

A New Year

Jack Tillotson sipped his Scotch and stared at the Christmas tree. This was the most beautiful tree he had ever seen, as was every tree they'd had over the past thirty years. It seemed a shame to take it down already, but tomorrow his wife would insist he haul it off to the woods so they could start the new year with a clean house. Well, technically she would insist on that today, since it was long past midnight. They had seen the old year out with their time honored traditions - old movies, Chex mix, watching the ball drop in New York City, and toasting the New Year with champagne punch. Now he was indulging in a private tradition, philosophizing over a glass of Scotch long after everyone else had gone to bed.

What would the new year bring? A promotion at work? A publisher finally showing interest in his book? Would this be the year he finished rebuilding the MG? Or maybe even just make some progress? His eyes wandered over to the pile of Christmas cards on the end table. They were filled with cheery form letters from old friends, all of whom seemed to have kids who had finished their PhD's in astrophysics, taken a year off to teach eager villagers how to end hunger in Africa, and were now settling down to raise a family with their new spouse and their fabulous new job. Maybe this would be the year his kids got married. Or took another shot at a community college. Or got a job.

Well, not all of the Christmas letters described perfect lives. There were a few references to medical tests, and one outright confirmation of a potentially fatal disease. All couched in the wonderfully cheery hopefulness of Christmas correspondence, but Jack knew there was nothing cheery about death. He was reaching the age where Death was nipping at the heels of his herd, picking off a straggler here and there. Nobody he knew well, but it was still unsettling to pick up a newspaper and learn that someone he had known vaguely in high school was no longer running with the herd. Would this be the year a close friend would succumb to the touch? Would he himself hear ominous words from his doctor? Surely not his wife! He had assumed from the day they promised to love, honor, and cherish 'till death made them part that he would go first. He wouldn't know what to do with himself without her.

He shook the thought from his head and took another sip of Scotch. There was something timeless about a Christmas tree. Year after year the tree was a magical, immutable symbol of beauty. The presents underneath changed, the furniture changed, and sometimes the house itself changed, but the tree remained the same. He let his eyes drift out of focus so the lights became soft, fuzzy balls of color.

He felt a tug on his pant leg. Looking down, he saw a tow-headed toddler in a red plastic fire hat. He was wearing pajamas that were covered with pictures of fire trucks and firemen. "I used to have pajamas just like that when I was his age" Jack thought.

"Can I have some Chex mix?" the boy asked.

"Of course" Jack answered. "Do you want to be a fireman when you grow up?"

The boy nodded “yes,” walked to the bowl of Chex mix, and began eating in a serious, methodical manner. He didn’t even look up when a horrible screeching noise emanated from the kitchen and quickly zoomed into the room. The noise was being made by a boy about 5 or 6 years old, wearing a white plastic fighter pilot helmet and green tinted goggles, making jet fighter noises into a microphone connected to a red plastic speaker that hung on his belt. The zooming jet noises were punctuated by spitting machine gun sounds as he blasted enemy fighters from the sky. “Oh Boy! Chex Mix!” he shouted when he saw the bowl. He squawked a message to fighter control into the microphone as he zoomed toward the bowl, using the word “Roger” as often as possible. He grabbed a handful of Chex Mix on the run, scattering it in all directions as he shoved the handful into his mouth. This was immediately followed by more spitting machine gun sounds. Jack didn’t want to see what the microphone looked like after that last burst.

“I used to have a Steve Canyon Jet Fighter Helmet just like that” he thought. I wonder if the sounds I made were anywhere near as annoying as those sounds.”

They were soon joined by a slightly older boy, wearing an astronaut’s helmet made out of a paper bag with a plastic wrap window. Then an inventor in a white lab coat joined the party, along with a skin diver (using a US Diver’s double-house regulator, Jack noted approvingly), a scientist, a history professor (complete with leather patches on the sleeves of his sport coat), a race car driver, a mechanic who restored antique cars, an author, a race car designer, and a military officer. (“A general, no less” noted Jack.) They crowded into the room and jostled each other while trying to get to the bowl of Chex mix. “These are all my old dreams and aspirations” thought Jack.

Then a slightly paunchy, middle-aged man entered the room. Unlike the distinctive costumes worn by the others, he was wearing a well-used flannel shirt, blue jeans, and sneakers which had clearly seen better days. Like Jack, he was sipping a glass of Scotch. Jack noticed that he seemed slightly larger and better defined than the other people. In fact, as he surveyed the room the others seemed to fade into insignificance, while the new stranger stood out as clearly the most important figure in the room.

“What are you supposed to be?” Jack asked.

“I’m a husband and a father” the man said with a smile.

The chiming of the mantle clock woke Jack up. Three o’clock in the morning! His wife was going to be up bright and early, wanting to take down the Christmas tree. Jack carried his glass into the kitchen to wash it. The cat was sleeping peacefully on a kitchen chair, and there was a fresh pile of cat barf on the counter next to the bowl of cat food. Somehow it seemed slightly reassuring to Jack. As he was cleaning the counter he realized it seemed like a sign that the new year was going to be pretty much the same as the last year. And that was pretty good.