

Christmas Blues

By Ron Knights



I sat at the computer, determined to write something. It was yet another Christmas Eve alone, and I was feeling so overwhelmingly sad, desperate and angry. How could she be away from me, when she was so much still a part of me. I could still feel the warmth of her body, the sound of her breath at night, as we slept peacefully.

I wanted so much to run over to her house, to beg for her love. The anger, the frustration, and the tears just built up inside. I stopped typing for a moment. It was too far to walk on a winter's night. Besides it was Christmas Eve.

It was a typical, dreary, frigid day outside. It was hot in my creepy small apartment. The floor fan shoved the breeze my way, and fluttered all the papers. I had to frantically weigh down my Kleenex, notepad, napkins etc. The long, sparse hair flapped into my eyes, and I brushed it impatiently away. My nose dripped again, darn it. Time to blow again. Where's the darned Kleenex again?! Oh there it is, weighed down by a dull letter opener in a bamboo sheath.

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That darned MedicAlert necklace was bothering me, so I yanked it off and stuck it into its assigned home in an ashtray guarded by some demented wizard holding a skull. No, I don't smoke any more. I quit 3 years ago when the doctor said I had emphysema. But breathing is still hard. Oh well, it's hard to carry around my fat carcass anyway.

Yeah, I'm large, to put it politely. I weigh 325 pounds. I'd been progressively larger over the past 30 years.

I stopped typing for a minute, and went through the usual routine. Bend back in the chair, grab the hair off the back of the neck, and form it into a silly, short ponytail, and let it drop. Then look down at my bulging belly. I dress casually these days because it's hard to find clothes that fit. Regular pants with belts just won't stay up if your belly is bigger than your butt and you have no hips. Sweat pants and suspenders are worn in cooler weather. Sure, it looks tacky.

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Darn! I just couldn't take it any more. I was typing furiously, in my own unorthodox manner. (Never use the little fingers, because it hurt.). The arthritis was settling into the ring finger of my right hand. The keyboard bounced a little as I attacked it furiously. I grabbed the fan's remote control, and turned it off, and slammed it down next to the cell phone that never gets any calls.

It was time to make another futile attempt to organize the junk on the desk. Move the wallet over a fraction of an inch, stab at the checkbook, and try to turn the watch right side up again. (It never stayed that way.) Move the fat pen over to the right of the watch, and to the left of the scratch pad. Grab the comb, and pretend to comb the ever-diminishing hair. Who would see it anyway?! Oh, there's an empty pill bottle, for the anti-anxiety medication. Wonder if that stuff works anyway? Maybe I'd commit suicide without it?!

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Suicide, now that's a wonderful subject. I already narrowed it down to two ways to commit suicide. The dramatic way would be to climb to the top of a high building, and just casually walk off the roof. Pretend to fly for a moment, smile, and then end it all crashing. Most likely, I'd curl up into a ball, and drift away to unseen worlds in my own mind. They'd find me, smiling, but totally unaware of my surroundings.

It was time for another diversion. This time, grab the bottle of Windex, a paper towel and try to clean the darned glasses again. The dirt got moved around, a little, and that was good enough. Time to grab the hair on my neck, and make the silly ponytail again, and let it drop. Damn my back was aching. It was those damned discs grinding against each other every time I bent over, or moved the wrong way.

Damn, I was going crazy. It was time to get out of this damned place, but where would I go? I thought about that for a second, and moved my tongue over yet another broken tooth which rattled easily around. It was almost ready to fall out, but I didn't dare pull on it. Couldn't get that fixed till sometime in the New Year. It was Christmas time, dammit.

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Yes, I had to get out of this fricking place. Time to find some half-decent clothes, real pants this time, and suspenders. Hopefully they wouldn't pop, and let the pants fall down. Damn, I was sweating with those clothes on. Time to leave in a hurry. Oh, but had to stop in the bathroom first. Damn, I couldn't go more than an hour these days. The whole body was falling apart.

I zipped myself up, and casually looked down. Nope, I hadn't messed myself this time. I turned around and washed my hands. Fiddled with the towel a bit, and dropped it on the floor. As I bent over, the suspenders snapped, I looked down, and slammed my head on the towel rack. I jerked back in blind pain, and slammed into the sink. I sunk like a rock.

