



**Jersey Devil Press
Holiday Half-Issue
2011**

JERSEY DEVIL PRESS
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Editor's Note: Seriously, Socks are Fine

It's that time of year again. Halloween has come and gone, so it's time to bust out the ornaments and the awful music. Thanksgiving? What's that? Corporations are spending millions of dollars to convince us to buy billions of dollars of crap, all in the name of whatever religious holiday they can appropriate. And if you try to fight this rampant capitalism, people call you things like "scrooge" and "grinch" and "get a job, hippie." It's almost like people *want* to go into debt to prove they haven't forgotten their friends exist.

Well, we haven't forgotten you exist, dear readers, and we're going to prove it without dropping a dime. This is the 2011 Holiday Half-Issue, our gift to you.

We've got a new Thanksgiving-themed story, "Almost Every November," from myself; the delightful and uplifting "The Resurrection of Old Saint Nick," from Samuel Snoek-Brown; "Chinese Take-Out," from Stephen Schwegler, a mouth-watering, Christmas-flavored semi-sequel to "November;" and, from Laura

Garrison, "The Long Happy New Year of Dora Wellington," which is either about a Kwanzaa celebration that goes terribly wrong or the long happy New Year of Dora Wellington. You'll have to read it to find out.

Now, if you'll excuse me, I have to get in line at Walmart. I hear they're selling a giant TV for slightly less than they normally do.

– Eirik Gumeny

Almost Every November

Eirik Gumeny

Dr. Wild ran into Dr. Mannheim's office, out of breath and slamming the door behind him. He locked it with great passion.

"Test subject TMO-3," he panted. "He's loose."

"Loose?"

"And pissed off."

"He's just a turkey."

"Haven't you been reading the updates?"

"No, not for the TMOs. I've been focusing on the PX project."

"Well, the short version is there's plenty to be concerned about."

Dr. Wild grabbed the top of a filing cabinet and began dragging it toward the door. "Help me move --"

The doorway exploded, sending Dr. Wild sprawling across the office and launching the filing cabinet's contents into the air. As the papers floated down and the smoke drifted up, a very large turkey stepped into the threshold.

Dr. Mannheim tilted his head. "Is that --"

"TMO-3!" shouted Dr. Wild, diving behind Dr. Mannheim and the large metal desk at which he was still sitting.

"I don't see what the big deal is. I've eaten bigger turkeys than --"

The genetically-modified turkey pulled an AK-47 from behind his back.

"OK, that's new," said Dr. Mannheim.

"He took out the security team," said Dr. Wild, grabbing Dr. Mannheim's shirt. "Now get down!"

In the extended moment it took TMO-3 to wrap his artificially-prehensile feathers around the trigger, Dr. Mannheim was able to flip his desk and join his colleague in huddling on the floor. A spray of bullets soon flew above them.

"Why did you teach him to use a firearm?"

"We didn't teach him," replied Dr. Wild, "he picked it up on his own. And quickly."

The stream of bullets moved lower and began slamming into the desk. Dr. Mannheim, however, was less than concerned.

"That is one hell of a desk," said Dr. Wild, admiring the lack of artillery tearing through it.

"I don't fuck around when it comes to office furniture," replied Dr. Mannheim. "And I don't fuck around when it comes to being attacked by poultry, either." Grabbing the phone cord, he pulled the receiver from around the desk and to his side. The earpiece was shattered, but Dr. Mannheim had no intention of listening.

He hit *99 and spoke into the phone: "Attention, this is Dr. James Mannheim. We've got a Code 12 in my office and need assistance. Release the Christmas Ham."

"We have a code for this?" asked an incredulous Dr. Wild.

"Yes. This happens almost every November."

"Is that why you guys recruited me so persistently last December?"

"It may have played a part."

The gunfire stopped abruptly. There was a small *tunk* and then a very, very loud *boom*. The desk bulged slightly and slid a few inches backwards.

"He's got explosives?"

"He's got explosives."

"You could have mentioned that."

"I was a little too busy trying not to soil myself."

An awful squawk cut through the air, followed by a gravelly yet high-pitched voice.

