

the

SHELF

on the

ELF



HOLIDAY LEFTOVERS BY
ANDREW SHAFFER



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INTRODUCTION

The Shelf on the Elf: Holiday Leftovers is a collection of off-beat holiday tales featuring consulting detectives, knife-wielding maniacs, and Steve Jobs. “Hunting Season” was written exclusively for this collection. The other stories have previously appeared online or in print.

Merry Christmas,

Andrew Shaffer
Portland, Oregon
December 2014

HUNTING SEASON

This true story happened approximately eight years ago in Iowa City.

On a cold December evening during Bush's second term, I was sitting in the window of an Iowa City coffee shop, staring at my laptop. Overhead, the sweet, sweet sounds of Christmas jazz lulled me to sleep. The novel I'd spent months working on seemed further away from being finished than when I'd started it. I don't remember which of the half-dozen novels I tried my hand at in my twenties it was, but it doesn't matter—they were all equally dreadful. Why did I keep starting and stopping? Furthermore, why was I still entertaining the dream of becoming a published author? I made decent money at my day job. My mind wandered from my manuscript, and soon my eyes did too.

The sidewalks outside were buried in snow. Iowa City had just received several feet of snow over the previous twenty-four hours. Meteorologists predicted near-record low temperatures overnight. The few pedestrians wandering past the Java House were bundled up, hidden beneath layers of clothing. Every one of them had their own story. Window seats are great on airplanes, but they're even better in coffee shops. People-watching never grows old. Occasionally, they even watch you back.

A man plopped down in the seat next to me. With his full-body camo jumpsuit and bright orange stocking cap, he immediately struck me as odd. Although we were right in the middle of shotgun season, you don't see many hunters stop off at the coffee shop for a latte after a long day in the woods.

The man leaned uncomfortably close to me. His skin was pale, as if it'd been bleached by the arctic air. His eyes were as black as the coffee I was drinking. While his wild beard made it difficult to guess his age, he appeared to be in his fifties. His breath reeked of alcohol.

I glanced around the packed coffee shop. No one else seemed to notice him, this man who didn't belong. Everyone had made a silent agreement to ignore his presence. Unfortunately, I couldn't ignore him—if he leaned another inch closer, he'd tip right over onto my lap.

“Can I help you?” I asked. I thought I’d seen him downtown a few times begging for change. If I gave him a few bucks, maybe he could get a coffee. Or just buy some booze. Either way, he’d warm up.

He laughed at my question, and shambled back out the door.

Okay, I thought. *Whatever*. I woke my computer up and stared at my novel. It was dead. The moment the words left my fingers, they were stillborn. I didn’t know why I was still bothering with—

I paused. The hunter was on the other side of the window facing me. When I looked up, he locked eyes with me and smiled. A wide grin that made me uneasy. What did he want?

And that’s when I saw it.

The knife.

As Crocodile Dundee would say, there are knives...and there are *knives*. This guy was holding a nine-inch Bowie knife with serrated edges. This was a *knife*.

At first, I was worried he meant to stab me with it. Then I remembered the thick glass windowpane separating us. He turned away from me, holding the knife behind his back so that I could still see it.

A woman walked past him and into the coffee shop, oblivious to the knife-wielding maniac at the window.

He wasn’t oblivious to her.

He’d watched her walk in, his head following her.

He wasn’t going to attack me.

He was going to attack someone else.

I picked up my phone and dialed 911.

“9-1-1. What’s your emergency?”

“There’s a man outside the downtown Java House with a knife. He’s got a knife, and he’s drunk, and he’s...he’s hunting people.”

“Hunting?”

“He’s dressed in a camo jumpsuit, and he’s—”

I stopped. The man had turned around. He saw me on the phone, and shook his head. *I ain’t getting caught. You’re in trouble, boy. You know what happens to tattletales.*

I thought he was going to come inside and gut me, but no. He just backed away from the window and began shuffling down the sidewalk through the snow.

“We’re sending someone now,” the operator told me.

“He’s getting away. I have to go.”

“Don’t follow—”

I ended the call and rushed out the door, leaving my laptop and coat behind. He was going to stab someone. If not now, then later. I didn't want blood on my conscience.

"Stop!" I shouted. Fortunately, he hadn't made it very far. Partially because of how wasted he was—and partially due to the snow-and-ice covered cement.

He continued, faster now. I followed, but kept my distance in case he turned on me. Thankfully, the sidewalk was deserted. I didn't have to worry about him attacking anyone else for the time being.

We hadn't gone more than fifty yards before I saw the lights of the police cruiser. I spun around and waved at the cops, who were exiting their car in front of the Java House. They spotted me, and then eyed the man in the camo jumpsuit. "He's getting away!" I yelled.

The officers rushed past me and after the man. They disappeared around a building. When I caught up to them, one of the cops was cuffing the man on the ground; the other told me to head back to the Java House.

Once we were inside and warmed up, one of the officers handed me a form. "Just write down what happened," she said, heading back to her car. She had her own paperwork.

I filled up both sides of the form. When the officer returned, she read over my statement. "*His eyes were as black as coffee. A wide grin that made me uneasy... As Crocodile Dundee would say, there are knives, and there are knives...*

"I've been doing this job for fifteen years," she said finally, "and this is the best damn witness statement I've ever seen. Have you ever thought about becoming an author?"

I nodded. "I've done more than think about it. Haven't had much luck, so far. I guess you need to finish a book before you can publish it."

She smiled. "Stick with it—you're good."

I thanked her for her encouragement.

The man had ditched the knife in a snowbank; there was no hope of finding it until spring. He was charged with public intoxication and disorderly conduct. Without the weapon, the cops couldn't charge him with anything more. It may have been for the best. The whole bit with the knife was probably a ploy to get locked up for the night. He was too drunk for a homeless shelter, and wouldn't have lasted until morning on the streets. He was thirty-two, and looked fifty-two.

I settled back into my chair at the window and opened a blank Word doc. It was time to stop watching people, and start writing them.

FRONTLINE IN THE WAR ON CHRISTMAS

In 2009, I was a guest on FOX News—and lived to tell the tale. This essay was originally published in Harper Perennial's The Atheist's Guide to Christmas.

