

The Christmas Village

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Lorraine sits at the kitchen table and stares at the sludge in her coffee cup. It doesn't seem like Christmas. She tries to remember the last time she was in a holiday mood — ten years ago.

Howard pushes open the kitchen door with his foot, his arms laden with fluffy rolls of cotton batting. His hair is dusted with snow. He smiles; there is a bounce in his walk. He squeezes through the doorway to the living room, whistling “Joy to the World” so off-key it is unrecognizable — except to Lorraine, who has been listening to it for months.

She shoves herself away from the table and pours another cup of coffee. She slumps into the chair in her pink fuzzy bathrobe and warms her hands on the steaming mug. Lorraine wishes she could go back and nip Howard's obsession with Christmas in the bud. With the clarity of hindsight, she knows exactly how it started — and it was all her fault.

The twinkling lights from the living room swim in the dark liquid abyss of her mug. She stirs the coffee into a whirlpool that sucks down each of the colored reflections, pulling her down into a melancholic recollection of Christmas past.

Ten years ago, Howard did not even shop for his own undershorts. Lorraine suspected something was afoot when he agreed to accompany her to Ralph's Discount World the week before Christmas. Howard pointed out each tinsel-draped display of marked-down Christmas items, every glittering gewgaw and cheap stocking-stuffer, as though he were visiting from a small village in

Eastern Europe. They lingered particularly long in the aisles crammed to the ceiling lights with Christmas decorations, even though their attic held enough lights and ornaments to festoon a forty-foot Douglas fir without cheating a single branch or needle of its cheerful burden.

Howard stopped as if a wad of chewing gum anchored him to the floor. “Look at those,” he called to Lorraine. “And they’re on sale, too.” He stood in front of the shelves laden with cheap little made-in-Taiwan cardboard houses, the kind that one would arrange into a circular village beneath the Christmas tree on a fluffy skirt of cotton batting to represent snow, with one bulb from a string of lights stuck into the round hole at the back of each house to show that miniature families lived in them.

Lorraine thought the toy houses looked especially cheap that year. The glistening mica snow had been sprayed at angles from which no storm could approach unless it had descended out of a whirlwind, depositing a blanket of snow even on the underside of the eaves. The spongy lichen trees had been glued to the bases in postures leaning into the make-believe blizzard rather than away from its blasts. The cellophane windows had been stuck on so haphazardly they could have been designed for miniature fun-houses. The church steeple slouched at a precarious angle, and the small shops were marked with crooked signs announcing “Candies Shoppe” and “Toys Shoppe”.

“You can’t be serious, Howard,” Lorraine said, moving aside to let the bottle-neck of shoppers pass around them. “They’re ugly, and cheap-looking, and they’re probably a fire hazard. See? They don’t have any UL stickers on them.”

Howard seemed disappointed by her remark. “But the price is certainly right: \$9.99 for the whole village. Come on, Lorraine. I never say a word about how you spend our money. Are you telling me I can’t get one lousy little Christmas village for ten bucks?”

“It’s not the money, Howard. It’s how cheaply-made and tacky they are. What on earth would you want them for?”

“Because I had one as a kid. I like the stupid thing, OK? Do I have to sign a voucher or something?”

Lorraine relented, deciding that \$9.99 was not worth an argument one week before Christmas. That was her first mistake. She told herself at least it will be under the tree. She had enough long, spiralled icicles and spread-winged angels to conceal a model of Manhattan beneath the lowest branches.

Howard’s impatience with the rest of their shopping caused Lorraine to suspect that her husband had got what he set out to find once the “Olde Tyme Xmas Village” had been loaded into their cart. She also suspected that, back at home, she would find a wrinkled, dog-eared page in the Sunday advertising supplement with just such an item in it, though photographed from the first models to roll down the assembly line rather than the tired little houses churned out by the weary Taiwanese trying to make a few extra yen in overtime before Christmas.

She wondered what they thought of the odd little trinkets they made, such as Pez dispensers and Groucho Marx glasses. After making all these Christmas villages would they think that every American house had a huge round hole in its windowless back side? What would they imagine it was for?

That year’s Christmas presents — mostly electronic gadgets in large boxes packed with molded styrofoam — did not allow enough room under the tree for Howard’s village, so the shops and houses were set up in a Main Street straight line on the mantel. Howard removed the clock, the

brass candlesticks and Lorraine's paperweight collection, setting the village up on fresh rolls of Red Cross cotton.

Lorraine considered Howard's arrangement suitably festive, so she raised no strong objections. She did not care for the effect created by the portraits of Howard's grandparents hung above the mantel, the old couple staring down sternly like disapproving deities plotting an assortment of natural disasters about to befall Howard's cheerful village, but she let all of that pass. She doubted the Christmas village would survive the summer in their hot attic. What didn't fuse together in the August heat would probably come unglued. She needed only to worry that the discount stores would again carry the cheap cardboard shops and houses. Maybe she could write a letter to Underwriters' Laboratories informing them of the potential hazard.

