

The Festive Season
By Chris Zell

I'm glad the holiday's are over. For some reason the holiday season always bring out the bizarre in people. I don't know if it's so cold that their brain freezes or they've been doing the holiday party thing since Pearl Harbor Day (that was this years first holiday party for me), but it gets weird out there. It all started for me when my girlfriend left for Europe and I have a feeling that she'd not coming back. One thing that makes me think that is that she took some clothes with her. OK, so maybe she'll need clothes in Europe. But there are other signs, like she went with another guy. Hey, I catch on petty fast.

And, of course, just like everyone else I'm sick of hearing dead guys sing yuletide classics and the insufferably cheery strangers that you meet (have you ever noticed that none of your friends are that cheery? It's always some total stranger that comes up to you to ask if you want to go caroling through the winter wonderland). But I'm glad the holidays are over because I think that people lose a little bit of their mind this time of year and don't really get it back until Ground Hog day, the next big holiday for me.

Let's start with shopping. We've all taken bets while watching two people fight about getting their precious little darling (who's probably locked in some closet at home with a ribbon around it that says Do Not Open 'Til Xmas) the last MegaDeath Warrior with the radiation poisoning eyes left in the state. I like to stand off to the side and call,

"Hey, look, a new shipment of the MegaDeath Warrior with the radiation poisoning eyes is coming in." They quickly rush to the loading area and once they are told by the shipping clerk that they no shipment is expected, they race back to the MegaDeath Warrior section, but by then the MegaDeath Warrior with the radiation poisoning eyes is already gone. I picked it up and am waiting outside to sell it to the highest bidder. It's a living.

But my favorite part of shopping is credit card stupidity. Don't get me wrong, as a good American, you should be so in debt right now that your parents won't lend you bus fare. That's not what I'm talking about. Credit card stupidity is when the overworked and underpaid clerk (can you tell that I've worked retail?) tells you that your credit card was declined and you say,

"That can't be right."

Right now, for future reference, let me point out that this is correct. Do you think the clerk, with 30 customers glaring and shuffling their impatient feet right behind you, has decided that the person the gift is for would hate it and is saving you the embarrassment you will surely feel on Christmas Day? Come on, right now the clerk sees you as one more in a long line of whining little trolls and would rather listen to 'Rudolph the Red Nosed Reindeer' over the store speakers for the next hour than have you there.

I was with a friend that I'll call Jim, because that's his name, and we were getting a watch and many other presents for his girlfriend. Jim, being Jim-like, waited until Christmas Eve to go on his shopping spree. I went because I figured that it would be fun to watch the already stressed

Jim be pushed over the edge during this shopping frenzy. Anyway, once he collapsed in a drooling heap I figured that I'd just take the presents that he'd purchased and exchange them the day after Christmas for things that I really want. Why should everyone's holiday be ruined?

We get to one jewelry store just as they are pulling down the grates. I heard the entire sales staff moan when we slipped under. The salesman jumped right to the point.

"How much do you want to spend?" The salesman, who looks so disgruntled that the post office will be offering him a job real soon, looks at Jim and Jim gives him a figure. Pulling out the three watches that are left in that price range he slides the tray across the glass counter. Here is where Jim makes his first mistake. It won't be his last so you may want to get a pen and paper to keep track.

"Is this all you have left?" I can see the salesman's temple bulge.

"Yes sir." He snarls. Up until that moment I only thought that waiters in French restaurants could snarl and say 'Yes sir' at the same time. Live and learn. Jim looks at the dozen or so watches in the case and points to one and asks me what I think (this is mistake #2 if you're keeping score).

"Does she already have a watch?" Jim nods in the affirmative. "Then let's leave these people alone." I mean, how many watches does a person need? One? Seems like plenty to me. Oh sure, I know what you're saying, you need a work watch and a play watch and a dress up watch. I don't know about that. You people seem to be falling into the watch manufactures myth. The shampoo manufactures have a similar myth. Wet hair. Lather. Rinse. Repeat. Repeat. Repeat. Repeat ad infinitum.

I've solved the watch problem for me personally. I don't wear oneuality than the mono-. I figure that I'm usually within 100 yards of a clock at work. If I'm playing I don't want to be reminded that I'm late for something. And if I'm dressed up, I'm dead and won't have a big need for a watch.