“Merry Christmas or happy holidays? Which strategy should retailers use to cash in? Here for a fair and balanced debate is Andrew Shaffer, owner of the Order of St. Nick [greeting card company],” *FOX & Friends* host Steve Doocy explained to the television audience.

It was 6:24 AM at the FOX News studios in New York—an early hour by anyone’s watch, but it was 5:24 AM in Des Moines, Iowa, where I was live via satellite. My fiancée had grilled me late into the previous night with questions that we expected a FOX News host would ask a heathen guest, such as, “Where are your horns?” and “Why do you hate America?” It had taken a hotel wake-up call, two cell phone alarms, a Red Bull, and a gas station coffee just to pry my eyes halfway open.

Greg Stielstra, a Christian marketing expert, joined the conversation from the *FOX & Friends* set. Greg’s position was that, by using the secular greeting “happy holidays” in advertising and store displays instead of “Merry Christmas,” retailers risk alienating a majority of their customers. This wasn’t semantics; this was war.

GREG: Businesses play a numbers game. They carry the most popular products. They open their stores in the busiest intersections. If 96% of the population is celebrating Christmas, and 77% consider themselves Christians, why wouldn’t you speak to Christmas as a retailer?

STEVE: All right. Andrew, what do you make of that argument?

ME: I actually agree with that. I think that if you're trying to reach the widest possible audience, that's a great strategy.

The atheist—I'm actually agnostic, if you want to get technical—and the Christian, finding common ground? The debate was over before it had even begun. It remains, to this day, three of the least-riveting minutes of television ever produced by a major cable news channel (and that includes every episode of *Larry King Live*). It wasn't a total disaster—at least I hadn't fallen asleep on the air, something I'm pretty sure that Larry King *has* done.

While Christians are usually portrayed as the defensive side in the War on Christmas, they fired one of the first shots in 1870 when President Ulysses S. Grant signed a bill into law declaring Christmas Day a federal holiday. If this sounds like a possible violation of the constitutional separation of church and state to you, you're not alone. Ohio lawyer Richard Ganulin sued the federal government in 1998 to have Christmas Day removed from the list of federal holidays. The lawsuit was tossed out. The U.S. Court of Appeals for the Sixth Circuit, upholding a lower court's dismissal of Ganulin's lawsuit, ruled that the 1870 law does not constitute an endorsement of Christianity by the government.

Case closed, right? Not so fast: State and local governments are not required to recognize federal holidays. In the late 20th century, city council and PTA meetings have become the *de facto* battlegrounds for the heart and soul of Christmas. If your children attend a public school in the United States, there is a reasonable chance they don't take two weeks off for Christmas break—it's likely they're being forced to enjoy a "holiday break" or a "winter break" instead. Christians are "asked to celebrate something they don't celebrate—winter—as if they are pagans in the Roman Empire," FOX News host John Gibson writes in *The War on Christmas: How the Liberal Plot to Ban the Sacred Christian Holiday Is Worse Than You Thought*.

Gibson views the usage of "happy holidays" and "winter break" as evidence of a vast conspiracy to eliminate Christmas from the public sphere. The bad guys, it turns out, are not just "professional atheists" but are, in fact, "mostly liberal white Christians." According to Gibson, the nefarious plot against Christianity is the work

of ACLU lawyers, school superintendents, and city council members—many of whom are Christian—afraid of running afoul of the constitutional separation of church and state. They’ve taken the law into their own hands, re-branding Christmas trees as “friendship trees” and stopping children from handing out candy canes. One misguided soul even banned red and green decorations altogether in his school.

The Supreme Court has consistently protected expressions of Christmas on government property and in public schools. As long as a Christmas display is not entirely composed of religious symbols, for instance, court precedents point to letting things slide. This has led to the Supreme Court’s stance being mockingly nicknamed the “Three Reindeer Rule.” With enough secular reindeer, snowmen, and elves, the religiosity of a display can be diminished to acceptable levels.

The War on Christmas isn’t limited to skirmishes over the separation of church and state. Businesses are the latest grinchers to enter the fray. Right-wing media had a proverbial field day with Walmart, Sears, and Target when they started using the term “happy holidays” instead of “Merry Christmas” in the 2000s.

“I think it’s all part of the secular progressive agenda...to get Christianity and spirituality out of the public square,” FOX News’s Bill O’Reilly said. “Every company in America should be on its knees thanking Jesus for being born. Without Christmas, most American businesses would be far less profitable.” Conservative Christian groups now maintain lists of “naughty and nice” retailers that concerned citizens can consult to find out who’s celebrating Christmas and who’s celebrating “the holidays.”

By December 2005, Christmas was under siege from all sides: in our schools, in our townhalls, and in our most hallowed grounds (retail stores). But at least the federal government still supported Christmas.

Then, the unthinkable happened: President George W. Bush and First Lady Laura sent a “holiday” card.

When the biggest, baddest Christians in America dropped the H-bomb on the 1.4 million people on their Christmas card list, all hope for the future of “Merry Christmas” was lost. The white flag had finally been waved. To paraphrase John Lennon, “War is over now...happy holidays.”

After the White House slight, the word “Christmas” suddenly felt dangerous and sexy. In 2007, I started Order of St. Nick, a greeting card company specializing in humorous Christmas cards. The most popular designs were a line of six tongue-in-cheek “atheist Christmas cards.”

By some estimates, up to fifteen percent of Americans consider themselves atheist, agnostic, or otherwise unaffiliated with any religion. If ninety-six percent of Americans celebrates Christmas, that means there is a large segment of the population that Hallmark and American Greetings had never spoken to directly: Santa-loving, tree-decorating, carol-singing non-believers.

The atheist Christmas cards struck a nerve. Comedian Stephen Colbert, host of Comedy Central’s *The Colbert Report*, gave me an on-air tongue-lashing that I will never forget:

A wag of my finger at the Order of St. Nick greeting card company.
Now I always thought that any card that was blank inside was already atheist. You open it up and see nothing but a void.
Once atheists start sending Christmas cards, how long before they are including their year-end atheist family updates? [...] “Sadly, Grandpa passed away this year, but at least we know he’s not in a better place. He’s decomposing. Merry X-Mas.”

Order of St. Nick sold thousands of atheist Christmas cards after *The Colbert Report* aired. The cards didn’t mock Christianity or cry for attention with cheap shock value like the drawings of Santa Claus nailed to a cross that teenage atheists doodle in their notebooks every December. The Darwin-as-Santa image was a sincere expression of my belief of Christmas’s unique ability to bridge the gaps between believers and non-believers.

