

SWEATSHIRT BLUES

by Thom Bennett

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“Sweatshirt Blues” is a story inside the book “The
Christmas House – 12 Tales of Holiday Magic”

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Also by Thom Bennett

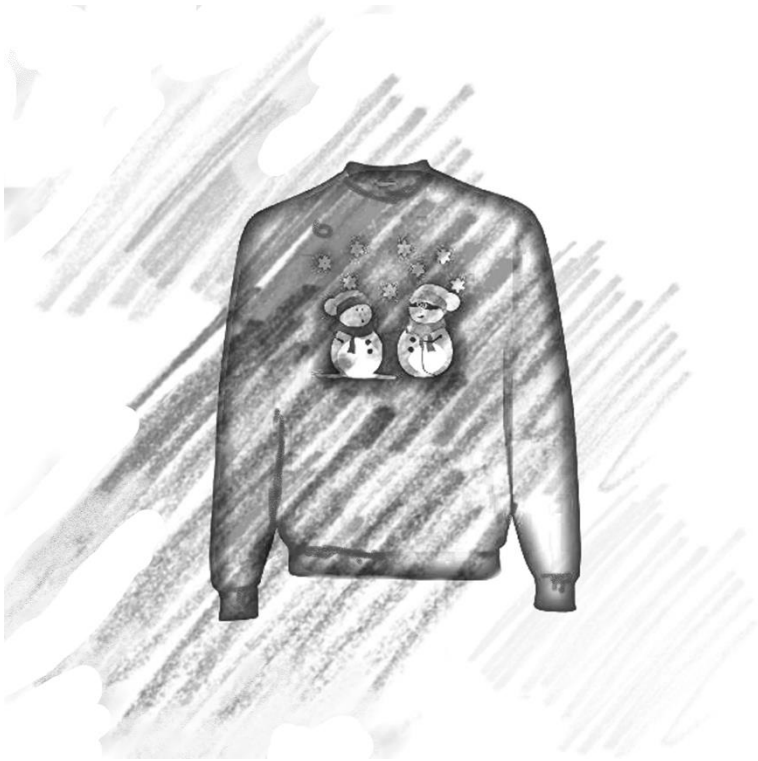
The Death Merchants

13 Tales from the Dark

Ravens Cliff

The Christmas House (12 Tales of Holiday Magic)

The Man With Hemingway's Face



Christmas, that glorious time of the year when our lives focus on hearth and home, friends and family, gifts and giving. It's a time of rituals and traditions, which, according to one cheeky rascal, is what folks do when they don't have the time or money to do things right.

I'm not so sure about *doing it right*, but there was a time early in our marriage when Kathi and I barely had enough money to do things *at all*, let alone *doing it right*. It was a time when the only presents we exchanged was money to pay off a few bills and perhaps a single gift or two.

On our first Christmas together, I remember she bought me a sweatshirt, a happily decorated sweatshirt that featured a ring of Christmas snowmen, all holding hands in jolly camaraderie. It was

enough. It was her love and the spirit of giving that spoke to my heart, not the monetary value of the gift. How I loved that old sweatshirt!

At first, I wore it to work and then around the house; eventually it became my nightshirt. For years, I wore it to bed as a pyjama top (I wore no bottoms in those hearty days!), until finally it became so threadbare that it had to be retired to be used as a dust cloth. In fact, I was wearing it the night that Harry Anderson and I had a little too much pre-Christmas cheer.

Now, Harry Anderson was a wonderful guy with a great laugh. He could tell outrageous stories, enjoy a few beers and a few laughs with the best of them and was, for a time, the cement that bonded me to the “good old days” of university life.

Every few months, he’d show up at our apartment door, with his little eyes squinting, his foolish mouth grinning and a case of beer under his arm. It wouldn’t be long before we were sprawled out in the living room, bottles in hand, and reminiscing about professors and classes, pranks and parties, and even some of the stage plays we’d been in together.

Eventually, no matter what month of the year, there would come a time in the evening when I’d rummage out a script from my favorite college production, a sterling adaptation of Dickens’ *A Christmas Carol*. I’d try to do justice to Ebenezer Scrooge, while Harry would be the narrator and read all the other male parts. Good-natured Kathi would read the women’s roles. She was always politely tolerant of us and our merrymaking, reasoning that *boys will be boys* and that, given enough time, we’d grow up. For the most part, in our long years together, Kathi’s faith and patience paid off.

On the December evening that I have come to refer to as “The Night of My Sweatshirt Blues,” Kathi wasn’t feeling too well and went off to bed early. But that didn’t stop Harry and me. We did justice to the Christmas cheer, slaughtered the first couple of acts from *A Christmas Carol* and dug into a large, frozen pizza. Then we popped open a few more brewskies and bumbled through the next act in the trials and tribulations of old Ebenezer.

We never made it to the end of the play. By the time I realized that the only voice resonating in our small apartment was mine, Harry was sound asleep on the couch, and the lines of my script were beginning to blur. Muttering disdainfully, I dramatically closed up Scrooge, snorted something in Harry's general direction about being a sot (a minor redundancy), and tottered off to bed.

I don't know what happened to my internal clock that morning. Usually, I'm awakened in the early hours by the irrepressible call of nature, but that night, the sun was up when I eased out of bed and squinted my way toward the bathroom. It seemed like a longer trip than usual, as my body, except for the aching bladder, was still pretty much asleep. Eventually, however, I was there, opening the door and passing beyond. I grunted around, took hold of the knob and firmly shut the door. Except it wasn't the *bathroom* door.

When the lock gave a loud, authoritative click, I was instantly awake and realized the worst. Instead of looking at the comforting sights of sink, bath and toilet, I was staring down the long, silent outside corridor outside our fourth-floor apartment. I was locked out! Now, this may not appear to be much of a problem, but permit me to point out that most people do not carry keys with them in their nightclothes—especially when their nightclothes don't have pockets and consist solely of a sweatshirt decorated with happy little Christmas snowmen!