"Well, she doesn't have a gold one with fine Swiss movement and. . ." He went on to explain until I wandered off to get away from the hate stares that everyone connected with the store was shooting our way. When Jim realized that the salesman wouldn't give him the \$1,200 watch for \$300 we left.

Walking down the streets of Boston I noticed one thing an amazing amount of watch stores. The reason I noticed because we stopped in every damn one of them. After about 8 stores without Jim finding the perfect watch (and his stress level starting to pin the meter) we finally hit a store with a watch he liked, it wasn't exactly what he wanted but I think he was starting to take my threats of disembowelment seriously. Jim gave the salesman a credit card and the authorization process took place. After a few seconds, the salesman turns around and tells Jim that the credit card was, alas, declined.

"Can't be." Before both words were out of Jim mouth I had him on the street and was pummeling him about the head and shoulders. A cop wandered by and asked what I was doing. When I explained the situation, the cities finest gave Jim a few whacks of his own.

"It's like when a guy shoots someone and then asks why we're taking him in. He didn't start the fight." I understood the analogy and pointed Jim back in the direction of the store. When the clerks stopped applauding my action, Jim apologized, took out another credit card, it went through and we went to the next store.

Next, Jim was going to buy her a coat and all the trimmings, including scarfs, gloves, hats and underwear. I asked what underwear had to do with the rest of the purchases and Jim told me that he didn't know either.

"I just like to buy women's underwear."

After concerning myself with the ramifications of this fact, I allowed Jim to lead me in the great coat purchase. Jim quickly picked three coats and asked a passing salesperson to try them on. After the guy refused, Jim found a woman who worked in the department .

"Do you know what size she wears?" Betsy asked an important question. I usually don't know these vital facts which is why I'm the king of the gift certificate. A friend of mine, Mo, asked what I got him. After he wouldn't take the phrase nothing seriously, he started to guess.

"I know that you didn't get me shoes because you don't know my size. And you didn't get me pants because you don't know my size. And you didn't get me a shirt because you don't know my size. And you didn't get me condoms because you don't know my size."

"I know your condom size, Studly."

"Oh yeah?"

"Yeah, Le Petit Male."

"Hey, that's not funny. I use the biggest size. As a matter of fact, I use Hefty trash bags. Yeah, and even that's a little snug." I know that he's going through this delusion while petting his crotch. Trying to calm the ferocious beast down, I guess.

It's funny how quickly guys come to the defense of their penis. Honestly, if you saw a penis like object crawling on the ground, I doubt that your reaction would be,

"Get that enormous, fearsome beast away from me."

I think you'd be more likely to say,

"What an ugly little thing." And smack it with a broom.

"Well," Jim answered Betsy in that male trick passed down through the generations. Lying.
"She's kinda about your size except she's taller and heavier."

"So basically she's nothing like this girl?" I answer as Jim quickly makes his decision and we head back to the cold streets. I don't know what it was about this winter, but it was extremely cold. As a matter of fact, it was so cold that I've started carrying a small box around with me. It's just in case my balls fall off I'll have something to bring them home in. Always prepared.

On the escalator that leads to the street Jim turns around with a concerned look on his face. I can tell that he wants to ask me a serious question. Or where the bathroom is. It's a toss up.

"Chris, do you think that Edna will like this stuff?" I can tell that he's not too sure. Jim always needs someone to tell him that he's done good. And I'm just the guy to do that. Yeah, right.

I think about the watch and coat and all the accoutrements and finally come to my conclusion. With all the sincerity I can gather, I tell Jim that,

"She's going to hate it." Have you ever seen all the blood rush from a persons face and their lungs collapse? You should. There's nothing like it. It's kind of like watching a balloon zip around the room backwards. I got some great gifts to return in a couple of days.

But it wasn't like I just bothered people over the holidays, I did my good deeds. The first, and I think most benevolent one, was that I avoided most of my friends like the plague. Don't get me wrong, I'm not avoiding them because I didn't get them gifts and am sufficiently ashamed of myself (get real, will ya?). I'm avoiding them because of a phrase they all use. Wether they see me on the street or leave a message on my answering machine, they all say the same thing:

"Happy Holidays and if I don't see you, have a great new year."

Now I may be missing something but doesn't that sentence scream with innuendo? Am I the only one that reads it to mean that if they do see me they want me to have a horrible new year? Well? I hope that you're a little scared right now.