For many, Christmas is already a secular holiday; believing in the Christian God is no longer a requisite for celebrating the day of His birth. The world’s most famous atheist, Richard Dawkins, exchanges gifts with his family and loves singing traditional Christmas carols. “I am perfectly happy on Christmas day to say Merry Christmas to everybody,” he told Radio Four’s *Today* program.

Dawkins is not alone. The Christmas season has become a time for families, regardless of religious affiliation, to get together, exchange gifts, eat cookies, and revel

in “the hap-happiest time of the year.” Celebrating Christmas without subscribing to Christianity is like watching the Super Bowl without having watched a single regular season football game all year. Some people watch the Super Bowl for the commercials; others watch it for the halftime show. Diehard NFL fans might turn their noses up at the party-crashers, but I submit that there are some spectacles so awesome that people can’t help but be sucked in by their gravitational pull. Christmas sits like a black hole on the calendar, and the other holidays implied by “happy holidays”—Hanukkah, Kwanzaa, Boxing Day, New Year’s Day, etc.—are powerless to be drawn in by its force. No matter how thorough a semantic cover-up job we do, we all know *The Holiday Whose Name We Shall Not Speak*.

Moreover, Christmas is no longer limited to countries with Christian majorities. Christmas is beginning to show up in places where Christianity has never taken hold, such as Japan and China. Several Chinese men and women I spoke with on a trip to Guangzhou, China, a few years ago recognized Santa Claus’ familiar visage . . . but couldn’t pick Baby Jesus out of a nativity scene.

Secular Christmas is already here.

The “church and state” court cases, the verbal wrangling over “happy holidays”—the War on Christmas that is being fought primarily in the United States, Canada, and, to an extent, the United Kingdom—feels so *unnecessary* by comparison.

Even as an agnostic, I feel some of Bill O’Reilly and John Gibson’s pain when the War on Christmas claims another town hall display or department store ad. Can’t we just back off Baby Jesus? Hasn’t He been through enough already? Perhaps I’ve just been beaten into submission. Perhaps a more passionate non-believer would not concede points to a FOX News host and a faith-based marketer on national television. Perhaps I should take offense at nativity scenes on city property; perhaps I should roll my eyes every time someone says that “Jesus is the reason for the season.”

But I’m an agnostic, not a vampire. I don’t need to cringe at the sight of a cross in a school Christmas pageant. Christmas has given all of us so much to be thankful for. Without Christmas, there would be no *It’s a Wonderful Life*, no *Miracle on 34th Street*, no *Die Hard*. We wouldn’t have Dickens’s *A Christmas Carol* or Christopher Moore’s *The Stupidest Angel*. And, growing up, I would never have received so many Transformers, Nintendo video games, and JC Penney sweaters. Without the warm fuzzies created in our hearts by our collective Christmas spirit and shortened workweeks, Seasonal

Affective Disorder would reach epidemic proportions every December in the northern hemisphere. As atheist Judith Hayes writes, “Life is difficult and short. If we can add some merriment to it, we should go for it. Every time.”

AN EARL GREY CHRISTMAS

This short story takes place a year after the events in my Fifty Shades parody, Fifty Shames of Earl Grey. It was originally posted as a free ebook on Goodreads.com and in the iTunes Store.

It was Christmas Eve, and I was working. This was nothing new, of course, as I worked in one of Amazon's massive shipping warehouses and the holiday season meant plenty of overtime. It was a little like being an elf in Santa's workshop, if Santa was a bald geek and elves were a couple of feet taller and a couple of degrees sadder. Not that I needed the money: I was married to Earl Grey, a man so rich he once bought every seat in a movie theater just so we could watch *The Avengers* without having to smell fanboys wetting their pants. However, I think of myself as an independent woman, and thus kept my job at Amazon. I had hoped to work my way up to an editorial position within their publishing division, but after two years was still stuck in the warehouse. My husband, who was a majority shareholder in the company, wanted to put in a good word for me with Jeff Bezos, but I would hear none of it. If I was going to make it in the publishing industry, I was going to do it on my own terms.

"Anna!" my supervisor yelled.

I set the box of ebooks I was carrying back on the shelf. "Yes," I said. "What can I do for you?"

"There's a call for you," she said, handing me her phone.

I pressed the phone to my ear. "This is Anna."

"What time will you be home, baby?" It was Earl Grey!

"Why did you call my boss's phone?" I asked, as my supervisor stood idly by with her arms crossed.

"I tried calling your phone first, but it went to voicemail," Earl said.

"Sorry, the battery died and I left my charger at home."

"It's okay. I just bought AT&T, Verizon, and every single other American cell phone carrier until I found your supervisor's cell phone number in their records."

“It would have been easier to pull it out of her personnel file,” I said, lowering my voice to a whisper. “After all, you do own the company.”

“Hindsight is twenty-twenty,” he said. “So what time can I pick you up?”

“I don’t know yet. My shift is scheduled to end at midnight.”

“By then Christmas will be over.”

“I thought today was the twenty-fifth of December.”

“It is. December twenty-fifth is Christmas Day, not Christmas Eve,” Earl said.

“Look, you’ve been working too much. I haven’t seen you in two weeks.”

I sighed. I had been sleeping in a cardboard refrigerator box for the past couple of weeks in between twenty-four hour shifts. “If things let up at all, I’ll call you to have you pick me up early,” I told Earl. “Otherwise, I’ll see you at midnight.”

There was a long pause on the other end of the line. Finally, he answered. “Fine. I love you, baby, no matter what,” he said. “Later.”

“Later,” I said.

It wasn’t until after I handed the phone back to my supervisor that I realized something: I had totally forgotten to get Earl Grey a Christmas present!

“So what *do* you get the man who has everything?” I asked my co-worker, Kathleen.

“I don’t know,” she said, absentmindedly dropping a boxed *Fifty Shades of Grey* trilogy into some poor, unsuspecting box and covering the hideous thing with a packing slip. “How about a BJ?”

“A basketball jersey? I don’t even think he likes basketball,” I said.

“Damn,” she said. “How about a blowjob, then?”

“Too vanilla,” I said.

“Then add some chocolate,” she said, winking at me.

“Maybe.”

