

Dorky's Christmas

By Hank Lajoie

It just didn't seem like Christmas. American advertisers had for years created this image of Christmas that took much of the spiritual out of it and inserted snow scenes with people all bundled up, noses red from the cold, eyes gleaming... especially those of the children. In fact, Christmas was running a close second to Halloween for the greed factor that the holiday seemed to generate. That greed seemed to permeate every holiday message.

Willy Coombs groaned in disgust as another snowy scene came on with a group of children singing and playing around a Christmas tree. He punched the mute button and said to his wife, "Them commercials is gonna gimme a headache, I swear."

"Why fret so? Ain't no darned thing you can do 'bout it."

"Maybe so, but if I can't complain a little about it I'm gonna explode."

"Now where's your Christmas spirit, Willy?"

Willy looked at his wife, Maude, pondering a response. She was standing on the other side of the room ironing clothes. After a pause he continued, "Well, the first Christmas didn't happen around no darned snow-covered Christmas tree now, did it? I mean it happened over in that there Middle East or somewhere like that... you know, with camels and donkeys. And there wasn't no sales in all the stores."

He wiped sweat from his brow with a dirty handkerchief, got up, crossed the small living area in their house trailer to the "ice box", and got himself another can of beer. He mumbled incoherently as he did so, then stopped and said to Maude, "You'd think a guy could sit and watch a football game without all them silly commercials, for Pete's sake."

“I heard you downright laugh at some of those commercials,” Maude said with a slight smile.

“Them’s the beer commercials... they’re different. They’re funny, mostly.”

“And some have pretty girls in them, showing whatever they can and still get on the TV.”

“Now, Maude,” Willy said, himself smiling slightly, “You know darned well I don’t pay no ‘tention to them girls. Why, at my age, I’m not even sure what they’re showing.”

“Oh, you know what they’re showin’ all right. Couldn’t do nothin’ about it, but you sure as daylight remember what all that’s about. Some Christmas spirit, sittin’ there drinkin’ beer and ogling the girls in tight skirts and short shorts.”

“What kinda Christmas spirit can you have with nothing but a few cards and some garland hangin’ on the wall?”

“It’s what we got and that’s it. We got each other; we got our health and still can afford beer and cigarettes. We got a lot more than some folks got. Some folks have to sleep in boxes on the sidewalk. At least we have a home and a warm bed at night.”

“Maybe you should start watchin’ some of these commercials. Christmas is about money. Look at how some of them folks dress... the grand houses they live in... them fancy fireplaces where they can hang stockings and... oh, the game’s back on.”

He returned to the couch, pulled the tab on his can of beer, took a sip and fell silent, deleting the mute as he watched the football game. He never finished his comment to Maude. He became completely immersed in the game once again.

The Palm Island Trailer Park, a sparsely populated community located “30 miles from nowhere,” as the residents described its location, was where Willy and Maude had lived for over 21 years. Their trailer home showed its age. Rust was the predominant color and it looked like it had been poured in rivers down the metal sides of the structure. Mounted on cinder blocks about two feet off the ground, it appeared that little effort would be needed to knock it off its foundation. The cleanest and most colorful object on the home was the registration sticker from the State of Florida.

Willy was a handyman and mechanic, but most who knew him admitted he was most handy when sober. He only drank beer, but he consumed at least two six-packs at a time, when he could afford it. He smoked two packs of cigarettes a day and had done so for the last 15 years, since he gave up chewing tobacco. The chewing distorted the taste of his beer so he switched to cigarettes. He didn't shave every day, but both he and Maude showered daily and they kept a neat trailer on the inside.

Although time and economics had not treated them well, Willy and Maude were usually of good nature, kind and helpful toward others. They went to church every Sunday, but took little part in the daily activities of the church. The week before Christmas, however, Willy approached Maude one morning with a proposal.

"Whyn't we go the church pancake breakfast? They have one ever' Wednesday and I hear tell it's good. Ain't no cost, neither... they just pass the plate and I got two bucks. So, let me take you on an eatin' date, OK?"

"Why, you romantic old fool," Maude said smiling. "Are you suggestin' we go on an actual date?"

"Exactly. What d'ya say?"