But my other good deed had more personal involvement (something that I try at all costs to avoid). My phone rang and after I answered it my good friend Ira said,

"I hate to ask you on such sort notice." This doesn't sound like a great way to start a phone conversation to me. "I wouldn't even ask you if the person who was supposed to do it didn't back out at the last minute. I really hate to do this."

"Just get to the favor, Ira." I don't mind being asked favors, just get to it before I nod off.

"I'm in such a tight spot."

"Cut to the chase, Ira. If you keep stalling, I'll say no just to piss you off."

"Can you watch my pets while I go on vacation?" I can feel the tension in his voice. Or is that a printer in the background?

"Sure. When do you want to drop them off?" I figured that he'll want to drop them off in a couple of days. Give me time to stock up on pet repellent.

"Right now."

"Oh."

Within the hour, I was joined by one soft, fluffy, long haired, white cat named Stupid. But I didn't agree with Ira on this name. I don't think she was stupid. I say this because in less than a week, she learned how to forge my signature and charged \$500 of fancy cat supplies to my American Express account. I didn't even know there was kitty deodorant and anti-tangle shampoo. The things you learn. So, while she lived with me I didn't call her stupid. I called her Thief.

The other cat's name was right on the money. Her name was Holy Occasion, She's Enormous because that's the first thing everyone said when they saw her. But we called her Hose for short. This cat is a seventy pound dust mop with an attitude.

When Ira let them out of their traveling kitty prison, Thief bolted out, jumped on my leg (this is when I think she went through my pockets and took my American Express card) spun off and hid in a corner. Presumably with forging tools and a pet store catalog.

Hose was a little slower. Actually that's an understatement. At first I thought she died in transit.

"No, she just likes to take her time." Ira told me as he hooked the cat cage up to a hoist and shook her out. She hit the ground with the same thud that's made when you drop a boulder on the head of your G.I. Joe from the roof of the garage while pretending that he's killed by an avalanche. What? No one else ever did that? Oh come on? I bet that you're the type that would light him on fire to get secrets out of him? I knew it. OK then, for you more sadistic readers, it's the sound that's made when you told your little sister that she really could jump out of her crib and fly across the room to you.

"Oh my God," I cried. "I didn't think she could get any bigger." In the week since I'd seen her it looked like she annexed a new wing on the lower forty.

Hose squinted her little cat eyes up at me and started up like a diesel truck.

"Hey, Ira, you're a good friend and all, but am I risking my life here?"

"Oh, no, you know her, she's very gentle." To prove the point he bent down and stroked her back. The diesel truck sound backed off a bit. "She knows you."

"Yeah, but for a couple hours here and there. What if she doesn't like living with me?"

"She'll change you."

"That's encouraging."

Ira changed the conversation by going out to his car to retrieve the sanitation facilities. Now I've had cats in my life and I know what a litter box is (a dirty disgusting thing that you keep as far away from humans as possible) and what to do with it (keep it in someone else's house). So I was not prepared for this space shuttle that Ira dropped in the middle of my living room. It looked like one of those little plastic cars that kids pedal around in enjoying hours of injury riddled fun. The Ferrari of toilet facilities.

Ira explained that if I didn't clean the box thirty times a day that Hose would honor me with an amazing technicolor scream.

"Stains the carpet forever." Ira warned and showed me how to clean the box. Now this should be pretty easy. Find shit. Toss shit.

Let me tell you, Americans can complicate something as simple as cat shit. Not only do I have to use a special cat ca-ca rake to sift out what the magic box had turned into mutated shit snowballs, but I had to endanger myself to an ammonia cloud of toxic levels.

"OK," Ira says pulling his head away from the cat box so that he could cough up a lung. "That's all there is to it." Ira stood up and started to put his coat on. As we walked to the door he said, "Oh, I almost forgot." And with that he pulled a rabbit out of his pants.

"I was wondering what was going on down there." I said watching Ira shake little rabbit shit M&M's down his pant legs.

"This is Sinbad and she doesn't like to be touched." Ira said showing me the flesh rips of someone who doesn't take his own advice.

