

## IGNORANCE AND WANT: THE DEATH OF CHRISTMAS

Disclaimer: Based on true events, all the characters in this story are fictional. Any resemblance to any real person is merely coincidental.

Every year, Allison took the Friday after Thanksgiving off (from work) just for this purpose. Since she was a junior in high school, the same year the first Mega-Shopper store opened its doors in Emerald City, they'd been coming here. A dozen years later, Allison considered their meeting in Row D of the Mega-Shopper parking lot on Black Friday at 2 a.m. a sort of family reunion. With her two sisters, Roxanne and Patricia, and their mother, Frances, they eagerly joined roughly three hundred other early bird shoppers who'd formed a makeshift line along the side of the store.

Allison's father had accompanied them only once. He hated it. In fact, he had complained so much that Allison's mother banished him to the car to sit quietly until the store opened. Upon his return, he resumed his bitching even more so. After all, he had had a couple of hours of sitting in a cold car—Frances forbade her husband to turn on the heater—to think about this bizarre tradition.

"Y'all a bunch of fruit cakes. Who in their right mind would stand in line for three hours just to save a few bucks!" he shouted.

"Shut up Carl, before I send you back to the car," said Frances. She wagged her finger in his face.

That did little to slow Carl down. He was on a roll. He flung his arms up wildly. "Y'all crazy! Y'all just damn crazy," said Carl. "I'm going back to the car. And not 'cause you told me to. If something happens, don't y'all be looking for me to help."

"What could possibly happen, Carl? We'll be in the store...shopping," replied Frances with a quick flick of her wrist signaling that she was done with him.

"Oh, humbug, you old Scrooge," said Patricia playfully. She kissed her father's cheek.

"When he opens his Christmas presents, he'll have a different tune then," added Allison. "Have fun in the car, daddy."

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In response, Carl blew snot upon the pavement. “I’m gonna listen to some good old music and turn the heat up real high...full blast.”

“Can’t take him nowhere,” said Frances. “The old fool.”

“Well, I’ve been looking forward to this all year long,” said Allison. She folded her arms. “It’s my only time to get away from Phillip and the kids. I’m not going to let daddy destroy my...our Christmas shopping fun. Come on y’all. Are we ready to shop til we drop?”

“Yes!” shouted the women.

Frances was right. Except for occasionally exceeding their holiday budgets, nothing ever happened, at least nothing serious, until today. The line continued to grow steadily, and the women moved about as best they could, while chatting and laughing to fill the time. When they were all up-to-date on the latest antics of relatives—there were plenty to gossip about, like baby mama dramas, cheating spouses and bad hair weaves—they moved to debating the use of ‘Merry Christmas’ versus ‘Happy Holidays.’

“Look here, Christmas is a Christian holiday. It’s all about Christ, peace on earth and helping your fellow man. I for one refuse to say ‘Happy Holidays,’” said Frances. For the most part, she was reserved, except for when it came to her principles and, of course, to making unreasonable demands upon her henpecked husband. Frances would fight any person who challenged her God-given beliefs. And that meant that Christmas was Christmas and nothing else.

“I’m with you mama,” replied Roxanne. No surprise there, since Roxanne was the spitting image of her mother. Though they were twenty years apart in age, people quite often mistook them for sisters—something Roxanne hated.

“I agree with you too. It’s like they’re trying to take Christ out of Christmas,” Allison added. “Damn heathens! I hate ‘em.”

“That ain’t gonna happen,” said the mother confidently. “Not over my dead body. I’ll be a Bible-toting Christian til the day I die.” She waved her hands up to the heavens. “Yes, Lord.”

“Oh no, you’ve done it now,” laughed Patricia. “She’s gonna start testifying right here in the Mega-Shopper parking lot.”

“Oh...stop your hating. Ain’t nothing wrong with loving Christmastime,” Frances said, placing her hand upon her heart.

“That’s right, mama,” said Allison. “I love everything about Christmas. All the Christmas decorations around town, the snow

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and the trees covered with beautiful lights, the parade. Everyone's so friendly around this time of year. It's so wonderful to see folks helping one another out. That's what Christmas is all about...family, friends and sharing."

"And the parties," interrupted Patricia. She danced within the small space allotted to her.

Though the parking lot was well lit, it was still dark out as a chilly, nasty breeze zigzagged among the crowd. The wind seemed to whirl itself around Allison like a miniature tornado. Nervous, she tried to shake off that sudden dreadful feeling that something was amiss. "This is madness," Allison heard someone yell from somewhere behind them, but too close for comfort.

"Why don't they open the damn doors right now! All the real shoppers are here," added the mystery voice. There was a collective agreement among the crowd. With all eyes now focused on the sliding glass doors and the fellow posted in front of them, the doors remained closed.

A robust man in the front of the line started to bang on the glass. "Open up," he yelled.

