



A Heavenly Christmas in Hometown

By Sharon K Souza

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One

The chamber was impressive, and that was an understatement of enormous proportion. Assembled within its ancient, hallowed walls, was a group known simply as The Committee. Its members were of the highest rank, as were their assignments. Membership was a thing to be coveted . . . in another place and time.

“The meeting will come to order,” the Chairman said. He sounded his gavel, then stood to address The Committee. “As you know, that most sacred and distinctive of all human events, the time when men’s hearts rejoice for the glad tidings that were delivered to them, a time, dear friends, of universal good will, is again upon the earth. I refer, of course, to Christmas. As the season unfolds, we have before us a great task—one that will require a degree of, shall I say, *finesse*.” He held up a document with the case number 163408576832-P and sadly shook his head. “Another holy celebration has been challenged.”

“Challenged?” asked Brother Spencer. “What on earth do they think Christmas is all about?”

“That’s a good question,” the Chairman said. “And we must help them arrive at the correct answer. This assignment has a rating of NI—Nearly Impossible—and could take what mankind refers to as *time*, and a great deal of it. But, there’s a promotion for anyone who takes this assignment and succeeds. Now then, who will begin the nominations?”

Several hands went up, to the Chairman’s delight. “The Chair recognizes Brother

Terrence.”

“Thank you, Brother Chairman. It is my great pleasure and privilege to nominate one who is esteemed among us, one whose merits are too numerous to name. I refer, of course, to our dear Brother Zebedee.”

“Very good, Brother Terrence. The secretary will please note Brother Zebedee’s name on the board.”

“Oh, dear,” stammered Brother Zebedee. “I graciously acknowledge your nomination. However, as you know, I *am* first harpist in the orchestra. One could hardly pursue such an indefinite business under the circumstances.”

“I see.” The Chairman forced a smile in the direction of the first harpist. “The secretary will remove Brother Zebedee’s name from the board.”

“However, I in turn would like to nominate Sister Terese,” said Brother Zebedee.

“Excellent choice!” declared the Chairman. “Make a note of that,” he said to the secretary.

“Oh no,” said Sister Terese, shooting out of her seat. “Like my esteemed Brother, I am indeed honored by the nomination. However...”

“However?”

“I too have commitments that would prohibit me from accepting such a diffi—I mean *consuming* assignment. I am in charge of the rookies this term, you know.”

“I hadn’t heart,” the Chairman said drolly, and motioned to the secretary again. “Strike that one, too. Brother Amos, have you a nomination?”

“I’d like to nominate Brother Horace.”

“Oh, my” gasped the nominee. “I’m afraid I cannot accept.”

And on it continued.

The Chairman was growing weary when another hand went up in the back of the room. It belonged to a seasoned member of The Committee whose merits were all-too-often overlooked. “There hardly seems to be anyone left to nominate, Brother Eustace, but be my guest.”

“Thank you, Brother Chairman.” He stood to his feet. “I know this is somewhat irregular, but I’d like to nominate...myself, sir.”

“Yourself?” the Chairman asked. That truly was a surprise.

“Yes, sir. I’d like the assignment.”

The Chairman shot the Vice Chairman a look of surprise. “Has this ever happened before?”

“Not to my knowledge. But if no one objects...”

The Chairman swept a confident eye across the room then sounded his gavel. “We have a nomination,” he declared. “Is there a second?” A chorus of seconds was heard. “Brother Secretary, please write Brother Eustace’s name on the board. As a formality we’ll put it to a vote. All in favor say aye.” A chorus of ayes bounced off the chamber walls. “Opposed?” The room was at once deathly silent. “The ayes have it. Congratulations, Brother Eustace. This meeting is adjourned.” The gavel sounded once again and The Committee members hurried out, before Eustace had a chance to change his mind.

“Now what did you go and do that for?” Spencer asked his friend. His voice echoed in the empty chamber. “Do you know what you’ve gotten yourself into?”

Eustace was silent.

“Yes, I guess you do,” Spencer said with a sigh.

