

Weird Santa

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My parents were an odd pair. My mother was a former Catholic nun, though not yet former at the time of my conception. My father owned a pizza joint near Columbia University at the time my mother worked on finishing her doctorate in astrophysics, compliments of the Benedictines. They fell deeply in love despite struggling against it. They enjoyed their honeymoon here in dusty old Red Willow, New Mexico, and never went back to New York.

What they had in common eluded everyone save an oddball friend they shared. His name was *Nicolás*, pronounced in the Spanish way. I have not witnessed a happier union than my parents' in my three decades on the planet. Their love was an elemental force and its warming rays enfolded me as well.

I'm proud to have my mother's intelligence and my father's calm control. My father, even when it was clear he was right, would say, "Oh, they'll discover their mistake." He was far from weak, but his patience exasperated my mother and me. My mother on the other hand, at the slightest slight, fired off incomprehensible volleys at full volume until she sounded as though she'd gone mad. My position between them meant that I tolerated an awful lot of crap, but when my lid blew, the explosion could be heard for miles.

My appearance melded my mother's flaxen-haired Nordic beauty and my father's curly-haired Mediterranean swarthinness. On most days I felt attractive, but on others I considered myself a girl designed by committee.

On my fourteenth birthday, my mother and father, Hildegard and Oscar, told me what a "stellar" young woman I was "evolving" into. Those were their words.

"You seem as capable of taking care of yourself as I was at that age," my mother told me, failing to mention at my age she resided in the cushy digs of the Benedictine Order House in Binghamton, New York. "The time has come for your father and I to fulfill our own destinies. I'm afraid we must leave you."

"Leave? For how long?" I asked.

My father turned and looked at her.

"Probably forever, my dear, sweet child. We're going up The Mountain."

"What're you saying?" I realized I sounded whiny.

“We will be following our shaman to the top of The Mountain to learn how to bring the world into existence each morning. It takes many years of study. We must stay on when the old holy man dies.”

I knew by my father’s tone that their minds were made up. I suppressed a grin. *C’mon. Really? A shaman?* I thought, and started to cry.

“You’ll be very well provided for,” my father said, unable to look me quite in the eye.

“Mom. Dad. Are you serious? I’m fourteen years old. Not yet. Please,” I begged.

“Well, then, when, Hypatia?” my mother asked. “Many children lose their parents at a much younger age. We want you to have plenty of time to become who you are, dear, without our getting in your way.”

“Gee, thanks. How ‘bout three more years?” I asked, trying not to sound too pathetic.

They glanced at each other and then at me. They nodded.

“You have us for another three years, child,” my father said, giving me a gentle hug and a kiss slightly salty with tears.

My mother hugged us both. Ever the practical one of the pair, she advised me, “And please don’t waste us on silly teenage tantrums, dear. Grow out of them before we go away. You can have them later in life if you like. Many of our friends do. Red Willow’s just the place.”

It was some of the best advice I ever received. They were the three happiest years of my life, too—at least so far. And, contrary to what I expected, I miss my parents more as time goes by, not less.

* * *

On my seventeenth birthday, at our little family party before my friends arrived, my father handed me a thick investment portfolio carefully wrapped in sappy birthday paper.

“You will never have to worry, dear child.”

“I don’t anyway, Daddy. It doesn’t change anything; a total waste of time.”

“God bless you, Hypatia, wise beyond your years,” my mother remarked.

My mother handed me her own small package. It contained the deed to their house and the keys to her eighteen-inch Newtonian telescope, to the motorized drives that moved the beast. She lost her composure and ran to my father, burying her face in his shoulder and sobbing.

I nearly broke down myself when I was saved by the doorbell. It was my friend Ginnie from school. She held a shiny foil package tied with sparkling red ribbon—entirely her style. My parents introduced themselves and then disappeared into the kitchen.

When the bell rang again, it was their strange friend, the skinny old guy the rest of town called “Weird Santa.” Now I knew who their “shaman” was. I pointed Nicolás—if that was his name—towards the kitchen. I heard them exchange blessings, and then the back door closed. I told my friend Ginnie my parents were running away from home.

“Oh, my God,” she screeched. “What’re you going to do?”

“Uh, let me see. My parents will be out of the house, not coming back. I have the keys to the liquor cabinet. My friends are coming over. What d’you think I’m going to do?”

