

The Grift of the Magi

By Sean Doolittle

I. Travelers

“I’m serious,” Scaz said from the passenger seat. “Get that shit away from me.”

“You gotta put a little on,” Denny said. “Let it blend with your natural hormones and shit. Hold still.”

He fainted with a little tester bottle of cologne from the handful he’d swiped at the mall earlier. Scaz ducked and bobbed, his face shaded red and green in the lights from Luther’s fancy stereo. Denny laughed and tracked him, finger poised on the spritzer.

“You spray me, I’m kicking your ass,” Scaz said. “You want your ass kicked?”

Behind the wheel, Luther said, “Kick me both your motherfuckin’ asses in about two seconds.”

Denny faked one last time with the tester bottle, grinning when Scaz flinched. Then he saw Luther’s eyes in the mirror and decided to do the wise thing. He dropped the bottle back into his coat pocket with the others, settled back in the seat.

Luther was in one of his moods. It was the weather. They were making shitty time in the storm. Denny had tried telling him they should leave earlier, but Luther wouldn’t listen. By late afternoon, the sleet had started, just like they said it would.

By now, the world had turned into a big white howl on all sides. Luther’s low-slung Buick was no good in the snow, and the cheap-ass tires he had weren’t helping.

“This sucks,” Scaz said.

Luther gripped the wheel and glared out the windshield, where the headlights reflected off the wall of swirling white ahead.

Denny tried to inject a little optimism. “It’s only eight. We’re cool.”

“It’s eight now,” Scaz said. “Be New Year’s before we get there.”

“Be spring ‘fore they find you assholes, you don’t shut the fuck up,” Luther said.

“Guys,” said Denny. “It’s Christmas.”

But he had to admit Scaz had a point. Tonight came only once a year, and at this rate, they’d be lucky to roll in by midnight.

Every year, on Christmas Eve, the big man threw a big company poker tournament at the big house on the big acreage upstate. By tradition, the game was open to all members of the organization who could scrape together a stake. Management, contract guys, grunts, cops, even your odd public official or two.

On Christmas Eve at Mr. Z’s, all came together as fellows. They shared the free food, the free booze, the free girls. They gathered elbow to elbow around the same tables, nobody better or worse than the luck of the draw. It was the kind of night that reminded you what you could make out of life.

Maybe, Denny would think later, luck hadn’t been on their side to begin with.

“Um,” he heard Scaz say. “Hey?”

Luther said, “*Bitch.*”

He stood on the brakes and cranked the wheel.

Then they were sliding.

It seemed to take a long time. When it was over, Denny grabbed the back of the seat, hoisted himself up off the floormats, and checked himself over. He heard a low moan from up front.

“Luthe?”

Luther rolled his big shoulders, popped his neck, and looked around.

“Shit,” Denny said. All he could see out the windows was white snow and green branches. It was freezing and windy in the car. In the front seat, Scaz lifted his head, moaning again.

“Hey,” Denny said. “You okay?”

“My fucking arm.”

Luther reached up, flipped on the dome light. They both looked at Scaz, slumped against an evergreen branch poking in through the shattered passenger window.

In the dim overhead light, Scaz looked as pale as the drift they’d plowed into. Denny could see part of the guy’s right forearm, where the sleeve of his black leather coat had bunched up. Guy’s wrist looked lumpy and purple and wrong. Scaz closed his eyes and rested his head against the seat.

Denny still couldn’t understand how there was a tree in the car. “What happened?”

“Camel,” Scaz whispered.

Denny patted his pockets. “I’m out.”

“In the road.”

“Huh?”

“A goddamn camel, you deaf asshole. We almost plowed right into it.”

“The hell you talking about?” Denny reached over and felt Scaz’s cheek. “You got knocked out or something, man.”

“Get off me.”

Denny didn’t know what to say. “Maybe it was a deer.”

“It was a camel. I saw it.”

“Cow maybe.”

Luther offered nothing. He was already getting out of the car. The blast of frigid air made Denny shiver. He looked at Scaz, slumped against the crumpled door - eyes closed, glass in his hair, his face all scuffed from the tree branch. Cradling his busted arm close to his chest.