“Or maybe not,” she said. “That reminds me of the time Jin turned my hoo-ha into a hot fudge sundae. I got a *painful* UTI that—”

“Do you know what TMI means?”

“Of course,” she said. “Too many Indians.”

My inner guidette rolled her eyes. “Anyway, I only have a few hours before he picks me up in his helicopter,” I said. “Where would I get sundae toppings—or *anything*—between now and then?”

“Um, you’re at Amazon. The center of the shopping *universe*. If you can buy it, it’s in this warehouse,” Kathleen said, motioning at the boxes piled hundreds of feet in the air around us.

I glanced down the aisle we were standing in, which seemed to go on for miles. “You aren’t suggesting I...*steal*?”

Kathleen shook her head. “Is it really stealing if you guys own the company?”

“I guess not,” I said, convinced. Truthfully, though, I was in such a pickle I could have been convinced to rip my employer off even if my husband and I weren’t majority shareholders. I was desperate, and it was the only plan I had—mostly because I’m not very creative.

“You go find your Christmas gift, and I’ll cover for you,” Kathleen said.

I glanced around nervously. We were the last ones working on Christmas night, besides our supervisor. “You’re a lifesaver, Kathleen.”

“Don’t mention it. If our boss comes looking for you, I’ll just fake a cocaine-induced seizure,” she said. “It shouldn’t be too difficult, because I’m pretty high already.”

“I don’t know how I’ll ever repay you.”

“A rolled-up twenty would be nice.”

I dug around in my jeans pocket and didn’t find any cash, but I did find a short coke straw.

Kathleen snatched it out of my hand. “That will do for now. Good luck!”

I ditched my orange safety vest and vowed to myself that I would find something for Earl Grey, something to prove I hadn’t forgotten that it was Christmas.

A half hour aimlessly wandering the warehouse and I was no closer to finding a gift than I was to finding the meaning of life. I passed boxes of flat-screen TVs, Kindles, Blu-ray players, and countless other electronic gadgets before stopping at a stack of boxes wrapped in clear plastic, the UGG logos visible. Maybe a pair of UGG boots

for *myself*, but definitely not for Earl Grey. He had recently started wearing those shoes and socks with toes, and I didn't think he would be impressed by a pair of boots that didn't treat each one of his toes with the proper respect. Pass.

Next to the boots sat hundreds of boxes of Movado watches, stacked a hundred feet into the air. Not something Earl Grey would be interested in. If he wanted to know the time, he would pay someone else to wear a watch and ask that person the time. Pass.

I wandered some more and found an entire aisle filled with hundreds of thousands of copies of Nickelback's greatest hits CD. His favorite band! I had never seen a copy of this album in Earl Grey's collection, so...could it be? The perfect gift?! When I picked one of the CDs up and looked at it, however, I realized that it only contained two songs (the total number of actual hits Nickelback had). Pass.

Finally, I stopped at an intersection that split left and right. The aisles of merchandise stretched for miles in either direction. I turned right. *As long as you have your phone with you, you won't get lost*, my inner guidette said. Suddenly, I froze: I remembered that my phone was dead. I turned around, but couldn't tell which aisle I had come down. I had turned right, hadn't I? Or left? I was officially lost. My main objective quickly turned from finding the perfect gift for Earl Grey to finding my way to the nearest exit.

I tried retracing my steps. My pace quickened as I frantically searched for a signpost that would guide me back the way I'd come. It was the first time in my life I wished to see a stack of Nickelback CDs. My only hope now was to camp out and wait for someone from third shift to show up and rescue me. They didn't start until eleven, which meant another hour on my own in the vast depths of Amazon's bowels.

All I had on were my jeans and a T-shirt; I had no way of knowing how cold it would get before I was found. I needed to stay warm, which meant finding something to burn. I looked around and found the perfect firewood: box upon box of the appropriately-named Kindle Fire. I ripped a half dozen of them out of their cardboard coffins and piled them on the floor. Now to set them on fire....

If only you smoked, you would have a lighter! my inner guidette said. *I keep telling you to start.*

"Shove it," I told her. "I'm not going to start smoking just on the off-chance I need a lighter."

It could save your life.

“It could kill me,” I said. “And if you don’t shut up, I’m going to kill *you*.”

Oh my...

“That’s it,” I said, preparing to fight my inner guidette to the death. Then I realized she was only a figment of my imagination, and I was going to have a difficult time killing her without hurting me. How did Ed Norton do it in *Fight Club*?

Suddenly, I was distracted by a shuffling noise in the next aisle. Footsteps! I was saved! Or was I? Who knows what horrors stalk the Amazon wilds at night? I picked up one of the Kindle Fires, sure that I could use it as a shield in case I was attacked by some creature of the night. I peered around the corner and into the adjacent aisle, and saw two short men loading boxes onto a golf cart. They were dressed in rags and sported war paint on their faces.

I must have gasped, because they turned around and looked directly at me.

“Are you...elves?” I asked.

“Are we *elves*?” one of them said in a thick Bronx accent. “I’m five-and-a-half foot tall. That’s a little taller than an elf.”

He looked more like five-foot-two, but I wasn’t going to push it. I had no idea how tall elves really were anyway.

“Where’s your vest?” the other, slightly taller guy asked me. “Do you work for the Man?”

“My boss is a woman,” I said.

“No, no you idiot. Do you work for *the* Man. Bezos.”

“Oh,” I said. “Then yes. But technically I work for my husband, since he’s the majority shareholder.”

“You don’t say,” the one with the accent said, rubbing his chin. His hair was wild and untamed. It was then that I looked up and saw the faded white letters spray-painted on one of the steel support beams. *District 13*. That could only mean...

“I’m sorry, I need to leave,” I said hurriedly. “I got lost, that’s all.”

I turned around and bumped into a tall, muscular man with long gray hair. He was flanked by two more men that could only be described as savages. “If you’re lost, maybe we can help,” the tall man said.

But I knew immediately that they did not intend to help me. I was no longer on Amazon soil.

Years before I started at Amazon, a warehouse employee had stumbled upon District Thirteen by accident. I'd only heard bits and pieces of the story, but supposedly an entire tribe of savages was found living in a section of the warehouse the size of a football field. No one knew if the savages had been there first, or if they had moved in after the warehouse was built, but one thing was certain: they weren't to be moved. At least that's what I was told. Allegedly, the government had granted them immunity or asylum or something of that sort, and the area they were inhabiting was turned into a reservation, where they could continue to live, hunt, and farm as they had been doing for centuries. It was a fantastical story that I had never believed, at least not until I happened upon District Thirteen myself.