“Aren’t you sorry?” Ginnie asked.

“Of course I am,” I told her. “But that won’t bring them back. I’m trying to make the most of my changed life. What d’you expect? I’m a teenager.”

The doorbell rang. It was Helen and Alice and Alice’s ugly, big-eared boyfriend. Word must have spread. Someone invited a Turkish techno band called Brief Heavy Downpours who played loud enough to crack two windows. There was no one the neighbors could complain to any longer. I was now the *majordoma*. Too bad.

Somebody brought pizza, but it wasn’t from my Dad’s place. It was pretty bad. I had a long make-out with a boy I didn’t like and sampled more flavors of alcohol than I knew existed, including one with a worm in the bottle which the boy I didn’t like coaxed me into swallowing. It must have been the worm. I spent the night and next morning in the bathroom.

When I awoke at the crack of noon, I was alone in the big old hacienda. I thought of my parents and cried for three hours—on and off, but mostly on—until I was as dry as the desert wind blowing into Red Willow. I haven’t touched alcohol since. Or worms.

I never laid eyes on my mother and father again

* * *

I remained convinced the odd fellow who followed my parents from New York and hung around the house every year at Christmas was the same guy everyone in town called “Weird Santa.” I know he had something to do with getting the behemoth Newtonian telescope from upstate New York out here to New Mexico from my mother’s Order House.

Nearly all the citizens of Red Willow had an encounter with Weird Santa at least once in their lives. It was certain his mottled gray-and-white beard was genuine, yet no one in town

sported such chin whiskers. Where did he hide out the rest of the time? Many of us had received one of his insanely appropriate Christmas gifts, meticulously wrapped geometric solids that bore no relation to the shape of the object inside. He knew each of us by name and remembered enough of our situations to qualify as more than a casual acquaintance. The *Red Willow Reporter* offered a one-thousand-dollar prize to the person who could unequivocally identify him. It has gone unclaimed for the past five years.

Last December, a dozen years after my parents went away, I stayed with my friend Ginnie in Santa Fe the week before Christmas. She had a boutique of hand-made punk turquoise jewelry, all of it too big and painfully ugly. It was wildly popular, and she was considering opening a second shop in Red Willow. Weird Santa accosted me in the parking lot and added another bundle to my overladen arms.

“Your mother and father are very well, Hypatia. They are quite adept at calling up the moon and it is only a matter of time before they can call up the sun by themselves. Stay warm, child.”

Before I could peek around the packages he was gone, up the street handing out a box in silver foil to another bewildered shopper. I dropped his present fumbling with my car keys. It did not appear to be broken: nothing tinkled or rattled. I set my purchases in the back of the car and unwrapped it. One box nested inside another like Russian dolls. The gift was a log, not even a whole log, but a split log. *Just what I need*, I thought, and put it back among the other packages.

It began to snow around Española and did not let up for the rest of the drive home. The temperature had plummeted, too. I was eager to get warm and snug.

A yellow sticker hung from the front doorknob. It did not look like good news. I fetched the presents and the half-log from Weird Santa and rushed inside.

The house was freezing, probably just a degree or two above the pipes bursting. The notice on the door had been a disconnect order from the gas company. Just great. And no one available for the next three days to reconnect my service—and my heat.

It was exactly like my latest ex, Elliot, to maintain his nano music service but forget to pay the gas bill. He'd left two weeks before, saving me the trouble of kicking his ass out at Christmas. His crap was already rotting in the *Eco-Happy Landfill*. I felt much more agreeable since he left, the best Christmas present he could have given me. But it was good-bye to boyfriend number five, the fifth in five years, each one's name beginning with the letter “E,” the fifth letter. I wondered, *Was there some kind of message here or was every datable man in Red Willow a loser with the intellectual life of a mushroom?*

I put the log from Weird Santa in the fireplace in the *kiva* and lit it with the paper and cardboard from its wrappings. It caught quickly and put out a good deal of heat for its size. I

stretched out my fingers. I would be warm for ten minutes. What then? And I'd have to drain the water system before the pipes froze. Merry Fucking Christmas.

That dear little yule log continued to pump out heat and a cheering glow for three more hours. I gave up before the fire did and went to bed. Even my bedroom, furthest from the *kiva*, was toasty. I was beyond figuring it out just then. Weird Santa's gift was *insanely appropriate*. He'd known exactly what I needed. Merry Christmas.

