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The 9-11 Christmas Cards

Selecting the perfect Christmas Card had been Tom's responsibility for a long, long time. It was not that Marlene was disinterested in the process. But there had been an incident early in their twelve-year marriage in which she had been shopping, saw cards she liked, and carried them home proudly to show her new husband. Although Tom didn't remember everything about the incident, he assumed he reacted poorly, went into his patented pout, and ended up letting the air out of the family's Christmas balloon. They had, of course, sent the cards, the theme of which Tom could not recall. He could not even remember why he had not liked them, or whether he was merely offended that she didn't seek his opinion on the selection. Eventually, they patched up that little spat. However, since then they agreed he alone would select the cards they sent to friends and family to acknowledge the holidays.

This season Tom was a little behind in the process. It was hard to muster the Christmas spirit in the wake of the 9-11-01 terrorist attacks on New York City, the Pentagon, and the tragedy laced with suspected heroism in rural Pennsylvania. Here it was 12-11-01, the third-month anniversary of those attacks, and he was strolling with trepidation into a mall, looking for one of the ubiquitous greeting card stores that dot the corridors of every shopping area. This third anniversary had been mourned all that day on television, every news channel showing a formal tribute to the victims in somber testimony. Tom wondered how many more months this anniversary would be remembered this way, and what would it be like on 9-11-02. The news media loved this kind of thing, he thought, with disappointment.

He entered the pine-scented card shop, passing the holiday trinkets and ornaments on display for sale, glancing at the humorous birthday cards, as he trekked to the rear of the store where boxes of Christmas Cards were stacked in a pyramid pattern. He wondered if that design was a conscious effort to avoid creating something that resembled the erstwhile WTC towers.

Like almost everyone in the world, Tom had been glued to the TV and his computer on 9-11, watching in horror, as the hi-jacked planes hit first the one tower, then the other, causing the highly populated buildings to collapse into themselves. He had received the e-mails from his friends with pictures of the scene as it happened and almost felt the heat and the rush of hot air when he saw coverage of people jumping from the highest floors to their certain death. The initial shock was followed by denial, or at least an emotional detachment from the horrible events.

Some of Tom's friends had jobs that often took them to New York City. He had listened to them talk about seeing the "naked" skyline for the first time, about going to "ground zero," smelling the smells, seeing the sights, and hearing the sounds of the still smoldering ruins. Tom had no desire to see, smell or hear any of it. Perhaps...he told himself...he was more interested in the future than the past.

Recently he had been to a show at the Kennedy Center for Performing Arts in Washington D.C., and during intermission, while having a smoke out on the veranda, he had, seen the enormous hole in the Pentagon. He had never really focused on the fact that the low, gray building visible to the right of the tower at Reagan National Airport was the Pentagon. He only looked at the damaged section for a few seconds after the realization of the image hit him. Then, out went the cigarette and back inside he went, hoping to be distracted from the sight he had just seen.

Now, perusing the Christmas cards, he became frustrated by the selection. He had never liked those big fancy cards, gaudy and ostentatious, with lots of shiny red, green and gold colors, even on the envelopes, and he wasn't interested in them today. None of the images on those ever reflected his holiday feelings. Maybe it was a card like one of these that Marlene had chosen many years ago. Tom liked cards with a subtle humor to them. Something that would make people remember your card out of all the others received. Nothing made Tom happier this time of year than to have a friend say, "Hey Tom, we loved your card!"

Perhaps, he mused, one of the smaller cards, simple, with just a candle or a tree on a white background, would be appropriate this season. He had dismissed automatically for this year any cards that were clever or humorous. All the jokes seemed stale anyway. Finally he thought he had found just the right card. It was a watercolor drawing of a lone candle in an antique-looking candle holder with the little hole for the finger against an off-white background. The glow of the flame was a yellowish red, a nice image. He flipped the box over to see the inside message, hoping for an innocuous phrase like "Seasons Greetings," but was disappointed to read "Peace on Earth."

No way this year could he send "Peace on Earth." Tom prided himself on never being a hypocrite. How could he send a message wishing "Peace on Earth" to his friends when he so strongly supported his President in bombing Afghanistan, the Taliban, the al Qaeda network of terrorists and the pursuit of Osama bin Laden? While he liked the abstract concept of peace on earth, he really just wanted peace in America. What he didn't want was the feeling he now had even whenever he came to this mall. He had a paranoid fear that this place would be the next terrorist "target." That the air he was breathing was contaminated with anthrax or smallpox, that his last sensation would be the feel, smell and sound of the blast of an explosion in front of Sears. With that last thought in mind he shrugged and placed the box of candlestick cards back on the shelf, holding up the left side of the pyramid of card boxes.