"Now, you have to promise not to try anythin' funny, y'hear?"

Willy chuckled. "I hope to eat so much all I'll be up to is dozin' off!"

They looked warmly at each other. Then, Maude said, "We should spruce up a bit, don't you think?"

"Yeah," Willy said, "I been sweatin' like a hog all night... must smell like it, too."

"Well, I didn't want to say nothin' but..."

"Stop right there, woman. I'm gonna jus' drag you into the shower with me... see how you like that."

"My word, Willy, we ain't done that in near 10 or 11 years."

"'Bout time we got to it, then."

"You *are* a romantic old fool... and I love it," Maude said with a laugh.

After showering, they put on their "Sunday clothes" and set out on foot for the church. They had no car, but the church was only four miles away and they were leaving early enough to make it in time for the breakfast that was served until noon.

It was not a typical Christmas scene; Willy and Maude, in their mid-forties, holding hands and walking along the road that was little more than a wide, dusty path. Foliage on both sides of the road tried in vain to envelope and bury it in its embrace, but the traffic was just enough to stave off such encroachment. Had advertisers the opportunity they would have made changes. The dusty pathway would be a snow covered rural lane... the trees would be snow-laden spruce... the couple walking hand in hand would be in their early twenties, young and pretty... it would be everything Willy despised.

The walk to the church was uneventful... no encounters with snakes or 'gators... no pesky mosquitoes... love bugs had long since gone into their dormant phase, until the following April. Both Willy and Maude felt a sense of calm... their spirits were high but in a quiet sort of way. Maude was even heard to hum a few strains here and there of her favorite Christmas carols. Occasionally, Willy would hum along... and he would squeeze her hand lightly.

This is good, Willy thought.

If she could have heard Willy's thought, Maude would have replied, *"This is very good... very, very good."*

As they approached the old wooden church, they noticed a school bus sitting in the parking lot. Alongside were a dozen children listening to the pastor. Neither of them could hear what was being said. They entered the church and descended the stairs that led to the basement hall. As they entered the large room, they noticed tables laden with all sorts of home cooked foods. Several men were busily cooking up pancakes in the kitchen. Members of the church greeted them warmly and several mentioned that it was especially nice to see them at a non-Sunday event.

Willy and Maude felt a little embarrassed at all the attention. One would have thought they were the long lost prodigals of the group. Maybe, Willy thought, in a way they were. Willy spotted Charlie West, also a resident at the trailer park and made his way toward him.

"Hey, neighbor," Charlie said with a big smile. "Ain't used to seein' you here on Wednesdays." He nodded to Maude, adding, "At least you had the good sense to bring your lovely bride along."

As they shook hands, Willy asked, "Who are all those kids out there?"

"They're from an orphanage down around Tampa. Ain't got no family. Kinda sad at Christmas time, y'know?" Charlie shook his head from side to side.

"Why're they here?" Maude asked.

"We been doin' this ever' year for about eight years, now," Charlie answered. "If the kids have a mind to, they can pair off with a couple to eat with. Then, if they's inclined, the kid gets to spend Christmas with them. It's just five days... two before and two after Christmas."

"Don't know if I'd like that," Willy said. "I just came for a cheap meal with my cheap date here." He looked at Maude, winked and smiled.

"Don't have to," Charlie responded. "The kids are just here for a good meal, too. I'm pretty sure they don't eat this good home cookin' at the orphanage. They don't expect to be invited, but I'll bet they'd love it if they was."

"You gonna take one in for the holiday?" Maude asked Charlie.

"Usually do. These kids are like a Christmas present to me," he answered.

As they moved on to greet other members of the church they usually saw only on Sundays, Maude suddenly paused and looked at Willy. "Why don't we take a young'un home for Christmas, Willy?"

"Are you nuts? We don't know nuthin' 'bout no kids!"

"Ain't my fault," Maude responded. "There's somethin' wrong and I can't have no kids..."

"Oh, Lord," Willy interrupted, "I didn't mean nothin' like that. I mean we ain't got nothin' to offer no kid from an orphanage. We live in a dinky trailer... our septic tank backs up at least once a month... we got snakes and 'gators all over our so-called back yard... we never know when the lights will go out... we're always worryin' about whose trailer will burn up next... I mean, what kinda nut kid would want to spend Christmas like that?"