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It is Christmas Eve again, a year later, my second holiday season without a boyfriend. If Weird Santa wants to bring me something I can really use, it'd be a man. I'm not ready to settle yet for just any man, though maybe I might in another week.

I regret there is still no boyfriend Number Six, but maybe that's for the best. I had many wonderful Christmases with my parents. It's the one time of year I associate particularly with them and their weird friend. I miss them, and I don't need another know-it-all boyfriend spoiling Christmas for me and getting me upset.

The log from Weird Santa is still burning twelve months later. It must be impregnated with some nasty petrochemicals, but it beats hauling firewood, cleaning out ashes, and choking on smoke. I don't know what's going on, but I'm sure it's not magical. My parents, I'm afraid, believed in such nonsense, and unusual abilities some called "paranormal" were ascribed to them. I lived with them for seventeen years and never witnessed anything that wasn't normal parental weirdness. Well, except maybe once.

I wanted to know if my parents were still doing it, you know, making love. I waited until I heard their bedroom door close, and sneaked around to the *portalo* at the back of the house and peeked through the window. They had candles burning everywhere. It was miraculous they didn't burn the house down. My parents floated several feet above their bed, nearly reaching the *vigas* on the ceiling, the sheets still wrapped around their legs and dangling down.

I ran from the sight. It scared me. But I never thought it was anything other than a mechanical contraption, probably of my mother's devising, to enhance their love-making. I supposed when you're in your forties you needed all the help you can get. My parents raised me to be a true skeptic. There's nothing I believe without unequivocal proof, even my dear mother and father. I never violated their privacy again no matter how bad curiosity had bit me.

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I glance up at the creche that was my mother's on the narrow ledge above the hive-shaped hearth. It is the only item I possess to mark Christmas. They are just an ordinary family fallen on hard times, to me, but they are held together by their love and they will make it.

I laugh at my first serious boyfriend Edward's coming over here at Christmas six years ago. He told me the creche was idolatry and my little live-potted Xmas tree was a pagan symbol used to invoke the devil. What a spoilsport. How to put a damp blanket on Christmas cheer.

"How about gingerbread men?" I asked him. "Does it promote cannibalism, you know, like the Last Supper?"

"Don't be ridiculous, Hypatia. You need to call on Jesus and beg His forgiveness."

"The hell with Jesus and the ass he rode in on," I told him.

Edward sputtered as though all the circuits in his brain were misfiring. He never got the words out. I grabbed his coat from a peg by the front door and threw it down the walkway after him. It landed in a puddle of slush: not my intention, but I wasn't sorry, either. What a drip.

* * *

I get up to make a cup of ginger tea with honey. It is only four o'clock and the sun is already setting. I remember what one of the old horsemen from the Pueblo said about the white man and Daylight Savings Time. He remarked it was like cutting one end off a blanket and sewing onto the opposite end to make it longer.

I pull my favorite chair in the kiva nearer the fire. Recalling boyfriends seems to be the theme of the evening. I take a sip of tea and give the perpetual log a little poke simply out of habit. It perks up a bit and I nestle into the chair.

Feeling I had learned my lesson dating a Christian, I found it easy to fall for Ephraim, a Jew from Santa Fe whose parents wrote a three-volume set on the diaspora in New Mexico. At least he could quote a few things not in the Talmud. He was a sweet man who didn't push his religion. I found other things to do on his Sabbath. But his dietary proscriptions drove me crazy.

Like a devoted girlfriend, I learned to cook according to his requirements, not that it occurred to me he might accommodate himself to a couple of my customs. That year I went all-out making and baking the Christmas foods I remembered as a girl, but done according to his religion—mostly. I liked him a lot, even if actual love was still on the back burner.

"What are these tiny red specks in the scalloped potatoes, Hypatia?" he asked.

"Small bits of bacon," I told him.

"Bacon!" he screamed.

"Let loose a little, Ephraim. It's Christmas. Besides, I'm pretty sure it's kosher bacon."

“Kosher bacon? Are you trying to send me to *Gehinnom*?”

I stood up and slammed down the casserole baking dish so hard it cracked in half. I nudged Ephraim up out of his chair and escorted him by the elbow to the front door.

