

This story contains mature themes and situations. I guess this is where I say no one under 18 admitted without parent or guardian.

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The Worst Christian: Installment V

The Post War Years

"Relieve"

Dan E.'s head popped over the side of the cubicle wall, grinning wide with it's usual mischief. Seeing other people miserable always made him feel better. It didn't matter why they were unhappy, what had happened, or who had caused it, it just mattered that someone felt lower than him. He never went out of his way to cause trouble or sorrow, but he would not miss the chance to rub someone's face in it.

"I thought you only worked remotely."

"Normally, yes..." I continued scrawling away in my usual hunch backed way. For the amount of time I spent sitting in viciously ergonomic chairs one would think my posture would be half way decent. Dan E. was still at the wall, waiting for me to say more. While I hoped that pretending to be engrossed in mind numbing work would get him to go away, either back to work or off to torment someone less hung over, I also figured the ruse would not work.

"So. What are you doing in Nak's cube?"

I slipped my board into the vacant holder under the desktop. Forever the petulant child, Dan's gophing over a wall meant no more work until after lunch. Seeing me acquiesce only fed his childlike behavior. He began bouncing slightly on the balls of his feet, brown curls of hair flopping in front of his eyes.

I swiveled the chair to face him putting my feet up on the only other furniture in the cube, the filing chest. "Nakamura's wife apparently had their kid over the weekend. Margaret seems to think it's a grand idea to bring me in to take his place while he's off on paternity."

Dan's lips parted to show a toothy grin, goofy as it must have been when he was three, nine, or sixteen. At twenty five he had grown into it. It suited his easygoing, but oddly hot-blooded nature. Margaret, our editor, could berate him for hours after missing a deadline, something he did fairly often, and he would laugh it off, smoothing out all the wrinkles and snags with an unbelievable story (coming from anyone else) and a drop dead article. At the same time, a badly timed joke or comment had been known to send him into a blind fury. The multitude of fist damaged panels in his cube stood testament to that.

"So what'd you do for Christmas, go home?" he asked.

The range of topics covered in office chatter never ceases to astound me. The fluidity with which people go from one topic to another: work, family, justice, office politics, all one

roundabout conversation that seemed to cycle endlessly. No matter what was discussed or in what depth, every topic could, indeed seemed fated to, return. This seems to stem from the fact that no one ever truly discusses anything. I learned when I started, you talk enough to be friendly, but actual commiseration and friendships are an exception, not the rule.

"Yeah the whole fam' was there. Big fun," I said.

Dan's left hand, cocked back menacingly, came over the cube wall, a nickel between the middle finger and thumb. Reflexively I shielded my face with my hands. I didn't go to the war to lose an eye to office shenanigans. "Spend the week in the bag?" he asked.

Through closed eyes I heard the sound of his snapping fingers, followed by a clatter and a violent "HEY!" from several cubes away. I looked towards where the noise originated. When I turned back Dan was gone. A beefy slab of writer came storming down the aisle between the banks of cubes. He paused at Dan's cube. In the sudden silence I could hear the scraping of his stylus against it's board. Work, always a good alibi. Incensed the man turned his thick body toward me, holding the nickel aloft.

"You do this?" he asked. His breathing whistled through his nose, making him seem more ludicrous than threatening.

I put on my best bewildered face, looking at the nickel like I could not tell what it was. "Do what?"

His head twisted on it's overly thick neck, looking back at Dan E. suspiciously. He disgorged a snort through flared whistling nostrils, then dejectedly returned to his cube.

After a moment the sound of writing stopped, marking the arrival of a crouching Dan in my cube. He held his board under his arm, stylus behind his ear, readied for a fast getaway. He tousled his brown hair with his free hand. The smile had returned, his deep brown eyes glittering with mischief. Very handsome. I could not help but think he must get a lot of girls, or boys. I would have find out over lunch sometime.

"So, soused to the gills or what?" Amazing. Seamlessly back into Christmas with the family.

I shook my head slowly, astounded by him as always. "Yup. Drink, drink, and drink some more."

"Rock and roll lifestyle?" He planted himself next to my feet on Nakamura's two drawer filing chest.

"No, I hated being home so now I am 'the tormented artist'."

"I thought you liked your parents?"

"Yeah, I do. OK, so it's like this, I was in Minnesota." Dan smirked. I burst out defensively, "I'm from Minnesota, OK? It doesn't bother me. I freely admit it. Fucking worse places to be from." I paused to think about that for a moment. "And why the fuck does it matter where you're from? Shouldn't it all be about

who you are and where you are now?"

"Very noble, coming from a self proclaimed elitist."

"Alcoholic to you."

"How about artist?"

"Same thing." I looked at the monitor I had slaved my board to. The cursor flashed rapidly in the middle of a half finished sentence. I wondered when I had set it to flash at that speed.

"Really?"

My attention returned to the conversation at hand. "I like to think so. That way I can write off a six pack as writing supplies. Tax deductible, like our boards."

"So, you're an artist, then."

"Actually, a con man"

Dan raised his eyebrows in genuine interest. "Please, do go on."

"Well, I tell everyone I am an artist and I make my scratch doing this crap." I pointed to the screen. "But in the long run, I drink like a fish and I love to fuck. Those tend to be my primary goals. Writing comes in a distant third to my raging hedonistic tendencies. Yet through it all I have convinced people I am an artist. Pathetic, really."

"You know, you never cease to amaze me, Jack."

"Lunch?"

"Lunch."