

UNWINNABLE WEEKLY

HOLIDAY SPECIAL





Ho. Ho. Ho.



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UNWINNABLE WEEKLY

HOLIDAY SPECIAL

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and Brian Daly



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Happy Holidays from the Editor in Chief

A couple years ago, I was working on Christmas night. I always enjoyed the newsroom on a major holiday. It is easy enough to make room for the family traditions if you're working the night shift and they're always terribly slow, so I was usually getting paid double time to read a book.

So here we are, three Americans and two Brits, bored to tears, slightly drunk on a couple champagne magnums someone thoughtfully left in the fridge. There's cookies and candy strewn about. The savaged remains of the take-out dinner the company paid for is still lying out, a stark reminder of our mortality, or the company's largess, or the company's cheapness, depending on who you ask. We're all staring at the clock.

Everyone else is cranky because I suppose that's how you're supposed to act while working on Christmas, but honestly, this doesn't feel all that different from a family holiday gathering.

Year by year, the hands of the clock slide closer and closer to 2:00 a.m. and our release.

To where? To our families? To our beds? No, to the nearest dump of a bar that happens to be open that late on Christmas night. Naturally.

There's something beautiful and sad and seedy and glorious about the

deserted streets of New York City at 2:00 a.m. on Christmas night. More so the warm darkness of a bar, where patrons are like ghosts from another era, the bar's history made flesh for one night, the characters from a Tom Waits song spilled out into reality.

The particular Christmas night, the bar was filled with a dozen or more Swedes. Tall, broad Swedes with rosy cheeks and blonde hair. I believe the word is "strapping." Even the women were taller than me. They all wore Christmas colors, the majority of them wearing red sweaters. They were, to a person, soused.

Bars close at 4:00 a.m. in New York City, so we didn't have a whole lot of time to do our work. We focused on whiskey and drank it as quick as we could swallow it.

At some point, the Swedes had crowded together into a circle in the center of the room, a massive group hug. They were singing "Feliz Navidad" as loud as their numb lips could manage, turning in an endless wheel. When they stumbled out of the chorus and into the verse, they muttered around in confusion for a second before simply starting over again. They did this until the bar closed.

The bar wasn't playing Christmas music, let alone "Feliz Navidad."

I often wonder about those Swedes, where they came from, what happened to them, what brought them in such great number to that particular dive on Christmas, so far from home.

My colleagues and I left happy that night, the spirit of something, be it Christmas, or whiskey, or Sweden, finding us at last in the wee hours of the morning.

This Christmas, I will not be working in a newsroom. I will be among friends and family. It will be nice, no doubt. But it won't be the same.

* * *

Anyway, happy holidays gang! This is our last issue of the year and it is packed with great stuff. I am excited for you to dig into over the next couple weeks.

Because it is the holidays, I've decided to give this one away for free. So, new readers! Hi! Make yourself at home!

I would like to take a moment to encourage you to subscribe to Unwinnable

Weekly. We are a small, independent publication dedicated to thoughtful commentary on the culture we love. We champion and print stories that other outlets won't. We believe in the value of diverse voices telling stories in equally diverse ways.

Our good friend Richard Clark over at Christ and Pop Culture recently wrote about us, saying:

“That elusive, constantly evolving tendency is what makes Unwinnable so special. Rather than keep a slavish focus on purpose and vision, Unwinnable is more interested in its writers. With every piece that is published, the reader is increasingly aware of the individuals that produce its content and the perspectives they represent. This approach comes with many dangers and struggles, but it also comes with one key benefit: incredible, risky, brave writing.”

A lot of people say they are glad Unwinnable exists, that having us out here, doing our thing, is important in some way. We believe that. But in order to keep the lights on, we need your help. If you like what we do, please subscribe. If you know someone who might like what we do, please tell them. Spread the word. Be our champions. With your help, we can continue to bring you vibrant cultural criticism that changes the way we see the world, one story at a time.

* * *

We're currently in the midst of a subscription drive (did you notice?). 150 new subscribers before January 5 will ensure we keep doing what we do, and actually start doing it better. To sweeten the pot, we're giving away our entire back catalog to new subscribers. Please visit [our subscription page](#) to learn more!

On that note, I've rattled on long enough. Have a safe and happy holiday. We love you! See you in the new year.

Stu Horvath,
Kearny, New Jersey
December 11, 2014

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WEEKLY

UNWINNABLE

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Twelve Days of the Long Dark

By Erika Barcott

On the twelfth day of Christmas,
the wilderness gave to me:

Twelve
Cans of
Soda-aaa!

Eleven plain wool caps,
Ten empty lanterns,
Eight sticks of tinder,
Seven liters of water,
Six hours of sleep,
Five granola ba-aars!

Four frozen carcasses,
Three rifle rounds,
Two can openers,
And a wolf hiding in the hydro dam! 🐺





Unpickleable
The Storied
Weihnachtsgurke
By Melinda Bardon

Welcome to the inaugural installment of Unpickleable: a celebration of all things pickle-related. Whatever your preserved pleasure, we've got the pickle for you. Bon appétit!

Forget the white elephant. Leave Secret Santa to Reddit. The real mystery present game of the season is all about *weihnachtsgurke*: the Christmas pickle.

The rules according to tradition are simple: a pickle or a pickle-shaped ornament is hidden cleverly somewhere on the Christmas tree. The first person to find it gets to claim an extra present on Christmas morning.

But why a pickle? You might be asking. Good question. If you're going to hide something in your Christmas tree for possibly days on end, why make it a cucumber, of all things? If it's simply about green camouflage, surely other less pungent ornaments could be used. Why not find the Christmas holly sprig, for instance? Or the Christmas fuzzy green pipe cleaner?

If you ask lifelong practitioners of the Christmas pickle game as I did, you will likely get something along the lines of this: "It's a tradition passed down from the Old Country."

Weihnachtsgurke, as you may have surmised from the name, is supposed to be a German tradition. Many seem content to simply say it was passed down from one generation to the next from the days before families migrated to America. Others say it originated not in Germany, but from within the German-American communities of the Midwest.

But many Germans or people of Germanic descent say they've never heard of the tradition. [This German home décor shop](#) claims the Christmas pickle is a "regional German custom". Which region in Germany the tradition comes from, the shop neglects to specify.

So where did the Christmas pickle come from, if not Germany? There are two origins stories behind the cucumber game.

The first takes place during the American Civil War, in Georgia's Camp Sumter. The camp, later known as Andersonville, became the largest prison of its time, housing 33,000 Union soldier POWs at its peak. Chronically overcrowded and plagued by diseases, polluted water, lack of food and exposure to the elements, the prison averaged 3,000 deaths per month.

According to the Christmas pickle tale, Private John Lower of the 103rd

Pennsylvania Volunteer Infantry was captured and sent to Andersonville prison in April 1864, where he managed to survive the atrocious conditions until Christmas Eve. Starving and near death, he begged a guard for something – anything – to eat. Even a humble pickle would do. The guard relented and found Lower a pickle, all twenty calories of which gave Lower the strength he needed to carry on for the duration of his internment. Once he was freed and returned to his family, he inexplicably turned it into a family tradition by hiding an actual pickle in his family's Christmas tree for his children to find.

Historical records show that there was in fact a Private John Lower in the 103rd, and he was indeed captured by Confederate forces in April of 1864, though government records of the time show he was imprisoned in Charleston, South Carolina and released before Christmas that year on December 10th.

Heartwarmingly bizarre as Lower's tale may be, there are others that claim the Christmas pickle tale has its roots in medieval Turkey. Though there seem to be exactly zero reliable historical accounts of this story prior to the mid-20th century, the yarn goes that one winter's evening, three young boys were traveling home from medieval boarding school. They stopped at an inn for the night where they were promptly stuffed into a pickle barrel by the innkeeper for reasons.

Fortunately for the lads, Saint Nicholas sensed they were in trouble and he swooped down and liberated them from a briny doom.

In an even better version of this story (as it was told to me), the innkeeper goes so far as to murder the boys and stuff their corpses in the pickle barrel (for preservation, I guess?) and Santa Claus not only shows up to open the barrel, he brings them back to life.