“No, just trying to get you out my house and out of my life. Your going to purgatory is up to Jehovah and, from what I read, he doesn’t like anybody. He’s a mean old white man with hemorrhoids and an electric finger.”

I flung his jacket after him, knocking his yarmulke, his beanie, into a half-melted puddle. Well, maybe I’d been aiming that time.

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In the last of the day’s light I see it is snowing lightly: big, fluffy flakes. It is supposed to develop into a fairly strong storm with a foot of snow possible by morning. I am glad I have nowhere to go tonight, though I wouldn’t mind if someone visited me.

With boyfriend Number Three, I eschewed Christians and Jews, and sidestepped Muslims and Mormons, and went straight for a born-again atheist. I consulted an analyst for my depression and sorry love-life, but it developed rather quickly into something more. I thought it might be unethical, but the doctor assured me no one would know. I wasn’t quite sure what that had to do with my therapy.

Dr. Egad De Bockel came to Red Willow a decade before from Holland and set up his practice to serve well-heeled clients—as in high-heels. They came here from the big cities in Colorado, Texas, and California. He assured me I was living in a “hat-sized fable” and that I could have any man I put my mind to wanting, even him.

Egad was a far better lover than either Edward or Ephraim, and he treated me as though I were special to him in ways beyond mere doctor-patient. I was naive back then and fell in love with his handsome goatee which he employed to tickle me into howling ecstasy.

Dr. De Bockel did not believe in God, but he had his own religion of psychiatry in which everything I did meant something else. I started saying the opposite of what I intended in hopes he might mistakenly take it the right way. I became so tangled in knots and subterfuges that I thought of seeing another analyst to get myself sorted out, but it felt like cheating.

The break-up with Egad happened once more on Christmas Eve. He questioned why I had a little tree with lights in the kiva.

“That tree is a symbol of gross capitalistic commercialism. It doesn’t belong in the home of any sane person who doesn’t believe in fairy stories,” he chortled.

“Listen, you affected windbag,” I replied, “that gross commercialism pays your way. If not for capitalism, there’d be no one with money to fritter away on getting analyzed, that’s for sure. They’d have to consult a genuine witch doctor who’d at least shrink their heads for real.”

Dr. De Bockel huffed and puffed and swelled himself up like an indignant blowfish. He stormed out the front door. Halfway down the walk, he turned for his tweedy little hat. I tossed it to him like a frisbee. The hat circled around his head and plopped in a patch of mud. I hadn’t meant it, but that did nothing to keep me from laughing hysterically.

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It appears I will have to spend this Christmas alone. I decide to soothe myself with a hot bubble bath and a second cup of ginger tea. The instant I turn off the tap, ready to climb in, I hear a crash from the kiva that sounds like the perpetual log tumbling out of the fireplace. I grab my bathrobe from the hook and go to investigate.

Soot fans out from the hearth. I discover a plate of sugar cookies and glass of milk sitting on the coffee table. It has to be Weird Santa. He’s got it ass-backwards.

He’s left a package in luminescent paper beside the hearth. The fire feels good. I hold the present against my breasts and turn around to warm my backside. I pull at the illuminated ribbon. The present puffs up several times in size but remains flat. It feels like heavy fabric or leather.

What tumbles from the neon paper is what appears to be a vinyl pool inflatable in the shape of a man. I stretch it to its full length: about six feet, anatomically correct. It makes me laugh. The laughter feels good on Christmas Eve. I guess I got my wish after all.

“Merry Christmas, Weird Santa,” I holler up the flue, knowing he went to a bit of trouble to make it look like that’s how he’d come and gone.

The inflatable is a sickly pinkish color, not quite opaque, and he’s a ginger. The valve is where you might expect. Naughty old Santa. The foreskin is the valve cap. I laugh so hard I cannot get any air into my new blow-up beau.

I revisit my memory of Number Four, the tortured Goth poet too frail to consider manual labor, which he saw as demeaning. He affected to be the Edgar Allen Ginsberg of Goth poetry. His poems, all the rage among the trust-fund hippies of Red Willow, were depressing. He was depressing.

We spent Christmas Eve together two years ago, the year before Elliot. I came home late after staying to help my friend Ginnie in her punk jewelry boutique. Edgar sat in the kiva stark naked, all but tapping his foot with impatience.

“Where were you?” he asked, glowering.

