except for the two I shot.”

The traveler was unable to hide the shock from his voice, as he forced himself to seek a rational explanation for the boy’s alleged confession. “So...you’ve been reformed...or, wait. I’m still lost on the whole *were* you fifteen or *are* you fifteen part of this convoluted story. And the other part that doesn’t work out is that I’m here, in this motel, right now. So, either they rebuilt it right away, or you’re full of crap, kid.”

“No, no. It burned down years ago. I watched it burn, until I fell asleep in the chair. It was the smoke, I think. I *was* fifteen.

They didn't rebuild it. It just comes back, once a year, and I always come back, to make my confession."

Trembling, the traveler asked, "Come back...from where?"

"From Hell."

"What?" the traveler barely breathed out the word, as he trembled with fear. "I don't believe you."

"Well, I burned to death, right in this chair." He stood up. "I killed everyone in this motel on that Christmas morning, and I was judged and sentenced. Thirty-two years, I've been telling my tale. You see, a devil in life becomes a devil in death." He grinned. "And, much to the perennial disappointment of my guardians, you better believe I'm a devil in death." The boy smiled wickedly, and his face suddenly appeared burned. The walls caught on fire all around the terrified traveler, and he screamed out in horror, jumping up from the bed and making his way from the burning motel to his car, all the while hearing the guiltless laughter of Andy Tombs, as he died in the fire for the thirty-third time.

Shaking uncontrollably, the traveler got in his car, sure that he would hyperventilate. His cell phone was dead. His laptop was in the truck. The night was pitch black, which was puzzling. He looked behind him and saw that the motel was gone. No fire. No smoke. No laughter. Only the deadly calm silence of night. He started the car, turned on his headlights, and there, in the ruins of

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some long burnt motel, stood the grinning, fair visage of the ghost of Andy Tombs.

About the Author

Glenn Slade Clark, Jr. is the author of ten books, including the novel *Cry, Wolf: Shadow of the Werewolf*, the short fiction anthology *The Great Debate*, the Gothic horror series *The Chronicles of Night-fire, Texas*, and two fantasy series: *Metrognomes* and *The Legends of Nod*. He lives in Dallas, Texas, where he is currently hard at work on his next book.

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