"Tom, hey, old man, how the hell are ya!" came a voice from behind, just as Tom left the card shop. He turned and saw the Boyles, Sue and Jimmy, shopping bags in tow. The Boyles were friends, acquaintances really, one of those relationships in which the girls were pretty good friends, but the guys tolerated one another for the sake of their wives. Tom always thought of Jimmy as a blowhard, and Jimmy's shout to him echoing off the storefronts served to confirm that opinion.

"Hi, Jimmy. Hi, Sue...I'm fine, just in here shopping for Christmas cards. How about you folks?" Tom said, trying to maintain a socially correct cordiality.

Sue interjected, "Oh, what a coincidence, we just picked up ours a little while ago. No peeking now, they are right here in this bag." She gestured to a bag bearing the name of a store Tom was not familiar with.

"Yeah, we don't want to spoil the surprise, this card is a hoot! Your laugh will have to wait for the mailman though," Jimmy boasted. "It's one of the funniest I've seen, we both saw it at the same time and agreed right away that we had found the perfect card." Tom was tempted to ask why they thought it was such a great idea to send out a funny card this year, between the 9-11 tragedy, a slumping economy and increasing unemployment. Well, he thought generously, maybe they are just doing their part to help boost the American spirit, like wearing the flag pins they both had speared to their tweed lapels.

"Hey, Jimmy, did you send Tom that e-mail joke? You know, the bingo one?" Sue asked. Tom was shaking his head "no," as Jimmy said "No, I don't think I have Tom's e-mail, Sue, you should've forwarded that one on to Marlene though, it's really a good one. Have you heard it, Tom?"

Tom smiled and confessed he hadn't.

"Did you know why the Taliban outlawed bingo in Afghanistan?" Jimmy asked, while Tom shook his head in reply.

"They were afraid of hearing 'B-52; B-52'." Jimmy laughed so hard he almost dropped his packages, and had to set down the bags in his left hand and hold onto the wall between Eddie Bauer and ShoeTown.

Not only was the joke only moderately funny in its mocking of the Taliban for being notoriously narrow-minded, but, of course, bingo has no number "B-52", the joke just being a play on the similarity between the famous U.S. bomber and the game. But Tom laughed politely with Jimmy.

Tom said his good-byes and went on his way, trying to decide whether it made any sense to try another store to look at more cards. The more he thought about it, the less he liked the idea of continuing his shopping. As he drove home from the mall, he thought of how he would handle this year's Christmas cards. Should he delegate it to Marlene? Not a chance. It would be worse this time than the last, since if he could find a card he liked there was no way she would find a card he liked, and he wouldn't want her to send out one that didn't meet with his approval. Maybe they wouldn't send out cards this year. He considered the consequences...some people would think they, the Armstrongs, were sick or had some personal tragedy, some would figure they weren't friends enough anymore to merit a place on "the list." Maybe they could just write a personal note instead. That would take a lot more time to do and what could they say anyway? No real solution came to mind.

He reached home and looked on the chair near the front door for Marlene's purse. It wasn't there. Neither was she. He figured she was still out with friends. Tom took off his jacket and entered the family room, picking up the TV remote control. It was 7:00 p.m., time for the national news broadcasts. He sat on the couch and pointed the remote at the blank screen. No TV Guide had to tell him what would be on tonight's news. Fighting in Afghanistan, this month's memorials to the victims, the burial service for the pilot of the plane that flew into the Pentagon, the latest arrests, etc.

They had at last stopped showing the doomed planes flying into the sturdy buildings. Too tasteless, even for the news media, to keep showing it over and over. He let the remote drop to his lap and just stared at the blank screen. In the loneliness of his empty house, in the frustration of not finding the right Christmas card, the blackness of that screen caused his imagination to conjure up the images he had so long repressed from that fateful day. Tom saw the smoke from the Pentagon, the fire from the burning building, people fleeing along streets of lower Manhattan, the sight of the huge plane torn apart like a beer can run over by a lawn mower and strewn across the Pennsylvania hills, all in his mind's eye. "Peace on Earth," the card said, he remembered, and said to himself "Yeah, I wish".

He raised his hands to his face and, for the first time since 9-11, he cried.

~Louis S. Pettey © 2002

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