The holidays over, Lorraine looked forward to having an uncluttered mantel for the next eleven months. Howard did not give her that long, however, to take a holiday away from the thought of his village. That June, on their vacation trip through the Ozarks, Howard stopped at every gift shop and tourist shack selling handicrafts. Unfortunately, he hit it lucky at the first such shop, a ramshackle addition to the gas station, where he found a pair of popsicle-stick log cabins with papier-mâché fir trees. The miniature cabins had been intended as holders for salt and pepper shakers. Howard planned to drill holes in the backs of the log cabins large enough for a seven-watt Christmas tree bulb and asked Lorraine if she had any use for a couple of extra salt and pepper shakers.

She did not say the first thing that came to her. "Why not make snowmen out of them?" she said instead.

Howard heard none of the sarcasm in her suggestion. “Great idea!” he said, and was then on the lookout for a drugstore to buy more cotton. Lorraine and the kids stayed in the car, sipping their warm milkshakes.

In late June it had not been so difficult to put aside thoughts of snow on the roof and Howard’s village coming down from the attic. But by the end of October, around the time the first stores began putting up their Christmas displays, Lorraine could not avoid the subject. Howard brought out the boxes he had stored in the hall closet and began unpacking his summer’s worth of acquisitions in miniature real estate. He even drew up a blueprint for the layout of his village.

It became clear to Lorraine that the boom-town Christmas village would no longer fit on the mantel. Howard set to work out in the garage, building plywood extensions to the mantel. She said nothing, having learned her lesson with her fanciful suggestion to turn salt shakers into snowmen. Her sewing basket had been ravaged and now the button-eyed miniature snowmen stared at her from across the room.

Each holiday season the village grew, as though land developers had descended upon the bucolic tranquility in speculative hordes. Howard spent their vacation trips and three-day weekends scouting garage sales, flea markets, and church bazaars in search of more items for his village. The miniature houses were no longer his main concern; he had dozens still to be unpacked and worked into the snowy setting. He now needed all the things that went with village life: the streetlamps, mailboxes, doghouses, cars, pedestrians, skaters, sledders, carolers, and snowmen.

Lorraine had been dropping hints to their relatives and friends not to buy any more miniature items for Howard. The village had expanded to cover all three windowless walls in their living

room, reaching upwards on additional shelves nearly to the ceiling, and downwards two more shelves practically to the floor.

But Lorraine's request was ignored. It was easy for people to shop for Howard. They didn't have to think about what to get him and he liked what he got. He could always use a few more streetlamps, especially the battery-operated kind that did not need to be wired up.

Howard and Lorraine tended to get more company during recent Christmases than they had been used to. Howard's village became an attraction, while Lorraine's Christmas tree — as meticulously decorated as ever — was all but ignored. Howard's village became the reason people visited. They never got further than the living room, content to gaze at it for hours on end, delighting in finding scenes they hadn't noticed on earlier passes.

Their enjoyment puzzled Lorraine. The village was cute and clever only from a distance. All the magic disappeared for her upon closer inspection. Nothing matched the style of anything else. The scale of things was way off. There were streetlamps from an old train set that towered above the church steeple. There were sleds so huge they could only have fit into the houses through the large round holes at the back. The skaters had come from so many flea markets that they were of such unmatched sizes and periods of dress they seemed like a freakish carnival skating across the glitter-dusted mirror. There were toy cars unable to fit in any garage and pedestrians tall enough to look face to face with second-story occupants gazing out their crooked cellophane windows. To Lorraine, it was as though Charles Dickens and Rod Serling had collaborated on a theme park.

Didn't anyone notice all these discrepancies, Lorraine wondered? Were they simply dazzled by all the blinking lights? Try as she would, she could not manage to see the charm of Howard's Olde Tyme Xmas Village.

Now there was less and less of each year that Lorraine did not have to look at this surreal concoction of cardboard, plastic, wood, and ceramic pretending to be a normal village. Last year it had taken him until the middle of April to put everything away and allow Lorraine to reclaim the living room.

This year, Howard had told her he planned to get a head start on setting up his village over the extended Labor Day weekend. Out came the boxes and rolls of cotton, the plywood shelves, and the stapling gun.

Lorraine had wanted a quiet barbecue in their back yard with just a few friends over. She could hardly get Howard to take ten minutes away from his project.

“Howard, please come out here and mingle, will you?” she called.

“In a minute, dear. Just let me finish up this one string of lights.”

“All right, but then that’s it. This is a holiday.”