"Devils! Savages! No more will you play God with my feathered brethren! No more will you torture us and experiment on us just for plumper, juicier breasts! No more will you freeze our desecrated corpses and sell them to families honoring their genocidal ancestors! Your time is at an end, barbarians! So sayeth Timothy the turkey!"

There was another *tunk*, another *boom*, and then the gunfire resumed.

"You never enhance their sentience. Never!" barked Dr. Mannheim. "That's rule one!"

"We thought we could make them accept their fate! Make them willingly plump themselves up! We'd already increased their appetites and their ability to gain weight. It seemed like the next logical step!"

The constant barrage of bullets against the desk was beginning to get louder as the metal began to give out. Just beyond it, though, was a frothing, snarling oink.

"What the hell is that?!"

"The Christmas Ham," said Dr. Mannheim with a cruel smile.

The AK-47 ceased firing almost immediately. A low, steady rumbling could be heard in concert with the oinking. Paper clips strewn across the ground near the doctors began to vibrate and jump.

"How big is that thing?"

"Big. Big enough to feed a small country."

The rumbling turned into something like thunder. There was a terrified skreak and then a porcine roar. And then there was silence.

Dr. Mannheim inched up over the desk to see what had become of Timothy the Turkey.

Timothy was gesticulating to the Christmas Ham, articulating all he had learned of the scientists' goals in a kind of animal sign-language. Confusion contorted the pig's face, but the Ham nonetheless appeared to be nodding his assent.

Dr. Mannheim slid slowly to the floor, his back against the desk.

"Well?" asked Dr. Wild.

"We're fucked."

The Resurrection of Old Saint Nick

Samuel Snoek-Brown

Step 1: Gather the bones of Santa Claus.

Check.

I knew I would find most of the skeleton in Bari, Italy, but there were so many other pieces, rumored and real, scattered all over the world. It took me all of this year and most of my savings to track down his fingers, his ribs, and a foot. In Germany, I was almost arrested making off with a stray tooth, but when the cops confronted me I swallowed the tooth and they couldn't prove a thing. I had to hold it in until I'd crossed the border into the Czech Republic and then I spent two days shitting in a bucket in Prague. Thank Christ for rubber gloves.

I knew all along I needed to end in Turkey. That was the key. It was the country of Santa Claus's birth, and it was the country

where he died. All his relics, like all his stories, had been stolen away, broken apart and reassembled in new ways, new art, all over everywhere. But he has always belonged in Turkey, the historical crossroads from Jerusalem and Mecca to Rome. If I succeed in bringing back Santa Claus, it has to be here.

In the Archaeological Museum in Antalya, not that far from the town where Saint Nicholas served as bishop, I found the last pieces of Santa Claus's head: his jaw, some more teeth, and parts of his skull. They rested on red velvet in a gold-trimmed wooden chest, an ikon of Saint Nicholas embedded in the raised lid, the whole thing under glass in a side wing of the museum. It wasn't hard. No one remembered these sad, forgotten relics, these ghosts of another era. Everyone's childhood tucked into a back hallway and ignored.

So I saved the museum in Antalya till last, and from there it was just a three-hour drive along the coast to the town where Santa Claus died. There's a little resort on the beach, but December is very much off season, so I have the place mostly to myself, which is both good and bad, because while I need the privacy, it was hell finding the dead fat man.

Step 2: Find a dead fat man with a beard. (Kill him if necessary.)

Check.

He didn't have to be fat, I guess. Saint Nicholas doesn't seem very hefty in any of his ikons. But if I'm going to do this, I want to do it right, I want to bring back Santa Claus in a way that the world will embrace him again. And right or wrong, our American fat guy sucking on a Coke has pretty much swept the world. So, portly, at least.

The beard was more important, because I'm pretty sure I can bring the man back but I'm not so sure his hair will grow any once he's in his new body.

The bones are known for miracles. I'd already heard about them secreting rosewater or myrrh on Saint Nick's saint's day. I don't know what myrrh is supposed to smell like but these things are sure as hell sweating something. It's thin but slick, like baby oil in bathwater. It smells sweet, too, but not like rosewater—it's a sharp, earthy sweet, like the cedar sap I used to get in my clothes

when I helped my dad clear brush in our back yard. Like the resin from live Christmas trees.