Denny climbed over the seat, re-started the engine, killed the dome light, cranked up the heater, and piled out after Luther into the dark bitter night.

They were banked off the left shoulder of the highway, the Buick crimped against a stout fir tree. All around, the wind had swept the snow into razorbacked drifts. Denny and Luther stood mid-shin in the stuff. Luther, wearing nothing but a Nike track suit over a tank top, surveyed the situation with a menacing expression.

Denny rubbed his bare palms together and shouted over the wind. “Whatcha think?”

Luther said nothing.

Denny looked at the car. “I can try pushing.”

“Camel my ass,” Luther said.

Denny could barely hear him. The snow felt like BBs hitting his face. He was freezing. It was dark. They had to be miles from anything.

He was just about to ask Luther if he had any other ideas when there came a low sound beneath the wind. Denny turned and saw a dim yellow glow over the hill behind them. In a minute, twin golden beams pierced the storm. Denny felt his heart leap.

“Luthe!” He turned fast, slipped, stumbled, and went down in a cold puff of snow.

He scrambled to his feet and moved on, fast as he could trudge, heading for where he thought the center line of the highway must have been, waving his arms above his head all the way.

“A doctor,” the man shouted, pulling his wool collar tight around his chin. He squinted against the whirling snow. “My brother-in-law is a doctor. They’re just a few miles from here. We were on our way there now.”

The man’s name was Tillman. He had a \$500 coat, \$100 gloves, a \$50 haircut, and a Land Cruiser.

Denny shouted back, “You don’t mind, you sure?”

“Come on,” Tillman said. “Let’s get your friend in the car where it’s warm.”

Luther stood with his hands shoved down the front of his warmups. He said, “So you got this four-wheel-drive over there, and you don’t got no pull chain?”

“Sorry.” Tillman shrugged and cinched his collar tighter. “You guys need a hand bringing him over?”

“Nah,” Denny said. He clapped Tillman thankfully on the shoulder, slipped Luther a scolding look. “I got him.”

He plodded alone through the snow back to the Buick, helped Scaz out through the driver’s side. Back at the Land Cruiser, Tillman held a door and directed his brood to make room. Denny saw Tillman’s pretty wife in the front passenger seat, concerned look on her face. A pretty teenage daughter scowled, shoved over, and stared out the dark-tinted window toward the treed Buick. Her kid brother, maybe eight or nine, stopped playing his little Game Boy thing and stared at Scaz’s crooked wrist.

As Denny hustled around the backside of the Cruiser, he spotted Luther coming toward him through the snow, toting a bright red bucket in each hand. All at once, Denny remembered the card game. He hurried back to the Buick, grabbing two heavy buckets of his own from the trunk.

It took a few trips transfer all 12 buckets from the trunk of the Buick to the back of the Land Cruiser. Tillman stood patiently in the cold wind, holding the tail door open with his body, his coat closed with both hands. He watched them moving the buckets, but he didn’t say a word.

Finally, they all piled into the Cruiser, blowing the cold from their fingers.

Tillman looked over his shoulder and said, “So are you guys volunteers or something?”

“Something,” Luther told him, in a tone that caused Tillman to glance at his wife, grin uneasily into the rearview mirror, and drop the Cruiser into gear.

“Swear on a stack of bibles,” Tillman said. “We saw it on the news before we left town. Didn’t we, Cath?”

Denny couldn’t believe it. He glanced over, wondering what Luther was thinking.

Scaz might have been onto something. According to Tillman, some church in the burbs was supposed to be have a Christmas Eve service tonight, complete with a live-animal Nativity scene for the kids, but the whole pageant had gotten called off due to weather. According to Tillman, who saw it on the news, one of the chapel custodians accidentally left the gate to the animal pen unlatched, and every last critter in the manger had escaped into the brewing storm.

“I’ll be darned,” Denny said, mindful of the fact they had kids in the car. “How they figure a whole live camel got all the way outta town?”

“I have no idea. You guys are going to have one heck of a story, that’s all I know.”

Tillman didn’t seem to notice Luther’s dark demeanor. He was too busy working the treacherous road while his wife and daughter watched the storm out their windows. The kid stabbed at his video game with his thumbs.