Howard eventually came out to the patio. It had been a long string of lights. The hamburgers and chunks of Italian sausage were indistinguishable from the unlit briquets at the edge of the barbecue kettle.

No tactic Lorraine could devise ever got Howard to give up or delay his project. She did vow to herself, however, that it’d be over her dead body that the Christmas village would be allowed to sprawl beyond the living room. It was the only time she’d put her foot down.

By Halloween, Howard had the shelves installed in the living room and began setting out the first houses according to his numbered and color-coded master plan. He relinquished part of one evening to carve a jack-o’-lantern, and then went back to rolling out the cotton. On Thanksgiving,

Lorraine had to enlist her sister's husband to carve the turkey. Howard had become entangled in the public works project that would bring light to Main Street.

Janet and Ricky rarely brought their friends over once their father had started setting things up in the living room. It was not so much his peculiar obsession that embarrassed them. Rather, their friends became so engrossed in looking at all the miniature scenes and in watching their father set up a new neighborhood that they hardly paid attention to Janet and Ricky.

Ricky now let his girlfriend wait on the front porch, ever since she had got so caught up making suggestions about how to place a row of houses on a terraced hill of cotton that she and Ricky missed the movie they had been looking forward to for weeks. Ricky wished for a father with more normal pastimes: one who watched every football game broadcast and simply grunted in response to all remarks and questions.

“Hand me that hardware store over there, will you, Ricky?”

“Pop, where's it all going? I mean, don't you ever stop? It's like you're still playing with toys. Here.”

“Thanks. It needs a new bulb. The box is under that roll of cotton. I guess I never thought of it that way: playing with toys. Maybe you're right,” he said, chuckling.

With that single remark, all the air was let out of Ricky's argument. You just couldn't insult him enough to get him to give it up. The whole family had tried.

This year, Howard added a new feature to enable the children and shorter adults to see how those on the upper tier of shelves lived. He built a wooden platform with three steps. To the high railing at the front he attached a small telescope. Lorraine and Janet and Ricky knew at once from

where Howard had drawn his inspiration: from all the scenic overlooks with stubby, coin-operated telescopes at which they'd spent a few moments during their vacation trips to gift shops.

The living room furniture was clustered in the center of the room, sofa and chairs back to back, with the viewing platform at one end of the group, nearly equidistant from the three walls. As a touch of authenticity, Howard placed a hand-lettered sign, "Please Watch Your Step", on each of the three risers. Janet's calligraphy set had been nearly depleted of inks before her father got the lettering just right. He had chosen Old English script, in keeping with the holiday theme.

The whack! whack! of Howard's staple gun awakes Lorraine from her depressing reverie, driving the thought of Christmas into her. Whack! It is nearly ten o'clock and she's still sitting in her bathrobe. She intends to keep the few remaining Christmas customs that Howard has not ruined for her, and hopes she has enough energy and enthusiasm left to make at least one batch of rum-balls.

The steady tramping of visitors up the walkway has not been impeded by the heavy accumulation of wet snow. If anything, it seems to add to their enjoyment of the season and their appreciation of Howard's village, which they can view in all its snow-blanketed charm without having to shovel any of it.

Lorraine grows tired of answering the front door. She is getting nowhere with her Christmas baking. She scrawls a note and tapes it to the door, asking visitors to let themselves in. She sets out two boot trays and unrolls plastic runners from the entrance hall to the observing platform. If they had charged only a quarter per head, Lorraine figures, they could have paid off the mortgage. But Howard objects to the idea. It doesn't coincide with his notion of the spirit of Christmas.

What *is* Christmas about, Lorraine wonders? She had once looked forward to the holidays and enjoyed every minute of their brief stay. Howard's stupid village has ruined all of that for her. She now dreads the holidays and overlooks any reminder of their coming as handily as she tucks away and tries to lose her dental check-up reminders. Why can't she get into the spirit of Howard's innocent pastime? Everyone else seems to enjoy it, even the strangers steadily trudging up their unshovelled walkway. What is she missing? What's wrong with her?

Every Christmas tale requires its King Herod or its Ebenezer Scrooge, just for contrast. Lorraine has somehow been cast in the role without ever trying out for the part. She vows to change that. After all, conversions are an integral part of Christmas lore, too. She takes her last tray of cookies out of the oven and makes herself a pot of tea, which she laces liberally with the liquor remaining from the batch of rum-balls. Nearly a quarter of the bottle spills into the teapot.

Lorraine settles on the sofa next to Howard, allowing the glimmer and glint of miniature streetlamps to sparkle in her blurry vision. The Christmas warmth spreads through her like a viscous fog. She is a little drunk and begins to feel sorry. She takes hold of Howard's hand and squeezes it. Not feeling up to words or apologies at the moment, she leans against his shoulder and hums, getting sleepier and cozier with each sip of tea.