The priests in charge of these things would collect the water in vials and sell them to tourists or pass them around at Christmas parties, but I went to college, and I know that Egyptians used to embalm people with this shit, so I'm collecting it, too. I keep the bones stacked in one of those huge drain pans you use when you change the oil on your car. It's almost two-thirds full already.

My point is, maybe the myrrh will kick-start a growing process and the body I use will sprout hair the way the bones sweat perfume. Or maybe it'll act as the embalming agent it has always been and stop anything from ever growing again. So I needed a guy with a beard, because I'm not taking any chances.

I found him at my own hotel, which I take as a sign that I'm on the right track here. I don't think he's Turkish. He might be Italian, he might be Romanian. It's hard to say. I found him in the sauna in the back of this seaside dive we're both staying at. He was on the back side of fifty and has a thick, iron beard. Not white, but close enough. His hair is longish, too – in the sauna, he had it pulled back in a tight, stubby ponytail. And while he isn't exactly fat – not Coca-Cola fat, for sure – he's definitely a fan of lamb and beer. And

sweating in the sauna, overheated and under that dark sauna lamp, he positively glowed red, his skin the classic suit, his black speedo like a belt.

I slipped outside and back to my room, returned to the sauna with a plastic shopping bag, and pulled it over his head.

He steamed in the December air as I dragged him back to my room.

When I laid him out on the bed and watched him cool and stiffen, I had to wipe childish tears from my hot cheeks, thinking about my five-year-old self and that long, long wait for Santa Claus. Finally, he had come.

Step 3: Find an electrical source with which to revive Santa Claus.

Check.

There's an outlet in my room.

The defibrillator is already plugged in.

Step 4: Insert Santa Claus' bones into a fresh body.

I'm still missing some relics, not because I couldn't steal them but because no one knows where they are. Trade in these things was rampant in the Middle Ages, and when things finally settled down after the Reformation, modern politics went and cocked everything up again, all this diplomacy, all these cries for the return of national property. As if any one country owns Santa Claus.

So I'm short a few teeth, a couple of ribs, some ankle bones. I don't know how that will affect the process, but I'm hoping I can pull a *Jurassic Park*. You remember in that movie (I never read the book) when the little cartoon DNA is jumping around explaining about the dinosaurs? And how they were missing a few key ingredients? They used frog DNA to fill in the gaps.

I don't need frogs. I have a whole, fresh, human body.

So the new Santa Claus will have to make do with a couple of Italian/Romanian ribs, and of course all the organs too: the heart, the brain, the spleen, the prick. But I don't think any of that will really be an issue. It'll make him more cosmopolitan, maybe.

I do wonder what language he'll wake up speaking. Italian/Romanian? Turkish? No, Saint Nicholas was Greek by birth.

Or nothing at all? Will he wake up new and pristine, and I'll have to teach him English and what little I've retained of my high school French? Maybe we can learn Latin together. Santa Claus always seemed like he might know Latin.

The hardest part, though, is going to be the transferal. Getting the existing bones out without completely dissecting the body is going to be tricky as hell, even with my few years deboning chickens at a bbq joint during college. But getting Santa Claus into his new body? Piecing together the jigsaw of the skeleton in all that dark and slippery meat, fitting joints and arranging muscles by touch along?

Back in the States, I bought a plastic skeleton from a school supply company and practiced assembling and disassembling it in the dark, like a soldier with a rifle. I even stuffed a lawn clippings bag full of steaks and pork chops and tried assembling the skeleton inside that. But let's face it, this is going to be something else entirely.

And I'll have to get it done – deboning and the reinsertion and the resurrection – before the body begins to rot.

I wonder if the myrrh in the bones will buy me time. Or at least perfume the meat if it starts to go bad.

A thought about the reindeer:

Granted, these are a recent addition to the Santa Claus story, and the bones won't recognize them as authentic at all. But I'm hoping for a miracle here. Because in the movies, it's always something like magic dust or elf-grown hay that makes the reindeer fly.