They were Richard, Catherine, Chelsea, and Joshua: the Tillman family. Except for Chelsea, the teenager, who came off a little bit on the hateful side, they seemed like a pleasant bunch of folks. Catherine Tillman found a bottle of aspirins in her purse, which she gave to Scaz, who popped the lid and poured a bunch into his mouth, like Tic-Tacs.

“Your name is Scaz?” Joshua asked.

“Josh,” Catherine Tillman said.

“It’s like a nickname,” Denny explained, ignoring a hard glare from Luther. “Account of he’s from Scarsdale.”

“From where?”

“Just some town. I never been there either.”

Joshua Tillman processed this information. In a minute he turned himself all the way around in the seat. He perched up on his knees, hung his arms over the back, and said, “What’s his regular name?”

Up front, Richard Tillman glanced at his wife, who didn’t glance back.

Denny realized that he actually didn’t even know Scaz’s regular name. He shrugged. “You can just call him Scaz. That’s what he likes.”

Josh turned to Luther, taking in the warmups and the gold chains and rings Luther wore. When Luther glared at him, Josh dropped his eyes back to his video game.

They rode along for awhile. Forward progress was noticeably improved in the warm, smooth-riding Land Cruiser, where you could feel yourself sitting up higher. Denny liked the feel of the drifts giving way beneath them, churned under by the big knobby tires. There was some Christmas music on the CD player, turned down low. It was sort of cozy.

Josh Tillman looked at Denny again. “Do you know what you’re getting for Christmas yet?”

“In a car wreck, I guess.”

The kid looked at Scaz, who said, “I’m Jewish, kid. We don’t have Christmas.”

“You don’t have Christmas?”

“Hannukah. That’s our deal.”

“What’s Hannukah like?”

“I don’t know.” Scaz wasn’t looking too good. “It’s like Christmas times eight.”

Josh seemed impressed. “Jesus was Jewish. I learned that in Sunday school.”

“Capital J,” Scaz said.

“My Sunday school teacher said Jesus was King of the Jews.”
“Don’t get me started.”
“So how come we don’t get Hannukah?”
Scaz closed his eyes. “It’s complicated, kid, look...I’m kind of in excruciating pain right now.”
Josh turned to Luther. “Do you get Christmas?”
Luther glared. “I’m fuckin’ Jewish too.”
Josh laughed. Richard Tillman’s eyes widened in the rearview mirror. Catherine turned in the passenger seat and said, “*Josh.*”
“He said the F-word!”
“I heard. Let’s stop talking for awhile, sweetie, okay? Your dad’s trying to watch the road.”
“Yeah,” Chelsea muttered. “So shut up already.”
Front seat: “*Chelsea.*”
Luther snorted.
“You’re a black person,” Josh told him.
“No shit.”
“Black people can be Jewish?”
“No,” Scaz said. His eyes were closed tight, and his voice sounded thin.
Josh Tillman was enthralled. He stared at Luther. “Say something Jewish.”
“Assalam alaikum,” Luther said.
Denny thought he saw Chelsea roll her eyes in the dark. Up front, Catherine shifted uncomfortably in her seat. Richard Tillman manned the wheel, tense but steadfast, steering them on toward shelter.

II. Bambino

It was after nine by the time Tillman turned off the main highway, crept one last unplowed quarter mile, and finally nosed the Cruiser out of the storm. They rolled up a long paved driveway lined with tall pine trees on both sides.

Denny watched out the windows. He surveyed the big house nestled way back in a wooded lot, windows glowing. The whole place was done up in holiday lights. He saw a snowy gabled roof, two brick chimneys trailing smoke, a garage the size of an airplane hangar.

Normally a place like this made Denny start wondering about the dog situation, thinking along the lines of window alarms. But it was Christmas Eve, and he liked these Tillmans. If they hadn’t come along, who knew?

A husband and wife met the Tillman family at the door, everybody smiling and hugging, warm air and good smells pouring from inside the house. Denny heard Catherine Tillman say, “Where’s my nephew?”

The man of the house held the door open for Denny, Luther, and Scaz. He nodded at each of them, polite, curious.

“These fellows went off the road a few miles back.” Richard Tillman said. He stomped his feet and unwound his scarf. “We gave them a lift.”