The periphery of her vision suffers a rum-induced collapse. Lorraine can no longer focus on the room or the furniture. She sees only the village, sparkling with tiny lights and mica-crustured snow. It's like being outside in mid-winter without the inconvenience of a bulky coat and sound-damping hats and scarves. The blasts of pelting snow cannot touch her.

The doorbell rings in the middle of her reverie. Howard pulls himself up from the sofa and opens the front door. A six-year-old boy has come to see the miniature village. His snowsuit looks

as though it has been pumped full of air. He waddles along the path of plastic runners, the snow slipping from his head and shoulders in muffled thwumps.

Howard helps the boy out of his hooded snowsuit. An oval of bright red skin lights up the center of his face.

“My mom says I can only stay till six. We’re going to open all our presents after supper.”

“We’ll let you know when it’s time,” Howard assures him. He takes hold of the boy’s hand and helps him climb onto the viewing platform. “Watch your step.”

Lorraine extracts herself from between the sofa cushions. She feels as though she has been swallowed up in a snow bank: a deep, warm, sleepy pile of snow. She brings out a plate of her cookies and a glass of milk for the boy. He hesitates, as though he doesn’t know whether to admire the cookies or eat them. He takes a bite of a sugar-sprinkled butter cookie and puts his eye up to the toy telescope.

“Neat,” he says, swinging the telescope around and nearly toppling from the platform.

“Why not come down for a minute?” Howard admonishes. “You’ll be able to see the streets on the bottom much better. Just don’t touch anything.”

“I won’t.” The boy walks around the room, leisurely viewing one tier at a time. Lorraine follows him with the plate of cookies and a cordless vacuum.

“What’s your name?” Lorraine asks.

“Michael.”

“Well, it’s almost time to go, Michael. You wanted us to remind you.”

“Oh. But I don’t really have to go home. Mommy and Daddy are fighting again, so I always go outside to play when they fight. I just came over here ’cuz I got cold. I saw the Christmas town last week. Can I stay a little more?”

“We’ll have to ask your parents,” Lorraine says.

“OK,” Michael replies, and recites his phone number to her as if it were a commercial jingle.

Lorraine goes into the kitchen. Her tongue has grown a little thick. She can hardly think how to phrase what she wants to say to the boy’s mother.

The woman on the other end of the line sounds distraught. Her voice is all in her nose, as though she had a terrible cold, or has been crying.

“He talked about that toy village of yours all week,” the woman says. “We’re not quite ready for Christmas yet. But I don’t want him getting in your way. Just send him home when he gets to be a bother.”

“But it’s dark out,” Lorraine reminds her.

“He knows the way home. Just tell him when you’ve had enough of him. Thanks for your trouble. And Merry Christmas.”

“Merry Christmas,” Lorraine echoes. She holds the buzzing receiver; she isn’t quite sure what’s been decided on. She gets herself a cup of black coffee and sets the dining room table.

When Janet and Ricky return from last-minute shopping with their friends, they say nothing about the extra place setting and the little boy who announces to them, “This is where I’m gonna sit.” When their father sets Michael on his shoulders, straddling his ears, and takes him on a close-up tour of the upper terraces of the village, Janet asks her mother what’s going on.

“Your father keeps busy with his hobby,” Lorraine says. “Here, bring the casserole along, will you? Maybe I have too much time on my hands. Maybe I need a hobby, too.”

“What, taking in under-appreciated kids?” Janet asks.

“You gotta be kidding,” Ricky says.

“Well, why not? You two are pretty much on your own. I’ve got the time. I could call the Volunteer Center. There are plenty of kids out there who need a little extra attention. I could always become a Den Mother or something. Please go call your father and Michael in to supper. The food’s getting cold.”

Throughout the meal, Janet and Ricky stare at their plates in silence. No one has to worry about keeping a conversation going. Michael does enough talking for everybody.

After supper, Michael grabs hold of Janet with one hand and Ricky with the other, and hauls them into the living room. He takes them on a guided tour of The Olde Tyme Xmas Village as though they might not have noticed it before.

“I don’t get it,” Ricky tells his sister. “Are we from another planet or something? I really don’t get it.”

“Me neither,” Janet says, lurching forward as Michael tugs on her arm.

The boy keeps them in tow, dragging them along with the enthusiasm of a real estate agent who suspects the young couple might have inherited some money.

Lorraine settles back in the sofa cushions. It is still early on Christmas Eve — plenty of time, she thinks, for a couple more conversions. The miniature lights sparkle in her eyes.

The Olde Tyme Xmas Village glows with renewed effort, too, as though conjuring up one last trick on behalf of the hard-hearted.