And I'm thinking the myrrh in the bones is pretty much the same thing. So surely I can get those bastards in the air.

Except there are eight reindeer – nine, if you count Rudolph, which I don't, but it wouldn't hurt to be prepared – and I've only collected that one oil-pan bucket of myrrh, and it's all going into the resurrection process.

Shit.

I have not thought this through.

Chinese Take-Out

Stephen Schwegler

An estimated seven million wild turkeys encircled the Palisades Center in West Nyack, New York, ready to strike. The mall was the last human stronghold of the avian apocalypse: a fortified monument to consumerism, packed with countless food vendors, a Home Depot to start doing some small-scale farming, a movie theater for some entertainment -- albeit only showing Oscar hopefuls -- and about a hundred or so other shops able to keep the survivors alive.

Or, at least, that's what the humans thought.

The largest of the turkeys climbed atop a Hummer that had been left in the parking lot. He wiped some dirt off his snood and addressed his followers.

"Fellow Butterballs!" he said, the turkeys having recently taken back the term. "As we make our way towards total human eradication I just wanted to say how pleased I've been with our

progress thus far. It's been a long, hard road to our liberation, but it's nearly at an end!"

The crowd of turkeys cheered.

"Now let's stuff them just like they used to stuff us!"

The turkey raised his wings to urge the crowd forward, only to feel some mysterious wetness upon them. Small drops of liquid appeared to be falling from the sky. He began turning back and forth as the water came down around him, his compatriots doing the same. The droplets began to fall faster, closer together. The turkey looked up to see where these tiny little pellets of water were coming from, but only saw clouds. It mystified him. He opened his beak, taken by the moment.

"And then what happened, Grandpa?" asked Simon, sitting with his grandparents in the food court outside Panda Express having Christmas dinner.

"Well, Simon," said Grandpa, "those of us who had barricaded ourselves inside the mall were unaware that the threat had been thwarted. We were still preparing for the worst. By the time we

knew the coast was clear, seven million drowned turkeys had crashed against the walls of the building, trapping us inside. The wet feathers fused together, cocooning every door and window. We were stuck here forever."

"Forever?" asked Simon.

"You were born in the Abercrombie & Fitch downstairs."

"Are you sure you really tried to leave?" said Simon, pointing toward the ceiling. "I'm pretty sure that's moonlight coming through the turkey-dome. It can't be that thick."

"All of the hardware stores here are out of ladders," replied Grandma.

"What about shovels? Did you ever try tunneling underground?"

Grandpa sighed heavily. "You need to understand, Simon," he said, "we had been in this mall for almost an entire month. And we'd run out of mini-burgers and Jamba Juice ingredients a long time before that."

"Are you saying...?"

"Yes," said Grandma. "We got desperate and resorted to cannibalism."

"But we tasted awful," continued Grandpa. "Like chicken, my ass!"

"So we all became vegetarians. Except for one day a year."

"We all vote and the loser gets... well..." began Grandpa.

"You see, you have to have some kind of meat for Christmas dinner. Just wouldn't be Jesus's birthday without a rotting carcass on the table."

"Have to," added Grandpa.

"But that --"

"No buts, Simon. That's just how we do things now. Society is inside this mall and we have to make due. Your parents were born here and you don't hear them complaining."

"They do all the --"

"Listen, it's Christmas," said Grandma. "Don't you ruin it with all this escape talk. It's just not going to happen. We've all come to terms with this and you should, too. Now, who wants more Pete fried rice?"

The Long Happy New Year of Dora Wellington

Laura Garrison

It was ten minutes to midnight on New Year's Eve, and Dora was the only one in her grandparents' house who was still awake.

Her cousins Peter and Jack were upstairs, sleeping in bunk beds that had once belonged to Dora's mother and Aunt Alice. Grandma and Aunt Alice were asleep in the master bedroom. Dora's parents had retired to the guest room around ten-thirty.