(Which leads to the obvious question: when did Santa Claus gain the power of resurrection? Has he had it this whole time? Who else has he saved? Does he only save the lives of good children? If the boys had been obnoxious little shits would he have just left them to their fate?)

Regardless, we are left to ponder: what does any of this have to do with hiding a pickle in a tree? No one knows. The myths keep getting copied and pasted, completely unattributed to any original sources, from one local newspaper to the next every few years in a vague attempt to explain why Target sells tree ornaments shaped like pickles.

Here's an alternate, far more plausible Christmas pickle origin story to tell your family, should they wonder why on earth you bought one this year.

It all began late one cold and miserable Black Friday, long ago before even the days of Cyber Monday. A trio of young boys, home from boarding school for the holiday and laden with shopping bags after spending twelve straight hours battling thrifty shoppers at the mall, wearily trudged through the snow.

In their quest for ultimate bargains, however, the trio had forgotten to eat or drink anything and on their journey to the furthest edge of the parking garage they became badly disoriented from severe dehydration. Lost and mildly hallucinating, they wandered far into the cold night, begging for aid.

Alas, none would help, for there were still three shopping hours left before the sales ended. The boys were left to fend for themselves. Desperately clinging to the last shreds of consciousness, they stumbled into what they thought was a Starbucks, but was in fact an old woman's studio apartment. They pleaded with her for a gingerbread latte, or perhaps even a peppermint mocha, but all she had on hand was a jar of old-fashioned dills.

The boys gratefully accepted the humble snack and electrolyte-replenishing brine and in exchange they handed the woman the smallest of their bags, not recalling what it was they had purchased. When they returned home and retold the story, it became a family tradition to hide a pickle in the tree and give a small present to whoever could find it.

If that doesn't cut it, try this one: there's no fucking origin story. It's an ornament, not an RPG. Whoever finds this thing in the morning gets to bring me my Christmas breakfast beer. There's your prize. Merry Everything.

Editor's Note: Alban Butler, in his Lives of the Saints, Volume Four, published in 1759, dismisses the story of the Saint Nicholas and the pickled boys as "absurd." He offers another tale, in which three daughters of a poor merchant could not find husbands due to their status and were contemplating turning to prostitution. Hearing this, wily old St. Nick concocted a plan to throw bags of gold through the window of the merchant's house to be used as a dowry for the girls. Over the centuries, artistic depictions of the purses have been misinterpreted as the heads of boys (?), giving rise to the story of the pickled boys.

Honestly, this story seems only slightly less absurd than the one involving dead boys in a pickle barrel. 🍷

Merry Krampus!



D G R S C H N A P P S I K V U C T C
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K I Z C I Q U V Y W K R U I Y V R S
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N P F K R A M P U S N D G N S O N T
A F V M Y K R A M P U S N A C H T W

- Krampus
- Demon
- Christmas
- Coal
- Naughty
- St Nicholas
- Xmas
- Punish
- Pagan
- Birch Branches
- Krampusnacht
- Schnapps



An Ale'd Irish
Christmas
By Corey Milne

It's Christmas and for whatever reason you've ended up in Ireland. Stepping off the plane you were met with a copious bombardment of tinsel and Noddy Holder to tell you Christmas time is here again. Ireland's largest celebration of the year can be overwhelming, sure, but if you stay calm, then good cheer and alcohol will see you safely through the festivities. So sit back, grab a mince pie and enjoy the craic as Unwinnable guides you through the foods, activities and drink of an Irish Christmas.

Christmas Eve (Mince Pies O'Clock)

By noon you will have drunk your body weight in tea. This is inevitable. Guinness should be administered liberally as you desperately try to remember the names of all these relatives you're expected to pull out of your head despite only seeing them at Christmas and funerals. Top the night off with a glass of Jameson, as the children leave out the customary bottle of Guinness (never too much Guinness) and mince pie for Santa (and a carrot for Rudolph). Attendance to Midnight Mass hinges on presence of one particularly religious aunt, so mileage there may vary.

Christmas Day

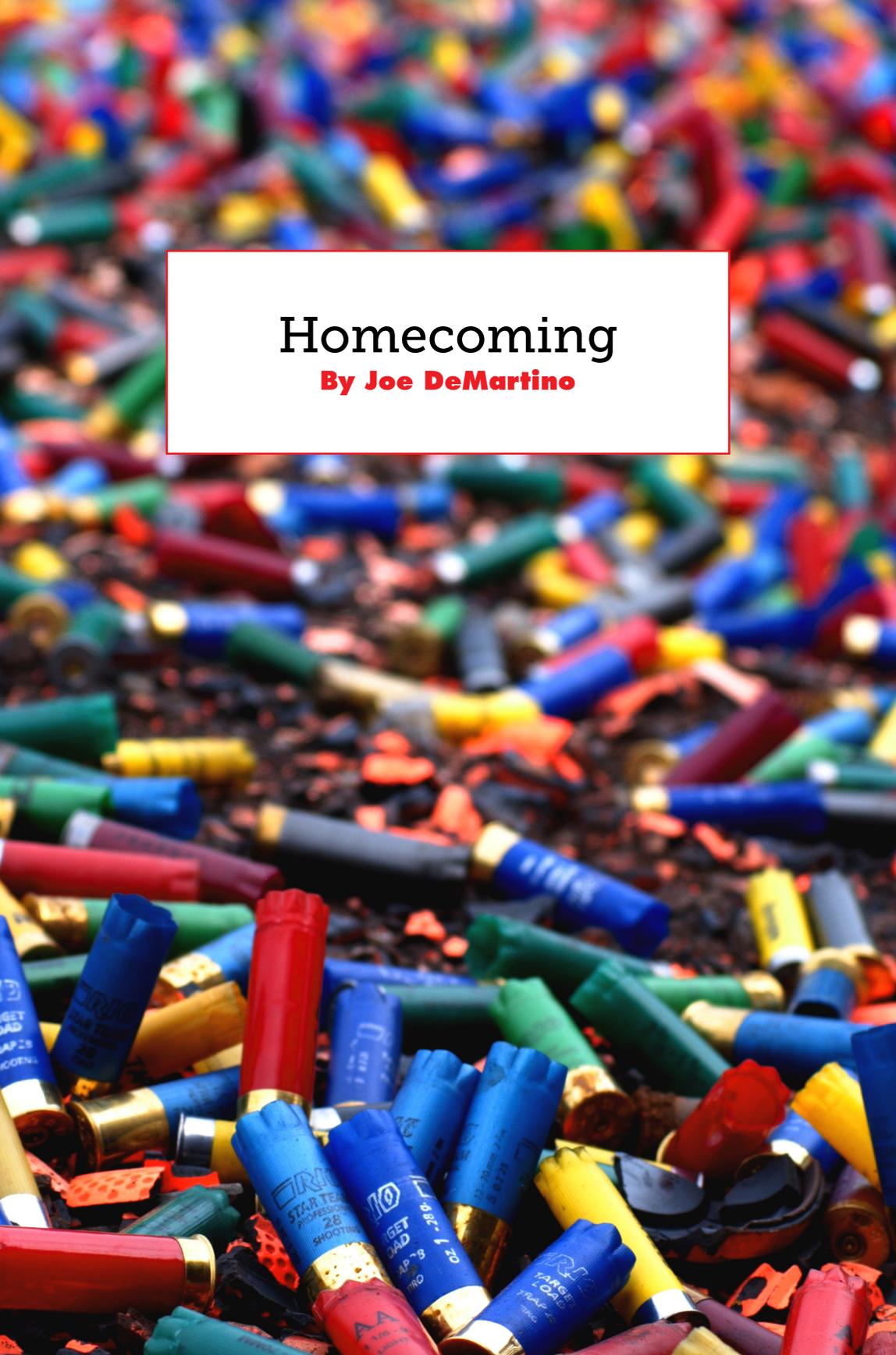
Grumble about getting up early for morning mass. One small brandy should make you feel better about Jesus or spark your cynicism for the coming year. Return for a nice glass of Bailey's Irish Cream. This totally counts as breakfast.