"Move back!" shouted the guard, placing his back against the doorbuster signs taped on the doors.

"Man, this is stupid," the man replied in a huff and returned to his place at the head of the line.

"Open! Open! Open!" An elderly woman leaning on a wooden cane chanted. A group of teenage girls quickly joined her, "Open! Open! Open!" Despite the pushing and shoving, the doors remained shut. Bored, the girls quickly lost interest, and replaced their chanting with playful gestures and frantic texting.

By now, an hour had passed, but this was the first time Allison had noticed the man posted in front of the doors. He was of average height and weight, somewhat nice looking with an amusing smile, for his mouth was a little crooked. He was dressed in the typical Mega-Shopper uniform, except for the reflective vest which every employee had to wear while working in the parking lot ever since two employees (gathering baskets) were run over by anxious holiday shoppers backing out of their parking spaces.

The man abandoned his post briefly to pace a few feet, as if to warm up. He rubbed his hands briskly, gently blowing into his palms. Despite the horde of people in front of her, Allison thought

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for a moment that the man had looked directly at her, into her soul. She smiled, only to have her good feeling dashed by a sense that something bad was about to happen.

Upon his return to the door, the man barely moved. He stood erect, stiff like a British guard outside Buckingham Place.

It was a silly thought that crossed Allison's mind. One that would revisit her again and again in the days after the incident. He's not such a big fellow. We should just knock his ass aside and let the shopping begin. Allison giggled. This thought was so unlike her.

Her feet ached. She should have worn her sneakers. The boots that Patricia had talked her into wearing may have kept her legs warm, but the two-inch heels were murder on her feet. She marched in place to help get the blood circulating in them again.

A childlike excitement rose in her. Visions of deals on toys and clothes and, of course, that TV (only four would be sold at that low price) she came to get, warmed her body. As usual, money was tight, more so this year since Phillip was out of work. They were rapidly draining their retirement savings to keep up with the bills. Allison had worked overtime for the last four months, saving every penny she could to buy this special gift for herself. She had even gone so far as to try surviving on one meal a day until she became sick and had to miss a week of work. But she was determined...no, she was absolutely positive that she was going to be the first to snag this unbelievable deal. Once she had the television, it wouldn't matter what Phillip or the kids got her for Christmas. She would have the gift she truly wanted.

Roxanne tapped Allison on the shoulder and handed her a mug of coffee. Although they lived in the same neighborhood, they rarely stopped by each other's homes. Roxanne didn't like Allison's husband, and Allison loathed her big sister's husband. Christmas was the only time that the two families managed to drop their swords and break bread together. This was another reason why Allison loved this time of year; she got to hang out with Roxanne. And they got to be silly, giggling high school girls again as long as neither one of them mentioned husbands.

"Open! Open! Open!" again the teenage girls standing behind Allison chanted.

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A plump girl chewing on her nails yelled, "Open the damn door. I gotta pee." She wiggled and hopped about. Her friends laughed hysterically.

Someone shouted, "Here!"

The girl was handed a red plastic cup. "That ain't funny," she told the stranger. "I ain't playin'. I really gotta go."

By 4:30 a.m., the crowd had swelled to over two thousand serious shoppers. At 4:50 a.m., every inch of space between shoppers had vanished. Hypnotized eyes stared at the digital clock positioned next to the door. Allison focused on the man still standing out front. He appeared nervous as he too watched the clock.

Allison, not one to take any chances, especially when it came to something this important, had gone to the store the day before Thanksgiving just to scope out the TV that was going to be on sale. What a bargain...a 50" Samsung plasma HDTV for \$499.

She had a game plan. Forget the basket, that would only slow her down. She would race through the store, make a left at the cosmetics counter, take a quick right across the shoe department and cut through the children's clothes. She had practiced her route just to make sure that she could be in the electronics department with her hand on her TV in thirty-three seconds.

By 4:58 a.m., her heart was racing. She had to remind herself to breathe slowly. Someone punched her side. Annoyed, Allison glanced over her shoulder, but everyone appeared above suspicion. She had noticed that over the past few years these Christmas shoppers had become rather unruly. Fistfights were commonplace. Two years ago, a woman was stabbed in the face when she tried to cut in line, and just last year someone snatched Patricia's purse. Fortunately, there was ice in the parking lot and the thief slipped. He broke his arm, sued the store and received a large settlement.

Allison was relieved that they had made it through the predawn cold and would soon be inside, claiming their gifts. She glanced at her mother and sisters. In a ready position, they like the rest of the crowd were focused on the doors.

The guard at the doors readied himself for the sudden rush of people. He positioned his body sideways so that once the doors opened he could swiftly get out of the way.

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At 5 a.m., there was a momentary hush over the crowd as the doors slid open but immediately stopped.

“Open the goddamn door!” someone yelled.