“Oh, no,” the guy said. “Come in, guys. I’m Joe Jurgens, and this is my wife, Marly. Come in and get warm.”

Tillman nodded toward Scaz. “I’m afraid we’ve got an injury.”

“Man says you a doctor,” Luther said.

Joe Jurgens glanced at his brother-in-law. He looked at Luther. After a moment, he said, “Well, I suppose that’s true.”

“You a doctor or not?”

“I’m a urologist.”

Luther glared. Richard Tillman looked nervous.

Marly Jurgens glanced at her husband. She looked at her sister, Catherine. Then she looked at Scaz, standing there sucking air through his teeth, and she said, “You should sit down.”

Chelsea Tillman had already disappeared somewhere inside the house. Denny could see Josh already dug in front of a big screen television in the far corner of the living room, shoes off, pillows piled all around.

While Denny and Luther stood there, making grimy snow puddles on the fancy tile, Marly Jurgens helped Scaz over to a white couch the size of a school bus. The couch faced a huge crackling fireplace and the tallest Christmas tree Denny had ever seen indoors.

Joe Jurgens said, “Help yourself to the fire, guys. I’ll go find the phone.”

They had a new baby, these Jurgenses. Their first, a little boy, only a couple weeks old. For Christmas, the Tillmans had brought the kid a piggy bank made out of some kind of clay.

“Hon?” Marly called. “Look at this!”

“It’s from Abu Dhabi.” Catherine pointed out a finger mark in the hardened clay that supposedly showed how the pig had been hand-crafted. “I found it in that shop you like in Soho.”

“I love it.” Marly leaned over the blanket they’d spread out on the floor, made some googly noises at the baby. She showed him the pig. “See what Aunt Cathy brought you? Yes you do!”

Denny watched all this from an upholstered chair near the fireplace. He felt like a pig himself around all this white furniture. He was afraid of getting anything dirty. A few feet away, Luther sat in a different chair, stewing. He looked like a turd in a snowbank. In a track suit. Scaz sprawled on the couch between them, tuning in and out.

Joe Jurgens and Richard Tillman came back from another room, Jurgens with a cordless phone in his hand.

“Good news and bad news,” he said. “They’ve closed the highways to the south and west. Sounds like we could probably make it to the emergency room in Chilton in one of the four-wheel drives, but I don’t know.”

Luther raised his head.

“Might be smarter if we rode out the weather,” Jurgens said. “We’ve got plenty of room here. I can look after your friend here as well as I can for tonight, and we can try the roads in the morning.”

Denny saw Marly Jurgens look over, but she said nothing.

“Yo.” Luther stood up, pointed at Tillman. “Look here.”

Denny got a bad feeling. He watched Richard Tillman follow Luther to a darkened archway. He watched Luther lift the front of his warmup jacket. He watched Tillman's eyes get big. He watched Tillman hand Luther the keys to the Land Cruiser.

Denny sighed.

The air in the living room changed. Marly Jurgens scooped up the baby. Catherine Tillman hustled everybody toward Josh, who had turned from the television to see what was going on. Joe Jurgens stood in the middle of the room, watching everything, holding the phone casually down by his leg. Denny saw the man's thumb pressing numbers.

Shit.

He hustled over, swiped the phone out of the guy's hand, took it with him over to where Luther waited by the front door. Richard Tillman passed him going the other way, pale-faced, lips pressed together.

"Luthe," Denny said. "What the hell?"

Luther jangled the keys. "You comin'?"

"You gotta be shitting me."

"Got me some card playin yet tonight."

Denny couldn't believe it. These folks were just trying to help them out. "What about Scaz?"

"Who?"

Denny looked over his shoulder. Richard and Catherine Tillman appeared to be arguing. Joe Jurgens had one arm around his wife, one arm around their new little baby. The Tillman kid, Josh, looked scared. Scaz looked asleep. Or maybe passed out.

Denny shook his head sadly. "Due respect, Luthe, y'all can be a cold motherfucker when you want."

Luther just chuckled. Jingle bells jingled as he headed out the front door.

Denny stood there a minute, letting the cold in, not sure what to do. It was a confusing moment. Normally, he couldn't generate much sympathy for rich folks in their big houses at the ends of their long driveways, but this seemed like a different kind of a situation. A guy should have some respect.

