

WHEN CHRISTMAS WAS IN DOUBT

a holiday tale for friends and family

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Did you ever hear the story of the time Christmas tried to retire?

Pull up a chair, and I'll share a tale of yet another way the Saint of All Giving managed to rescue our favorite holiday.

The Saint and his makers at the North Pole were very close to being ready for his annual ride around the world when his chief maker, Blaine, appeared at his chambers with a strange expression. The Saint looked up with a smile. "You look troubled, old friend."

Indeed he did; The Maker's sharp, thin features were drawn into an expression the Saint had never seen there before: Confusion. "Sir," began Blaine, and then he hesitated, clearly at a loss as to how to continue.

"Come, come," rumbled the Saint, in his best, jolliest rumble. "What's the trouble? One of the makers drank too much eggnog? Donner having a bit of digestive distress from too many frostberries? Whatever it is, I'm sure it's fine--give voice to the predicament, that we may solve it together!"

Blaine's eyebrows drew upward, achieving a countenance more archly familiar; a kind of 'you asked for it' face, then announced:

"Christmas Day has quit."

The Saint immediately ordered Blitzen and Vixen hitched to the sleigh (he only needed the full team on Christmas Eve) and in short order they were flying to the Realm of the Days.

The Realm is difficult to describe to anyone who isn't themselves a Day, partially because it changes so frequently. It has been known to shape itself as a network of caves, with different Days in different chambers. It's also chosen from time to time to resemble an enormous tree, with limbs as wide as city streets, and Days nesting in different areas, separately or together. However, when the visitor is an honored guest (and the Saint is always an honored guest) it generally arranges itself as a large manor house, with an endless variety of rooms-- drawing rooms, sitting rooms, ballrooms, dining rooms (though Days rarely eat, except for Feast Days) and, of course, private rooms for resting.

Why the need for such size and variety? Consider, for a moment, how many different Days there are, and the varied needs they serve. Some are widely known and perform with steady diligence, such as the Days of the week, Monday through Sunday. These Days have been with us for a long time, and they are nothing if not reliable. Each spends a seventh (or close to it) of its time providing a strong and reliable structure to our existence. As the old saying goes, "You can't always trust the weather forecast, but you can always count on Tuesday."

Monday through Sunday are generally very well liked by the other Days, for it's understood that they put in the most time in service, and are generally the most relied upon (and the least appreciated) by mortals. There are a few other days which exist in close-knit fashion as smaller teams-- the Days of Hanukkah, of Kwanzaa, of Ramadan. But the great majority of other days are once-a-year specialists, providing opportunities for joy and celebration before taking an entire year to rest up for their next effort. The newest of these can be a bit insecure (you must never, ever mention to Valentine's Day that it's an invention of the Greeting Card Syndicate, and Black Friday seems to think it has a lot to prove) but by and large the Specialty Days are grateful for both their chance to serve and for the short term of that service.

Which is why it was so very strange to learn that Christmas Day had quit.

"They *say* they've only "*retired*," scoffed Opening Day, who had met the Saint at the main entrance. "What's the difference, I'd like to know! Quit, retired, it still means they've decided not to show up for work!"

"Is it a recent decision?" inquired the Saint, opening himself to the entrance hall so that any who heard the question might feel entitled to answer.

"Well, you know how they are," answered Labor Day, who held a low opinion of anyone who grumbled about work. "Every year, it's always 'Never Again' and 'Who in their right mind would do this?' But that's right after, when any Day might be feeling a bit worn out, so we never pay much attention."

"They don't feel '*appreciated*' is what *I* heard 'em say," grumbled Monday, who'd stepped over to join the conversation. "Just try *my* job on for size, if you ever wanna feel unappreciated! Who ever heard anyone say 'Hurray, it's Monday!' I ask you."

"A lot of three day weekends include you though, you have to ad--"

"*Shut up, Friday!*" chorused a dozen or so others, and Friday fell meekly quiet. (Everyone loves Friday, but it means that Friday almost never has the chance to complain about anything.)

"Friends!" The Saint raised his hands in a request for peace, and the Hall fell silent. "Each and every one of you strives to perform tasks which too few of us understand how to properly appreciate, and I hope you believe me when I say you have my thanks!" Low murmurs of approval brushed the tapestries hanging on the walls, and the Saint continued. "But I know you'll understand that I've tasks of my own to perform, and I cannot perform them if I am without my longtime partner. I must be given the chance to change their mind. Where might I find them?"

"Up the stairs, head to the right, end of the hall, right again, the purple door," instructed Yom Kippur.