Christmas dinner (eaten around noon) will see you come up against mountains of several types of meat, at least three different types of potatoes and rivers of gravy. Surrounding family members will ensure you are never without wine. Discussion topics include: farming, which old people your granny has managed to outlive, the recession, more farming, snide comments about family members who have decided not to join you.

Saint Stephen's Day, or Day of the Wren

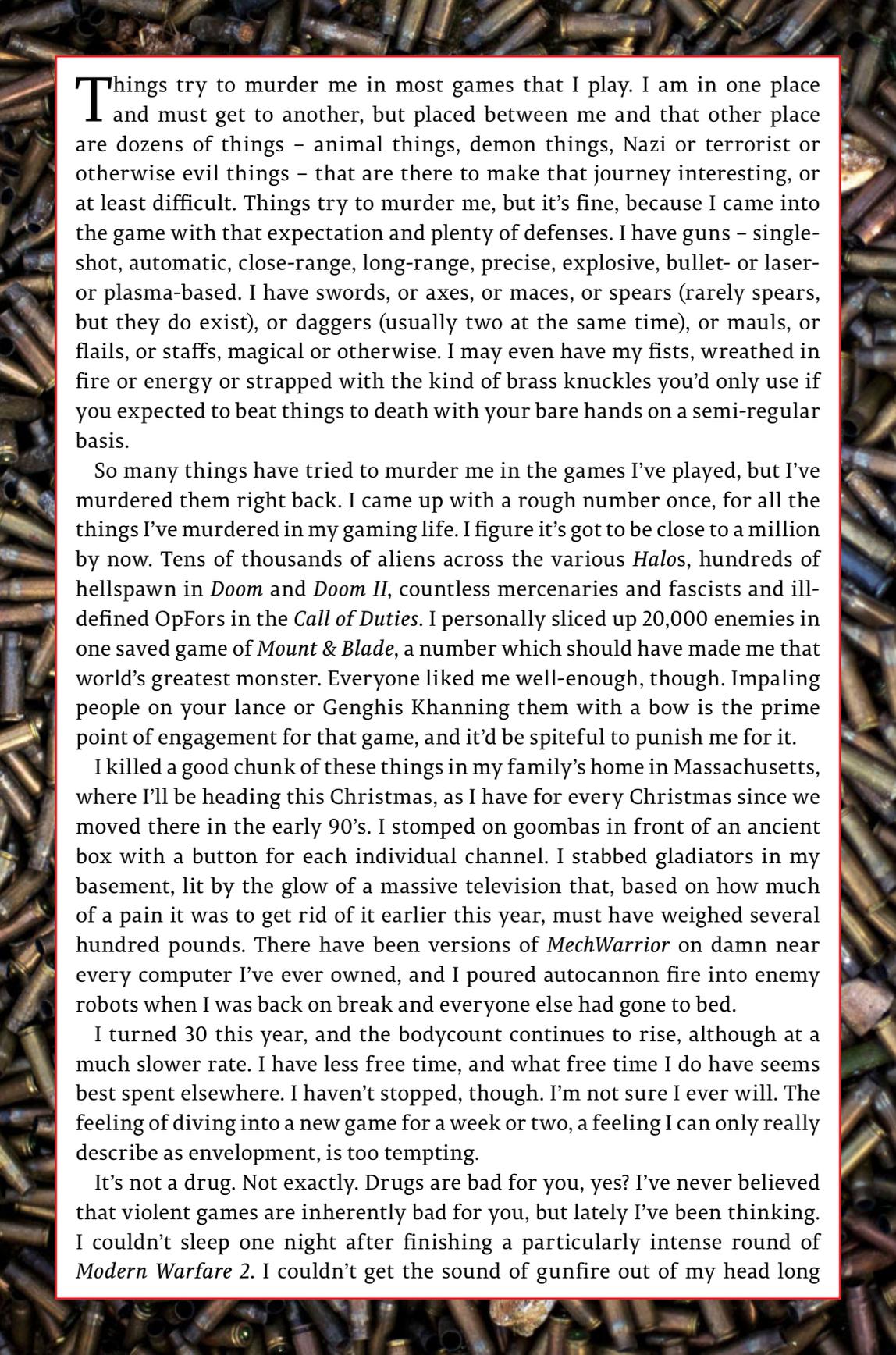
Bat smaller, weaker cousins out of the way as you dig into leftover turkey sandwiches – boxing jokes are optional. Then it's down to the village local for more Guinness. Remind yourself how lucky you were to escape this rural nightmare, before returning home to be out-drunk by a woman in her nineties who drinks whiskey like water.

Congratulations! You've made it! Nollaig Shona Duit! 🍷



Homecoming

By Joe DeMartino



Things try to murder me in most games that I play. I am in one place and must get to another, but placed between me and that other place are dozens of things – animal things, demon things, Nazi or terrorist or otherwise evil things – that are there to make that journey interesting, or at least difficult. Things try to murder me, but it's fine, because I came into the game with that expectation and plenty of defenses. I have guns – single-shot, automatic, close-range, long-range, precise, explosive, bullet- or laser- or plasma-based. I have swords, or axes, or maces, or spears (rarely spears, but they do exist), or daggers (usually two at the same time), or mauls, or flails, or staffs, magical or otherwise. I may even have my fists, wreathed in fire or energy or strapped with the kind of brass knuckles you'd only use if you expected to beat things to death with your bare hands on a semi-regular basis.

So many things have tried to murder me in the games I've played, but I've murdered them right back. I came up with a rough number once, for all the things I've murdered in my gaming life. I figure it's got to be close to a million by now. Tens of thousands of aliens across the various *Halos*, hundreds of hellspawn in *Doom* and *Doom II*, countless mercenaries and fascists and ill-defined OpFors in the *Call of Duties*. I personally sliced up 20,000 enemies in one saved game of *Mount & Blade*, a number which should have made me that world's greatest monster. Everyone liked me well-enough, though. Impaling people on your lance or Genghis Khanning them with a bow is the prime point of engagement for that game, and it'd be spiteful to punish me for it.

I killed a good chunk of these things in my family's home in Massachusetts, where I'll be heading this Christmas, as I have for every Christmas since we moved there in the early 90's. I stomped on goombas in front of an ancient box with a button for each individual channel. I stabbed gladiators in my basement, lit by the glow of a massive television that, based on how much of a pain it was to get rid of it earlier this year, must have weighed several hundred pounds. There have been versions of *MechWarrior* on damn near every computer I've ever owned, and I poured autocannon fire into enemy robots when I was back on break and everyone else had gone to bed.

I turned 30 this year, and the bodycount continues to rise, although at a much slower rate. I have less free time, and what free time I do have seems best spent elsewhere. I haven't stopped, though. I'm not sure I ever will. The feeling of diving into a new game for a week or two, a feeling I can only really describe as envelopment, is too tempting.

It's not a drug. Not exactly. Drugs are bad for you, yes? I've never believed that violent games are inherently bad for you, but lately I've been thinking. I couldn't sleep one night after finishing a particularly intense round of *Modern Warfare 2*. I couldn't get the sound of gunfire out of my head long

enough to drift off, and it concerned me so much that it was the last time I ever played that game, or any other in the series.

Increasingly, the moments I've enjoyed the most when playing a new game don't come from clearing out a challenging room full of enemies, or conquering a well-composed set piece battle. Those are still nice, but I've come to regard them as a kind of formality. They're there because they have to be there, because we haven't quite figured out a better risk/reward than what you get from violently disagreeing with something trying to murder you. What I've come to love from a new game these days is going home.

If an appropriately-genred game doesn't have some kind of home – a place where you can ditch your armor, review your progress and rejoice in the fact that nothing is currently trying to murder you – then it blunts the impact of the times where your character is actually in danger. You start to regard the murder carousel as your normal. A set piece battle can be exquisitely crafted for maximum thrills, but if it's just the next one in a very long line, it can come off as rote. Just another dive into the Skinner Box.