“Open! Open! Open!” The chanting started again. This time more people joined in.

Eerie animal-like noises came from the back of the crowd as the herd rushed forward. There was a loud bang, and then the sound of glass shattering. Allison tumbled but managed to grab the coat of the man in front of her and quickly pull herself up. A little frightened, but mostly excited, she looked around for her mother and sisters. To her satisfaction, they were a few feet ahead of her. She would catch up with them later after she had her television.

Within seconds, she was in the doorway. The bright florescent lights were a sharp contrast to the lights outside. For a moment, she was blind. She was partly walking and partly being carried by the mob. Several people stumbled in front of her but continued to move or at least crawl away from the crowd still pouring in.

Caught in the midst of this frenzy, she couldn't tell what she was stepping on but she knew that it wasn't the floor. It was soft and sank with each step. She heard a muffled cry.

She slipped and fell. Her feet and hands landed on the floor. Finally, her eyes had adjusted to the light. Allison glanced down into the distorted face of the man who had been in front of the door. Before he could move an inch, another wave of holiday shoppers stepped on, over and around them. Panicked, she managed to stand up quickly. A throbbing pain came from her hands. Several small pieces of broken glass protruded from her palms.

The crowd continued to stampede. It was insane, with people running...scrambling in all directions. It was something similar to the running of the bulls. Allison half expected to see a mad, angry, black bull come charging through the entrance. Her shoulders were knocked left and right; once she was even spun around.

She stared down at her cut and bloody hands, and then she looked at the screaming man on the floor. He was begging customers to help him. A couple of people tumbled upon the man, slowing the pace of the massive crowd, but it continued to surge into the store like water escaping from a broken dam.

It wasn't really a thought, but more like a subliminal message. Should she help this guy? After all, she was an ER nurse. This man

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clearly was in need of medical care. His bruised hands reached out grabbing at nothing as people continued to rush inside. He looked directly at Allison, same as he'd done when she was outside. His eyes cried out to her. Then she heard what sounded like a distorted 'Help me, please.' A thick, rich stream of blood rolled between his eyes down the bridge of his nose onto the floor. His frightened eyes were large, wide and pleading. His safety vest had been torn down the middle and his shirt was ripped open exposing black and blue shoe prints on his back.

It was like watching a caravan of cars repeatedly run over roadkill. The shoppers entering the store stepped on or leaped over the man, as if he were a piece of trash. Several people fell on the man. At one point, seven or eight bodies piled atop the injured employee. Everyone was screaming. People managed to either get up on their own or were pulled away by loved ones.

Though at times the man appeared to be gasping for air, he managed to scream when two women trampled upon his legs; neither stopped to help him. Terrified, he covered his head with his battered hands as he rolled onto his side into a ball.

For some reason this action plus the fact that the crowd had thinned out made Allison feel better. Now people seemed to be walking around the man. He would be okay, she thought. She didn't need to get involved. Besides, she could see other store workers running to help their fallen comrade.

The man was sweating. She could see basketball-sized patches of moisture growing beneath the armpit areas of his shirt. His eyes rolled back. He was going into shock.

Allison took a step toward the man, and then stopped. What about my television, she thought. Helping this stranger wasn't a part of her carefully laid plan. Besides, she had sacrificed a lot including her own health for an opportunity to get a new TV. Allison glanced over at the downed man once more. His eyes were partially closed. He was probably unconscious. Someone's probably called for an ambulance. They'll take him to the hospital and he'll be okay.

The next action she took would be something that she would regret for years to come. She turned away from the man and quickly ran toward the cosmetics counter. She ran through the children's department. The man was still on her mind, but a sudden calmness moved within her when she saw that only one person was standing

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near the four boxes with TVs inside them. She placed her hand on top of the closest TV box moving it towards her. "This one's mine," she said to the sales associate.

The clerk helped Allison load the TV into a basket. "Enjoy your new TV," he said smiling.

Returning a smile, Allison replied, "I will." Yet something deep inside of her told her that she wouldn't. She ignored this odd feeling and continued to shop.

While she pushed the basket through the store, she heard ambulance sirens quickly approaching. The injured man crossed her mind again. Maybe...I should have helped, she thought as she looked at the television box. Eager to push this notion out of her mind, especially since it was ruining her Christmas spirit, she turned her attention to a table lamp on sale for half price.

Allison whipped around a corner and ran right into her mother and sisters at the jewelry counter. "What's going on over there?" Allison asked, although she already knew the answer.

An employee was performing CPR. It was a procedure Allison knew all too well, having performed it twice last week—once on a fifteen-year-old boy and that same night when reviving a man who'd come into the ER complaining of chest pains before collapsing. Without realizing it, she was counting along with the worker as he frantically pumped on the man's chest. The victim was unresponsive. Customers continued to enter the store; some slowed to watch the action, but none offered any assistance. A woman heading out of the store with a basket full of goods ran into the security guard's feet. Several of her presents tumbled to the ground. She scooped them up and continued out the door.