"Oh, so you hide it down your pants." Ira slowly moves his hand down his pants and counts,

'1,2,3. Yep, everything's there.' When he's satisfied that his math was correct, he says,

"Nothing happened, right?" Oh, like that's a big consolation. "Well, I guess I've got to be going." And with that Ira was in his car and gunning down the street. I swear that just as he pulled away I heard him laugh and say, "Sucker."

Actually, after the initial meeting, it wasn't all that bad. We negotiated a truce (I offered to feed them whenever and whatever they wanted, only watch their favorite programs on TV it was hell trying to find a station that played a Tender Vitals commercial 24 hours a day and they promised not to strap me to the bed again and to give me back my credit card) after that, the week just flew by.

The cats had very little to do with each other. As a matter of fact, the only time they were even in the same room was when I cleaned the rabbit cage. The rabbit hopped happily through my room while the cats huddled in the corner watching. I swear that I heard them say,

"Hey, what's that doing out?"

"I don't know but that's the ugliest cat that I've ever seen."

"Yeah," the cats start posing and primping. After about an hour of this, they continue, "And whatever he did it must have been terrible. I mean, sure, they keep him locked up all day, but they also cut his tail off."

"Bastards."

I tried to explain that it wasn't a cat, but then I realized I was talking to animals that lick themselves. See, this holiday thing really gets to me.

And then there are the parties. I was talking to my friend, Dennis, and we were complaining about the number of parties that we've been forced to go to this year.

"I'm so tired." Dennis said as we stood in the middle of a bar. "I'll be glad when this is over. It seems like I've been out every night since Pearl Harbor Day."

"Yeah, it sure does get tiring. All these people to see. All this running around. You know, last night I had to rush around just to get to the three parties that I was supposed to go to. And wouldn't you know it, I forgot about one."

"It's a strain, I know." We stood there commiserating for a moment and we had the same thought at the same time. "Listen to us," Dennis says. "We're complaining about having fun. Having friends."

"Yeah, sometimes having a life is such a damn hassle." Dennis agreed and picked up a couple more beers from the open bar.

Let me tell you though, it's not always fun having a life. There can be the dangers of frivolity. The last party of this festive season was thrown by a radio station and it was just a hoot from the beginning. I'm going to give you some advice about going to parties with people who work in radio. Don't. You'll thank me later.

Maybe it's not just radio people, but I've never seen this aberration before. I looked around and noticed that everyone was talking. Every pair of lips in the room was flapping. Now, correct me if I'm wrong, but when one person is talking shouldn't the other person be listening? Obviously this doesn't count in the radio biz. In radio there's talking and waiting to talk.

Not only was this party loaded with people who wouldn't shut up, but a handful of lucky listeners got to go to this special holiday blast. Oh joy.

A band is on stage playing it's holiday classic 'I Hate Christmas' and I guess some of the lucky listeners felt that they were just too lucky to live and a fight broke out. Actually, it was more of a screaming and shoving match than a real fight. But that didn't mean that the big tough guys of radio weren't scrambling to the back of the room as soon as they could climb over the person next to them.

I was watching this one guy in particular, he was on the fringes of the fight with his hands on the back of a chair. With one deft movement, he raised the chair above his head and promptly lost his balance and back pedaled into the nearest wall. After the crash, he looked around to see if anyone noticed (nah, no one would have paid attention to this guy running backwards holding a chair over his head), put the chair down and sat there nicely for the rest of the evening.

After making sure that this guy really was going to sit there nicely, I turned around to see the stations program director in a lip lock with a sponsor. Now this may not seem like a big deal, but 1) he's married and 2) it was in a public place and they were getting a little out of hand. Station employees were circling around the happy couple in awe. I swear that neither of them breathed for half an hour. I called Guinness because that had to be some kind of record.

Needless to say, this breach of etiquette was the talk of the party. I mean, he didn't offer to share or nothing. Management scum. After the club closed and we were hanging around the hotel suites that the station rented the program director cornered me.

"I hear that you've been talking about me?" I noticed one of the largest hickeys that I'd ever seen just above his collar bone. "What I do is none of your business."

"Maybe if you hadn't put on a floor show no one would have said anything." I knew that he realized, a little late, his lack of discretion and needed to confront someone. Being one of the few non station employees at the party, I was the perfect mark.

"It just so happens that she's going through a painful divorce and needed a shoulder to cry on."

"It sure didn't look like your shoulder she was interested in to me."

All I can say is that it's over and I survived. Time for a nap.