Add a place for downtime, however, and you have a way for the player to pace herself. Player homes give you a place to almost literally get away from it all – many of them are set apart from the main map and combat only takes place there under narrowly-defined circumstances. They offer storytelling opportunities, letting scenes take place in a bar or bedroom as opposed to a battlefield. They're a place for other characters to express themselves beyond combat taunts and simple banter, all the more important now that developers are starting to think of characters as characters as opposed to a collection of tropes and guns. Homes can vary in complexity – *Dragon Age: Origins* had a simple, peaceful nighttime camp by a small pond, while *Dragon Age: Inquisition* bestows upon the player a castle called Skyhold which is so massive that I was still discovering new parts of it sixty hours in.

My favorite scenes happen in homes. Kill a dragon with the Iron Bull in *Inquisition*, and you can get drunk with him afterwards, as he explains the symbolism of dragons to his people and translates a phrase he screamed at it during the fight (“I will bring myself great sexual pleasure while thinking about this later, with great respect”). *Mass Effect 2* had a massively-improved combat system from the first game in the series, but I'll remember Mordin Solus singing Gilbert and Sullivan on the Normandy SR-2 long after I've forgotten shooting geth in the head.

I used to play games when I was home for Christmas, but not anymore. You don't get very many of them, after all, and I can always stomp robots and slay dragons some other time. Home's for more important things. 🍷

A Castle in Battlemuir

By **Luke Arthur**



Miles was building a castle in the agricultural field next to the old ruined Kirk. He had asked Father Christmas for a toy castle, but unable to wait the long few days before the day itself, he had decided to try and make his own. Usually he wouldn't have been allowed out unaccompanied but his mother had relented as a holiday treat, on the grounds that he go no further than a few feet around the corner; the church was in the process of renovation, and the team of builders responsible for transforming its gothic façade into a charming coffee shop front would be able to look out for Miles. They had given him some good-natured advice on his project—"A castle needs good foundations, lad. Make sure they're well protected from that moat"—before downing tools early for the day, leaving Miles alone to contentedly pursue his project.

The field he was in was exposed, jagged with frost and without a barrier of trees to stem the elements. But Miles had been able to burrow himself into the bottom corner beneath the dry-stone wall of the kirk where he felt sufficiently sheltered. He had been working all day on his structure, and had carefully pieced together three curtain walls decorated with towers, secured in small trenches of soil and pebbles.

He would have to go in soon. It was getting dark, and he could see the icy smoke of his breath as he talked to himself. Still, Miles reckoned he could finish up before tea. He was busy trying to work out how to best use one short plank of wood which was much thicker than the others—possibly a very wide drawbridge?—when he heard cheerful whistling coming from the gate by the road.

He looked in its direction and saw stout man in a long dark green wax jacket, carrying a shotgun under the crook of his left arm. The sight of a game hunter in the Scottish Borders was far from a remarkable one, and Miles ignored the momentary-but-routine distraction to return to his work. The whistling came nearer, and was then replaced by a husky chuckle.

"What are you building there, little architect?"

Miles looked up and saw the man in the green jacket now standing over him and his castle. He had a silvery beard, full but well-kept, and a sparse covering of white, windswept hair. Miles was on his knees, his tongue out in concentration.

“It’s a castle,” said Miles to the stranger.

“It’s very good!” the man replied. He had an accent which Miles didn’t recognize; a round, warm burr which was pleasant to listen to.

“Thank you,” the boy said. “My name’s Miles.”

“Very nice to meet you, Miles!”

“What’s your name?” Miles asked.

“Hmm,” The man stroked his beard. “I’m not so sure you would believe me if I told you.”

“Why not?”

The man hesitated and cleared his throat. “Do you believe in Father Christmas?”

Miles looked doubtful. “You’re not Father Christmas.”

The man raised his eyebrows in fun. “Now, why would you say a thing like that?” he boomed, affecting mild hurt.

“Why would I say I was Father Christmas if it wasn’t true? Do you ever introduce yourself as someone that you’re not?”

“Sometimes I pretend to be a knight,” said Miles.

“Ah but that’s different. I’m not pretending, I promise. And anyway—” the man said in mock accusation, wagging a finger, “—how do I know you’re really Miles, and not a knight, eh?”

“I am me!” Miles blurted, his eyes wide in protest. The man chuckled again.

The boy relented. “I’m sorry, I’m not calling you a liar, it’s just—well, you don’t look like Father Christmas. Father Christmas wears red.”

“I’m out hunting,” said the man simply, pointing at his jacket and gun. “Christmas isn’t for a few days yet. The reindeer are at home resting for a long journey. The elves are putting the finishing touches to all of the presents. Everything’s ready, so I’m just taking a little break before things get busy. I’ve still got the beard, see?” He said, pointing to his face.

“Hm,” said Miles, chewing his lip in confusion. “Okay!” he stood up excitedly. “I know! If you’re really Father Christmas,” he said, visibly concentrating, “then you’ll be able to tell me what I asked for for Christmas.” He stood back and folded his arms in satisfaction at the challenge.

The man furrowed his top lip slightly, looking for a moment towards the sky before flicking his eyes imperceptibly towards the small fort Miles had been

crafting. “A wooden castle.” He said it with conviction. Miles blushed, unable to suppress the excited grin that crept across his face whenever he thought about the toy that he had wanted for months.

“That’s right,” Miles confessed sheepishly. The man folded both hands, rocking back and forth on his heels in satisfaction. The chuckle returned, accompanied by a triumphant wink.

“You’re a very perceptive young man, Miles. Not many children have asked as many questions as you within minutes of meeting me. You’d make a good scientist one day!” He wandered over to the wall and propped his shotgun up against it.

“I prefer building things,” said Miles simply, returning to his kneeled pose and fussing over a tower.

“Yes, of course, and you’re very good at it too, I see,” said the man, distractedly motioning at Miles’ efforts.

“Now,” he rubbed his hands together briskly, “I was wondering if you might be able to help me with something, Miles?” He pressed on without waiting for a response. “I’m looking for a man called Gideon. I suppose you might know him by the name of Mr. Hogg?”

“Yes, he lives in the village,” said Miles, nodding.

“I know he lives here,” he chuckled again. “I know where everybody lives, remember? Who’s been naughty, who’s been...nice.” The man rolled the sentence around in his mouth like a pebble. “But you see, I went to visit him this morning and he wasn’t at home. I was wondering if you know where he went?”

Miles looked up from his construction and thought hard. “Ummm,” he said. “I think I saw him earlier?”

“Good, excellent, Miles! The man leaned forward hungrily. “Which direction was he going?”

Miles tried to recall, looking into the distance at the rolling fields and nearby copses. His mind was blank. “I can’t remember,” he said apologetically.

The man’s face looked different for a moment. “It’s very important you try to remember, Miles. Mr. Hogg has something that belongs to me and I would very much like to have it.”

“I’m sorry, I honestly can’t remember,” Miles face twisted in guilt. Then

he brightened. “Can’t you just wait for him to come back? I’m sure he won’t be long. We can go there and wait together if you like. Once I’ve finished my castle.”

The man looked agitated. “I don’t have much time to spare,” he said, his voice softening self-consciously before breaking into a throaty titter. “Like I said, Father Christmas is very busy this time of year!”

Miles bobbed his head in acknowledgement. “Couldn’t you and Mr. Hogg just share?” he asked.

The man sighed.

“No, Miles.”

“Why not?” asked Miles.

The man looked away for a second, setting his jaw and exhaling pointedly. It was nearly dark, and purple twilight had settled on both of them. The hem of the man’s jacket met the top of his Wellington boots, and in the approaching gloom it served to give the impression that he had no legs.

He turned back to Miles, smiling. “Mr. Hogg said I could have it, so it is mine to have. Is that not fair?” he appealed in a soft voice, curling his lip into a sad frown. “Suppose,” he said, accelerating into a more vigorous tenor, “Suppose I said to you that you can have your toy castle for Christmas, but I never give it to you – how would that make you feel?” Miles gasped.

“What if I were to say I would give it to you, but never did? Would that not make you angry?” His voice broke momentarily on the passion of his rhetoric, burr crackling to coalfire.

“It would make me sad,” said Miles, visibly distressed.

“Sad, angry—” the man whirled his hands impatiently, growing into his lecture. “The point is, Miles, it’s not fair. Someone should not do something if they aren’t prepared to accept the consequences of their having done so.”

