



## ONE MAN'S CHRISTMAS (1988)

You may not believe in Santa Claus, you may even be a real Scrooge. But you know the Christmas Season is upon the land when, even before the Thanksgiving turkey enters the oven, decorated trees and lights appear in the shopping malls. You manage to ignore the sign, at least until you turn the calendar to December, but then you begin to study the newspaper-ads and check them twice and try to decide on the best time to hit the stores to avoid the crowds. (Last year you nearly goofed, waiting till the day before Christmas as you've traditionally done, to find a host of other people with the same idea.) You rack our brain and draw up a List of things you don't really need (that's why you do not already have them) to send to kids who cannot afford to buy gifts anyway.

You crawl up the rickety stepladder in the garage to retrieve the dusty boxes of decorations and lights and the old tree-stand from the rafters, and nearly fall from the third-from-the-bottom step on the way down. You curse and think that maybe you're getting too old for this stuff. Then you haul out and set up the extension ladder and do a balancing act ten-feet off the driveway while over-reaching to the highest hooks of the gable to hang - for the umpty-umth year in a row - a string of blue, red, yellow and green lights under the eaves, and wonder why it is that almost no one else on the block has to go through this exercise any more.

But this year, as last, you were relieved of the most serious chore of all, choosing the Christmas tree, when your generous relatives delivered a fresh-cut fir of perfect shape and size right to the door step. From then on, though, it got back to the old routine: measure the floor to ceiling height and subtract for the star (why is it that you can't remember those numbers for twelve months), cut and drill the tree stub and stuff it into the stand. You move half the furniture in the house, haul the tree in - like an assault weapon wiping out some knick-knacks along the way - and plant it in the far corner of the living room being sure to seek the advice of your wife (without whom you'd not be doing this) on which is the best side for the front. Now you test the tree-lights for burned-out bulbs before stringing them, and repeat the operation when they're on the tree because several of the bloody things went dead in the process; and then your spouse tries to fit the two-hundred-or-so ornaments, collected over the past thirty-seven years, onto a tree that could support fifty at most. You finish the job by covering several of the lights and dangling objet de'Noel with state-of-the-art icicles of flimsy plastic that, unlike the good old lead-foil strips, reach out to grab at passers-by throughout the merry season.

And now, when you think you can relax a bit, over-sized red, green and white envelopes begin to show up under the mail-slot in the front hallway, reminding you that some of your friends and relatives were motivated to get an early start on their Christmas cards. You remember the time many years ago when you thought of starting a mass-protest against sending those missals, but couldn't figure out how to get it off the ground and succumbed to the tradition; only to discover, as you grew older, that it's not such a bad custom after all. In fact, it's the only time of year that you hear from some of your oldest friends. So now you embrace the cards-job with more enthusiasm than you muster for any of the rest of it.

Some folks are natural gift-givers (your wife falls into that category) and seem to know what will please the recipient. You were never good at either end of that scale; too worried about getting just the right present for someone, and too embarrassed when you received more and better gifts than you gave.

Virtually all of December has been given over to Christmas giving and buying, wrapping and decorating, drinking and reveling (relatively few people actually celebrate the Birth of Christ any more) and you try to excuse yourself from all of the hype. You even wear a badge that appropriately proclaims "BAH HUMBUG" for all you meet to see. But they go right ahead and wish you "A Merry" anyway. So you are trapped. There is no escape.

At Last, on Christmas morning, you awake to find the kids (really adults but reverted to kids for the moment) already at the hearth where the same old decorated stockings hang from the mantle, each one bulging with tangerines and walnuts and pecans and some unique little toy or other a-la-tradition of Santa Claus. They hound you to take the annual photograph, of the three of them holding their pets, in front of the tree which is now almost obscured by stacks of fancy-wrapped presents.

Within the hour the family's month-long effort is culminated in piles of gifts and candy and empty boxes and paper and bows that literally cover the living room floor. You reminisce of years gone by when there was less furniture and more space for the stuff, and draw a parallel to when many of the items were toys. Now there's still a lot of toys but of the adult variety. You wait patiently after the last opening, to clear away the chaff, and then you join the Christmas Brunch that the others have prepared.

Now, finally, you can relax. You've survived another season. You sit in your comfortable chair, inventory the thoughtfully-chosen gifts you've acquired, lean back with your feet before the crackling fire in the fireplace, close your eyes and count your blessings. There have been many; among them a good wife and family, good friends, good health and much happiness. What else could anyone, even an avowed Scrooge, ask for?

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