From her seat at the kitchen table, Dora had a view of the living room, where Uncle Bud and Grandpa were passed out on the couch and the easy chair, respectively. Grandpa's Boston terrier, Mugsy, was asleep on his lap. They were all bathed in the soft electric glow of the television, which was tuned to the live broadcast from Times Square. The volume was low, but Dora could hear the drone of cheerfully intoxicated revelers who were waiting for the ball to drop. The only other sounds were Grandpa's periodic snores, which clattered like handfuls of gravel in a high-speed

blender. Whenever he let one rip, Mugsy's ears would twitch, but the dog never opened his eyes. *He's probably used to it by now*, Dora thought.

Having anticipated this exact situation from years of experience, Dora wandered over to the refrigerator. She swung open the door and was greeted with a solid wall of leftovers in Tupperware containers. She selected a few of them and made herself a sandwich: turkey, mashed potatoes, peas, and sugar plum jelly on rye, with a dollop of congealed gravy on top. If anyone in her family had seen her eating this, she would have been subjected to an insufferable onslaught of jokes and gagging noises; as it was, she would be able to savor every delicious bite alone. Afterwards, she would perform her other secret ritual, the one she had begun when she was fifteen years old.

Dora's New Year's Day ritual was simple yet profoundly satisfying. She would stay awake until sunrise—roughly 7:20 a.m. or so—and in the long, dark hours in between, she would teach herself something new. Nothing too difficult; in previous years she had learned to "walk" a poker chip along the back of her knuckles, figured out how to juggle using tangerines from the fruit basket, and knitted a yellow-and-navy-striped scarf. This year's challenge

would be to make a perfect omelet. She didn't know a lot about cooking, so it would probably take a while, but with a little luck, she would greet the first sunrise of the new year knowing she had mastered another desirable skill.

But first she needed something to drink. She set her sandwich plate on the kitchen table and returned to the fridge. There probably weren't any beers left, but sometimes a can got pushed to the back of the fridge or rolled into the salad crisper. Dora wasn't technically old enough for beer, but her family was pretty lax about that sort of thing. *And it's not like I'll be driving anywhere*, she thought, glancing out the window over the kitchen sink. A three-day blizzard had piled the snowdrifts as high as seven feet in a couple of places, which was typical for a western New York winter, and the plows wouldn't clear the side roads before noon the following day.

Dora crouched down and reached as far as she could into the back of the fridge, past bottles of rancid salad dressing and jars of expired mustard. When her fingertips brushed the rim of an aluminum can, she grabbed it and pulled it out. "Root beer!" she groaned. "Well, I guess it's better than nothing."

She brought the root beer to the kitchen table and set it down next to her sandwich. The can looked positively ancient. It was dented in several places and speckled with black tarnish, or possibly mold. On the side of the can were the words Black Forest Root Beer, a brand with which Dora was unfamiliar. The words were printed above a picture of a buxom fairy with butterfly wings sipping daintily from a froth-capped stein.

Dora happened to glance at the clock on the stove just as the numbers changed from 11:59 to 12:00. "Happy New Year," she whispered to the fairy on the soda can. She pulled the ring-tab.

Instead of the familiar *psst-CHUNK* sound she expected, Dora was instantly enveloped in a cloud of sparkling green mist that erupted from the mouth of the can. She had time for one fleeting thought (*I probably shouldn't drink that root beer*), and then the mist cleared. She found herself staring at a tiny man in red silk pajamas. Other than his size, he bore no resemblance whatsoever to a fairy; he had a strong, square jaw and a pencil mustache. *He looks like a Clark Gable action figure*, Dora thought, amazed.

The man was sitting cross-legged on the top of the soda can. As Dora watched, he unfolded his arms with majestic slowness, puffed out his chest, and burped.

This was no ordinary eructation. It was astoundingly deep and resonant, like the lowest note on a tuba, and the rich sound gradually increased in volume until it shook the walls of the house, rattling the cups in the cupboards and sending a light dusting of plaster down from the ceiling.

The whole thing lasted perhaps twenty seconds. As soon as it was finished, the house sprang to life. Lights came on, bedroom doors flew open, bare feet pounded down the stairs and up the hallways, and everyone seemed to converge on the kitchen at once.