Something in the man’s words made Miles feel scolded, as though he had done something wrong and that Father Christmas would no longer give him his present. He wanted to win his approval but felt as though he couldn’t give him what he wanted. The pleasures of the day’s building accomplishments felt distant. He felt mixed up in something adult and complicated, a situation where there was no interest in making or sharing things.

“I’m sorry,” Miles managed numbly, looking at the flinty grass beneath his

feet, unsure of what else to do. The man relented. He tousled Miles' hair, accompanying it with his chuckle. "I'm sure I'll find him, anyway. Thank you, Miles, for your help." He looked at Miles warmly.

The man walked over to the shotgun by the wall. "I'd best be off if I'm to catch something before the light goes, I suppose."

"I think I saw some grouse at the top of the hill earlier," Miles offered. He still felt bad for reasons that he didn't understand.

"I'm not hunting grouse," the man replied.

He turned back to Miles. "Oh! That was silly of me. I almost forgot something." The man laughed reproachfully to himself, a hand straying to his pocket. "I have something for you."

He pulled out a small black box with a plastic lid and handed it to Miles. His mouth curled into a smile. "I do hope that you play with it." Then he shouldered his gun and prepared to make way over the hill.

"Goodbye, Miles. It was nice to meet you."

"Goodbye," said Miles.

The boy waited until the man had gone to look at the box he had been given. Condensation from the cold had mottled the plastic lid, but he could clearly make out the form of an intricately carved pewter knight resting on a crimson bed. He removed the figure gingerly from its box and placed it on one of the castle's towers. The filigreed fidelity of the knight emphasized the asymmetry of Miles' rudimentary work, like an masterfully-crafted decoration sat atop a burnt cake. It made him feel stupid and inadequate, his castle nothing more than agricultural flotsam.

Miles thought about how much time he had wasted and how he couldn't wait to have his toy castle on Christmas day, a good castle, not like the one he had made. He took a final look at his folly through a fog of confused tears and then pocketed the exquisite figure, his fingers tracing the historical minutiae worked into its chainmail and sword.

Miles set off down the lane towards the sleepy luminescence of the village. Smoke was rising from the chimneys. In the distance, a shotgun sounded. 🏹







A Cherished Christmas Classic

By Michael Edwards

As the years pass it's odd what objects we long for. For Charles Foster Kane it was his sled of lost childhood happiness. For Montgomery Burns it was his teddy bear. For me it's a beat-up VHS with a piece of old masking tape on the side. It's a time capsule and, as the hastily scrawled description of the content states, it's a happy accident of a Christmas mixtape. Contained on that tape in six hours of EP Mode glory, were some of the best animated Christmas specials ever (and a couple of duds) followed randomly at the end by *The Empire Strikes Back*, most likely borne from us not owning many blank VHS tapes and my dad trying to cram as much as possible on one tape. Every year, I watched it, and as the pièce de résistance of this cherished childhood tradition *Empire* has become my favorite Christmas movie.

What's Christmassy about *Empire*? It's the most depressing entry in the Star Wars canon. It has a frustrating cliffhanger ending. Luke wasn't on Dagobah long enough to learn that much about being a Jedi. Still, I can make the case that *Empire* is actually an appropriate holiday movie. First, though, a little history about my VHS, which I probably watched a hundred times from November through December for over a decade.

The current whereabouts of the tape are unknown, so it's been a while since I watched it, but I'd wager the history of its contents began in 1985. That was around the time my dad purchased the VCR that would be the main family machine for the next 5 years, before it lost the ability to record things and we had to buy a new one. We didn't know much about programming the VCR at that time, so I think only 15 minutes of the Rankin/Bass *Frosty the Snowman* started the tape off. Then there was *Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer*, *How the Grinch Stole Christmas*, *Mickey's Christmas Carol* and *A Charlie Brown Christmas* (all probably part of a CBS programming block) to get us in the mood for the Star Wars depression up ahead. There were also a whole lot of vintage mid-'80s TV commercials, because we didn't bother cutting those out back then. While many of these TV specials still air to this day and are readily available in multiple physical and digital formats, how I'd kill to have all the bizarre holiday and great toy commercials included.

As the Peanuts gang is joyfully singing "Hark! The Herald Angels Sing," the screen turns to static-y snow for about a minute. As the static fades we see an overhead shot of a true snowy wonderland. A bundled-up man is riding

a bipedal beast through the tundra. A close-up shot of the stranger pulling down his scarf reveals Luke Skywalker. Yes, that was a surprise to me as a kid a few times – this was the version of *Empire* that I watched – for years it wasn't labeled on the tape and was a legitimate surprise each time I discovered it. Eventually, I would label it so I could proceed with my ritualistic viewing of both *Empire* and *Return of the Jedi* as I got older. I was a teenager when I finally watched the opening crawl and probe droid launch sequence – it was like watching a whole new movie.

The reason why *Empire* was so haphazardly taped onto the end of what may have once been a longer selection of Christmas specials is that my dad probably was flipping channels one night, saw that it was starting up on one of those weekends where we had a free trial run of HBO, and realized this was his one shot at taping most of the movie. My theory is that he thumbed through the 8 or so VHS tapes we had at the time and went for the holiday one, because in his mind he thought, “How many times is my son going to watch these cartoons?” He checked to see that there was enough tape on it, shoved it into the VCR and pressed record. Fortunately, I wasn't kind and hadn't rewind, stopping the tape during the credits of *A Charlie Brown Christmas*. For me, a holiday classic was born as a result.

Which is a long way of getting to why *Empire* should be considered a Christmas movie. First off, a good chunk of the first hour takes place on the frozen ice planet Hoth, with cranky beasts you can ride and even crankier abominable snowman you better steer clear of. How different is that from the places Rudolph goes to on his adventures, or from the Grinch in his secluded home? Whenever the weather gets hostile around this time of year I instantly think of Hoth, especially the scene where Leia, the droids and Chewbacca are standing at the open gate of Echo Base staring out into the bleak and wintry night, wondering if they'll ever see Luke and Han again.

Then there's the AT-AT Walkers, which I always wanted for Christmas (the toy version, not an actual AT-AT, like I do now). Even during that spell in the late '80s where Star Wars merch was off the shelves, I would be reminded of how much I wanted an AT-AT of my own. I eventually bought one, and I admit that I was a little too old to have done so. Currently it sits in the guest room at my parents' house like an inanimate dog.

This next point may sound like I'm stretching but bear with me: Yoda is the Santa figure. Luke travels far and wide to seek him out, then is disappointed when all he finds is this clown-y Muppet that kind of sounds like Miss Piggy. Then the muppet gets real and Luke has egg on his face. As a result of Luke being a dick, Yoda forgoes coal to instead force Luke through rigorous bootcamp training that puts P90x to shame. And just for good measure Darth Vader shows up in a cave and freaks Luke out.

While I can't say much for the rest of the crew post-Hoth and pre-Bespin, the bounty hunters could be taken as a weird metaphor for the biblical Wise Men. Just replace Myhhr with a thermal detonator. Ok, that's grasping – but I did own and constantly play with all the action figures for all of the Bounty Hunters (with the exception of Dengar, who's just ridiculous).

With the Cloud City you've got a magical wonderland that's akin to the North Pole and The Island of Misfit Toys. There are little pig-like elves toiling away in rooms full of vapors and machines turning men into home decorations for wealthy slug mobsters. You've got a figurehead in Lando Calrissian, someone to serve as a face and spokesperson for the marketing people (if Coca-Cola existed in the Star Wars universe, then Lando is the one on the can). Meanwhile, behind the scenes are guys like the overworked and undervalued bald cyborg Lobot, who keep the operations running and makes sure the product goes out on time. I guess you can compare it to Dudley Moore's character in *Santa Claus*, Vince Vaughn's character in *Fred Claus* or any other right-hand man character from one of the many mediocre modern Christmas movies.