"I don't know, but if a young'un chooses to eat with us, will you at least think 'bout it?"

"God, woman... you don't know what you're askin'. If we have to spend any money on him, I'll prob'ly have to give up beer and cigarettes for a day or so."

“I’m sure the Lord Jesus would love you for that. What would you say to Him if you go for judgment and He asks you why you didn’t help one of His young’uns?”

“Tell the truth, Maude, I ain’t never been ‘round kids. They scare the wits outta me.”

“Watch your language... we’re in the church... oh, look, the young’uns are comin’ in.”

The children entered in an orderly row. They took places at the front of the hall, faces bright and shiny, smiles splitting their faces, eyes gleaming with excitement. For some of them, this was the first time on the “Christmas Outing” while others had been to one before, but not at this church. The orphanage had taken obvious pains to assure the children all looked clean, neat and healthy.

“Aren’t they just darlin’?” Maude murmured to Willy.

“They all look that way when they ain’t yours,” Willy responded.

“You are such a Scrooge,” Maude answered quietly.

“I ain’t no Scrooge,” Willy said under his breath. Maude heard him anyway and thought, *Oh, yes you are, darlin’ Willy.*

Before he realized what was going on, he felt a small hand slide into his, grasping it lightly. He looked down into the face of a young boy, maybe 7 or 8 years old. His hair, a tousled but neat looking series of tight waves, was an odd mixture of auburn and light brown... he had freckles bridging his nose... bright, blue eyes gleamed as he looked up into Willy’s eyes with a broad smile. Willy couldn’t resist returning the smile.

“Hi,” Willy said. “Who’re you?”

“Everyone calls me Dorky,” the boy responded. His smile seemed to widen to a point that Willy thought might split his face in two.

“That’s a funny name,” Maude said. “Is that your real one or a nickname?”

“Oh, it’s just what they all call me. They say I’m a dork... whatever that is. I don’t mind, because everyone says it like they’re really friendly. I think it must be a good thing.”

“And what’s your true name... your *for sure* name?” Willy asked.

“Marvin... but I’d rather be called Dorky,” the boy said.

“But, why?” Maude asked.

“Cause it sounds better than Marvin,” he answered with a smile.

“Well, would you like to eat with us, Dorky?” Maude asked.

“Yup,” Dorky smiled. “I seen you the minute we walked in and I figured you two was the best people here... Know what I mean?”

“I’m not sure we understand that at all,” Willy said, the boy’s hand still comfortably nestled within his own.

“But I can eat with you, right?”

“Of course,” Maude answered. “We can’t think of anyone better.”

After signing a number of forms to legalize the “vacation” for the children, members of the church began filing out into the parking lot, heading for the cars they drove there.

“We ain’t got no car... at least one that’s runnin’, anyway. Sorry you have to walk with us,” Willy said to Dorky. Willy realized that there had been no further discussion of bringing one of the children home with them. It seemed to have just happened and he was glad it turned out to be Dorky.

“That’s OK,” the boy said with a smile. “Ever’ time we go somewheres from the orphanage we go in a rickety old bus. I like walkin’ lots better.”

He walked between them, hand in hand, down the dusty roadway. The road in front of the church was paved, but it curved away from the direction of Willie’s house. Willy and Maude had been walking for over a month since their car blew a head gasket. Willy kept saying he was going to fix it, but there was little motivation to address such chores when there were sufficient funds to purchase beer and cigarettes. Maybe with the boy staying a few days, Willie would get around to fixing it, Maude silently hoped.

“Ain’t this the prettiest place, Mister Willie? Look at all them heavy bushes and grass. I’ll bet there’s a whole lotta critters in there, huh?”

“You better believe it, honey. So don’t you go wandering off the road or outa the yard at our place. Wouldn’t want no ‘gator makin’ you his Christmas dinner, now would we?” Maude responded.

Willie said nothing, but smiled.

They walked along in silence for quite a while when the silence was suddenly broken by the sound of a woodpecker busily punching through bark to find a morsel or two. Dorky stopped and looked around.

