

ONE TIME RIGHTS

2500 WORDS

THE PACKAGE

BY JAMES J. COLLINS

Christmas has fond memories for most people, but one Christmas will continue to haunt a teenager who lives some place in New York. No one knows who he is or where he lives, but he probably still wakes up screaming about his experience. It all happened in the following way.

Friday before Christmas in 1963 was a typical cold blustery New York City day as three workers sat eating lunch in a small room in the Herald Tribune building on West 41st street. They were a study of the basic fabric of the American worker. All were union men working on the paper for a number of years and they met each day for lunch and coffee break.

At thirty five, Danny Kelly the pressman, the youngest of the trio, was tall and thin with a cock sure attitude in his walk, and his mannerisms that was bred on the lower east side. Proud of his origins, he was more proud of the fact that he had graduated out to the suburbs of Nassau County, where he had a small house and a growing family. He was very pleased with his accomplishments. He had graduated from high school, served three years in the army, been apprenticed to a union shop, acquired his union card and as a full fledged union member was gaining seniority. His future was secure.

Sitting across from him was a forty five year old paper handler, who had spent all his time with the paper except for a couple of years as an infantry man when he spent an inordinate time digging fox holes across the fields of Europe. Ever since the

war, which Chris Johnson thought he would not survive, he loved everything the country could offer. His beaming smile and his hearty "hello" let everyone know...here was a happy man. However, today he seemed preoccupied.

Sipping his coffee, Victor Schultz a fifty year old Linotype specialist, the senior member and informal leader of the group, shuddered, and pulled his sweater tighter around his neck, as a blast of cold air rushed into the room throwing open the door.

"Can't those guys keep the loading dock door close when there's no truck to unload?" he complained as he rose to secure the door.

"Vic you say the same thing every day. Why don't you take it up with Tony? He's the supervisor in there. If he tells them to shut the dock, you can bet they will."

"Why are you pulling my chain? You know we don't even talk since he torpedoed me for that group leader job."

"Please don't bring that up again." said Chris with a tone to his voice that was out of character, "We've heard that tale a thousand times. It never changes and we can all repeat it word for word. If you won't talk to Tony, then either stop complaining or ask the men on the dock to do you a favor and close the door. We don't need the aggravation; we've all got our own problems."

"What kind of problem do you have that we don't already know about?" asked Vic defensively.

"I'm glad you asked. I was going to bring it up later because I've really got a problem on my hands, and I don't know what to do."

"What's the matter?" asked Danny Kelly, the youngest of the trio. "You seemed to be walking on air Friday; you didn't have a care in the world. What happened over the weekend?"

"It's this damn garbage strike has been going on for the last two weeks, and it has me all pissed off. The garbage unions and the trains always seem to time their strikes for the Christmas holidays."

"Well," said Victor, "that's a good union tactic. What you want to do when you have a strike is to get the maximum impact."

You want to have a strike at a point in time when you can get enough people ticked off so they bring pressure to bear and they force the city to settle. That's why the trains always go out on New Years Eve. There's nothing better than leaving a whole mess of drunks get stranded all over the city. Half of them can't find a cab so they can't get home and they really get agitated. Then they start calling their representatives to complain. The reps get worried that they will lose their jobs, and they lean on the big wigs down town and the next thing you know the strike is settled.

The garbage men do the same thing but they like to have their strikes in the summer time when it's nice and hot and you really smell the garbage. The only thing is that the city set the contract so they end now in the wintertime when it's colder so that if the garbage has to sit in the streets for some time they don't have an epidemic on their hands. But when it gets bad enough they'll settle."

"Yeah I understand the advantages from the union's side, and that's great but I got a personal problem at the present time that's being aggravated by the situation."

"What's the matter?" asked Vic.

"Well, my wife's dog Rap died Saturday."

"So...That's too bad, but what's the problem? If I remember correctly you were never a fan of his."

