

The Hudson Press

Timeshoppers

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Christmas ornaments rustled and crunched underfoot like dry leaves.

Holly and Plum Zeitman thundered towards the living room door, late for school as usual. They'd just taken a running leap, bumping slightly into each other, legs flying over the bouncing, rolling decorations. December's Christmas avalanche was accelerating and they were starting to feel the pressure. As they streaked down the driveway they called,

"Bye Pops!"

Plum glanced back at their father, Bill. He was slumped head down on the computer workstation in the center of his garage lab, facing The Device, sound asleep. Usually when he went on one of his all night work benders he didn't run out of gas until mid-afternoon. He must be really wiped this time, Plum thought. Then she heard a slight snoring noise. The garage full

of hi-tech gear in front of him was still humming away, a big Frankenstein mess patiently waiting for its master.

Pops, their father, was a nuclear physicist and his official job was teaching—better put pounding—relativity, black holes and quarks into the blocks of freshman heads at UCLA. With the semester winding down only nights offered enough free time to run an experiment uninterrupted. He'd been at this at least fourteen straight hours. That was well past the point where the mind gets stuck in a mental snowbank, wheels spinning, going nowhere faster. Now exhaustion had taken command.

Plum felt a sudden pang that slowed, then stopped her running. No matter how many times he redid the equations, the numbers had never worked. Their father's project had been hovering in the background for most of their lives, a jealous mistress demanding time and money. But looking at him head down on the console, it just felt so sad. The girls wanted to believe because he believed so hard. His spirit was impossible not to admire, he never gave up hope.

Then she glanced down at the iMac and the blinking green letters CHARGED AND READY. He'd conked out half-way through a test run. No, Plum thought, we'll keep trying. She whispered *wait* to Holly, slipped out of her shoes, put her books down, tip-toed back, leaned over him and hit the ENTER key. Please, she thought, *please* let it work. Then she ran back down the driveway and practically jumped into her heels, grabbing her bag and tote.

The garage full of high tech gear lit up with an ominous low hum, slowly winding up for a big pitch, about to take off, louder and louder. Bill stirred slightly at the audible rumble of

running power. Then the rising sound abruptly fell off a cliff with a distant internal *tink*. He sank back to sleep.

Plum sighed and ran down the driveway. Holly called back, as always, “We’ve got the car!”

The word car finally drilled through the sleepy fog of funk and exhaustion just as they were hands on handles of Bill’s decrepit twenty year old dust blue Plymouth Reliant. His head popped up, gasping and gagging,

“Huh? What? HEY! HOLLY! PLUM!” craning his neck, shouting back. Plum and Holly locked eyes over the roof, almost half in the car.

“Plum!” Holly whispered. “D’ja have to do that?”

“Me? You have to yell and tell?”

They slammed the squalling, complaining old car doors with an exasperated groan and darted back.

“Pop? Weren't you paying any attention?” Plum asked.

“Sure! Of course!” He stared a split second too long. Holly sighed,

“Shopping! After school?”

“Shopping! We need the car!” Plum said, “Remember, the Christmas— er—” she caught and primly corrected herself, “the Holiday Fete Ball?”

“Of... course! I remember. Today! Car. Shopping, no problem.” Another pause. As they watched his expression they could read his brain go *Oh right* as he suddenly remembered their campaign to land next year’s Fete Ball committee, the biggest fish in the school social pond. He gave them a big thumbs up, any dispute over the car forgotten.

“Gonna be the go-to girls. Yeah!” It was pretty clear from his expression he wasn’t exactly sure what that was, either. He slowly pushed up, bending his lanky frame over like he’d played a big tournament yesterday and seriously overdone it. It was a grim spectacle. He hadn’t shaved in two days or changed his clothes in a week, still wearing the over sized coffee stained MIT Reunion 2010 T-shirt he’d picked up in Cambridge the previous May. He was probably headed for his morning class looking like that, too.

But then he lived in a world where he could do that, and get away with it. Nuclear physicists had an almost cliched reputation for eccentricity and somewhat dysfunctional personal behavior. Accordingly, he was cut even more of the slack college professors were usually given. Except by Holly and Plum.

“Oh, Pops, you’re never going to get any dates looking like that!

Holly grabbed a brush from her bag and began hurriedly smoothing down his wild, unruly hair, tugging and pulling at it. His dark curly mane tended to stand straight up and then lean drunkenly one way or the other. That and a small mustache together with a distracted wide-eyed gaze gave him a Charley Chaplin air their mother once found entrancing, then not so. At least that’s what Gran had told them.

Plum plucked a pink Post-It-Note from the back of his shirt, “Pops, did you work all night again?”