Dora's parents were visibly flustered. Her mother's face was twitching, and her father was trying unsuccessfully to tie the belt of his robe with shaking hands. Aunt Alice put her arms around her sons' shoulders, pulling them close. Whether this was to give comfort or receive it was unclear, as Peter and Jack looked more excited than scared.

"What was that? An earthquake?" Dora's mother asked.

"Excuse me," said the little man in the red pajamas, "but you don't spend a thousand lifetimes trapped in a can of off-brand root beer without accumulating a little gas."

Everyone stared at him.

"Sweet mother of pearl," Grandpa whispered. "I knew I shouldn't have eaten all those hot pickles right before bed." He was holding the trembling Mugsy in his arms and stroking him absently with one gnarled finger.

"Don't be an idiot, Herbert," Grandma said. She turned to the little man. "Explain yourself."

He cleared his throat. "I'm a genie. I'm here to grant you nine wishes." He paused to let this sink in before adding, "My name's Stanley."

"Nine wishes?" Dora's father said. "Why not three?"

Stanley regarded him with a level gaze. "Would you prefer three?"

Dora's father mulled this over. "Well, it seems more traditional, but no, I suppose not."

Grandma had no such hang-ups. "I wish for a new toaster," she said.

"You got it," Stanley replied. There was a flash of light on the kitchen counter, and a sleek chrome toaster appeared. "Eight left," he said.

"A new *toaster*?" Aunt Alice said. "What a waste."

Grandma glared at her. "It's nothing of the sort. You know I've wanted a new toaster for years. The old one always burned my bagels."

There was a brief silence while they all considered this.

"Hey, where's Dad?" Peter asked suddenly.

Dora glanced into the living room and saw, with only mild surprise, that her uncle was still sound asleep on the couch. When it came to beers, nobody could knock them back like Uncle Bud, and after his New Year's Eve libations, nothing short of setting him on fire would wake him up before early afternoon.

"He's fine," she said, turning back to the others.

"So, what next?" Stanley asked. He plucked a speck of lint from his red pajamas and flicked it away.

"I've got one," Jack piped up. "I wish Peter were a giant slug."

Aunt Alice clapped her hand over Jack's mouth, but it was too late. There was a flash of light, and then Peter was gone and there was an eight-inch banana slug on the floor where he been standing. It was sporting a rather incongruous shock of Peter's shaggy blond hair.

Jack collapsed in a fit of high-pitched giggles.

"Nice kid you got there," Stanley observed. "Seven left."

Aunt Alice bent down and pulled her older son off the linoleum, grimacing at the long strings of slime that stretched out like melted cheese between his belly and the floor.

"Poor little guy," she said. "Don't worry. I'll fix this." She took a deep breath. "I wish Peter were back to his normal human self."

There was another flash, and then Aunt Alice was staggering under Peter's weight, as he had reverted to his usual form.

"Six left," Stanley said.

Peter jumped out of his mother's arms. "I wish I had a bucket of creamed spinach." It appeared in his hands with a flash, and he promptly dumped the whole thing onto his brother's head.

"Oh, *gross!*" Jack cried. "I *hate* this stuff!" He wiped off as much of it as he could, but there were green streaks all over on his face, and one big glob of spinach clung to the neck of his t-shirt like a strange brooch.

"Five left," Stanley said.

"Well, who's wasting wishes now?" Grandma said to Aunt Alice, with more than a hint of triumph in her voice. "My new toaster's starting to look pretty damn smart, isn't it?"

Dora sighed. Why had she pulled that stupid can out of the fridge? The new year had barely begun, and already everything was a mess.

"Hey," she said, "why don't we all just—"

She was interrupted by a series of sharp barks from Mugsy. He began to squirm in Grandpa's arms, so Grandpa set him down on the floor. There was a flash, and Dora's sandwich, which had thus far escaped everyone's notice, vanished from the table and reappeared on the floor in front of Mugsy, who immediately buried his face in it, wagging his stub of a tail in satisfaction.

"Careful there, Mugsy. That's one evil-looking sandwich," Grandpa observed.

"Four left," Stanley said.