I must have been out for awhile. I took the suspenders off, and threw them on the floor. I wouldn't bother with my hat, coat and cane. I really didn't care.

Sweat was running down my forehead, as I maneuvered around the door. I patted my butt to confirm the wallet was in the back pocket, and my side to confirm the keys were there. The door was closed and automatically locked.

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Fortunately, no one was in the halls or elevator. I just hated the customary Merry Christmas greetings. I was alone, and empty inside. I certainly wouldn't have a Merry Christmas. I stumbled across the empty parking lot, and across the street to the local bar with the well-deserved lousy reputation. They called it the Cage, which would go well with the Rage I felt tonight.

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Don't ask me why a bar was open on Christmas eve. Maybe people needed a place to get away from home, and try to drown their emptiness, forget the past, and not worry about the future?! The place was suitably dark. One could easily hide his face from prying eyes. The bar was almost empty.

A jukebox was playing "I'm Mister Blue". This was the place to be tonight.

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Over at the bar, an old guy sat, wearing dirty clothes, and smelling like a local dumpster. He turned around, looked at me, and mumbled something. His breath floated slowly my way. I turned, and walked to the far side of the bar, closest to the jukebox.

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I sat at the bar, and looked at the barkeep. He had one of those silly comb-over hairstyles that didn't fool anyone..

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He greeted me with a great big smile. "My name is Sam, what can I get you sir?!" I smiled, despite myself.

"My name is Rick, and you can get me a Coors Lite, thanks!" I took the beer, and took a sip.

Sam saw the smile on my face, "Great stuff, hey?!"

I looked at a bowl of pretzels, reached out my hand, and withdrew it with a frown. Sam was a good bartender; he could see the hidden meaning in his customer's gestures. He grabbed a bowl of popcorn, and slid it my way. "Here, I have better luck with popcorn myself!," and flashed a grin that showed a few missing teeth. I returned, with a wide, toothless smile myself. Hadn't done that in months!

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I looked above the bar, and squinted in an effort to read the menu. Sam yelled: "Normally the grill is closed this time of night, but what the hell it's Christmas Eve. You want a cheeseburger and fries?!" How did he know that was one of my favorite meals?!

As I waited for the burger, Little Anthony sang "Hurts so bad." Yes, I hurt so bad. I didn't have the guts to go and beg my wife, because I already knew the answer. I was alone once again.

My eyes watered, and got that faraway look. The lips quivered, as I attempted to hide the tears. Who was I kidding? The glasses came off my face, and the clean hanky came out to stay. Better to put the glasses in my shirt pocket tonight. I looked up, sheepishly to see Sam there with the burger and fries.

"Medium well, right buddy?!" he said. He'd seen grown men cry before. "Can I get you another Coors?!" I grabbed the burger, and ate it slowly.

Sam looked over, smiled and nodded, knowingly. "You're only lonely" was playing on the jukebox. Who was paying for all those songs?!

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I'd just about finished the burger, and washed it down with Coors, when someone at the door shouted. "Ho ho ho, Merry Christmas."

I turned around to see some weird looking guy dressed in a dingy Santa Suit. The beard was hanging loosely on his face, and was overshadowed by his huge nose. Yes, the nose was red from the cold.

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“No fricking Santas allowed here, Marlin. If you wanna come in, change your clothes in the bathroom. Here's a paper bag for that stinky outfit.” Marlin looked back sheepishly, grabbed the bag, and skittered into the bathroom.

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He emerged a few minutes later, wearing a checkered flannel shirt, faded blue jeans, and jogging shoes.

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Marlin sneezed, and blew that huge nose of his with a faded red handkerchief, like the cowboys used. "There, is that better, you ole fart!? Now shut up and give me a Bud Light!," and he threw the paper bag at Sam. Sam chucked it below the bar, and smoothly slid a can over to Marlin.

"You got any pizza Sam?!" Marlin shouted. Sam looked back, and yelled harshly. "How long you been coming here? You know we don't have any pizza. Shut up while I get you a cheeseburger and fries! Chew on these while you wait." A huge bowl of pretzels sailed past my eyes. I looked at them longingly. "Yeah, I still have a few teeth left!" Marlin smiled. "Want one?!" He knew better, but that was ok. "Hey I haven't seen you here before. My name is Marlin. I'm a regular. Somebody has to give Sam a hard time." "Says who," shouted Sam, who flipped the bird, and smiled.