“Couldn't sleep, that's all.”

Holly finished smoothing down his cowlick, viewing her work appraisingly, as if he were the one heading off to school. Well, he was, in a sense. She glared down at the bright kneecap peeking through one leg of his worn, skinny Levis.

“You want us to get you a new pair of jeans?”

“Uh, yeah, sure.”

They knew from what they’d heard and the slightly awed demeanor of his grad students when they came around that Bill had risen in the Physics Department on the sheer genius of his papers. But in some ways he still lived like them, like a student, despite the fact he’d been their single parent for over a dozen years. Up late, race them to class, lunch in the cafeteria, whereupon he headed back to the lab. Often— very often, actually— they’d join him for dinner in the university cafeteria. That was fun, it was like they had already moved up to college, too.

How they’d developed into such well adjusted, responsible young women— they’d been doing all the grocery and most other shopping for nearly two years— was one scientific mystery Bill did not care to explore, although their grandmother might suggest part of the answer, maybe over one of her frequent family dinners.

A UPS truck ground to a halt out front. Bill's expression rose. His aches and pains abruptly seemed to vanish. He dashed down the driveway to meet the van like a kid chasing an ice cream wagon, grinning and waiting for the delivery man to open the door, eagerly reaching to sign the clipboard,

“Ah! Great, been waiting for—” as Plum and Holly trailed hot on his heels.

The arrival of the big brown van was rarely a good sign. Holly leaned over, checking the return mailing address. A scientific instrument maker. Her brow wrinkled into a small frown, “What'cha got Pops?”

Bill uneasily looked down at the box and hesitated. Plum pushed in between them, “Ah, good one, Pop, more parts.”

“Pops, you've been pouring money into that thing since second grade!”

That thing was his great white whale of an experiment, The Device. On the grant application paperwork it was formally the Superconducting Gravity Wave Detector. In either case, it was his ever bright dream of making it big in physics, maybe a Noble Prize, humming and glowing in the garage behind them.

The system was supposed to provide the first reproduceable proof of the existence of the seemingly magical and unexplained force that kept apples falling *down* from trees. Or, alternatively, as Bill preferred it to explain it to his classes, what kept people stuck to the ground instead of being flung *up* and *out* into space by the force of the Earth's centrifugal rotation. Apples falling? Ho hum. Being thrown into space? That did get student's attention, it was funny, the way he explained it.

At the electric phrase *pouring money* the sudden combined implications of Christmas, committee, ball, shopping and his little box mentally clicked together like a pair of handcuffs snapping shut.

“It's just a... Fete Ball you said?”

“Oh, no—” Holly said. “You didn't take money from our dress jar, did you?”

Plum's eyes widened considerably, “Pop, our Christmas money's in there, too!” Holly turned for a quick dash to the house to check. Bill lunged and hooked her arm back in the nick of time,

“Noo— hey, don't worry! I needed some change. Here. Take my credit card.” He dug it from his wallet and handed it to Plum.

They relaxed a bit. Okay, they thought. The Master Card. Just as good. Actually, better. A bit more wiggle room in the budget than toting a bundle of small bills.

The UPS driver geared up and rumbled down the street, exposing a dark grey Ford with tinted windows parked across the street. The car was quite nondescript, an average four door sedan, nothing you'd ever pay attention to, except it sprouted a full array of police antennas. None of the Zeitman's noticed when the window rolled down with a soft whirr. In the bright sun the dark form of a driver could barely be seen inside. A large telephoto camera lens rested on the window sill with a light click, pointing at Bill and the twins. It turned slightly and zoomed in on the garage with a small *zzzt*. Then it withdrew. The window whirred up again.

His back to the street, Bill happily, if a bit ruefully, started a fatherly pre-school checkout, not that his artfully polished and leggy twins needed one from the likes of him. They patiently smiled.

"That your Mom's?" Plum nodded. They'd inherited their late mother's clothes but only Plum went for her 80s New Wave look, today a very short black snakeskin mini-skirt. "I remember that. She wore that when we went clubbing in Soho. CBGB's, Mudd Club..." She'd accessorized it with plum colored lipstick, her signature shade, the only spot of color in her all black ensemble, smokey eyes included, almost a goth look. "New load?"

"We were over to Gran's Saturday," Holly said.

Gran's closet was how they managed Bill's indifference to all things financial, except his project, of course. If it was totally left to him they be the kind of kids who went to school in the middle of winter wearing shower clogs and cast offs from Goodwill or a church basement swap rack. Vintage fashion was their creative answer, cheerfully and artfully blending clothes from

two generations. They made it their image, their thing, pursued and studied it. It did chafe at times, never being able to buy anything new, but they refused to be victims, they grabbed Gran's old stuff and the challenge with zest.