Without looking up, Frances replied, "Some guy got knocked down."

"Oh, that's too bad," said Allison cagily.

"Wow, look at these earrings. They will go great with my dress for New Year's Eve," said Patricia. She modeled the earrings for Allison. "What do you think?"

Before Allison could respond, the announcement over the intercom startled her. An employee had been injured, trampled. Shoppers were asked to exit the store *immediately*.

"Why we gotta go?" asked Patricia. "Damn, this is so unfair. It ain't my fault that somebody got hurt."

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“Patricia,” said Allison. “That’s not nice.”

“Girl, Christmas shopping is a contact sport these days. Everybody knows that,” added Roxanne laughing.

“Look, I’m sorry someone got hurt,” said Patricia.

“He’s died,” replied Allison.

Patricia hesitated; she didn’t want to get into an argument. The last time that happened, they didn’t speak to each other for months. “They said he was hurt.”

Allison looked at the man. He looked more like a broken mannequin than a lifeless human. “He’s died,” she repeated.

The employee who’d been performing CPR shook his head at his co-workers. They had formed a human barricade around the man. One by one, they started to cry.

“Well, there’s nothing we can do about it,” said Frances. “It’s a sign of the times we’re living in.”

Patricia held up a sweatshirt with a smiling reindeer on the front and said, “It’s not all bad. His folks are gonna get a lot of money from the store. Remember that guy that snatched my purse. He got rich and he just broke his arm.”

“Yeah, I bet your family can get a lot of money if you get killed in a store,” replied Roxanne as she whipped out her phone and pointed it toward the man.

“What are you doing?” asked Allison angrily.

“Girl, I might get some money for this,” Roxanne answered.

“Don’t do that,” said Allison. “What’s wrong with you? You’re acting like a savage or something.”

“Savage?” replied Roxanne. “I see you got your TV.” She tapped on the bloody handprints on the box.

In her mad dash to get to her new TV, Allison hadn’t noticed that she had left several bloody prints on the box.

“Can we still check out?” asked Patricia.

“Of course,” answered Roxanne. “I didn’t stand out in the cold for three hours to go home empty-handed.” She picked through her basket until she found what she was searching for. “You see this? I had to fight this Asian couple to get this blender. It’s five dollars, normally it’s around thirty. I’ve earned my Christmas present and the margaritas that this baby’s gonna make for me.”

“Yeah, I though I was gonna have to hurt some skinny bitch over these jeans,” said Patricia. She proudly held them up.

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“Oh...those are nice,” replied Roxanne. “How much?”

“Seven bucks,” answered Patricia smugly.

“Get outta here,” said Roxanne.

Their conversation was interrupted by another announcement for all customers to leave the store immediately. “Ladies, please exit now,” said a clerk. His eyes were red and puffy.

“I don’t believe this,” said Roxanne. “I wanna check out, please.”

The clerk looked puzzled, and then replied, “You can come back into the store when...” He couldn’t finish his sentence so he just pointed to the man on the floor. Someone had placed a safety vest over his head.

“This is so wrong. What about us? The customers?” pouted Patricia. “My stuff ain’t gonna be here when I get back.”

“Well, at least Allison’s prints are on her TV box,” said Roxanne laughing. “At least you can prove that’s your TV.”

Allison didn’t reply. What could she say? The box was covered with her bloody handprints.

As they headed toward the exit without their Christmas gifts, they stepped slowly past the man on the floor. Not that they had any great sympathy for him; they just didn’t want to leave the store.

Allison was the last in her party to reach the entrance lobby. She watched a police officer using tape to secure the area. For Allison this seemed like an odd thing to do now. A man, a human, was dead. She, along with throngs of impatient holiday shoppers, had stomped him to death. But even worse was how she felt—culpable. She could have helped, yet had chosen not to. What kind of person did that make her? It would be a long time before Allison could answer that question.

She wanted to reach down and touch the man, maybe to say I’m sorry. But of course, she didn’t. It was too late. Her chance at heroism died with the man on the floor.

“Come on, Allison. Let’s go get something to eat and come back when this stuff is all cleaned up,” said Patricia, doing her best to avoid stepping on the broken glass.

“Wait til daddy hears about this,” replied Roxanne cheerfully.

“No, no we ain’t gonna tell him what happened here,” said Frances, “‘cause he’d just get to fussing about how silly people get around this time of year. I don’t want to hear none of that...this has already messed up my Christmas.”

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As a paramedic was retrieving a stretcher from the ambulance, Patricia asked him, "Say, do you know if there's an IHOP down the street?"

A police officer, his face bewildered and distressed, kneeling next to the lifeless body looked up at Allison and said, "So, this is Christmas."

**God bless us, everyone!**

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