"Hey." Denny shoved into his shoes, tromped out the door after Luther, into the snow. "Hey, you hang on a minute."

Luther didn't hang on a minute. Denny caught up with him, grabbed his shoulder. Luther looked at Denny's hand on his shoulder. Looked at Denny.

Denny followed him the rest of the way to the Land Cruiser.

"One a them buckets is mine," he said. He was prepared to stand his ground, though didn't know why. "I earned it."

Luther just smiled and shook his head slowly, snow whirling all around. He opened the back of Tillman's Land Cruiser. "Do what you gonna do."

Denny did. He picked one of the heavier buckets and pulled it out, its thin metal handle icy in his bare palm. Snowflakes started collecting on the lid.

Luther shrugged, shut the tailgate, got in, and cranked the engine. Denny stepped out of the way just in time to avoid getting his feet backed over.

He listened to the fading crunch of snow beneath the Land Cruiser's big tires as Luther rolled away down the long driveway in a frozen cloud of exhaust. Denny watched until the red tail lights winked, hung right, and disappeared.

When he got back inside the house with his cold red bucket, Scaz hadn't moved from his place on the couch. Josh Tillman was crying, and Catherine was hugging him, rocking him back and forth on his feet. Richard Tillman looked like he'd swallowed a bug.

Chelsea had reappeared. She looked bored. Joe and Marly Jurgens stood with the baby.

"Folks, I really feel bad about this," Denny said.

It had come to him early this morning. He and Luther had been heading downtown to get some pancakes and put their heads together on how to scare up their stakes for the game at Mr. Z's. It hadn't been what Denny would have called a growth year for either of them, earnings-wise.

On the way to the pancake house, they'd cut through the old warehouse district down near the riverfront, past the Salvation Army's main branch downtown. Denny saw the line of volunteers in the snow-packed parking lot, all standing around a guy with earmuffs and a clipboard, the whole crew bundled up like Eskimos. The idea came as a bell chiming faintly in his ear.

Luther thought it was the dumbest thing he'd ever heard.

Denny said, "Oh yeah? Let's just see."

He'd had Luther park a few blocks down, so he could go get in line like he was supposed to be there. A half hour later, Denny met Luther at his assigned corner, outside a Gap store at the mall. His red bucket hung on a stand. Over his regular clothes, Denny wore the gear he'd been issued: red vest, Santa hat, handbell. He gave the bell a clang and grinned. "How do I look?"

"Like a fuckhead," Luther said.

Denny had smiled. "You just pick me up at three, smart guy. Then we'll see."

When three o'clock rolled around, Luther had pulled up right on time. Denny was beat. Both arms ached from ringing the bell all day, and his eardrums clanged. He couldn't feel his fingers and his feet felt like blocks of wood.

But he had to admit, he'd actually had some fun. He'd chatted with a few hot-looking college girls, and he'd gotten a kick out of watching the holiday shoppers all day. They'd stuffed his bucket full.

When Luther ambled over, Denny hefted the bucket and grinned. "Gee, this bucket's so heavy, I almost can't even hold it anymore. Where should I put it, huh? Huh, Luther? Smart guy?"

Luther opened the trunk of the Buick and said, "How 'bout in there with them others?"

Denny had looked to see that Luther had a whole trunk full of red metal Salvation Army buckets. Wire handles and slotted lids, just like the one in Denny's hand. Denny realized it had probably taken him all of an hour to go around boosting buckets until the trunk was full.

He'd sighed. "Cheater."

Luther had done something then that Denny had only rarely heard him do. He laughed. "You such a sorry motherfucker. Aint' ya?"

“It’s yours,” Joe Jurgens said. “Take it. Just...please. Don’t hurt anybody.”

They stood in a room with high ceilings, built-in bookcases, stout furniture with leather upholstery. There was a big desk with a computer on it. On the desk, Jurgens had lined up half a dozen bundles of cash, crisp new twenties, which he’d taken from a floor safe.

Denny looked at him. “Guess you like to keep a little cash on hand, huh?”

“There’s a diamond necklace under the Christmas tree,” Jurgens said. “Earrings, too. They’re yours.”