"Yeah your right, but I can't get rid of the dog. I can't put the dog's carcass up on the piles of garbage in front of the house. The cats and the rats climb up there at night and tear everything apart. If my wife saw the dog taken apart by those scavengers, I'd have a Looney on my hands. I have a real problem. What do I do with the mutt? There's no place to bury him. That part of the Bronx is wall to wall concrete. I can't figure what to do with him. I can't put him out, and I can't keep him in the house. Right now, I got him wrapped in a plastic bag, a couple of old rags, and he's lying out on the fire escape. He's cold and he'll keep a couple of days but I've got to do something real quick."

"Hey I think I can help," said Danny Kelly, "I've got an acre

and a half out in Nassau county. If you can get the dog down here, I'll load him in my car, take him out to my house, and bury him in the back yard. There's plenty of room, and your wife can feel at ease. She'll know he is buried. No problem. The only thing is that I can't get up to the Bronx. I got to get home on time because the wife has an appointment tonight, but if you can get him down here before five o'clock we're in business, and your problem is solved."

"Hey that sounds great," said Chris, "Let me call my wife and see if she can't get the dog down here. He was a little dog, and didn't weigh fifteen pounds she'd go along with that. She'd love to have the dog buried somewhere out in the country. "So with that Chris Johnson pulled out a dime, walked over to the pay phone and dialed his home number. He explained the offer to his wife and suggested that she figure out a way to get the dog downtown before five o'clock. She agreed, and he put down the phone.

Two blocks off the Concourse, in a six-story elevator apartment that had the vestiges of past glories illuminated in its dingy marble hall ways, Vera Johnson, a young looking forty five year old housewife, rummaged through the closets in the four room apartment, looking for a suitable container to carry Rap's body. The problem was how you move a fifteen-pound dog carcass through the public transportation system of the City of New York without attracting attention. It's against the law to move a body, and the question in Vera's mind was did that apply to dogs? Well she didn't want to get involved with the police so she figured that the best solution was to hide the problem. She finally decided on a shopping bag, but when she put the dog's body in the bag, the feet were sticking out.

"This won't do," she muttered to herself. "I need something to cover Rap when he's in the shopping bag." She surprised herself by her coolness while at this task. She had really loved the dog and cried when he died, but that was three days ago, and now disposal was a real problem.

Fumbling around she came across a box that carried Christmas ornaments which was just the right size. She got Rap off the fire

escape, and laid the dog's body inside the box and then placed the box inside the shopping bag.

"That looks good, nobody will know that poor Rap is in there, but a bow on the top of the box will make it look more authentic," Vera said to herself, as she affixed a bright red bow to the top of the box. She put on her coat, hat, and a muffler. Sliding on a pair of warm gloves, Vera picked up the shopping bag by the handle and felt the weight pulling her to the side. Then she walked over to a full-length mirror where she could view herself. "I look like any woman out shopping for Christmas gifts," Vera told herself, as much to reassure herself as to relieve her tension as she adjusted her hat. Taking a deep breath, she turned to the door, and began her adventure.

Sitting on the IRT Woodlawn and Jerome with the shopping bag between her legs, Vera swayed as the train screeched around a turn in the underground tunnel. As the train pulled to a stop at the 42nd street station, Vera picked up her burden and slowly walked out the door to the platform.

"Conductor," she asked, "how do I get to the shuttle to 42nd street and Times Square?"

"Up the stairs, make a right and follow the crowd to the end. Get on the train, go two stops, and you're there," said the harried man.

"Thanks," she said perfunctorily, as she started to lug her package up the stairwell. As she trudged up the long flight of stairs, with her package, she was forced to stop once or twice, and leaning against the bannister, catch her breath. The weight of the package was more than she had figured, and she was huffing and puffing from the exertion, ignored by the majority of people who were passing by.

