

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

It was an old familiar nightmare, the one about men in black hoods chasing him through tall grass toward the precipice overlooking jagged rocks and great greenish waves rolling and crashing in the abyss where sharks with chainsaw teeth awaited and great black buzzards hung in the air and there he was sliding toward extinction and then Mr. Sparrow woke up 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 masked men torturing him with a Christmas carol before tossing him to the sharks, and he lay waiting for the dream to evap-

orate, *poof*, so he could restart his sleep, but it was still there, that Christmas song he loathed and despised:

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. He was in Chicago. Mrs. Sparrow lay asleep next to him in their emperor-size bed in the hushed splendor of the master bedroom in their baronial twelve-room apartment on the 55th floor of the Wabasha Tower, and it was December 22. In two days, the red-green monster of Christmas would descend. The World's Longest & Unhappiest Holiday. Mrs. Sparrow adored Christmas and Mr. Sparrow dreaded it. It gave him the heebie-jeebies. It gave him the hives. The brass quintets tooting "God Rest Ye Merry, Gentlemen" on street corners and the sugar-plum fairies twirling in the windows of Marshall Field and inside, in women's lingerie, a pianist plowed through the little town of Bethlehem like a backhoe digging a ditch. It was ubiquitous, inescapable, the smell of pine and the bullying ads and the germs of guilt—you *did not buy Christmas gifts for all the people you should have and the gifts were not nice enough*. You could fly off to Hawaii—and Mr. Sparrow was hoping to do just that—but you could not drive Christmas away, it was a dark fog of nostalgia and disappointment that gripped you like a vise.

A CHRISTMAS BLIZZARD

“Oh darling Joyce, Oh Joyce my love, let’s away to the warm Pacific and float in the star-spangled sea,” he said to her one week ago. “We’ll see,” she said. He groaned. “I’ll check my schedule,” she said. He groaned again. The snow and the cold, the bleakness of light, and the sheer horror of “The Little Drummer Boy” coming at you when you least expected it, *pa-rum-pum-pum-pum*. Mrs. Sparrow attended two *Nutcrackers* every year, two *Messiahs*, and three *A Christmas Carols*, she loved Christmas so much (and also she served on the Boards of Directors of the ballet and the symphony and the theater). Mr. Sparrow wished that the mice would carry Clara away and lock her in a dungeon and that the *Hallelujah Chorus* could be embargoed for ten years and that Tiny Tim would learn a useful trade and quit blessing people. Poor Mr. Dickens and the juggernaut he had wrought. Back when he wrote about Scrooge and the neb-bishy Cratchits, Christmas was a one-day event, like Valentine’s Day or Memorial Day, and you did the thing on that day and it was over, but his little book created a rage of Christmas, and it spread out of control, and now the good man would be horrified to see it. The incessant dinging of bells. The godawful music seeping out of cracks in ceilings like liquid gas. The anguished jollity of store clerks living in the hell of holiday shopping. The invitations to parties where people who don’t like each other stand cheek by jowl at a downtown club and get glassy-eyed on Artillery punch.

Mr. Sparrow's company, Coyote Corp., did not do Christmas parties. His 325 employees were sent nice bonus checks and given a week off but nothing to do with Christmas, thank you very much. There was no glittery tree in the lobby, no wreaths, no candles.

He hoisted himself up on one elbow and gazed at her, earplugs in place, his true love in her cardigan sweater, soft purple pants, and red socks, and groped for the bedside lamp and knocked a book off the stack on the bedside table and also his eyedrops and almost spilled a glass of juice. Mrs. Sparrow turned over but did not open her eyes. He put the glass to his lips and—*pffffffeh!!!!!!!!!!!!*—cranberry juice! Simon had left him a glass of *cranberry* juice. Why? The mere taste of it brought back bitter memories, the boredom of breast of turkey, the big yawn of yams, the pointlessness of pumpkin.

Said the shepherd to the little lamb,

I have a gift to bring, pa-rum-pum-pum-pum

A noose and scaffolding, pa-rum-pum-pum-pum.

It was the digital clock radio Simon had installed that Mr. Sparrow had never figured out. The thing cost \$14,000, an iClock with an eRadio and a pPhone (with videocam) that could access bank accounts, activate a coffeemaker, download a newspaper, start a robot vacuum cleaner or trouser press, open up e-mail and have it read to you in a pleasant

A CHRISTMAS BLIZZARD

Australian female voice who would also say your schedule for the day (9 A.M. *you have a breakfast meeting with Mr. Jeepers. Here. At Wabasha Towers. This concerns tax liability.*), and if you wished to change the schedule you could get the Australian lady to call Mr. Jeepers' voice mail and deliver the message (*This is a recorded message from Mr. James Sparrow. He is very sorry but he is forced to cancel your breakfast meeting today at 9 A.M. He apologizes for any inconvenience this may cause and he will be in touch with you as soon as possible. Thank you, and have a wonderful day.*) It was a marvelous device, made by BRB Inc., a wholly owned subsidiary of Mr. Sparrow's Coyote Corp., and he didn't know how to turn it off as it played him Christmas music that made him faintly ill.