Denny didn’t know whether to admire the guy or stomp his nuts. Part of him liked the way Jurgens stepped up for his family. Part of him thought, *you rich fuckers anyway*. It was Luther in here, instead of Denny, and whatever Jurgens thought it was, he’d be finding out what the fuck was negotiable.

Denny picked up one of the cash bundles, riffled the edge with his thumb. It was stiff new green. He could smell the ink. Jurgens watched him.

Denny dropped the bundle. “You think I wanna hurt your family?”

“Anything in the house,” Jurgens said. “Take whatever you want.”

“Fuck you.”

“I’m sorry. Please, just don’t hurt anybody.”

“Hurt who? A fuckin’ little kid?” Denny couldn’t believe this. “Hurt a fuckin’ baby? Hurt you?”

Jurgens blinked.

“I got brung here, motherfucker.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Stop saying that.”

Jurgens stopped.

Denny sighed. Could he really blame the rich prick for being scared?

“Look,” he said. “I ain’t here to hurt nobody.”

Joe Jurgens nodded carefully. “What about your friend?”

“Friend is overstating things.”

Jurgens said nothing.

“Look, I can’t go nowhere,” Denny said. “You can’t go nowhere. Let’s make the fuckin’ best of it. Okay?”

Jurgens nodded.

Denny left him standing there.

“Urologist,” Scaz said. “That’s like, what, a brain doctor, right?”

“It would be for some people,” Catherine Tillman said. “Depending on where your brain is located.”

Richard Tillman scowled. “Nice, Cath. Perfect. We’re doing this now?”

“Excuse me,” said Scaz. He sat at the round oak table in the kitchen, arm stretched out in front of him, leather coat hung over the back of the chair. “Anybody mind if we focus on the patient here?”

The kitchen had a breakfast bar and a little dining nook attached. It was about twice as big as Denny’s whole apartment.

“No,” Dr. Joe said, looking at Scaz’s arm. “I’m not like a brain doctor.”

“Huh.” Scaz squinted. “What’s urologist mean?”

“It means that if you were struggling with erectile dysfunction, you’d be in the right house.”

Scaz said, “You’re a funny guy, Doc.”

Then he gasped.

“Sorry,” Jurgens said. “Does that hurt?”

All the color had drained from Scaz’s face. “Jesus. You sure you know what you’re doing?”

Jurgens turned Scaz’s wrist carefully. “I did a trauma rotation back in med school.”

“Yeah? When was that?”

“About twenty years ago.”

Scaz tensed up a little. Denny stood a foot or so away, watching.

“Okay,” Jurgens said. “I’m going to try a little traction now. Are you ready?”

“Tell me you got some painkillers around here.”

“Sorry.”

“Hold up a second.” Scaz fished in his shirt pocket with his good hand. He pulled out a joint, wet it down, left it pinched between his lips. Reached back to dig a lighter from the pocket of his coat.

“Please don’t light that thing in here,” Marly Jurgens said.

Joe said, “It’s okay.”

Scaz sparked up the jay and took a deep drag. He closed his eyes and held the smoke until he coughed. The acrid smell of pot now mingled with the sweet smell of cinnamon from over on the stove.

“Hey,” Denny said, making a herding motion with his arms. “What ya say let’s all go into the other room there. Watch a little TV.” He looked at Josh. “How ‘bout it, big guy?”

Josh wouldn’t look back. He stuck to Catherine’s leg like he was four instead of nine.

“I’d rather stay in here and get high,” Chelsea muttered.

Quietly, Richard Tillman said, “Move your ass, young lady.”

“Go on, everybody,” Joe Jurgens said. “Please. I need to concentrate. We’ll be okay in here.”

“Yeah,” Scaz said, holding another hit in his lungs while he spoke. “Let the man work.”

Denny tried to lighten the mood as much as he could. He smiled at Marly Jurgens as she passed him, got a hateful glare in return. Richard Tillman pretended he was in charge.

Out in the living room, nobody said a word. Catherine and Marly took turns holding the baby, who seemed to be taking the whole thing fine. Denny stayed in there with them, hanging back out of the way. He stayed until he heard Scaz gasp, growl, and finally scream.