“Earning our daily bread, dearest. Ginnie stayed open late. We had customers.”

Edgar stood up, growing erect, and motioned me to my knees. I was in no mood. I hoped his ass was getting cold. I put my lips around the tip of his penis.

“You are an imbecile, Hypatia. You are so literal. *Blow job* is just an expression, an idiom. What do you think will be accomplished by blowing?”

“That I’d get out of having to give you a blow job, you jerk. Out. Right now.”

I pushed him by degrees toward the front door and opened it.

“Hypatia, are you crazy? It’s snowing.”

I gave him a playful push and he sprawled in an icy puddle. Before he could scramble back up the walkway, I flung his car keys at him and wished him a Happy Holiday. Pulling the blinds helped conserve heat. I donated his clothes to the homeless shelter.

* * *

I light the old railroad lantern that had been my father’s. It casts a cheering glow. Weird Santa’s yule log flares a little. I feel sleepy, and lightheaded from blowing up the mannikin. It is nearly fully inflated. I lie down on my back and put my head against his belly, feeling comfy and warm. I fall asleep, wishing I had wished to see my parents again instead.

* * *

I awake startled and gasping for air. The Inflatable Man has moved, or at least it seemed like it in my half-wakeful state. I must have poked a hole in him. I hear a leak, like a sigh. I turn around. His chest heaves slowly and rhythmically. This is one realistic toy. I wonder where Weird Santa got it. Ginnie would get a hoot out of having one.

The blow-up dummy’s eyes open and it sits up. I jump up and grab the poker, brandishing it like Hypatia the Amazon. He does not seem the least bit threatened.

“All right, buster, get up. Move slowly or I’ll bash your head in.”

“Why do wish to hurt me, Hypatia? I am your Christmas present. Don’t you want to play with me before you break me?”

It turns its head and looks at me. I lean forward and rest my hand on its shoulder. It is warm and firm, not like a hollow man, a balloon man. It must be a robotic toy. *But how did it come all flat and folded up like that?* I wonder.

“You breathed life into me,” it says in a beautiful baritone. “Now I am yours.”

Yeah, in my dreams, I think.

“But you are awake,” it says.

“Oh, so, a toy that reads minds,” I beam at it.

“I am not a toy. I am a man.”

His penis swells and inches upward.

“Did Weird Santa send you?”

“Santa Nicolás brought me, yes, but you breathed life into me. I am yours.”

What is going on, I ask myself.

“It is Christmas. I am your present. Let’s be friends.”

He sounds like a *Forrest Gump* simpleton.

“I find it hard to believe in Christmas. It’s mostly for children,” I tell him.

“Then be a child, Hypatia.”

“Please don’t tell me what to do, uh... uh... What’s your name?”

“I don’t have one until you give me a name.”

I think for a minute. It will most definitely not begin with the letter “E.”

“How about ‘Number Six,’” I suggest. “‘Six’ for short.”

“I am Six,” he says, beaming with pride.

His voice reminds me of a cello: resonant, deep, and sad. His beautiful, rugged body distracts me so that I can no longer concentrate on keeping straight what’s real and what isn’t. I tell him to sit by the fire while I look for something of Elliot’s to hang on Six’s well-built frame.

I open the bottom drawers of the chest where Elliot kept some of his old clothes, hoping I might have overlooked something. He was about the same size. There’s a worn pair of Levi’s and a threadbare gray gym sweatshirt. I just hope nothing rubs off. I like Six just as he is.

Six gets into the jeans and sweatshirt, and I swear he is almost as sexy with his clothes on. We lie opposite each other on the sofa and wiggle our bare feet beneath the cushions. Six pulls a slightly tattered blanket over us. It has one end cut off and sewn coarsely to the other.

“Where did this come from, Six?”

“I guess it must be my baby blanket,” he says, breaking into a grin.

“There’s something you’re not telling me.”

“I am the gift, you are the recipient, Santa Nicolás is the messenger, and your parents are the givers.”

“You saw them?”

“Not actually, but they send you their love. They have sent me to you as an expression of their love. I am your present. I am yours now, all yours.”

I am too tired to argue or probe further. Moving to lie next to him, I snuggle against his chest. Six wraps his arms around me. Knowing he came from my parents, I feel comfortable and safe. I fall asleep listening to his heartbeat.