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I introduced myself. Marlin's burger and fries slid to home in front of his face. He smacked his lips, squeezed lots of mustard on the burger, and ketchup on the fries. "Why so glum, chum?!"

I'm shy, withdrawn, and rarely look people in the eye for more than a second. But this guy was so easy to talk to. It was that huge nose, zany smile, and flashing eyes. I talked, as he chewed on his burger and looked into my eyes. For once that didn't make me feel insecure.

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I told Marlin about my all-too-brief marriage, I blubbered again, cursed, grabbed my hanky, blew my nose, wiped my eyes. I looked up to see Marlin fidgeting with his own hanky, wiping his eyes and nose. Damn, this guy was sensitive like me.

"Sorry, I'm just a softy..." Marlin said, and Sam grunted. "Shut up you ugly bastard," Marlin shouted, and laughed hysterically. I looked at him, and for a moment, everything was clear. The thoughts, the words, rumbled to the surface, but I could only sputter.... "Don't I know you.....?!" Marlin looked at me softly, put his finger to his lips. "Don't worry about it buddy...."

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"It hurts so bad" was playing on the cursed jukebox. I just wanted to do something to kill the pain. I wanted to go over there, and beg....." Marlin shushed me again, and smiled. "Sam another round, and let's crank up the jukebox. You know the songs we want." "Town without pity" played, and we sang along. Even Ole Stinky sang. Damn, he actually had a decent voice.

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After awhile it was time to take care of Mother nature, and get to the bathroom. Marlin followed me in, keeping a discrete distance. He stood by me at the wall, and looked at the wall, and spoke. "You gotta remember she's someone special just like you." We washed our hands, and grabbed some paper towels. "Both of you have come a long way. But you still have some more traveling to do."

I knew he was right. I was a real mess when we first connected. She reached out over the distance, and rescued me. We had some great moments, but all too often, something was missing. I just couldn't break past my own weaknesses, and overcome our doubts.

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We had another beer or two, sang some more sad songs, blew our noses and wiped away the tears. Then Marlin looked over at Sam, “Do you think he's had enough?!” “Yes, get him home,” said Sam.

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Stinky turned around and waved goodbye. "You'll be fine, boy."

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Marlin let me put my arm over his shoulder. We left the bar, still singing. Thankfully there were no cars on the street, and no people to hear us. As we entered the parking lot of my apartment building, a few lights came on. "Time to quiet down a bit," said Marlin, and we giggled like a couple school kids who just couldn't stop laughing even when the teacher was watching.

Marlin helped fish out my key ring, and waved the key fob at the security device, opened the door when the green light came on. "Fourth floor," I mumbled. "I know," Marlin said. How'd he know?

Marlin helped inside, and I flopped on the bed. He pulled the blanket over me, and said "You'll be fine, ole buddy. Just don't give up."

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I woke, several hours later, with a dry mouth, and throbbing head, and headed to the bathroom. God, my mouth tasted like crap, and I stunk! Time to peel off the clothes, and take a long hot shower. What day was it?

Yes, it was December 26. Thankfully, I'd slept through Christmas day. I was still alone, but felt a bit better, emotionally. Physically, I felt like shit. Some orange juice helped a little. A quick shower made me feel better. I ate some breakfast and sat at the computer. I looked at the monitor, and my mouth dropped open.

"What the hell?! Sam, Marlin?! Waitta minute!" Sam and Marlin were my cartoon characters. "Well I'll be a son of a gun!" A quick phone call confirmed the Cage was closed for the Holidays. Hysterical laughter was followed by tears and more Kleenex.

"So it was only a dream!" Then I tripped over another pair of shoes, and cursed. What were they doing by the bed? Inside the right shoe were some pieces of popcorn. There was a note on the nightstand. "You'll be fine, ole buddy. You'll be fine."

"Yes, I will, eventually, Marlin. Thanks." A bottle of Dr Pepper, helped ease the dryness in my throat. I sat at the computer for awhile, started to cry. "Time for a nap!" Off came the pants and t-shirt, and I crawled into bed wearing only BVD's. Sleep came quickly, and I smiled again.

The End