

The Curse of Christmas Present

by Martin "Red" Fredricks

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In the wee hours of Christmas morning, with all the presents opened, wrapping stuffed into huge, black trash bags, all the "some assembly required" chores completed, and as my relatives gently slumber, I confront the Curse of Christmas Present.

My bride breathes softly, deeply, contentedly at my side. No doubt she's dreaming of the cool gifts she tore into and the warmth of family and feast to come on the 'morrow.

As for me, I lie there in agony, stomach and intestines twisted like red and green ribbons. Over and over I ask myself, what in the world I to do with that all-in-one handyman set from Uncle Buck, the orange-and-pink-striped tube socks from Aunt Agnes, the around-the-world tea sampler from Cousin Carey? I'm a coffee man, for God's sake. Wide eyed and frightened, I confront grim reality — I'm stuck with them.

Unwanted, useless gifts. They come out of nowhere, from relatives I wouldn't dream of inquiring as to where they scrounged up such items, let alone come right out and ask for receipts. I see these people only once every couple of years; the \$3.99 socks are not worth the insult and hurt feelings.

Still... I can't use the darn things, either. I could donate them, I suppose, but that seems like adding insult to injury to the lives of the less fortunate. I could throw them away, but there's enough Ebenezer in my blood to recoil from the thought of tossing something with value, how little it might be. If something can be purchased, I pathetically reason, surely it can be returned, possibly even replaced with something useful or desirable.

Through the maze of options twist my sleepless thoughts on Noel morn. My wife murmurs, readjusts a little. In the twilight, I see she actually has the hint of a smile at the corners of her pretty mouth. And why not? She got a diamond necklace. As for me, I resolve to enter into that newest and most frightening Christmas tradition. Like the running of the bulls, it has elements of danger and, at times it, too, resembles a stampede.

The Returning of the Gifts.

Oh, sure. We gripe about the bustle of the malls and shops during those last few precious and precarious days before The Bearded One arrives, but we know the post-St. Nick urban warfare will be much, much more harrowing. Long lines. Screaming kids. Frustrated, glaring parents. Occasionally short-tempered clerks. Few receipts. Little courtesy. Less common sense. It's brutal.

Most stores, even the huge chains, do their best even as they watch holiday profit margins plunge like The Fat Man's swoosh down a chimney. They establish special return lines, schedule extra customer-service help, and direct employees to scan receiptless items to determine whether those items were, in fact, purchased there.

Without too much trouble most of the fake-leather gloves and foot massagers, even those hideous holiday sweatshirts adorned with bon-bons and trinkets hanging every which way, go back. More often than not they're taken with a smile, despite the long lines of snot-nosed whiners and sunken-eyed moms. I know this and, fluffing my pillow, take some comfort there.

There is a catch, however, and it gnaws at me like The Grinch's pup on a bone. If I can't find the store where an item was purchased, it's mine forever. Reclining in that peaceful house on that silent night, I see my sorry Christmas story unfold.

In store after store, cashiers will scan my items and shake their heads. "Sorry," they'll say, "we don't carry those." I'll lower my head and mumble, "Thanks anyway," before trudging out to yet another ice-covered parking lot, determined to try one more store, knowing my fate will be the same. Others heading in with the same hopeful thoughts I harbored less than half an hour before will look at me as we pass. Their confidence will crumble ever so slightly. Deep down they know, like I do, that the gift return can be as elusive as a Minnesota Lutheran church lady dodging queries about her recipe for Jell-O Surprise.

My bride rolls over, sighs. On the verge of coming to terms with my predicament, I remember I've been stuck with ultimate Curse of Christmas Present terror: The Christmas CD. You've seen these nasty things. They have titles like "Anne Murray's Most-Loved Holiday Hits" or "The Chipmunks Christmas." Most of them are by washed-up artists trying to stage a comeback on Santa's coattails.

I try soothing myself with the old standard, "It's the thought that counts." But, as they say in the corporate back rooms of the businesses where I'd like to return the gifts, that is a non-starter.

Forget it, I tell myself, get some sleep. At least the game on tomorrow will be a perfect excuse for avoiding conversations with Buck, Agnes and Carey. I slip my headphones on and press play.

Croon on, Ms. Murray, croon on.

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