I wish this song were done, pa-rum-pum-pum-pum

Go get my gun . . .

"So what do you want for Christmas?" she asked him two days ago, having forgotten what he'd said about the Pacific.

"Hawaii," he said. "All I want for Christmas is warmth and sunshine. I am desperate for sunlight. The freedom of walking out the door in your shorts and T-shirt and into a warm and welcoming atmosphere. You feel the same way. Admit it. So let's go. The plane is gassed up and ready to go."

“Oh darling, why can’t we wait until the week after Christmas?”

The truth was, Joyce was uneasy about the luxury, having grown up frugal in Wauwatosa, Wisconsin. She felt bad about the fuel consumption of the company jet, the eight-passenger twin-engine (4000-lb. thrust) Conquistador 409 named the *Lucky Lady*. “Don’t think about it,” he said, but she did; she sat grim-faced in that beautiful pale leather (1000-cu.-ft.) interior of the plane and he knew she was thinking they should’ve invited some disadvantaged children to come with them, so as to justify the expense. He did not care to have disadvantaged children with him in Hawaii. He had been disadvantaged himself and now, as a recovering disadvantaged child, he had learned to enjoy pleasure, actually *enjoy* it, not merely tolerate it, waiting for the other shoe to drop. Mrs. Sparrow, on the other hand, definitely did *not* like to be waited on by old black men in starched white uniforms and she fretted about the fresh-cut flowers in all the rooms and about food waste and how much they were paying for this 1997 Pinot Noir with elegant structure and an extended palate, complex and bright on a tannic frame, nicely oaked with a lingering finish of boysenberries, sheepskin, and pencil shavings, and what that money could do if you spent it on digging wells for African villages which didn’t have any.

And then that night they had a big stupid argument

about going to her family's for Christmas. So yesterday, hoping to make up with her, he dragged himself through Marshall Field looking at velveteen cocktail dresses and bright blouses and silk pantaloons, thinking, *Anything I like, she won't. Guaranteed. So give up.* He looked at a miniature Swiss village made of porcelain with clock tower and church steeple and people sliding down a hill on tiny toboggans and couples skating on a pond. Looked at books. Big luxurious picture books. *The Twentieth Century in Pictures.* He opened it. And then closed it. What does a beautiful woman need to know about the wretched mistakes of great men and the insanity of war? The past is over and done and let's dance on into the future.

He stopped in the music department and a boy with four earrings in each ear, and a strange hairdo like a small animal crouched on top of his head asked, "Are you looking for something?" and James guessed he was not. He looked at digital cameras, telescopes on tripods, a long-haired sheepskin from New Zealand, luxurious white turkish bathrobes and cosmetics, where a woman with skin the color of oiled almond spritzed a liquid on a card and rubbed some on the back of his hand for him to smell and whispered, "For whom are you shopping today?" and James said, "For a woman I love who I had a fight with." The almond-skinned woman smiled and said, "This will do, then." And he bought it. For almost a thousand dollars. An ounce of something called PH.



He clicked a switch on the console and the wall opposite the bed lit up with a bright projection of a map of Chicago and a blinking light at 59th and Cicero where *Lucky Lady* was parked at Midway Airport. He could call Simon, asleep in the servant's wing, and have him call up the driver Ramon and the pilots Buzz and Buddy and the plane could be airborne in two hours. But he could not, could not, could not, turn off the song. He was upright now, feet on the floor, looking for the light switch. The iClock said 5:42 A.M. He poked some dark circles on the touch pad and a different song came on:

Starlight moonlight

All alone, thinking about you

When a man loves a woman, Lord, Lord, what can he do?

It was the Moondog show on AM77 which sometimes in bouts of insomnia he tuned in for a fitful hour or two to hear the Moondog talk about Fanny May and how she tormented him with her passionate ways followed by tears of regret and then long passages of indifference. He poked the pad again.

Adeste fideles

Laeti triumphantes . . .

A CHRISTMAS BLIZZARD

He knelt down on the floor to search for the plug and snaked his hand far under the bed but couldn't reach the outlet. The choir was calling for the faithful to come, which brought back painful memories of Christmas growing up in Looseleaf, North Dakota—of the scrawny Christmas tree and Mother worried it would burst into flames and they would die in their sleep of smoke inhalation and Daddy worried that Mother would spend them into bankruptcy and they would have to go live in a public institution and wear orange jumpsuits and pick up trash along the highway.

*Gonna lay my head on the railroad line
And let the longest train I ever saw come and pacify my mind
'Cause the water tastes like turpentine
And I can't keep from cryin'
And the nations so furiously rage against me.*

"Darling?" he said in a clear voice. "Darling—" She opened her eyes, the comforter pulled up to her chin, her dark hair splayed against the pillow. She pulled an earplug out.

"How do you turn this music off?" She looked up at him in wonderment. So he repeated the question.

"It's voice controlled. You just say *OFF*." And the music stopped.