* * *

I awake alone, tangled in the tattered blanket. The sofa is not the best place for a long lie-down. I knew it had to be a dream, and feel sorry that someone like Six is not real. I smell bacon frying and sit bolt upright on the lumpy sofa. There is clattering in the kitchen.

Six is at the stove frying bacon and making a large omelet with jalapeños and cheese. Bread pops up from the toaster, and he reaches for butter and cherry jam. He senses my standing there and turns around, switching on his smile.

“Merry Christmas, Hypatia. Are you hungry?”

“I’m famished.”

“Go sit down. I’ll bring it to the table.”

He pours a mug of coffee and, adding a splash of cream, hands it to me. Somehow he knows how I like my coffee. He brings a tray with two plates of toast, omelet, and three strips of bacon each. He seems amused by my voracious appetite, watching me intently as I devour each mouthful. We discuss plans for a Christmas supper and manage to agree on everything. I’m sure the real Six will turn up sooner or later, the one with the horns.

After breakfast, he hurries off with the dishes. He begins washing them and I point out to him there is a dishwasher.

“I do not know how to operate one,” he tells me. “Do you need a license?”

“My ex seemed to think so, but, no, you don’t need a license as long as it stays in the house.”

He doesn’t realize I’m joking. I find that endearing somehow. I head off to the bathroom. The bubble bath has gone flat. I decide to have a long shower instead, for as long as the meager hot water holds out.

I shut my eyes and let the soothing water stream over my face. *Ahh*. When I open them again, Six is peeking around the shower curtain, smiling at me.

“Why don’t you hop in?” I tell him. “No. Take your clothes off first.”

“Right,” he says.

Six’s skin is less puckered. He has filled out nicely and his fleshtone looks more natural. It is browner. His hair, too, is now more auburn. He is quite a specimen of manhood.

Six steps into the shower and giggles like a boy. He wiggles around and tries to get behind me.

“It tickles,” he howls.

I wouldn’t be surprised if it were his first shower. The water seems to bring out his “new” smell, like something starched or sized when it gets wet. I show him how to adjust the stream by turning the showerhead. I have never known a man willing, even eager, to learn something from a woman. It’s a first. He thanks me. Am I dreaming *now*? I don’t know whether to stick myself or him with a pin. Will I wake up? Will he deflate?

Six takes the washcloth and soap from me and begins washing my breasts. He lets the washcloth drop and continues with just his hands and the bar of soap. It is exhilarating, then exciting. He washes me everywhere, slowly, caressingly. He tilts my head back and shampoos my hair, running his fingers through it, pulling me back beneath the water to rinse me off.

“Your turn,” I say.

As soon as I touch him with the soapy rag, he laughs. He jumps around so much I could hold the washcloth still and let him do the work. I think the soap has gotten rid of that “new man” smell. When I cup his penis in my soapy hands, his little friend wakes from his slumber.

Six lifts me by my waist and I put my arms around his neck and wrap my legs around his hips. Despite the slightly awkward position, he enters me with ease. His movements are masterful: no need for instruction here. He knows precisely what I want. He has the loping grace and rhythm of a cat, of a mountain lion.

At the moment of our shared climax, the shower grows noticeably warmer, steamy hot. I experience an orgasm throughout my body, everywhere Six has touched me, everywhere the water flows, from my ears to my toes. I look deep into his eyes.

“It is hard to breathe,” he says.

“Yes, that happens,” I tell him. “Next time, we’ll go a little slower.”

After our shower, Six enfolds me in a warm towel and rubs me dry. I scurry off to the bedroom. The house feels chilly after the hot shower. *Where’d he get a warm towel?* I wonder. The man is full of mysteries.

I get dressed in a green skirt and red sweater, going intentionally sappy for Christmas. I find a pair of stretched-out old wool hiking socks for Six. He’s in the kitchen preparing the supper we’d discussed, dressed again in the old jeans and sweatshirt. I hand him the oversized socks. He puts them on, then goes back to stirring something in a saucepan.

All the supper choices are mine except one. Six wanted to make gingerbread cookies. He’s a gentle and agreeable man. I hope I’m not railroading him.

“Tomorrow we have to get you boots and a jacket,” I tell him. “And gloves.”

“That would be nice,” he says.

“Sure it would when I’m the one paying,” I grouse.