“What’s makin’ that noise, Mister Willy?”

“Just an old woodpecker lookin’ for somethin’ to eat.” Willy looked around in the direction of the sound then stopped suddenly.

“Look,” he said as he turned Dorkey toward the sound. “Way up in yonder tree... near the top. See him?”

“Wow,” Dorkey said with a sigh. “Ain’t this some kinda wonderful!”

“Sure is,” Willy said with a smile. “I ‘spect you’ll see a lot of them wonderful things while you’re out here.”

“I’m gonna like it here,” the boy smiled.

Maude and Willy exchanged glances with broad smiles. Maude thought to herself, “*Yes, this is surely some kinda wonderful.*”

When they arrived at the trailer, Maude went quickly to the kitchen to fix some iced tea and lemonade for their refreshment. Dorkey spent no more than five minutes looking through the trailer.

“This is a real nice place, huh?” Dorkey asked.

“Well, it ain’t no palace, but it’s home and we like it,” Maude explained. “It ain’t a house that makes a home... it’s family... people who love each other. What kinda house did you live in?”

“Me and my momma stayed in an old building where nobody lives anymore. She had a sickness and had to take shots ‘bout ever’ day. It helped her to sleep good, she said, but one night, she didn’t wake up. I ‘spect the medicine just gave out on her and couldn’t help her anymore.”

“My goodness,” Maude said, feeling overwhelmed with concern. “And where was your paw durin’ all this?”

“Don’t know. Momma said he was dead, but one of her friends said he was in jail. I never saw him. When Momma died, I got so hungry I was asking for food at McDonald’s when the cops found me and brought me to the orphanage. It was OK

there... I had food and a warm bed. When they told me I had to stay there, I thought it was a pretty good deal. I even got to start school when I got there.”

“Had quite an adventure for yourself, didn’t you?” Willie interjected.

Dorky shrugged. He took a long sip of his lemonade. His eyes sparkled as he said, “Your lemonade is better than at the orphanage.”

Maude smiled. “Thank you, kindly, young sir.”

Willy got to his feet. “Well, c’mon young ‘un... let’s see if we can fix that old jalopy out there.”

“What’s a jalopy?”

“Just an old car. We gonna fix it when I can get the part I need, but you’re gonna have to help me, OK?”

“Sure, but I don’t know nothin’ ‘bout no jalopy... but I could give you the tools when you need them.”

“That’ll be fine. Bet we’re gonna make a pretty good team,” Willy said as he walked to the door.

Maude watched the two of them as they left the trailer. She was about to burst with joy. It felt so wonderful having a youngster around and it looked as if this was going to be a pretty special Christmas. She busied herself in the kitchen, pulling together some leftovers to make a presentable dinner for the three of them. Before she realized it, the sun was going down and she hadn’t heard a sound out of Willy and Dorky for some time. She looked out the trailer window where the car was parked and could see no sign of them. The hood of the car was propped up with a piece of board and Willy’s toolbox was sitting beside the front tire. She went to the door and when she opened it, she saw the two of them walking up the long, dusty driveway, hand in hand. Willy was carrying something in his free hand. As they got nearer, she shouted, “Where’d you two get off to?”

“Went down to Andy’s place. He had some old Fords like ours, so me and Dorky here tore into them. We found a good head gasket on one of ‘em, so we’re ready to fix up our old clunker.”

“How’d you pay for it? I know it’s just a junk yard to us, but it’s Andy’s business.”

“It’ll come out of my pay. I start workin’ there the Monday after Christmas. An’ you’re gonna have to start callin’ it a *Salvage Yard*, long’s I’m workin’ there. Andy was real impressed how easy we got that old motor apart.”

“You shoulda seen him,” Dorkey said excitedly. “Mister Willy knew where ever’tin’ was and took that old motor apart almost with his bare hands. Bet he *coulda* done that, too.”

“Well you can do the fixin’ tomorra. Now get yourself in here and clean up for dinner.”

