

The Cracker Factory – A Christmas Story

Jack adjusted his tie, pulled the cuffs from under his suit sleeves and took one more look at his shiny buffed shoes. He wiped the sweat from his hand before knocking on the door. A man with a white beard of wizardly proportions opened the door and a pair of spectacles huddled under whiskery eyebrows.

A broad hand was extended. "Piers Andersen. You must be the new guy."

"Thank you, Captain Obvious," said an older gentleman behind Piers.

"You're welcome, Sergeant Sarcasm," replied Piers. "Welcome to our office."

"Thank you. I'm Jack Marshall."

Ushered into the room, Jack took a quick survey. The room was less office and more of a conglomeration of lounge room, study and dining room, with a hint of man cave. There was the ubiquitous microwave, coffee machine, kettle and fridge but it lacked the sterile austerity of an office coffee room where people hurried in and buzzed out like bees in the hive.

The front of the fridge was a mish mash of kids' paintings, Christmas cards and assorted fridge magnets. The walls formed an extension of the fridge, covered by more children's paintings, framed photographs of smiling families and a cinema poster for Marilyn Monroe. The middle of the room was occupied by a dark stained wooden dining table with matching chairs. To one side of the room beneath a large window was a reclining armchair with the footrest extended. A television occupied the sideboard opposite the recliner.

By the door stood a hat stand, its wooden fingers clasping a woollen beanie, a trilby and a faded baseball cap. Beneath each hat hung a cardigan, a dark suit coat and a leather jacket.

Looks like home, Jack thought.

"Yes," said Piers. "Would you like a cup of tea?"

"Thank you," said Jack. "If you don't mind."

"No, I don't mind. I baby-sit. Could you put the kettle on, Alfred?"

"I'll try, but I'm not sure it's gonna fit," said Alfred pushing himself from the table and trundling over to the kettle. His threadbare slippers shuffled on the carpeted floor while he adjusted the waist of his trousers to a fraction under his armpits.

Piers motioned for Jack to sit at the table. Strewn across the table was a collection of loose papers, most of which had been scribbled on. To one side an open packet of cream biscuits invited consumption.

"This is Michael," said Piers, motioning to a middle aged man with a full head of hair and an expanding paunch. They shook hands as Piers took his seat.

"What is it we actually do here? The advertisement asked for a writer, but didn't stipulate what the job actually was," said Jack.

"We write the jokes that go into Christmas crackers and bonbons," said Piers.

"But according to the advertisement, we all have to be fathers. Why is that?" asked Jack.

"Qualifications," said Alfred attending to the whistling kettle.

"Qualifications?"

Alfred continued. "I have 3 children, 9 grandchildren and 27 great-grandchildren. Piers here has 5 children and 16 grandchildren. And Michael is expecting his first grandchild any day now. How many kids do you have?"

"I have three: twin boys aged six and a girl who's three," said Jack. "But I don't quite understand. I used to write television drama."

Alfred pattered back with Jack's cup of tea. "I wrote advertising copy for forty years. I also moonlight writing those little sayings you get in fortune cookies. Piers here doubles as Santa Claus."

"I was a business writer for a newspaper," said Michael.

"So you're all professional writers?" asked Jack.

"Used to be," said Alfred. "Professional writing involves thinking. Writing cracker jokes just taps into the vein of bad humour Dads are known for."

Piers joined the conversation. "When you went on a family holiday and you drove past a cemetery, what did your Dad say?"

"He would point and say, 'There's the dead centre of town. People are dying to get in.'" Jack said.

"Now you've got the idea. Bad jokes are a staple of the Christmas cracker and bonbon and who better to write the worst jokes of all time than Dads?"

Piers, Alfred and Michael sorted through the shambolic pile of loose paper on the desk, sifting through reams of discarded humour.

"You've got two basic types of jokes," said Alfred. "There's your simple Question and Answer format. For example, 'Why did the orange use suntan lotion? It didn't want to peel.' Another format is a statement utilising another pun. 'Did you hear about the guy who dreamt he was a muffler? He woke up exhausted.'"

"Here's one," said Michael. "'There has been a reported break in at a local police station where a toilet was stolen. At this stage police have nothing to go on.'"

Piers interrupted. "Every joke is simply a variation on a theme. However, the more cringe-worthy the joke is, the better. 'How does the butcher introduce his daughter? Meet Patty.'"

"Around here we measure the success of the joke by the intensity of the groan it elicits," said Michael. He thumbed through a few pages, bringing one to the front. "Psychiatrist's Nurse: 'There's a man in the waiting room who claims to be invisible.' Doctor: 'Tell him I can't see him right now.'"

Jack smirked. "My uncle used to say to me, 'What do you call a guy lying under a car? Jack.' He said it every time I saw him. And he laughed as loud as if it was the first time he'd said it."

"I'm writing that down," said Alfred reaching for a pen.

Piers pushed a piece of paper and a pen towards Jack.

"Time for a little aptitude test. You've got five minutes to write your first Christmas cracker joke."

The three gentlemen sat back in their chairs and sipped from their cups, nibbling on cream biscuits, waiting for the delivery of the requisite droll humour.

The white expanse of the paper waited to be defaced but Jack's mind drew a blank. Blowing into his hands he looked towards the ceiling. He wondered what was for lunch. Frowning, Jack wondered why his mind lurched towards food. Lunch. Food.

Inspiration. An idea made itself known and Jack scribbled a joke on the blank paper. With a few more passes of the pen he was satisfied with the result.

"Time's up," said Piers. "What have you got?"

Jack swallowed. "How do you make a sausage roll?"

He waited for a beat, a pause, unable to read their faces. He swallowed. "Easy, you push it."

Light chuckles came from the three wise guys.

"You'll fit right in," Piers said extending his broad hand. "Welcome."

Jack shook it warmly.

"And Merry Christmas."

*Wishing you a joyous and blessed
Christmas*

*Thank you for reading and
allowing me to share this
with you*

*Blessings
Adam P.D.*

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Adam is an English teacher and wanna-be rock star drummer sifting through the ennui, minutiae and detritus of life and cataloguing them as potential story ideas. It's a pad of sticky notes plastered on the fridge door.

Surprisingly, being a high school teacher yields few ideas. Perhaps he just isn't looking hard enough.

Occasionally he finds loose change.

Any offer of a strawberry milkshake is greatly appreciated.

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