How can a movie as depressing as *Empire* be associated with the holiday season? Take a look at suicide stats associated with this time of year for your answer. With each passing Christmas you move farther and farther away from those innocent times of childhood. They seem innocent because you didn't know as much and, in most cases, adults were taking care of things and providing for you. Luke realizes this in *Empire* as his attempts at being an adult fail rather spectacularly. He has a nasty fight with his father, he loses his hand, he fails at his job training and his face is all messed up by an abominable snowman (oh, and he hallucinates that he chops his own head off in a cave).

All of these things relate to what we all go through each year of our adult lives. By the end of it, all Luke can do is have a moment staring out at the stars with a woman who he has a rather complicated relationship with. It's in that beautiful end scene of *The Empire Strikes Back* where, if you're watching it for the first time, you have no idea what's going to happen next. At the end, all you can do is enjoy the moment – and the company of friends and family.

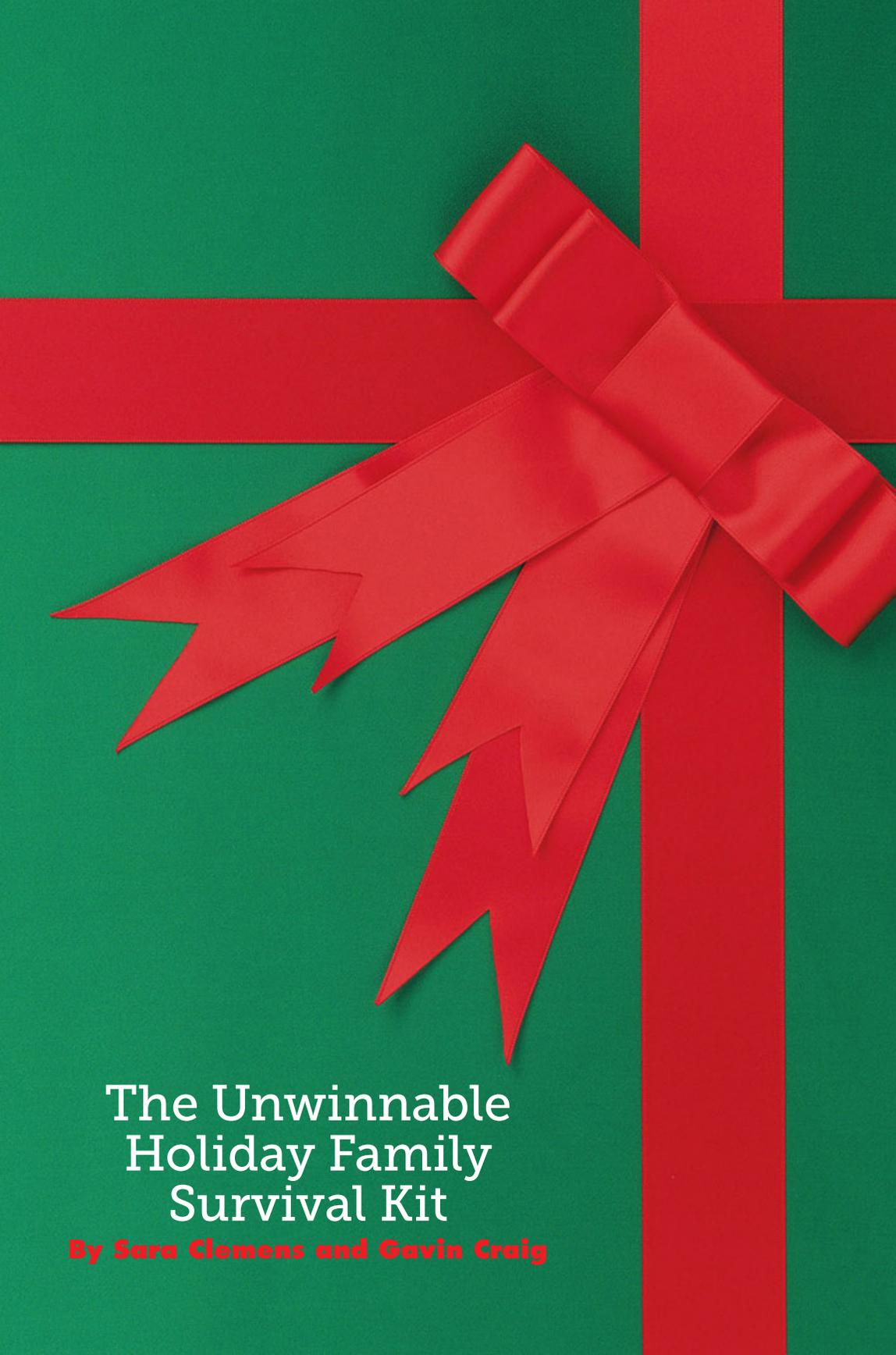
None of us know what's going to happen next in our own lives, but there's one thing we have that's the greatest possession of all: hope. And of course after that, there's the good memories, even one accidentally captured on an old beat-up VHS tape. 📺



“Luke, come on, you only have to wear the sweater Aunt Beru gave you during dinner. You can take it off right after.”



“Nooooooooooooooooooooo! It itches!”

A large, vibrant red ribbon is tied into a bow, positioned diagonally across the upper right portion of the frame. The background is a solid, deep green. The ribbon has a slight sheen and is layered, with some parts overlapping others, creating a sense of depth and texture. The bow is the central focus of the upper half of the image.

The Unwinnable Holiday Family Survival Kit

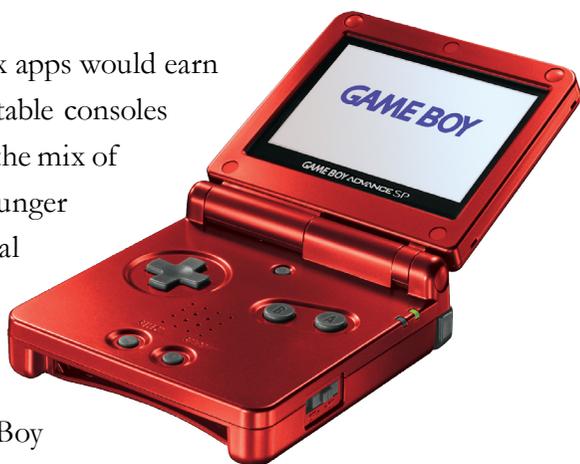
By Sara Clemens and Gavin Craig

This is the season for a stocky of smug “how to win an argument with relatives at holiday dinner” think pieces. But nobody ever wins family holiday arguments anyway, minus your creepy uncle. And he’s just looking to draw attention away from that uncomfortably plausible rumor no one wants to bring up.

Luckily, this year you can prepare yourself instead with the Unwinnable Holiday Family Survival Kit, a carefully curated set of items for real holiday contingencies. Everything here is obtainable at minimal expense and, most importantly, all easily fit within a large winter jacket pocket or a small clutch. Here we go.

Game Boy Advance SP

You might think that Netflix apps would earn the current generation of portable consoles a spot in the Survival Kit, but the mix of old school cred and lack of younger cousin “let me play that” appeal gave Nintendo’s final and most perfect iteration of the Game Boy the edge (well, technically there’s the Game Boy Micro, but that thing is just too damn small).



The perfect balance between compact size and rich content delivery, the GBA SP not only has its own extensive catalog of games, but saw the re-release of a number of classic NES and SNES titles including *Metroid*, *Super Mario Bros.*, several *Final Fantasies*, the original *Legend of Zelda* and *A Link to the Past*. Choose wisely, though, because you’re only bringing one of them – preferably something you can play obsessively for hours at a time in a leave-me-the-hell-alone sulk.

There’s no changing cartridges at a family gathering. If you look up from the screen, it’s game over. Remember, it’s not about getting comfortable. Comfort is for suckers and Netflix is for the weak. It’s about making yourself unapproachable as you run out the clock. Grandma doesn’t have wi-fi anyway.

Earbud Headphones

In addition to keeping your GBA's 8-bit bleeps and bloops from attracting the attention of wayward family members, earbud headphones can be the key to late-night detox sessions. Almost everything with a screen has a headphone input. Want to watch some TV during the one time you have complete control of the remote? Need to rinse the "Rockin' Around the Christmas Tree" out of your brain with some Black Sabbath? Did you manage to steal the password to your brother's new iPad?