"*What?*" Dora's father exclaimed. "Now the *dog* gets a wish?"

Stanley shrugged.

"Well, I guess I'd better get mine in before they're all used up," Dora's father said. "Now, what do I need the most? Infinite knowledge? World peace? A motorcycle?" He stroked his chin, frowning with concentration.

"I wish you would get rid of that gut," Dora's mother said, poking him in the stomach.

There was a flash.

"Three left," Stanley said.

"Thanks a lot, Honey," Dora's father said, peering down at his newly svelte physique. "You obviously put a lot of thought into that one. Allow me to return the favor. I wish you would be nicer to me."

Another flash.

"Oh, Schmoopsie Poo, you knew just what to wish for," Dora's mother said. "I'm so proud of you, my clever, handsome man." She squeezed his arm and looked up at him with an expression that made Dora's stomach fold over on itself. *I'm glad I didn't eat that sandwich after all*, she thought.

"Two left," Stanley said.

"I wish I had a birdfeeder that would keep itself filled all the time," Grandpa said slowly. "I like watching the birds, but I'm sick of tromping out there through the snow every other day with that bag of seed."

Through the kitchen window, Dora saw a flash like lightning from somewhere in the vicinity of the backyard birdfeeder.

"Done," Stanley said. "One left."

"Geez, Dad, that one was worse than Mom's!"

"Horsefeathers! Mine's been the only good wish so far!"

"Oh, I suppose I should have just let my son be a slug for the rest of his life."

"Now there's only one left!"

"Really? And whose fault is that?"

They were all getting into it now. Everyone began shouting, and it wasn't long before the conversation degenerated into a babble of angry voices and vehement hand gestures.

Dora rolled her eyes. This couldn't be further from the peaceful night she had planned. If she didn't interfere, they would bicker into the small hours of the morning.

There was only one thing to do. She bent down and whispered into Stanley's ear.

"Excellent choice," he said.

There was a brilliant flash.

Uncle Bud snapped awake as something cool and wet washed over him. "What the *hell?*" he exclaimed, scrambling to his feet.

The last thing he remembered was lying down on the couch and turning on the television. Now he was standing on a beach, and the sun was much brighter than he would have preferred. He looked down and saw that he was wearing swim trunks.

This was very peculiar.

"Well, look who's up," his mother-in-law said. She was wearing a skirted bathing costume and a wide-brimmed sunhat. His father-in-law stood beside her in a tank top, shorts, and sandals with black socks. Mugsy was playing in the surf, plunging into the waves and snapping at small fish. Further down the beach were his sister-in-law and her husband. She was resting her head on his shoulder, and he had his arm around her waist. Uncle Bud's sons, Peter and Jack, were digging in the sand with plastic shovels.

"Hi, Daddy!" Jack shouted, waving.

"We're making a sand castle!" Peter added.

"That's... that's nice, boys." He turned to his wife, squinting and confused. He had a massive headache.

Aunt Alice handed him a bottle of water and four aspirin.

"Thanks," Uncle Bud said. He swallowed the aspirin and proceeded to chug the entire bottle of water with his eyes closed. When he opened them again, a long-tailed animal with enormous feet was hopping past him, leaving oddly shaped tracks in the sand.

"Is that a . . . ?"

"Kangaroo, yes," Aunt Alice said. "Sit down, and I'll tell you all about it."

Dora leaned over to inspect her cheddar-and-mushroom omelet. It was perfect: uniform pale yellow and as fluffy as a cloud. Smiling, she carried it over to the kitchen table. The Black Forest Root Beer can was still there, but Stanley had disappeared in the flash that had signaled the fulfillment of the final wish. Outside, the sun was just beginning to break through the trees in her grandparents' backyard, painting the snow with delicate tints of pink and peach and lilac. Chickadees darted back and forth between the branches of the blue spruce and the recently installed font of everlasting

sunflower seed. Dora paused with her fork in her hand, savoring the silence. She knew that her family would make its way back home eventually, but for now, she was alone with her thoughts, her sunrise, and her omelet. Despite an inauspicious start, it was starting to look like this might be a very good year.