"The hall of retired Days, doncha know," added Diwali. The Saint thought he might have heard a snicker or two at that, but couldn't be sure.

Up the stairs, right, right, purple: The door was there as promised, and after the Saint knocked and was bid enter, he stepped into a fascinating assemblage of Days long forgotten or (worse) ignored. The room had to have been large to hold so many, yet it felt cramped and unaccommodating; poorly lit, with shadows shrinking it even further. There were overstuffed chairs and couches that were worn bare, with a few pictures on the wall that had faded until one couldn't be sure whether they showed crowds or cornfields. It felt a bit like the dreary faculty lounge of a college long since closed for lack of students.

But it was far from empty. Closest to the door, the Saint recognized Saturnalia, who grunted a greeting when he looked up from his chess game with Old Clem's Night. The Saint nodded at them both as he navigated his great bulk past Arbor Day, who smiled a wistful hello, and Lammas Day, chewing on something that looked half-biscuit, half cupcake. Moving carefully around an almost empty bookcase, the Saint heard May Day call out "He's here, Christmas! Just like you knew he would be!" Then May smiled at the Saint and said, in a quiet Cockney, "Christmas told us you'd come, and they said it like they was grumpy, but I think they was looking forward to seeing you." The Saint kissed her on the forehead, drawing a giggle, and then squeezed past, moving closer to a fireplace beside which Christmas lounged in a well-studied pose of careless boredom. "Look who it is," murmured Christmas. "I had a feeling you might seek me out."

The voice was... well. Who can describe the voice of Christmas? It certainly wasn't like your voice, or my voice, or even the Saint's voice. It was a glorious mixture of sounds, of choirs singing Glories, and of the crackling of Yule logs, of toasts cried out in fellowship and of snow hissing over gently jingling harness bells... but it was without one thing that had always been there before.

It was without joy.

The Saint heard this (or, I should say, 'noted its absence') and began to understand the difficulties that lay before him, for when Christmas loses its joy the road ahead is hard indeed. But he knew that sympathy and coddling would be of little use, so he adopted his jolliest tone and asked rather casually "What's all this then, Christmas, why are you hiding back here?"

"I am not hiding," replied Christmas. "I am resting. In the place I belong, with all the other Days whose meaning has been cast off or forgotten."

The Saint pondered how to proceed. Argue and protest? No. Scold? Definitely not. Beg? Never. Instead, he made the simplest choice, the choice more of us should make when facing a friend who has lost heart. "Tell me," he said.

Christmas was startled by the simplicity of the Saint's request, and found that yes, it was very much something that *needed* telling. "I know we all change," they began. "I know that all of us serve humankind. As they change, we change."

"It's true," agreed the Saint. "Why, just look at Easter. Once a Day of renewal and life revived, now apparently a day celebrating magical rabbits that bring candy."

“Oh, haven’t we all heard about *that*,” said Christmas ruefully. “Careful you don’t bring it up to them, or you’ll be stuck listening for a fortnight.”

“But they’ve not walked off the job,” observed the Saint carefully.

Christmas eyed him, and then at length “No, they stay in the harness... but perhaps it’s because they’ve not been so thoroughly abused as I.”

The Saint grunted, acknowledging the point, then asked “Say more?”

Christmas shook their immense frosty head, as though at a loss. Then at length, despairingly, they cried “I’m only a Day! A single Day! Yet they stretch me and strain me past all endurance, past all *reason*. Do you remember the song that I used to complain to you about?”

The Saint chuckled “Indeed I do, the one about twelve days...”

“Little did I know that a mere twelve days would feel like a mercy compared to this! I’m now the twelve *weeks* of Christmas, lights and songs and decorations are out the minute All Hallows has said good night, if not earlier! And do you know what that does to a Day?”

“Wears it out?” mused the Saint.

Christmas leaned closer. “Wears it out and worse: Makes it *ordinary*. Makes *me* ordinary.” Their voice grew louder: “*I’m not meant to be ordinary!*”

The Saint waited, knowing there was more, and at length, there was. “I’m not saying I deserve better, I’m not complaining because of how I *feel*, don’t you see? It’s not as simple as a feeling. It’s a fact. The sun is bright, water is wet, and a Day stretched over weeks and weeks is no longer a Day at all, it’s merely a...”

“A season?” offered the Saint.

“A *billboard!*” retorted Christmas. “A thing that’s always there, so commonplace that you stop noticing it, stop seeing it, as it fades to grey until it’s invisible!” They sat in silence for a moment and then Christmas said, almost inaudibly, “I will not be made invisible.”