After freshening up Willy and Dorkey came into the kitchen area. Maude had been busy fixing things up for dinner. She had neatly folded a bed sheet to fit the table and had placed two candles on the table, each sitting in a teacup saucer, casting a warm glow on an assortment of leftovers Maude had rescued from their small refrigerator (which Willy still insisted was an ice box). Dorkey’s eyes were wide with wonder. He had never seen candles on a table like that, except on television. His eyes scanned the table excitedly: collard greens; mashed potatoes; bread; butter; and a variety of sandwich meats and cheeses. It was a veritable feast!

As they sat around the table eating, Maude looked long and hard at Willy. “You ain’t never said you was gonna look for a job. You surely are full of surprises when you wanna be.”

Willy smiled. “Well, it’s Christmas and we gotta think more ‘bout others like Dorky, here. Andy gave me a few bucks for a nice Christmas dinner and we gonna make it kinda special.”

“Well, you couldn’t get me a better present, Willy. You made me very happy.”

During the conversation, Dorkey had cleaned his plate once and at Maude’s urging, helped himself to more. “Lordy, chile, where’s all that food getting’ to? One little bitty stomach can’t hold all that, can it?”

“Oh, yes, Miss Maude. I was right hungry after all that work on the jalopy.”

They all laughed. Maude cleaned up after dinner while Willy and Dorkey sat on the couch watching television. Occasionally, Dorkey would ask a question and Willy would answer. Shortly after Maude joined them on the couch, Dorkey nodded off to sleep.

“Guess we oughta put the tyke in bed,” Maude said.

“Where?” Willy asked. “Aint’t got no extra bed for the kid and I don’t think he oughta sleep with us.”

“We can put him in our bed. We can sleep on the couch. Why, we haven’t even opened it to a bed since we moved in here. That should work just fine.”

It did just that... worked out fine. The next day, Willy and Dorkey tinkered with the car until everything was put back together. Willy had spent a good deal of time explaining the torque wrench to Dorkey to no avail. The Willy said, “Tell you what... I’ll set the torque and you just tug on it one more time. Then we can tell ever’one we gave the bolts an extra Dorkey torque.”

Dorkey laughed and he no longer was interested in the mechanical theory behind the torque... just knowing about the Dorkey torque was enough to please him. It was mid afternoon when the engine roared to life and they both cheered. Maude went to the window, smiling. She noticed that Dorkey was sitting in Willy’s lap, hands on the steering wheel. Hunched over like next year’s NASCAR star.

Christmas came and went. Willy, Maude and Dorkey accomplished a genuine bonding in the five days they were together and when it was time to return Dorkey to the church, an air of sadness hovered around them. They left early so that Willy could talk to the pastor and get permission to drive Dorkey back to the orphanage instead of waiting for the bus. It was not an unusual request, Willy learned. Several other “sponsors” also did the driving back to Tampa to stretch the length of the visits.

“We could come t’visit you in Tampa sometimes, if you like,” Maude said to Dorkey.

“An’ bring me cookies, maybe?”

Willy laughed. “If I don’t eat ‘em on the way.”

“Oh, you can eat some of ‘em,” Dorkey said, “but be sure you leave me some. D’ya think maybe I could visit with you again... besides at Christmas, I mean?”

“Sure!” Maude said excitedly. She couldn’t ask for a more successful five days she thought. Having a youngster for Christmas was the most enriching and rewarding experience she had ever ever felt.

“If the orphanage will let us, how would you like to come live with us?” Willy asked.

“Really!?” Dorkey bounced in his seat.

Maude stared wide-eyed at Willy, astounded by what he was proposing. Tears welled, here throat tightened.

“Well,” Willy said, “that depends if Miss Maude wants to try fillin’ out all them papers.”

“Of course I would!” Maude practically shouted.

“You, too, Dorkey?”

Dorkey was fidgeting in his seat. What could he say? What if he spoiled all this with his answer? It’s what he really wanted. He couldn’t help himself. He shouted, “Yes... oh, yes!”

“Then we can take care of it when we get to Tampa,” Willy said. He glanced over at Maude, then in the rear view mirror at Dorkey. Tears that had welled in their eyes were now flowing freely down their cheeks. He felt a strange warmth growing inside as he smiled and said, “Merry Christmas, y’all.”

HL/4,156 words