“I came here with nothing. I came here empty, Hypatia. These are not even my clothes. You gave me everything and you filled me up. I have only myself to give you.”

I put my arms around him and cry into his shoulder.

“I did not mean to be so mean, Six. I’m sorry, especially on Christmas.”

He wipes my tears with his thumbs.

“It is time for the gingerbread men to be born,” he says.

He opens the oven and grabs the cookie sheet with his bare hand. I scream, but he does not seem hurt and does not react to my loud cry. Instead, he smiles. Maybe he thinks it was a squeal of delight. He certainly has a high tolerance for heat.

The aroma of gingerbread made with real ginger returns me to girlhood. Six scoops white frosting into a pastry bag, twists it closed, and hands it to me. I begin decorating the gingerbread men. I give them tiny male appendages. Six laughs. I have not had this much fun at Christmas since my parents went away.

When I've put icing on roughly half the cookies, Six takes the pastry bag from me and decorates the remaining asexual ones. These he gives sugary breasts and little vaginal "V"s.

"If I put the cookie sheets back in the oven, maybe we'll get a bunch of gingerbread kids," he suggests.

It is his first intentional joke. Six hands me a steaming mug of ginger tea—prepared when I wasn't paying attention—and waves me toward the kiva.

A second squall of snow has begun, already a few inches, yet the flagstone walkway is perfectly clear. I ask Six when he shoveled.

"After our shower and before making supper," he tells me.

"But the walkway is still dry."

"It must still be warm."

"Warm?" I ask him.

"Here, taste this," he remarks, putting a spoon to my lips.

I don't know if he's trying to distract me or really wants to know what I think of his sauce for the scalloped potatoes. In either case it worked. It's delicious. I return to my mug of tea. I feel like a child again: warm and cozy and cared for. It is my fervent wish not to have to send Six down the walkway on Christmas—or any other day.

* * *

I awaken from my doze. Six stands at the hearth. He hears me and turns around. The perpetual yule log flares up even though he has no tools in his hands and the screen is closed. The wind moans. I become engulfed in scrumptious aromas, each of them distinct, and breathe them in.

"Come, Hypatia. Our meal is ready," he says, offering me a hand to get up from the sofa.

I open the oven and peek at the beautifully crisped roast duckling. The orange and honey sauce bubbles on a back burner. The casserole dish of scalloped potatoes garnished with bits of bacon and parsley sits on the tile counter. A loaf of bread, bursting from its pan, sits on the cutting board.

“Have a seat,” Six tells me. “Let me serve you.”

He brings in bowls and platters of food, including a perfectly carved duck. He sits down across from me in the dining area, his chest puffed out with pride.

“It is beautiful, Six,” I tell him. “Oh, don’t forget the candles.”

As I scoot my chair closer, I see a flash at the corner of my eye. Six is withdrawing his finger from the now-burning candle.

“You lit that with your finger,” I tell him more than ask him.

“Yes,” he admits.

“And the yule log and the hot shower and the walkway and the towel?”

“Yes, yes, yes, yes.”

“How do you do it?”

“I don’t know,” he replies. “But I can’t keep supper warm forever. You must say a thanksgiving. It is customary.”

“Why me?”

“We are beneath your roof.”

I am speechless, a condition my father believed impossible. Many impossible things happen at Christmas, I guess, and if they happen then they must be possible.

“I thank my parents, Oscar and Hildegard, for building this roof over our heads, for providing this wonderful meal with the proceeds from stock sales, but most of all for the man they sent me who made every tidbit and morsel with love. And Merry Christmas to Weird Santa Nicolás, too, whoever he is.”

Six touches my lips with his finger.

“Thank you,” he says, and scoops a heap of steaming potatoes onto my plate.

Throughout the meal I glance past Six at the gingerbread people on their cookie sheets on the tile counter behind him, basking like naked sunbathers. I couldn't possibly bite off an arm or a leg or a head. I plot to save them.

"Why don't we get a little Christmas tree tomorrow?" I suggest. "They'll probably be free, since it will be the day after. We'll cut our own."

"That would be fun," Six replies, licking orange sauce from his fingers.

"I'll get red and green ribbon and we'll hang the gingerbread cookies on the tree," I add.

"OK," he agrees. "Then we can admire them every evening with a glass of milk after supper."

I laugh. If Six learns any faster, I may find it hard to keep up with him.