

Merry Christmas, Edward Lee

By David Stone

Lights hung in bright streamers across the street, while tinsel and other decorations vied for place among the seasonal offerings in the shop windows. In spite of the rain that filled the air, a group of carol singers gathered around the Christmas tree, together with a small band, and their music echoed sweetly along the length of the street.

Edward Lee hunched in a doorway to escape the drizzle and blinked bitterly out at this festive scene. People moved restlessly in and out of shops, carrying bundles and bags of Christmas fare that Edward couldn't even hope to afford. Many of the people eyed him with suspicion and Edward buried his feelings deep within himself. Swallowing tears at the extremes that separated him from his fellow man, he hunched into himself, trying vainly to hide his ragged, unkempt appearance from their view. Outwardly he scowled at them, forcing himself to appear unconcerned, while inwardly he ached for the chance to join them in their Christmas revelry. They wouldn't accept him, he knew. He was an outcast, a leper of society. No one would want to share their Christmas with the likes of him.

Shaking his head in misery, Edward broke from cover and scurried away from the people, leaving them to their joy. The hostel didn't open until nine and so, limited in his choice of where to go, he selected one of the secluded places he knew about that provided both shelter and privacy. Relief mingled with despair as he reached the road he wanted and turned away from the main shopping area, away from the crowds and their contempt, back into the darker, quieter parts of town.

He headed for his favourite place, the Colosseum as he called it. A large stone building, erected centuries before for no purpose that he knew of. Whatever glories it had housed in the past, now it was abandoned, forgotten, tucked away in an unfashionable part of town, its stonework crumbling. Edward slipped through a gap in the iron railings that surrounded it and headed towards its ornate facade. Among its four massive pillars was shelter from the weather and shadows to shield him from prying eyes. He was almost there, almost at his sanctuary, when he saw someone else had got there first.

Edward's heart sank further still. This was the one place where he had never found anyone before. There was plenty of room, but the people who needed such shelters rarely liked sharing them – Edward himself wouldn't have wanted to share it if he had got there first. He stopped, regarded the other person - an elderly man, he now saw - then he turned away to go in search of somewhere else.

"There's plenty of space," the old man said. "You're welcome to stay."

Edward hesitated. He felt too depressed to want company, and he'd have to put up with more than enough when he went to the hostel later, but he did want the shelter of the Colosseum.

"Don't worry," the man went on. "I don't want anything from you. But it's a night to be with other people."

Edward felt just the opposite, but the old man's voice was soft and kind. Edward wasn't used to hearing this, and despite himself he turned back. Climbing the few steps to the shadows of the façade, he nodded silent acknowledgment to the old man. Edward sat down on the bare stone floor and began rubbing life back into his cold hands.

"Ah yes," the old man observed. "Very seasonal weather." Edward didn't respond, not wanting to get drawn into a conversation. "Very seasonal," the other

continued, seeming content to speak with no answer. “A very cold night. As cold as I want it to get, though no doubt it’ll get colder. Ah yes, I’ve known some cold nights in my time.”

Despite himself, Edward glanced at the old man. He sat with his back against the wooden door, the warmest spot as Edward knew. His head was leant back and he gazed up at the high roof. He looked just the same as other old men Edward had met in his time on the street. His companion glanced at him and there was a sparkle in his eye that suddenly made him seem entirely unlike any of them.

“Cold indeed,” the old man whispered. “But tonight it’s more bearable. Tonight is a special night.”

Edward turned away. “Ah,” he grunted. “Christmas.”

The old man gave a soft chuckle that made Edward look back at him.

“Christmas indeed. You say it, but you don’t know it. Christmas Eve. A cold night, but a holy night, nonetheless. Listen!”

Edward glanced back at the old man who was leaning his head back as before. “Listen to what?”

“Just listen.”

Edward listened for a moment and shook his head. “I don’t hear anything.”

“Of course not. You don’t know what you’re listening to.”

Edward sighed, resigning himself to listening to the man’s prattling. “Well what do *you* hear, old timer?” he grunted, glancing upwards as the old man was. “Sleigh bells? Angels singing Hosanna? The Voice of God?”

The old man laughed aloud, but still he sounded kind. “No, my friend. I hear what you hear.”

“But I don’t hear anything!”

“Exactly. Silence.”

Edward opened his mouth to retort, then paused, listening again. The old man was right. There was silence. The usual hub-bub of city noise was not to be heard in this remote corner. The longer he listened to the silence, the more he realised what the old man was listening to. “Silent night,” he breathed, although he hadn’t intended to. “Holy night.”

“Indeed,” the old man said with warmth in his voice.

Edward looked back and found the man gazing at him with a smile on his face that Edward couldn’t help but return. “Here,” Edward said unexpectedly, pulling his precious bottle from his pocket and handing it across. “Christmas cheer.”

They drank together, then the old man rolled a couple of cigarettes and passed one back. “Christmas lights,” he told Edward. They lit up and gazed wonderingly at the red lights that pin pointed the darkness.

Edward moved closer so he could share the little insulation of the wooden door, and passed his bottle back to the old man. “Not such a *very* cold night, perhaps,” he decided.

“No indeed. It’s warming up nicely.”

Edward glanced at the old man and smiled, accepting his bottle back.

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Later, walking back through the crowd of last minute shoppers, Edward could see the strain on their faces, irritation in their eyes. They clutched carrier bags, boxes, rolls of bright paper, weighed down by all the paraphernalia they believed to be so essential for a good Christmas.

Edward walked at ease through the crowds, his head higher than usual, enjoying the Christmas gift he’d received. If he listened carefully, he could still hear

the Silence that reigned eternally behind the din, and he sensed the peace and hope it offered to any who could hear it. Silent night, he told himself. Holy night.

People avoided him or glanced suspiciously as he passed. None of them would share their Christmas with the likes of him, but there was nothing to stop him from sharing his Christmas with them. Edward responded to them all, offered them smiles and from his heart he wished them joy this Christmas.