When he went back into the kitchen, Scaz was slouched in the chair, panting and sweating. Joe Jurgens wrapped his wrist and hand with an Ace bandage.

“How we doing?” Denny said.

“It’s a bad break.” Jurgens didn’t look up from his work. “He’ll need X-rays. And an orthopedist.”

Scaz took a little mini-hit and blew smoke toward the ceiling. His breathing was already starting to level out some.

“Okay,” Jurgens said.

Scaz looked at him. “That’s it? We’re done?”

“It’s what I can do. The bandage should help with the swelling. And it’ll keep your hand halfway splinted until you can get into a cast.”

Scaz grinned. His face was still pale and his eyes were red. He took one last hit, then reached across to drop what was left of his joint into the water glass next to his bandaged hand. The roach died with a quick sizzle. Scaz sat and rested for a moment or two.

Then he reached behind his back and pulled a .45 out of his jeans. Jurgens looked at the gun. He looked at Denny.

Scaz tipped the gun forward, drawing the hammer back with his thumb. He wagged the barrel toward Jurgens. “So, doc. You said ‘four wheel drives’ before. As in plural?”

Last year, Denny had spent Christmas in a bus station. County lockup the year before that. The year before that, he’d gotten twelve stitches in his neck.

Every one of those years was a damn sight holier than this frozen turkey of a Christmas was turning out to be.

After Scaz took off, things in the Jurgens household sort of went downhill. In an upstairs room, behind a closed door, Richard and Catherine Tillman screamed at each other for an hour. Josh pooped his pants and wouldn’t come out from behind the Christmas tree.

Later, in another room, Marly Jurgens cried for so long that Joe had to get her a pill. Denny could hear them talking over the baby monitor, which they’d forgotten in the living room. Joe talking. Marly crying. Then quiet for awhile.

Later, during a trip to the bathroom, Denny heard Richard and Joe talking in Joe’s office. He heard Richard Tillman say: “Go ahead and tell me different, Joe. Nigger and a Jew. Am I wrong? Because you can go ahead and tell me if I am.”

Chelsea Tillman had disappeared again.

Denny finally got so depressed that he seriously considered taking his chances on foot out there in the storm. By midnight, freezing to death was starting to sound kind of fun.

By two a.m., the big house had fallen quiet. Denny went exploring, just to keep himself occupied. He found Joe and Marly Jurgens asleep on the floor of the baby’s room. He found Richard Tillman in the basement, passed out in a recliner with bottle of Stoli at his hip, some kind of softcore cable flick playing quietly on a small color television.

In the living room, Catherine and Josh Tillman slept together on the huge white couch like mismatched spoons. Josh wore a pair of his Aunt Marly’s sweatpants, rolled up and pinned. Catherine snored softly, her arm draped over his small shoulders. The big fireplace had burned down to glowing coals.

Looking at the two of them together, Catherine Tillman asleep with her boy, Denny was overcome with a powerful urge to bawl his goddamned brains out. He honestly didn't know what the hell was the matter with him.

All he knew was that it was time to go. Outside, the storm had blown itself out a half hour ago. The way Denny figured it, he was maybe three miles from Luther's car. Five miles, tops.

He was on his way to the entryway, where he'd left his shoes, when he noticed the clay piggy bank from wherever, still sitting out in the middle of the living room floor.

Thing was big as a basketball. Denny put on his shoes. He looked at the damned Salvation Army bucket, sitting there in the corner, where he'd left it. He thought about schlepping that damned bucket all the way back to the car.

He sat there and thought about other things.

Without really thinking too much more, he pried the lid off his bucket of gambling money and went back into the living room.

The pig was the kind that didn't have a plug in the bottom. One of those you had to break open to get the cash out. Denny sat down, cross-legged, bucket between his knees. He sat there awhile, in the light of the Jurgens' Christmas tree.

He finally started feeding coins through the slot in the pig's back. He kept feeding coins until the sound of falling money changed from a hollow rattle to a dull metallic click.

There was something soothing in it, he discovered. Sitting there dropping coins into that damned clay pig. It didn't take long before Denny had lost himself in the task. He got so involved in what he was doing that he didn't even notice Chelsea Tillman watching him until he looked up and saw her there, cross-legged on the carpet, not two feet away. He jumped. Felt stupid. Jesus. She'd been a snake she'd have bitten him.