With earbuds and a dimmed screen, you are the night. Troll through his ebook collection for anything you can use as leverage in the ongoing "Ugh-You're-SUCH-a-Dork" War. Personally, we're waiting for someone to make a microwave with a headphone input that somehow also magically funnels the fan noise through it so we can have sneaky pie. Sneaky pie tastes better.

Earplugs

When the ear buds come out, the earplugs go in. Go for the cheapies here, less than a buck per pair at your local drug store. If you wear your hair over your ears, you're home free, but for the rest of us, there's tinnitus. A chronic condition caused by overexposure to loud, damaging noise, tinnitus is a permanent sense of a ringing sound in one's ears.



An affliction like this is just technical enough to satisfy any inquiries, and it appeals to every older generation's conviction that you really did have your music turned up too loud. Readers who do actually suffer from tinnitus know that earplugs don't do anything to reduce symptoms, but being left alone with the ringing in your ears is still preferable to putting up with your racist Uncle Frank.

Dice

Whether it's a pair of traditional bones or a 20-sided set, dice are uber handy. Settle arguments about dibs on the last crescent rolls, picking up cousin Clem at the train station and waking grandma for church with diplomacy and fun. Plus, all it takes is a hallway and a wall to get a lively game of Christmas craps going.



Or any kind of holiday-themed craps. Just don't invite Aunt Sheila (she's got a problem with the ponies).

Fake Blood Capsules

At some point, you're going to have put up with just about as much as you can take, and you're going to need an exit. If you're helping in the kitchen, the fake blood capsule eliminates the need to actually cut yourself, while still delivering the same urgent and sufficiently nauseating excuse to depart. If you're not handling sharp objects, then a palmed capsule makes for a convincing nosebleed.

Just enough, in either case, to necessitate driving yourself to urgent care or, say, the closest drinking establishment, but not so dire as to require summoning an ambulance. Waiting rooms take hours, especially on the holidays. It's simply not reasonable to expect you to make it back. If there's an unexplained rash of minor injuries next year, you can't possibly be held responsible.

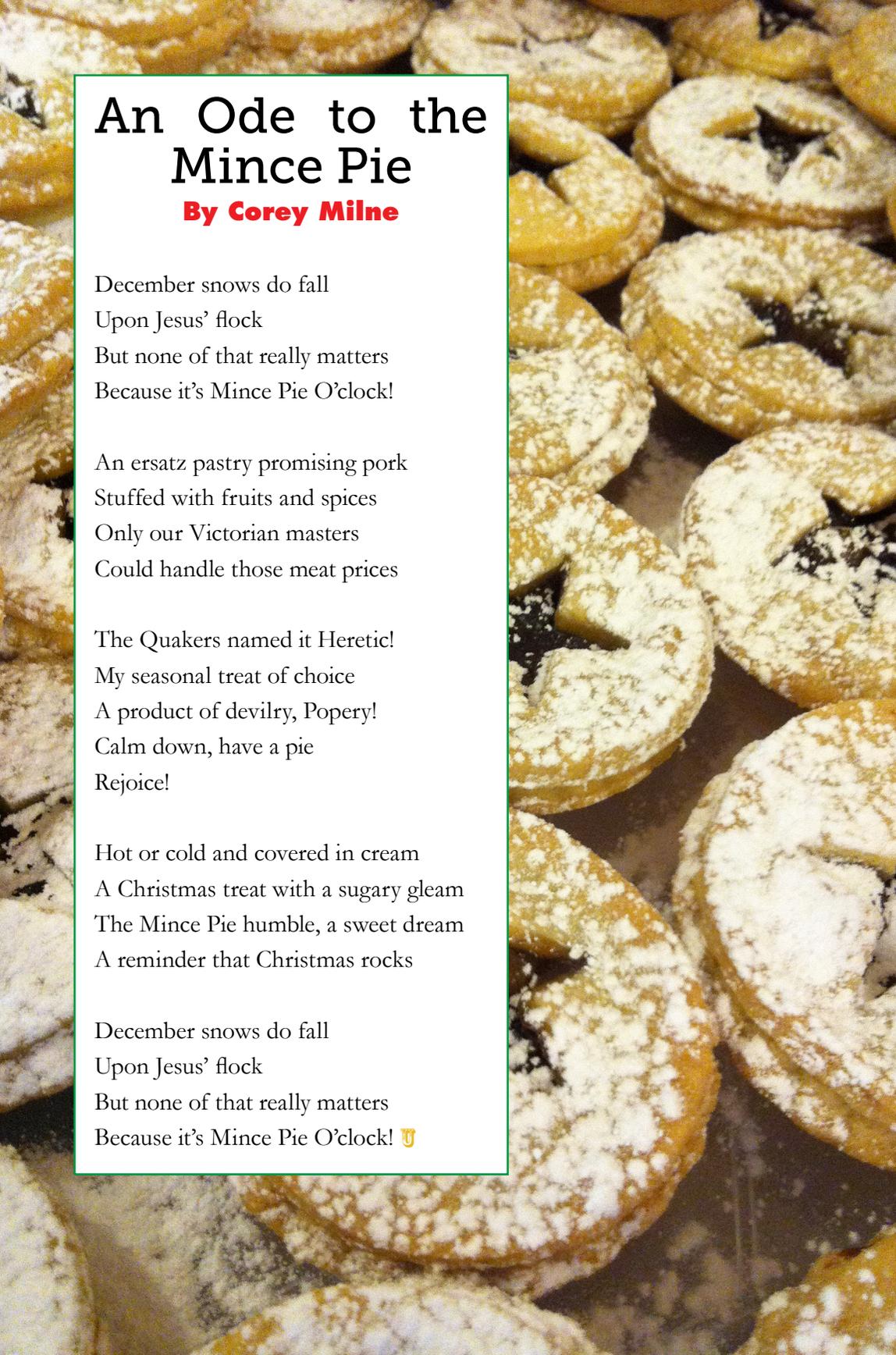
The Number of a Local Birthday Clown Who Does Last-Minute Appearances [ONLY TO BE USED IN EXTREME EMERGENCIES]

The dog's chewed your one GBA cartridge and now it won't even fit in the slot. Your earbuds just went on a suicide mission through the washer/dryer. Your dice and the last pair of your earplugs were found in baby Nelson's morning diaper and sis is totally on to your blood capsule scam.

No one's seen the rum or the whiskey since second cousin Roger got in from Flagstaff last night, the baby won't stop screaming (gastro-intestinal distress), the rest of the kids are in the basement reenacting *Lord of the Flies* and the phrase "key party" keeps drifting in from the den.

So you make the call. You ask for Giggles. When the lime green '67 VW bug pulls up to the curb, you slip out onto the back patio and head towards the yard. You pull your coat tighter against the crisp evening air. By the time you've reached the edge of the woods behind the house, the only thing you hear is the crunch of snow underfoot mixed with distant sound of children's shrieking glee. That is glee right? You're pretty sure it's not just your tinnitus. U





An Ode to the Mince Pie

By Corey Milne

December snows do fall
Upon Jesus' flock
But none of that really matters
Because it's Mince Pie O'clock!

An ersatz pastry promising pork
Stuffed with fruits and spices
Only our Victorian masters
Could handle those meat prices

The Quakers named it Heretic!
My seasonal treat of choice
A product of devilry, Popery!
Calm down, have a pie
Rejoice!

Hot or cold and covered in cream
A Christmas treat with a sugary gleam
The Mince Pie humble, a sweet dream
A reminder that Christmas rocks

December snows do fall
Upon Jesus' flock
But none of that really matters
Because it's Mince Pie O'clock! 🍥

A Space Marine Carol

By Aurelius Vento



Editor's note: Each month, Unwinnable's resident advice columnist dispenses wisdom from the ages in response to your email and Twitter questions. He just happens to do so from 38,000 years in the future. With the help of the ancient computer CHAD and the mecha-tentacled Magos Valence Mak, Tech-Marine Aurelius Ventro of the Imperial Fists delivers the enlightenment of the Emperor to your unworthy human eyes - as only a Space Marine can.