“It’s an important assignment. I can’t think of anything more challenging for the holidays.”

“Or difficult.”

“That too,” Eustace agreed. “Well, if you’ll excuse me, I have some packing to do.”

“Won’t you be lonely? All by yourself, I mean?”

A curious eyebrow went up. “Why do you ask?”

“You know very well why I ask,” said his friend. “I can’t let you go alone. But you counted on that all along, didn’t you?” Spencer, a younger member of The Committee, smiled fondly at Eustace.

For a reply Eustace returned the smile.

Spencer looked around the chamber, which was beautifully decorated in honor of the Christmas season. Maybe, if all went well, they’d complete their assignment and be back in time to celebrate with the heavenly host. “I’ll clear this with the Chairman, then get some things together.”

“Great. I’ll meet you at your place. And, Spencer, thanks.” With all his heart he meant it.

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“What on earth should I take?” Spencer thumbed through his closet. An empty bag lay open on a chair.

“I took the liberty to include a few things for you,” Eustace said, holding up a small suitcase. “I hope you don’t mind.”

“I see we’re traveling light.” He replaced his own bag in the closet and took one last look around. He didn’t know what to expect on this trip, but he was sure he wouldn’t see anything as lovely as his home here in the Heavens. “I’m ready if you are,” he said, hoping the butterflies he felt in his stomach didn’t show on his face.

“Then let’s get started. We’ve a long way to go.”

They’d been traveling only a short while when Eustace turned an inquisitive eye upon his young companion. “You seem a little nervous, Spence. Is something wrong?”

“I didn’t want to mention it before, but, well, this is my first time to go.”

“Ah. I thought it might be. Is that why you volunteered?”

“Not entirely. Well, mostly,” he admitted. “What about you? Have you been, you know, *there*?”

“Yes, once. A long time ago.”

A mixture of awe and apprehension crossed Spencer’s face. “What was it like?”

“It’s rather hard to explain unless you have some knowledge of the language. I’ve forgotten many of the terms, but they’ll come back to me.”

“How does one learn the language?”

“It’s acquired very easily once you enter the atmosphere. Since you’ve never been, I don’t suppose you have any concept of *time*?”

“I’ve heard about it, but I must admit it’s difficult to understand. What exactly is it?”

“Let me see if I can explain. Eternity, the realm in which we exist, is without beginning or end. On earth, however, there are tiny units of measured existence called *days*. They’re forever starting and stopping. One moment it’s today and the next moment it’s tomorrow, which becomes today all over again.”

“How odd.”

“Quite,” Eustace said, “but humanity finds it agreeable.”

“Really? Please, tell me more.”

“Well, for one thing there’s the existence of *night* on the earth. The days I was telling you

about are divided into two parts: half is day and the other half is night when it isn't day at all."

"Well, if it isn't day why do they call it day?" asked Spencer, obviously confused. "And what is night?"

Eustace tried hard to explain. "Night is the portion of day when darkness covers the earth."

"Darkness?" Spencer scratched his head. "You know, I've heard of darkness, but what exactly is it?"

Eustace searched for an answer his friend might understand. "Darkness is the opposite of light."

"The opposite of light?" Spencer repeated. "I'm afraid I can't conceive of such a thing. The whole topic is very confusing."

"I'm sure you'll catch on eventually."

"How did Earth receive you the first time you went? I assume they were astounded."

"Actually, except for a handful of shepherds, they hardly took notice."

"Hardly took notice? Truly?"

"Truly."

Spencer was shocked that such was the case, and contemplated what it should mean. "Not take notice?" he whispered to himself, while Eustace enjoyed the lull in the conversation.

Their journey was well under way and the Heavenlies were far behind. The soft, warm light to which Spencer was accustomed gave way to a cool dimness. A sense of rapid motion was evident, as their surroundings became darker and colder. No such feeling of motion existed in the Heavenlies. Movement was a state of mind rather than body. This new sensation left Spencer feeling a little queasy.