In quick order, the savages tied my hands behind my back using nylon rope. It reminded me of the games I played with Earl Grey. Next, they blindfolded me and told me to start walking. There was just one problem.

"I can't walk with my eyes closed," I protested.

"What do you mean, you can't walk with your eyes closed?" the gruff one said.

"I mean exactly what I said. I can't walk with my eyes closed."

"Maybe we should take her blindfold off," the other savage said.

"What? No way. That's ridiculous."

"What if she falls?"

"She won't *fall*, you nitwit."

"I will too," I said.

"Shut. Up. And. Start. Walking."

I tried to imagine my left foot going forward, followed by my right foot, and then...what? Repeat steps one and two. Right? It was all so confusing without being able to see my feet! I gingerly stepped my left foot forward, and wobbled ever so slightly.

"I'm falling!" I shouted.

One of the savages gripped my arm to steady me and removed the blindfold.

"Thank you," I said.

“I swear you are dumber than the cast of *Fox and Friends* on whippits,” the Bronx savage said. He didn’t appear to be happy that his friend had removed the blindfold. “Now *move*.”

“Okay, okay,” I said. The five savages flanked me on all sides so I couldn’t run for it, but really, where would I run? I was as good as dead.

I was brought to a large makeshift building composed entirely of empty boxes. “Inside,” one of the savages said, prodding me with the sharp end of his spear. I walked through the door. Sitting on a throne of printed books was a man shrouded in darkness, lit only by strings of Christmas lights draped from the ceiling.

“We caught her inside the perimeter, sir.”

“Thank you,” the man on the throne said. “Stand guard outside. I wish to speak with her in private.” The savages left.

“So, we finally meet...Mrs. Earl Grey.”

Dammit! He knew my name. “You can’t keep me here. Earl Grey will find you!”

“And what?” the man said, still shrouded in darkness. All I could make out was a tight black shirt and jeans; his face was almost entirely hidden. “Will he buy you back? Is that what you think this is, ransom?”

“I have no quarrel with you or your savages. I didn’t mean to enter District Thirteen. It was an accident.”

“Or maybe it was fate.”

“Fate?”

“Do you believe in fate, Miss Grey?”

“I don’t know,” I said. “I’ve never thought about it, I guess.”

“How is that possible? You’re, what, twenty-three? And you’ve never once contemplated the interconnectedness of the universe and your place within it?”

“Not once,” I said. It was true: I just didn’t ever think about such things. Maybe if I did, I wouldn’t always get myself into such stupid situations.

“You called us savages,” the man said. “But do we not resemble learned men?”

“Your ‘men’ wear rags and paint their faces. They carry spears. What would you call them?”

“Warriors.”

“Warriors? In what? What ‘war’ are they fighting?”

“We are fighting for the future of publishing. My men are all ex-Amazon employees, recruited to the cause.” The man stepped down off his throne and walked slowly toward me. I didn’t flinch. What could I do? My arms were still bound behind my back, and the door was guarded. When the man was just two feet from my face, I could make out his visage finally: the black turtleneck sweater, the thin-rimmed glasses, the scruffy facial hair and close-cropped hair....

“Elvis Presley!” I said.

“What? No, no, no. Steve Jobs.”

“Who?”

“Co-founder and ex-CEO of Apple? The inventor of that iPhone you probably carry?”

“Doesn’t ring a bell.”

“How is that even possible? I’m Steve Jobs. Ain’t nobody who don’t know who Steve Jobs is.”

“Sorry,” I said. “I like my iPhone, though.”

“Damn straight you do,” he said. “I still can’t believe you aren’t astonished to see me alive.”

“See, that’s why I thought you were Elvis,” I tried to explain. “Most dead white guys look the same to me.”

He shook his head. “I’m not dead. Just in hiding, training an army to one day retake the future of publishing—and, by extension, the *future of the world*—from Jeff Bezos. The only way to do that is by using his own people against him. It’s the ultimate inside job.”

“Did you invent the iPad too?”

“What?”

“Did you invent the iPa—”

“I heard your question. Didn’t you hear anything I just said? I just explained my big, bad master plan to you, and you’re asking if I invented the iPad?”

I nodded.

“Yes,” Steve Jobs said, with a sigh. “Guards! Take Miss Grey to a holding cell.”

“Wait, so that’s it?” I asked as the guards surrounded me. “You’re not letting me go?”

“Of course not,” he said. “We’ll return you—unharmd—to Earl Grey in exchange for his majority stake in Amazon.”

“I thought you weren’t going to hold me ransom!”

“I never said that. I did dodge the question, because I had to explain my master plan to you.”

“So once you control Amazon, then what?”

“Then I merge it with Apple and create the largest technology-slash-publishing-slash-retail corporation ever seen. I’ll use my newfound market clout to squeeze the last juice out of Barnes and Noble, Penguin Random House, and whatever other players are left in the publishing business.”

“You’ll destroy them all!”

“We’ll have to, you see, if we want to rebuild everything in my image,” he said.

“You have some kind of sick God complex. This isn’t about the ‘future of publishing’ at all—it’s just one big ego trip for you.”

Before he could respond, there was a loud crash as one side of the building toppled to the ground. There was a flurry of hooves and sleigh bells, which could only mean one thing.

“Santa Claus?” Steve Jobs said, picking himself up from a shamble of boxes and facing down the bearded man in the red suit. He was sitting in an enormous metal sleigh, pulled by eight reindeer.

“Am I interrupting anything?” Santa asked.

“Sort of,” Steve Jobs said.

“I’ll make this quick, then,” Santa said, pulling a pair of Glocks from his leather belt and taking aim at Steve Jobs. “Have you been naughty or nice?”

Steve Jobs hesitated. “Nice.”

“Wrong answer,” Santa said, spreading his arms wide and firing the guns five times in quick succession, putting a bullet through the head of each of Jobs’ henchmen.

“Now I’m going to ask you again: Have you been naughty, or have you been nice?”