"Hey, lady, can I help you carry that heavy package up the stairs?" asked a voice with a pronounced accent

Turning she met a dazzling display of smiling teeth with one gold tooth prominent on the left. An eighteen-year-old Hispanic youth with handsome features, bright eyes, and jet-black curly hair was holding out his hand to take the burden from Vera's

fingers. He was wearing jeans, a windbreaker, and sneakers, the standard uniform of New York teenagers.

"That looks berry heavy for an older lady to carry. Eet looks like eet's wearing jou out," he said, "A young fellow like me, I can help jou. Eet's Christmas time, and I like to do good deeds. Maybe I can help jou with the shopping bag. I'll be glad to carry eet up the stairs for jou."

"Why thank you," said Vera, handing the shopping bag over to her rescuer, "It was getting very heavy and I still have a ways to go."

"Where are jou going?" asked the good Samaritan

"Over to Times Square, I have to get this package to my husband. It's very important."

"Well, jour in luck," he said, "I'm going the same way, and I can help jou with this package till we get there," smiled her new friend.

"Thank you," said Vera, "that's very nice of you. It's not often that somebody offers to help, and I was getting very tired."

"Ees no problem, "he smiled, "Ees my pleasure. Christmas time ees a time for good will; a time to be nice to people; a time for happiness. Older people like jou, should be helped by the jounge ones like me"

"That's a nice thought," said Vera, "I wish more people acted the same way."

Vera, who was glad to put down the heavy burden, meekly followed her newfound friend through the throngs of people as he snaked his way to the shuttle platform.

A train was waiting on the platform since it was the end of the shuttle line and the two of them walked on the subway car. The Samaritan put the heavy shopping bag down on the floor of the car next to the door, as Vera gratefully dropped into a seat.

"Why don't you sit over here?" asked Vera

"Theese package ees very heavy I think," said the Samaritan, "We only have to go two stops. Eets best eef I stand here with eet unteel we get there."

"This train now leaving. Fifth Avenue and Times Square are

the next stops," blared over the intercom.

WHOOsh The air exhausting from the pneumatic doors, as they started to close was the signal that the Samaritan was waiting for. As the door closed, he bolted. He grabbed the package, and squeezed through the door as it was closing. Using his arm pressed against the rubber edge to hold it open, he slipped through, and took off up the stairs two at a time, with the package held tightly in both arms.

Vera was temporarily stunned.

"Help stop that boy he just robbed me," cried Vera. Then she halted thinking "Why am I hollering?"

"It's too late lady," said a young girl, "He's gone and the train is already moving. What did he get? It looked like a large bag of presents. It's too bad but you won't see them again."

"Yes '"said Vera, "I was taking the package over to my husband. I must tell him what happened. I have to get off at the next stop and call him and tell him the package was stolen."

At the four o'clock coffee break, Chris Johnson related the tale to an expanded group that included Danny, Vic and six others, who joined the group when they heard the raucous laughter. They watched Vic pounding on the table, with tears in his eyes, as he tried to describe his image of how the Hispanic kid would react when he opened the package.

"Ha," roared Vic, "I would like to be there when that kid opens that package. If he's one of those suspicious kids who believes in voodoo, he probably thinks your wife is a witch and changed the presents to a dead dog to curse him. Even if he wasn't suspicious, the dead dog in the package will probably scare the hell out of him, and if he tells his friends, they will treat him as if he is cursed under the evil eye, and keep away from him. No matter what, he's going to be sorry he ever robbed your wife. For the next month, the kid will probably be going around trying to get blessings from everyone, and looking over his shoulder thinking he has been cursed. Who knows you may have turned a kid from a life of crime."

Joining in to the merriment, Chris laughed, "Ha, ha, I was

just thinking, if he ever sees Vera any place in New York, he'll be running the other way as fast as his legs will carry him. She won't have to worry about him trying to rob her again. I just wonder what he is doing right now."

"Who cares," said Danny, "When he grabbed that bag he let you off the hook. At least you don't have to dispose of the dog anymore. It's now his problem."

THE END