"Just a little motion sickness," Eustace explained. "It'll soon pass."

"Is it normal?"

"Quite."

His eyes blinked involuntarily as he tried to drive away the approaching darkness. "This must be night?" His question sounded hollow in the empty atmosphere.

"It's only the beginning, my boy." Eustace's smile was lost to his companion. "In just a little while you'll understand it fully."

Spencer wondered if he'd made a terrible mistake in wanting to come. "I don't think I'll

like it.”

“But you’ll get used to it,” his friend replied.

On they journeyed, moving closer to the whirling orb hung eerily in the darkness. A feeling of heaviness settled upon them, yet the movement of their travel was unaffected.

“Why do I feel like this, Eustace? So sluggish.”

“It’s called weight,” he explained. “You’ll get used to that as well.”

“I don’t think I’ll like that, either. How slow the human race must travel.”

“Unfortunately, not slowly enough. It’s life in the fast lane as they say. Rushing here, rushing there. Everyone in a hurry. Especially this time of year. It’s a jungle.”

“How do you know so much about humanity?” Spencer asked.

The old angel smiled. “I read a lot.”

As their journey continued, they lost sight altogether of the Heavens. Spencer began to feel more earthy and less angelic. “Where exactly are we going, Eustace? And when will we get out of this awful darkness? I can’t see a thing.”

Eustace took the orders from his pocket. Trying to focus his eyes in the dimness, he held the orders at arm’s length. Still, he could hardly make them out. He placed a pair of eyeglasses on the end of his nose, and began to read.

“What on earth are those?” Spencer asked.

“They’re spectacles.”

“They certainly are.”

“No, I mean eyeglasses. They help you see things more clearly in this veiled environment.”

“Could they help me see through this awful darkness?”

“No, I’m afraid they don’t work like that, Spence.” Eustace smiled. “From the looks of these orders we’re going to Hometown USA. Sounds like an interesting place, don’t you think?”

“It sounds interesting, but how will we ever see it? Everything looks so...so...”

“Dark.”

“Exactly.”

“See, my boy, you’re picking up the lingo already. But don’t worry, things will look different in the morning,” Eustace promised.

“One can only hope.”

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Morning did bring welcome changes as Spencer and Eustace continued their descent. The sky was a crisp blue on the early December day, and blankets of fresh clean snow covered the ground.

Spencer looked around him with pleasure. “This is more like it. It even has the appearance of the Heavens. Everything is so clean and white. Is this where we’re going?”

“Yes, I think so,” said Eustace, referring to a map. “It looks as if we’ve reached our journey’s end. Are you ready?”

“I’m ready.”

“Then let’s land.”

Their feet touched Earth in a matter of moments, bringing their flight to an end. Spencer, feeling the effects of his journey and the burden of his body weight, dropped himself onto the ground for a short rest. Instantly, he was back on his feet.

“What on earth is *that*, Eustace?” He shivered for the first time in his life. “Its...it’s...”

“Cold. It’s called snow, Spencer. This is winter.”

“It looks like home, but it sure doesn’t feel like it. Snow, you say?” He reached down and picked up the white powder, which melted in the warmth of his hand. He’d expected it to feel like a cloud. It definitely did not. “How odd.”

“I think we’d better get on, Spence. Hometown should be just over this hill. But first let’s change into our earthly attire.” Eustace opened the suitcase and removed several items. “You’ll need a shirt and trousers,” he said, handing the items to Spencer, “and socks and shoes.” Before the words were spoken Eustace was dressed. “This jacket should be nice and warm, and a hat will just finish it off.” He pulled one out of his suitcase and fitted it on his head. “What do you think?” He turned to show off his wardrobe.

“A bit strange,” Spencer confessed. “How do I look?”

“Much the same, I’m afraid.”

Spencer frowned as he adjusted his jacket. “It seems rather binding, but I suppose it will have to do. Shall we continue?”

“Yes, but Spencer,” Eustace said, pulling him back to Earth, “we’d better walk the rest of the way.”