“If you put it that way, I guess I’ve been naughty, Santa,” Steve Jobs said. “Very, very naughty.” With superhuman speed, he pulled a ninja throwing star from his jeans pocket and flung it at Santa, knocking both guns to the ground with a ricochet shot.

Before Santa could retrieve his weapons, Steve Jobs tackled me to the ground. When he stood me back up, he was holding a curved dagger to my throat. Santa pointed the guns back at him. “Take the shot,” I said. “Take the shot!”

“You trust Santa with your life, little girl?” Steve Jobs said. I could smell the Dr. Pepper on his breath. “Now drop the guns.”

Santa set the guns down.

“Now raise your hands, Kris Kringle,” Steve Jobs said. “Nice and slow.”

Santa raised his gloved hands into the air. “Just let the girl go,” he said.

“I’m afraid I can’t do that,” Steve Jobs said, holding the blade firm against my throat. My hands were still tied; I was useless. Even worse, I was about to be used as a pawn in Steve Jobs’ bid for world domination. Once Earl Grey showed up, he would have no choice but to bargain for my life.

“You’re a dead man walking, Jobs,” Santa said.

“That’s what most would say, ha ha!”

Santa laid a finger aside his nose. This was obviously some sort of signal, because the reindeer sprang to life, charging straight at Steve Jobs and me! He shoved me to the side and flung his dagger into the throat of the lead reindeer. Hot blood spewed from the wound, but still the reindeer marched on. Santa snapped the reins as they trampled Steve Jobs. It turned out this was only the set-up for the next act. After the deer were done tenderizing their victim, they began to bite into him with their powerful jaws and tear away chunks of flesh. The cries—of the deer, or of their victim, I couldn’t be sure—were inhuman and gave me the chills. Finally, Santa hopped down off his sleigh and leveled a Glock at what was left of Steve Jobs. The reindeer backed away. One pull of the trigger later, the deed was done. Steve Jobs was finally, once and for all, dead.

The remaining District Thirteen warriors were rounded up by Santa and his reindeer, and willingly surrendered once they saw the carnage Santa hath wrought. Santa tied the two dozen men and women up and left them for the police.

“You forgot one thing,” I said to Santa as we stood and surveyed his handiwork.

“What’s that?”

“I’m still tied up.”

Santa winked at me. “Maybe that’s how I like you.”

“Are you hitting on me, Santa?”

He reached a hand up to his beard and pulled it down, revealing—

“Earl Grey!” I exclaimed.

“You didn’t really think I was Santa, did you?”

“No, of course not,” I lied.

“Are you disappointed?”

“That you’re not Santa? Not really,” I said. “Because Santa comes only once a year.”

“Poor guy.”

“I’ll say,” I said. “How did you find me?”

“I had a tracking device implanted under your skin, in your upper left arm.”

“When did you do that?” I asked.

“It’s not important,” he said. “What’s important is that I was able to save you. If I hadn’t found you, who knows what would have happened?”

“Well, I know—Mr. Jobs pretty much told me his entire evil plan.”

“Oh. Okay, then.”

“There’s a small problem still,” I said. “I forgot to get you a Christmas present. That’s how I got myself into this whole mess. I’m sorry.”

“You’re all the present I need, baby,” Earl Grey said.

“Really? Because Kathleen suggested I also give you a BJ.”

“That sounds wonderful, actually,” he said, unhooking his belt.

“Great!” I said. “I have only one question: What’s your favorite basketball team?”

HIDING THE HOLIDAY PICKLE

This essay was originally published online at OliveReader.com, Harper Perennial's blog.

Christmas morning, 2008. A light dusting of snow covers the ground outside my parents' house in Iowa. Coffee is brewing. Three generations of our family are gathered around the artificial Christmas tree, in anticipation of a "surprise" that my mother has promised.

"This year, I thought we would start a new tradition," she says. "We're going to play 'hide the pickle.'"

Cue wide eyes, confusion, nervous laughter.

"Is this like 'hide the sausage?'" my brother asks.

My mother ignores him, explaining instead that "hide the pickle" is a Czech tradition—and the first of us to find the pickle ornament hidden within the Christmas tree will have the privilege of opening the first present.

I called bullshit on the story and hit the Web to find out more about this supposed "tradition." According to Internet lore, "hide the pickle" is actually a German—not Czech—tradition. One version of the legend, frequently copied from the Internet and packaged with glass pickle ornaments sold in the United States, reads:

A very old Christmas eve tradition in Germany was to hide a pickle deep in the branches of the family Christmas Tree. The parents hung the pickle last after all the other ornaments were in place. In the morning they knew the most observant child would receive an extra gift from St. Nicholas. The

first adult who finds the pickle traditionally gets good luck for the whole year.

A team of writers at About.com found several flaws in the legend. First, St. Nicholas visits German children on the fifth or sixth of December, not early Christmas morning. Second, German children open their presents on Christmas Eve, not on Christmas Day. “But the biggest problem with the German pickle tradition,” according to About.com, “is that no one in Germany seems to have ever heard of it.”

“Growing up in Germany, celebrating Christmas often at my sister’s house in Stuttgart, living then in the south in Freiburg, I never came across a pickle on a Christmas tree,” wrote one anonymous poster in an online forum. “This thing must have been hidden very well!”

There are two separate legends purporting to be the origin of the pickle tradition, according to B. Francis Morlan:

One is a family story of a Bavarian-born ancestor who fought in the American Civil War. A prisoner in poor health and starving, he begged a guard for just one pickle before he died. The guard took pity on him and found a pickle for him. The pickle by the grace of God gave him the mental and physical strength to live on.

The other [...] is a medieval tale of two Spanish boys traveling home from boarding school for the holidays. When they stopped at an inn for the night, the innkeeper, a mean and evil man, stuffed the boys into a pickle barrel. That evening, St. Nicholas stopped at the same inn, became aware of the boys’ plight, tapped the pickle barrel with his staff, and the boys were magically freed.

Again, I called bullshit. A single pickle gave a prisoner the will to live? A pair of boys freed from a pickle barrel by Santa Claus? Puh-leaze.

