

1. James Sparrow awakens too early and is besieged by the mean Christmas blues

It was an old familiar nightmare, the one about screechy men in black hoods chasing him through tall razor grass toward the precipice overlooking jagged rocks and great bilious greenish waves rolling and crashing in the vast abyss where sharks with chainsaw teeth waited to chew him to ribbons and great black buzzards soared and screeched, and there he was running barefoot and his pajama bottoms falling down and heart pounding as if to burst and he unable to cry out for help and then Mr. Sparrow woke up in the darkness of his condo in south Minneapolis to a song emanating from somewhere close to the bed—

*When he plays his drum, pa-rum-pum-pum-pum,
Let's break his thumbs*

He thought maybe it was part of the dream, the Christmas carol he loathed most of all, the loathsome song of the

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dreadful Yuletide season, that godawful month (heck, two months! maybe three) of relentless, regimented, joyless joy, and he lay waiting for the men to throw him over the cliff, but they had evaporated, and only the loathsome song remained:

*I played my drum for Him, pa-rum-pum-pum-pum
He told me, Beat it, Jim, pa-rum-pum-pum-pum*

It was dark except for a faint glow from the bathroom. Mrs. Sparrow lay asleep next to him in their double bed in the tiny bedroom of Unit F in the Middlesex Arms condominium complex. It was a former linseed oil factory that a dishonest developer had made into apartments and sold to gullible buyers. Dazzled by the ornate Art Deco lobby, they paid a fortune for rather cramped one-bedrooms with temperamental plumbing and tissue-paper walls and ill-fitted windows. In this December cold snap, the bedroom was freezing. He edged closer to Mrs. Sparrow, a good warm wife. It was December 22. In two days, the red-green monster of Christmas would descend.

The World's Longest and Unhappiest Holiday. Mrs. Sparrow adored Christmas, and Mr. Sparrow dreaded it. It gave him a bad case of the yips. The brass quintets tootling "God Rest Ye Merry, Gentlemen" on street corners and the sugrplum fairies twirling in the windows of Macy's, and in-

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side, between Cosmetics and Housewares, a pianist plowing through the little town of Bethlehem like a backhoe digging a ditch. It was ubiquitous, inescapable, the jingle-jangle, the ho-ho-ho, the smell of pine, the bullying ads, and the guilt—the nagging thought that you had not bought gifts for all the people you should have and the gifts you had bought were not nice enough and you were not joyful, as you should be, seeing as God had sent His Son to earth for your redemption—you, wretched sinner that you are, should be dancing for joy, and instead you feel crappy. You wish you could drive Christmas away, this whole dark fog of nostalgia and disappointment.

Why could they not use the money Mrs. Sparrow had inherited at the death of her dad to fly to Hawaii, *pa-rum-pum-pum-pum-pum*, and lounge on the beach at that lovely resort at Kuhikuhikapapa'u'maumau, where they had spent their honeymoon four years ago? Sometimes, when a man is in the depths of misery, a good vacation is a wise investment. Yes, he understood that they were in bad shape financially. The real estate market was in the toilet. The condo, heavily mortgaged, was worth about half of what they had paid for it, and they were pouring money into a rat hole. And Mr. Sparrow was very likely on the verge of losing his job. (He had not shared this information with his wife.) He was a communications specialist at Coyote Corp., which made an energy drink from ionized chlorophyll from coyote

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grass, and which was struggling in the wake of lawsuits by consumers who had suffered violent intestinal upsets. The owner of Coyote, Billy Jack Morosco, had retreated to his penthouse on the fifty-fifth floor of the Federated Mutual Tower to brood and conduct a séance with his advisors, and the axe was expected to fall soon after Christmas, and Mr. Sparrow expected to be handed his hat and pushed out the door.

Mr. Sparrow did not use Coyote himself, but he knew all about it. Coyote grass is a broad-stemmed plant devoured by coyotes during mating season, and the drink gives a person high energy and focus, inducing a manic state, enabling you to thrive on just three hours of sleep a night for months at a time. A greenish liquid, it was a word-of-mouth phenomenon in America's managerial ranks in the late 1990s. Millions of people knew about it—a few drops in your coffee and you were a monster of superhuman productivity and able to handle the avalanche of work that fell on middle managers beset by corporate cutbacks and mergers. Middle managers in their forties who felt antiquated by the hyperspeed of technological change and the new lingo that came with it. It was rocket fuel. You took home a briefcase bulging with work and labored late into the night and napped for a few hours and awoke before dawn feeling fresh and ambitious and showed up at the 7:00 a.m. meeting full of brilliance and you stunned the younger staff with a list of Large New Ideas



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and you maintained a killer pace all day, skipping lunch, and all around you, people marveled at your productivity and top management said, *What would we ever do without Perkins?* and you never never never complained about the workload, though your spouse and children did, but you ignored their sullen resentment and mounted your great steed and galloped every day back into battle. All thanks to a grass that coyotes ate to give them stamina to flirt and howl at the moon. The Sioux warriors who ate Custer's lunch at the Little Big Horn were tanked up on coyote grass.