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BOOT FILE 709-755-6-EL-3***

TEMPORAL COMMUNICATION PROTOCOL INITIALIZED

TRANSMISSION BEGINS

Dear Mortals:

In lieu of answering another moronic query this month, I have elected to share with you a most singular and bizarre experience of my own in the hope that some shred of wisdom may yet trickle down into your underdeveloped brains.

Caution: This account contains graphic depictions of violence and terror. Those of weak constitution - which is most of you - may wish to look away.

Everyone Deserves That Much

By **Stu Horvath**



I was walking up Broadway on my way to join the dregs of a Christmas party that had gathered in a grungy Nolita dive bar. Multi-colored lights shone through darkened store windows. Small clusters of disheveled people in Santa hats gathered at corners in an attempt to hail near-mythological cabs. It was 2:30 in the morning and uncomfortably warm, but the drizzle was cold.

A man, a little younger than me, stopped me as I walked past.

“Excuse me, sir. I don’t want any money. I just want some encouragement.”

I looked him up and down. He didn’t have any of the obvious signs of substance abuse or dereliction that usually come with random strangers trying to talk to you on the street in Manhattan. His clothes were neat, his speech clear. He didn’t even look like he’d had a drink, though at that hour I could hardly have begrudged him. It was entirely baffling. Confusion was plain on my face as I silently stared at him.

“I am going to the Staten Island Ferry,” he continued, “but I don’t know if I should get on. My family is in Staten Island and I don’t know if I deserve to see them. I guess I am just looking for someone to tell me that I do. Deserve to see them.”

“It is the holidays, man,” I replied. “Everyone deserves at least that much.”

He thanked me, patted me on the shoulder and walked off into the night.

Christmas never means one thing for very long. When I was a kid, it meant presents, the memories of each year tangled up with the toys under the tree. When I was a teenager into college, it meant family (and presents), fueled by the holiday’s dinners and gatherings. As an adult, Christmas has mostly been defined by working in a newsroom and struggling to eke out even a sliver of time for festivities.

These days, I don’t know what Christmas is about. The years have been marked by a steady erosion of the family and friends who previously defined the holiday. My paternal grandfather, a steady source of cheer in the cheerless house where our family gathered for Christmas dinner, died when I was in seventh grade. The Cobb family, who we visited every Christmas Eve, whose home spilled over with decoration, is practically extinct.

Walter, the church organist; my maternal grandfather; Aunt Donna; the Lambertsons - year after year, more people went missing. When my father died a few years ago, he left a tiny immediate family: my mother, her mother and I. The house still gets decorated, but mostly out of stubborn tradition than any kind of holiday spirit.

For other people, at least judging from the news, Christmas means a whole lot of other things. There's the folks who swarm into stores at unholy hours to gobble up "deals" and the shrill religious minority indignant at the trampling of their most sacred of holidays and the party people who are storing up a year's worth of bad behavior for the excesses of the office party.

It all combines into an unbearable red and green cacophony of jingling bells. There are so many competing meanings of Christmas, it had no meaning at all. Everyone, from the noblest altruist to the crassest materialist is competing to win you over, to out-cheer everyone else. They trot out their chosen Meaning of Christmas like tinsel clad pimps with grit-teethed grins and warrior hearts.

I hate the din of it all.

I've been thinking about the man on the street, about what he might have been going through. I wonder if he was thinking about throwing himself in the river. Maybe my puzzled encouragement convinced him not to. Maybe it didn't. Maybe he was just drunk and melancholy and simply needed to hear another person's voice.

More than anything, though, I was disappointed in my initial cynicism. I don't know which is worse: that my first thought was that this man was a junkie who wanted something from me or that my instinctive reaction to that was wary annoyance. Granted, this is learned behavior on my part, a sensible manifestation of street smarts, but it also represents a kind of hardening of the spirit with which I am uncomfortable.

While pondering that in the days since, I think I've realized something about Christmas. Maybe this is obvious, maybe I am late to the party, but even if that is the case, it bears repeating.

It is unavoidable that the end of the year should inspire a certain amount of reflection. It is a liminal time, neither of the old nor yet of the new. We look backward and forward. We take stock. We celebrate our victories and resolve to change our failures. All of the traditions, the faith, the gifts sprang from this seasonal preoccupation.

Christmas is about putting that stranger in our path and challenging all the pessimism that gets caked on us over the course of a year.

Christmas isn't about being good, it is about trying to be better.

Editor's Note: this story was originally published last year on Christmas day. Even though I posted it on Unwinnable, I didn't write it for anyone but myself and I didn't feel right, at the time, promoting it. One very surreal year later, well, I've changed my mind. 🍷



UNWINNABLE



HOLIDAY BONUS STAGE

Erika Barcott is a freelance writer living in the Pacific Northwest. She enjoys recording Let's Play videos and knitting, and is determined to earn the Best of the Best banner in *Mass Effect 3* multiplayer before *Mass Effect 4* is released. You can find her on Twitter [@noquartersreq](#).

Melinda Bardon is a baker, writer, editor and pickle enthusiast. Follow her on Twitter [@Bardonian](#).

Corey Milne has been into videogames ever since he went on an adventure with a bandicoot. Other interests include history, science fiction and Judge Dredd. An Irishman living in Scotland, he is attempting to make a living from writing to justify his masters degree. Follow him on Twitter [@Corey_Milne](#).

Luke Arthur is noted amongst his peers for celebrating Christmas in December every Calendar Year. You can follow him on Twitter [@King_LArthur](#) which is named after the greatest of Santas' Reindeer's who eventually went mad and slew millions.

Michael Edwards is a jack of all trades. While possibly the greatest hitchhiker in the galaxy, he also likes to write and play music. He is working on some music and weird fiction at the time of this writing. Follow him on Twitter [@EdwardsDeuce](#).

Sara Clemens is editor in chief at [Videodame](#) and not a plainclothes elf gathering intel for the Man in Red. Why, what have you heard? See her normal human tweets at [@TheSaraClemens](#).

Gavin Craig plans to work on Christmas just like any other day and categorically denies ever knowing anyone named Marley. He tweets variations on "Bah, humbug" at [@craiggav](#).

Aurelius Ventro is a Tech-Marine from the 4th Company of the Imperial Fists Space Marine Chapter who won't be born for another 38,000 years, but that doesn't mean he can't dispense wisdom from the 41st millennium. Solicit responses to your pitiful mortal queries at [DearSpaceMarine@gmail.com](#) or at [@DearSpaceMarine](#). The only human he follows on Twitter is [@johnpetergrant](#).

Stu Horvath is the editor in chief of Unwinnable. He reads a lot, drinks whiskey and spends his free time calling up demons. He once made a series of greeting cards about Christmas-themed Victorian murderers. Follow him on Twitter [@StuHorvath](#).

Amber Harris is an artist, lover of lore and a *Magic: The Gathering* fangirl. She is trying hard to convince her parents that creating art for a living is a good idea. You can find her art at cowsgomoose.tumblr.com. Follow her on Twitter [@amburgersupreme](https://twitter.com/amburgersupreme).

Chris Martinez is a freelance artist who loves drawing cute things, surprisingly. He can be reached at [@DrakeLake](https://twitter.com/DrakeLake) if you want to tell him to get a real job, that bum.

Kenneth Lucas is Unwinnable's podcast producer and in-house DJ. Listen to his songs on [SoundCloud](https://soundcloud.com/kennethlucas) and follow him on Twitter [@Kursse](https://twitter.com/Kursse).

Brian "Bee Tee Dee" Daly is an illustrator and musician. He combines the two in his comic, *Novelty Song*.

Illustrations:

Cover: Amber Harris

Santa's Fall From Heaven: Gustav Dore, vandalized by Stu Horvath

Twelve Days of The Long Dark: *The Long Dark* screenshot courtesy of Hinterland Games

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An Ale'd Irish Christmas: Guinness Christmas ornament courtesy of Guinness

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King Ghidorah, King Diamond and King Kong: Chris Martinez

A Cherished Christmas Classic: Poster and stills from *The Empire Strikes Back* courtesy of Lucasfilm

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**CLICK A PLANETARY BODY TO GO TO
A DESTINATION**

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UNWINNABLE
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GREAT
STORIES**

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you for
reading!**

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