Hiding the pickle, it turns out, is as German as German chocolate cake. It’s an American myth that has taken off fairly recently. In some areas of the United States, it’s blown up: Every December, the quaint Michigan township of Berrien Springs (population: 5,075) holds its annual Christmas Pickle Festival. “Be sure to attend the annual pickle parade led by the Grand Dillmeister!” the town’s official website proudly proclaims. Jimmy Fallon even played “hide the pickle” with actress Kirsten Dunst on

his old late night talkshow. Many people see “hiding the pickle” as nothing more than a perverted hoax. On Cafepress, you can buy a t-shirt of a rather phallic vegetable adorned with a Santa Claus hat, emblazoned with the slogan, “I got your Christmas pickle right here!”

Who’s to blame for propagating the myth that “hiding the pickle” is an ancient German tradition? If you want to be cynical, you can point a finger at the burgeoning pickle ornament industry.

“Even families with many wonderful holiday traditions already in place can make room for this charming Christmas event that delights the old and the young alike,” the description for an “Old World” pickle ornament reads on Amazon. (The pickle, like most glass ornaments, is made in China.) One customer, who ordered two pickles from the Amazon seller, left this rather prickly review: “They arrived quickly, and very well packed; however you can see the lines where they were cast, which takes a lot away from the ornament. I suppose I expected more from an Old World Christmas ornament.”

I made a conscious decision not to venture further down the Internet rabbit hole in search of the “truth.” The ornament that my mother purchased was made in the Czech Republic, so it was significantly more “Old World” than the cheap imports from China for sale on Amazon. If I could accept a decorated tree (bastardized from a pagan tradition) and Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer (originally an advertising campaign for Montgomery Ward) as synonymous with Christmas, what right did I have to argue that a glass pickle was somehow in-apropos?

My family’s inaugural game of “hide the pickle” was a success. We all had a laugh at it, and the younger kids had fun hunting through the tree branches. We’ve hid the pickle every year since. You might even say it’s become a tradition.

THE MURDERS ACROSS THE STREET FROM THE RUE WHOREHOUSE: A CHRISTMAS STORY

This Sherlock parody that has its roots in an Edgar Allan Poe story—half the words are Poe’s, although I’ll leave it up to the reader to figure out which ones. It originally appeared on my website (www.andrewshaffer.com) under the pseudonym “Edgar Allan Pole.”

Residing in Paris during the fall and winter of 20—, I there became acquainted with a Monsieur Bandersnatch Cumberbund, who fashioned himself a “consulting detective” in the manner of the legendary Sherlock Holmes. Neither of us had any family in town, so we spent Christmas Day together, ordering out for Chinese food and watching *Mad Men* DVDs at Cumberbund’s apartment. That evening, as we were making out way through the fourth season (“The season of Don Draper’s discontent”), Cumberbund happened upon a sensational story on the website of a well-known English-language Parisian newspaper, *La Huffington Poste*.

On Christmas morning, about three o’clock, the inhabitants of the Quartier St. Roch were aroused from sleep by a succession of terrific shrieks, issuing, apparently, from the fourth story of a house in the Rue District, known to be in the sole occupancy of Madame Schulberg and her daughter, Mademoiselle Camille Schulberg.

Neighbors broke into their apartment with a crowbar after receiving no answer. The apartment was in the wildest disorder—the furniture broken and thrown about in all directions. There was only one bedframe; and from this the mattress had been

removed, and thrown into the middle of the floor. On a chair lay a razor, besmeared with blood.

The first of two horrific discoveries awaited the search party underneath the mattress. When lifted, they found the corpse of the old lady, with her throat so entirely cut that, upon an attempt to raise her, the head fell off. The body, as well as the head, was fearfully mutilated—the former so much so as scarcely to retain any semblance of humanity. An unusual quantity of soot being observed in the fireplace, a search was made in the chimney, and (horrible to relate!) the corpse of the daughter, head downward, was dragged therefrom. The body was quite warm. To this horrible mystery there is not as yet, we believe, the slightest clue.

Cumberbund seemed singularly interested in this affair. The next day, he asked me my opinion respecting the murders. I could merely agree with all Paris in considering them an insoluble mystery, and saw no means by which it would be possible to trace the murderer or murderers. The doors throughout the home had been deadbolted from the inside; likewise, the windows had all been discovered locked from the inside. There was some speculation that it was a murder-suicide, but the brute force required to dispatch of both women easily discounted such chatter.

“The Parisian police, so much extolled for *acumen*, are cunning, but no more,” Cumberbund said. “There is no method in their proceedings, beyond the method of the moment. As for these murders, let us enter into some examinations for ourselves, before we make up an opinion respecting them. An inquiry will afford us amusement”—I thought this an odd term, so applied, but said nothing—“and, besides, Le Bon once rendered me a service for which I am not ungrateful. We will go and see the premises with our own eyes.”

We proceeded at once to the Rue District. The house was readily found; for there were still many persons gazing up at the closed shutters, with an objectless curiosity, from the opposite side of the way. Before going in we walked up the street, turned down an alley, and then, again turning, passed in the rear of the building—Cumberbund, meanwhile examining the whole neighborhood, as well as the house, with a minuteness of attention for which I could see no possible object.

Retracing our steps, we came again to the front of the dwelling, rang, and, having shown our consulting detective credentials, were admitted by the agents in charge. We went upstairs—into the chamber where the body of Mademoiselle Schulberg had

been found, and where both the deceased still lay. The disorders of the room had not been disturbed since the investigation began. I saw nothing beyond what had been stated in the paper's story. Cumberbund scrutinized everything—not excepting the bodies of the victims. The examination occupied us until dark, when we took our departure. On our way home we stepped in for a moment at a Starbucks. He then asked me, suddenly, if I had observed any thing *peculiar* at the scene of the atrocity.

There was something in his manner of emphasizing the word “peculiar,” which caused me to shudder, without knowing why.

“No, nothing *peculiar*,” I said. “Nothing more, at least, than we both saw stated in the paper.”

“Dismiss the idle opinions of reporters,” said he. “The police are confounded by the seeming absence of motive—not for the murder itself—but for the atrocity of the murder. The suspect or suspects did not steal anything, least anything of value; neither of the women was sexually violated. The police are puzzled, too, by the seeming impossibility of reconciling the voices heard in contention, with the facts that no one was discovered upstairs but the dead bodies.