"I never saw that," Bill said, "what is that?" He quizzically pointed to Holly's minidress.

"Isn't it great? It's Gran's 60s airline stewardess uniform, Pucci I think. This'd be such a catch in a vintage shop! I've been bugging her for it for awhile." Pink frosted lipstick and big lashes completed Holly's look. The brightness fit. Plum sighed and rolled her eyes, her identical twin, her polar opposite.

"Ah, okay, that was way before my time. Braniff I think. Gran flew for a couple others, though. There's a clear plastic space helmet that goes with that. I used to play with it when I was a kid. Did you write her a thank you note?"

"We emailed her."

"No, send her a note. You know, on nice paper. She'll like that. You're lucky she's such a pack rat, mothballing her stuff, your mom's. And having great taste in clothes, both of 'em. You air those mothballs out?" They easily nodded. "Good. You look like go-to girls!" They bubbly grinned. "Go on, you'll be late for school!"

"Okay. Thanks Pops!" and ran out. Bill smiled and waved after them as the car pulled away,

"Bye! Do great! Miss ya!"

As they rolled down the street he turned and bolted into the house. The dark Ford quietly rolled after the girls, keeping a careful distance, skillfully slipping behind cars and out, unnoticed, tracking and tailing them several blocks and around a corner.

Bill dashed across the living room to an overflowing desk. Christmas ornaments crunched underfoot again, more dry leaves flying in the wind.

“Fete Ball? Christmas? Oh— shit! SHIT!” He tore through a pile of credit card statements and mailings, tossing aside the empty jar labeled DRESSES. Nothing. No good credit card checks — *why did they have to put dates on those buggers!* — no uncashed paychecks. Just a third warning letter from the mortgage company threatening foreclosure. Where to get the money?

But he knew the answer. Time to sell something. No choice. His stomach gave a slow heave,

“Aw balls—” and he stepped back onto a sharp Christmas ornament with his bare feet. “OW! Fuck!” It began playing a cheery, tinny *Jingle Bells*. He hopped on one foot and kicked it across the room. It died with an off key whine.

It was twenty days to Christmas. They’d taken the holiday decorations down from the attic a few days earlier but had gotten diverted somehow. The boxes now spewed holiday cheer into harm’s way all over the living room floor. He picked up a good one and hung it on their mangy looking artificial Christmas tree.

The ornament swayed and bobbed a second. Then the tree top broke off with a snap. He tried forcing it on. It flipped off again. The cheap plastic socket had shattered. Well, no problem, he thought! He grabbed a roll of duct tape from the drawer, taped the two halves

together and stepped back to admire his handiwork. The top bent at a crazy oblique angle from an ugly grey bulge. Tent caterpillars come home for the holidays. He gave it a angry shove,

“Aw fuck. Has to be Christmas, doesn't it?”

Bill turned and contemplated his living room for a long, sobering moment, clinically assessing what he saw: a typical suburban house, but badly in need of paint and repair. Old worn out furniture, ground up carpet. The only impressive feature was a large glass case of archeological artifacts he'd inherited from his father, Harvey Zeitman, Grendel Professor of Archeology at New York University.

From the 30s into the 1970s Zeitman senior became as famous as archeologists became: posing in Life magazine with a spectacular bust of Aphrodite he'd found in Smyrna. Aphrodite's invitingly bare breasts did help.

Major pieces like that went to museums. What he quietly brought home from his sites in Turkey, Syria and Egypt were small brown clay artifacts— votive statues, pots, the inevitable mountains of small clay lamps. In truth they were not particularly attractive. But they were very old, rare and valuable. That was the only thing about them that mattered anymore.

Bill gazed for a long moment at the silver framed photo of this father sitting reproachfully atop the case. Then with a start he recognized something for the first time, and almost felt a chill.

The eyes, he realized. The girls have their grandfather's eyes, the same intelligent, focused and determined look, an expression filled with drive. Never saw that before. Growing into it, probably. That's where that go-to girls business comes from.

At times they already seemed to mentally merge with Elaine, their austere, artistic mom, or Adele, their impish pack rat grandmother, especially now that they could look him straight in the eye barefoot. There was their mother's sandy hair and high cheekbones, too, which conveyed either high mood or hauteur. Now they added their grandfather's reproachful eyes.

Christmas. Fete Ball. Shit anyway. Might as well get it over with. Sorry Dad.

Bill gently opened the glass case of artifacts, studied them a long moment, winnowing them out in his mind, then lunged in and began hurriedly stacking several ancient pots in his arms.

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