"Oh," he said. "Hey."

Chelsea Tillman had pretty brown eyes. "What are you doing?"

Denny shrugged. "I dunno."

Kid didn't say anything. She looked at Denny's bucket. She looked at the scatter of bills he'd plucked from the coin pile, letting them collect on the carpet around him. After a minute she looked over her shoulder, toward where her mom and brother were sleeping on the couch.

Denny went back to dropping coins. In the way of conversation, he said: "Guess your folks ain't getting along too good, huh?"

"They're getting a divorce."

"Yeah?"

"They think I don't know."

"Sorry to hear."

"He's banging my piano teacher."

Denny didn't know what to say to that. Kid seemed to want him to say something, but who was he kidding? He was out of his element here.

"Hey," he finally said. He used his hands to separate what was left of his gambling money. He pushed a pile in her direction. "Help me stash this loot."

Chelsea didn't say anything. She wiped her face with the sleeve of her sweatshirt. Sat there.

After a minute, she reached forward and picked out a quarter. She dropped it into the pig.

In no time they developed a system, alternating back and forth. Their change piles got smaller and smaller. They folded the paper money, creased it sharp. Slipped the bills in through the slot. Pretty soon, the pig was so heavy a person could've broken a toe on it, if they came through in the dark with bare feet and didn't notice it sitting there.

III. Wassail

Denny slipped out of the Jurgens household just before dawn.

Light seeped over the horizon, into the sky. Pretty soon the sun came up. The whole world was white and sparkly. It took Denny an hour to make it to the highway, trudging through crusted drifts up to his knees. He spent the last ten minutes of his trek listening to a growl in the distance, wishing he had a pair of skis.

Finally, a big orange road department snow plow appeared over the hill. Denny stopped lifting his legs, resting along the shoulder while the plow eased to a halt with a heavy diesel rumble. The operator cut the engine back, rolled down the window, and stuck out his head.

"Morning," he called.

"Howdy," Denny said.

"Kind of a shitty day for a walk, ain't it?"

Denny jerked his thumb over his shoulder. "Went off about two miles back. Spent the night in the car."

"Come on up. Heater's on."

When Denny climbed up into the cab of the plow, the driver thrust out his hand and said, "Name's Grady." He was a big burly sonofabitch with a grease-stained coat and a Grizzly Adams beard.

Denny shook his thick hand. "Tillman. Thanks for the lift."

Once the cab was sealed up nice and tight and warm again, Grady tilted his big shaggy head. "Say."

"Yeah?"

"I ain't gay or nothin', but what's that you got on?"

At first, Denny didn't know what the guy was talking about. Then he remembered the little tester bottles of cologne in his coat pocket. He grinned. "Why, you like it?"

"Smells kinda classy."

Denny dug a bottle from his coat, handed it over. "Merry Christmas."

Grady took the bottle, looked it over. His belly shook when he laughed. He reached down along the side of his seat and brought up an open bottle of Jim Beam. "Same to you."

Hello. Denny took the bottle and had a swig. It burned nice all the way down.

"Your health," he said, handing the bottle back.

"Yours too." Brady took a swig of his own. He passed the bottle back for Denny to hold. "Ramming speed."

The big plow rumbled. Off they crept, maybe two miles per hour, pushing the drifts apart on either side of the blade.

Not one time did Brady mention the donkey and the sheep following along behind the plow in the freshly-opened road. For almost two miles, Denny thought about bringing it up.

He finally settled in and did his part with the whiskey, checking the big side view mirror from time to time. Every so often he smiled to himself.

Back and forth went the bottle. Off down the road they plowed. Soon, Grady began to bellow out verses to the Christmas tunes playing on the plow's crappy radio. Whenever Denny knew the words, he joined along.

Sean Doolittle is the author of the crime novels Dirt, Burn, Rain Dogs, and The Cleanup, winner of the 2007 Barry Award for best paperback. His short stories have appeared in The Best American Mystery Stories and The Year's Best Horror Stories. His next book, Safer, will appear in 2008. He used to try and write funny bios but now he can't think of anything. Drop him a line at www.seandoolittle.com.