“The perpetrator of this evil deed escaped that locked house,” continued he, sipping from his skinny mocha (no whip). “Let us examine, each by each, the possible means of egress. It is clear that the assassins were in the room where the bodies were found, or at least in the room adjoining, when the party ascended the stairs. The doors and windows were all locked from the inside; no manner of escape would have been possible. Therefore, the only exit would have been through the chimney. I peered into the hearth, where the young woman's body was found, and saw that it narrowed as it reached the rooftop—allowing passage of an animal no larger than a house cat.”

“So the murderer is...a cat!” said I.

Cumberbund shook his head. “Oh, my dear friend, what an imagination you have,” he said. “Think, for a moment, about what kind of villain would be able to enter and exit a house *via a chimney*.”

I thought his question over for a moment, for it was an exceedingly perplexing one. And then it struck me. “A vampire!”

Cumberbund looked at me with a worried countenance upon his face. “Before you think me mentally ill, allow me to explain,” said I. “A vampire is the only *man* I know

who can commits terrifying acts of violence in the dead of night and can exit a locked room through a chimney—by transforming himself into a *bat*.”

“In some respects,” he replied, “your idea is not irrelevant. But while I do not disagree with you in the general, I must disagree with you in the specific—for, if our villain had been a vampire, would we not have found the bodies drained of blood?”

I conceded the point, but this left me more perplexed than ever.

“Let’s take another train of thought,” Cumberbund said. “If a thief had taken any money or valuables, why did he not take all? We must imagine, then, that the perpetrator is either very *stupid* or very, very *rich*. You have properly reflected upon the odd disorder of the chamber, we have gone so far as to combine the ideas of a strength superhuman, a butchery without financial motive, and an escape up a *chimney*—well, what impression have I made upon your fancy?”

I felt a creeping of the flesh as Cumberbund asked me the question. “Saint Nick.”

“Precisely,” said he, nodding in agreement. “Father Christmas. The Jolly Fat Man.”

“Santa Claus,” I said, my stomach turning in knots.

“Yes,” Cumberbund said. “As we all know, Santa Claus has superhuman strength and speed—for how else could one traverse the world in one night without exhaustion? And, using these same supernatural talents, Santa Claus has the means to enter and exit homes through chimneys, no matter their size—he can enter any home, in fact, by the same mysterious means. All of this I suspected, but it wasn’t until I observed the roof from the second story of a nearby whorehouse that I saw the most damning clue: reindeer droppings.”

“Wait, when did you find time go to a brothel?”

“It’s not important,” Cumberbund said. “All that matters is that we know the killer’s name.”

“And what do you suppose his motive was?”

“Ah,” said he. “You’ll notice that the murders occurred at about three in the morning on Christmas Day. Santa would have been in the midst of his annual rounds, bringing presents to the nice children and coal to the naughty boys and girls. When we visited the house in the Rue District, I noticed something interesting: no Christmas decorations were to be found in the house. A menorah in one of the downstairs windows confirmed my suspicion. This was not a Christian, but a Jewish household.”

“So you’re saying Santa Claus is an anti-Semite,” I said, “and he murdered them because they were Jewish.”

“Don’t be absurd,” Cumberbund said. “That’s hardly motive enough for murder.”

“It seemed to be enough for Hitler,” I reminded my friend.

“Touché,” said he. “But let’s not get sidetracked by Godwin’s Law. I believe we can chalk this up to a simple misunderstanding.”

“A misunderstanding!”

“Yes,” said he. “A misunderstanding. You see, the two women who were slain were not, in fact, the owners and permanent residents of the house. They were renting it from a Christian family whose two children are of the age to be visited by Saint Nick on Christmas. The Christians had recently left Paris, however, for Canadian soil, where the father was to be stationed for six months for business purposes. All of this I learned from interviewing one of the fine ladies at the aforementioned whorehouse.”

“Wait, you interviewed a *hooker*? I dare say, that’s the damndest investigative technique I’ve ever heard of!”

“It is but one of many of my *trade secrets*,” Cumberbund said, without a hint of a smile on his face.

“So the Jewish women were renting. I don’t see the connection,” I said.

“Let me connect the dots for you,” said he. “Santa Claus, unaware that the owners had rented the house out—I’m guessing they didn’t properly have their mail forwarded—slipped down the chimney with his bag of presents for the Christian children at approximately three o’clock Christmas morning, startling the women into a frenzy. Since they were Jewish, they were obviously unaccustomed to the sight of a giant, fat stranger in a red jumpsuit entering their home by magical means in the early morning hours of December the twenty-fifth. In their confusion, they attacked him.

“While Santa Claus was on a mission of goodwill, his mission is, as you can imagine, also one of *expedience*—one delay and hundreds of thousands of children’s Christmas mornings may be ruined. So he did the only thing he could do, under the circumstances: he pulled out a hunting knife and murdered the hysterical women to silence them. It was self-defense, really. He then laid a finger aside of his nose and, giving a nod, up the chimney he rose. He sprang to his sleigh, to his team gave a whistle, and away they all flew like the down of a thistle.”

I shook my head in disbelief.

“Now if you’ll excuse me,” Cumberbund said, rising from the table, “I must be off. I have several more interviews to conduct at the whorehouse before the night is through.”

“I dare say, you’ve all but solved the crime, Bandersnatch,” said I. “What could you possibly have left to gain from interviewing these Rue District call girls further?”

“Firstly, prostitutes who work out of brothels are not ‘call girls.’ They are simply *prostitutes*,” he said. “And secondly, I consider the case closed. My true purpose of re-visiting the Rue District—if you must know—is to sleep with as many of the prostitutes as I can afford.”

“Then what of St. Nick? Should we not turn over the fruits of our investigation to the authorities?”

“I have no intentions of doing any such thing. Is it not the season of forgiveness?” Cumberbund said. “Besides, I do not think Parisians have anything to fear from St. Nick...at least not until next Christmas.”

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Andrew Shaffer is a humorist and *New York Times* bestselling author whose works include Syfy's *How to Survive a Sharknado and Other Unnatural Disasters*, *Great Philosophers Who Failed at Love*, and the Goodreads Choice semifinalist *Fifty Shames of Earl Grey*.

He has appeared as a guest on FOX News, CBS, and NPR, and has been published in *Mental Floss*, *Maxim*, and *The Daily Beast*, among others. An Iowa native, Shaffer lives in Portland, Oregon, a magical land of flannel and craft beer.

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THE SHELF ON THE ELF: HOLIDAY LEFTOVERS.

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