The two sat in silence for a bit until the Saint asked “What remedy, then, old friend?”

“I don’t know that there *is* one,” replied Christmas, a note of defeat added to the other aspects of their voice. Then, with a new energy: “It’s not just the stretching that’s the problem, it’s the *reason* for it. It’s greed! It’s the simple lust to turn my name into obligation and obligation into profit! ‘Hurry up, Christmas is coming, you’re late, quick, buy more, send more, do more.’ If I’m not a billboard then I’m a list of chores, and the few get rich from the panicked labors of the many, and I am not the Day for this, I never was and I never will be.”

The Saint could hear the despair in Christmas's voice, despair mixed with righteous anger, and his mind flew back and forth across the problem, like the shuttlecock of a loom. It was not a mere fit of pique, that was the thing; Christmas wasn't mistaken about any of the things they'd said. But the Saint felt certain that something was missing, that they were both overlooking some basic and fundamental--

"The children," he breathed.

"How's that?" asked Christmas.

The Saint took another moment and then looked his friend in the eye. "Nothing you've said is wrong. You haven't uttered a single untrue thing."

"I know that, no one knows it better than--"

"And it. Doesn't. Matter." the Saint continued, startling Christmas into silence. He let the silence have its moment, its ripples extending in every direction, and then he continued. "I'm not saying that *you* don't matter. I'm not saying your feelings don't matter. I'm saying that the bad behavior of a few greedy mortals shouldn't be permitted to dim your understanding of your own mission, your own reason for being."

Christmas snorted. "Children are my reason?"

The Saint leaned closer, his voice gaining intensity. "Yes, that is precisely what I'm saying. Oh, not your *only* reason, I'm not as feeble as that. There are any number of reasons for Christmas to exist, for you to *continue* to exist, but children are the most important, indeed they are! Your magic feeds them, and their magic feeds you! If you simply decide that you are weary of the abuses of the few, you condemn the very creatures who rely on you the most!"

"It's not as simple as--"

"I! AM NOT! FINISHED!"

The entire realm shook to its very foundations. Every Day in the place froze at the sound, which seemed to echo from the sky itself, filling the world. The Saint's laugh could reverberate across whole kingdoms, frequently had done, but none had ever heard this voice before. The eyes of Christmas grew wide, and the Saint lifted his hands in apology. "I am sorry to have taken such a tone with you. Perhaps I too have grown a bit weary lately, but that's my point: neither you nor I can be permitted to surrender to weariness, because without us, without *you*, the children lose something beyond measure, and when children lose, the whole world loses with them. It loses its very future."

He gathered himself, and continued: "It's not for you or me to say that any particular Day is more important than any other, but I can tell you this, friend Christmas: You are the Day that makes children believe anything is possible. Can you even begin to place a value on such a thing? It's not the gifts I carry to them; indeed, they might be the least of it. It's the way you make dreary winter into something wonderful, filled with songs that strangers sing or whistle to one another when passing on the sidewalk, trading smiles. Those smiles! That fellowship! The *harmony*, of the music and of the people giving it voice, those are all things the children see and feel! And it's more, it's the *light!* The way the mortals *brighten* their world, with beautiful, dazzling colors or with soft, simple candles, so that the darkest time of the year is transformed into a joyous wonderland! It's all of that, and more besides, but not if you give up. If you stay in this sad little room, the lights vanish! The music is stilled! And the children, the very future of the world, are given less reason to hope. Less cause for *faith!*"

The Saint drew another deep breath and shrugged his massive shoulders. "You are the reason children see that this world is never just one single thing. That a person's world can change, simply by them wanting it to. *You* teach that to them, and the lesson comes to them from every direction, with joy and love." Then his voice dropped lower: "Unless you quit."

The Saint got to his feet. "Thank you for listening. I hope you'll consider what I've said." He opened his arms, and the friends embraced for a long moment.

As the Saint turned to leave, Christmas spoke up. "You're heading out now?"

The Saint nodded. "Back to the pole. Back to the work I hope still needs doing."

Christmas nodded and then said, very casually, "Maybe I'll come with you a ways. Stretch my legs. I could do with some fresh air. Maybe I'll just... have a look around. Check on things. Make sure all is as it... well. As you've reminded me it should be."

The Saint smiled his world-warming smile. "If you are in the world, Christmas, then everything *is* as it should be."

And the friends walked together, into the twinkling winter's night, as the gentle sounds of bells and carols floated to them on the winds of winter wishes and the holiest of hopes.