There I was, wondering how in the world I was going to get back in, while at the same time conceal my *shortcomings*. No problem. All I had to do was to stay calm and gently ring the doorbell. So I stayed calm and immediately began pounding on the door.

Nothing. No sounds from within, only hollow echoes of my frenzied assault.

Keep cool, I told myself. There's no need to panic. Just keep calm. There's more than one way to skin the ol' proverbial cat, before you skin the ol' proverbial knuckles.

So I knelt down and lifted the latch on the letter box and looked inside the apartment. There was Harry, sprawled asleep on the couch, his hands folded across his chest and his mouth wide open in a startling imitation of Marley's ghost. I nervously rang the bell. No movement.

"Harry!" I hissed through the mail slot. "Ha-a-a-rrry!"

Nothing.

I rang the bell steadily, supplementing it with alternating pleas and profanities. Still nothing. Even Kathi appeared to be immune to my cries for help. The only response I received was a less-than-delicate belch from Harry and a rumbling noise behind me. I'd deal with Harry later, but the rumbling noise was of definite concern *right now*. Someone was coming up in the elevator and as ours was the last floor in the apartment building, I realized that I'd have company at any moment.

In seconds, I was on my feet and heading for the fire exit. Once the heavy steel door was between me and the unwanted intruder, I paused to catch my breath and think.

When I woke up that morning, there was light in the sky and there were no newspapers in front of any of the apartment doors. That meant the "intruder" was the newspaper man with the Saturday morning papers, and it was around seven o'clock. People would be up and about within the hour, so if I was to get back into my apartment, I'd have to make my move immediately.

Within seconds, I removed the sweatshirt, draped it around my front like an apron and tied the arms around my waist behind my back. Dumb! My frontal anatomy was discreetly clothed, but the breeze drifting up the exit stairs reminded me of my rear-view exposure. I hurriedly told myself that this would not do and immediately reversed the drapery. Dumber! This was getting nowhere fast.

Then an idea came to me. "Eureka!" I chortled, and promptly removed the sweatshirt. Turning it upside down, I forced my legs through the sleeves and gallantly tugged it upward. Although loosely fitting around the middle, this new apparel sufficiently served its

purpose: I was now, more or less, decently covered and ready to proceed with the next stage of my plan.

And what a crazy, ill-conceived plan it was.

There comes a time in every man's life when he could simplify its little problems by taking the easy way out. But he doesn't. Instead, he takes the thorny path, the road fraught with more complications, more hassles. I say *he*, because women tend to be wiser in these matters; they seem to have better decision-making skills. At least, in retrospect, Kathi did.

What possessed me on that cold, snow-flurried December morning to turn away from my own doorway, clothed in decent albeit peculiar garb, will always be a mystery to me. Instead, I bizarrely reasoned that the best way of returning to hearth and home was to make my way down to the lobby and buzz Kathi and Harry awake by means of the entrance intercom.

On my bare-footed way downstairs, I planned my attack. Once there, I would be confronted by the door to the garage, the elevator door and the entrance to the outside world. I focused my feeble attention on the front entranceway: the lobby would exit to the outside, and it was there that I would find the intercom system. I'd ring up my home on the fourth floor and hear my loving wife's voice, a glorious prelude to salvation. One problem, however: if I exited via the outer door to get to the intercom, I would be locked outside of the lobby!

Aha! I thought triumphantly. I'm not that stupid. I'll find something to wedge the door so it won't lock behind me. Then I'll buzz Kathi, who'll answer and say, "Hello darling, of course I'll let you in, poor baby," and that will be the end of this stupid nightmare!

So I took a deep breath, cautiously opened the first-floor fire door, peeked into the lobby and found that the coast was clear. All the rest was simple. Sitting in the ashtray beside the elevator door was an empty booklet of matches. I picked it. up, folded it once and proceeded toward the inner set of doors.

I opened the inner doors; nobody was around. I stepped outside, bent down and wedged in the matchbook. Perfect! I stepped back to admire my handiwork, and watched as the door began to close. It closed with ease until it reached the matchbook. The door was blocked by the wedge, as the matchbook held. For at least two seconds. Then the door pushed aside the matchbook and firmly closed. The door clicked, and I was locked outside!

Verging on tears and feeling an overwhelming need to go to the bathroom, I rested my entire weight on the intercom's buzzer. After what seemed like an hour and a half but was, in reality, only 20 or 30 seconds, a very sleepy soprano voice answered.

"Yes?" asked the sleepy voice.

"Dear, it's me," came my embarrassed response.

"Who *is* this?" said the voice, no longer sleepy. And it didn't sound happy.

That was a very long time ago, and many Christmases have come and gone since then. Kathi and I were blessed with two children, each grown to adulthood with young families of their own. They bring us both a great deal of comfort and joy in our retirement years, especially when we are all gathered around the Christmas tree during the Yuletide season.

As for Harry Anderson, he became a career soldier, applying the knowledge he'd acquired earning his engineering degree to assist oppressed countries in building up their infrastructures. He could have retired young, but didn't, opting for more tours of duty before eventually being killed by a roadside bomb in some far-off corner of the world.

But Harry will always be remembered by Kathi and me for his great laugh and outrageous stories. We especially remember the morning when he roared with laughter when I sheepishly came back

into our little fourth-floor apartment. I'm sure he got a kick out of telling *this* story more than once over the years.

He must have laughed for a half hour after I got back upstairs. All the while, I was wishing that one of his blood vessels would burst or that he'd at least get a hernia. But neither happened, and soon I, too, was laughing, as if these events had happened to another, greater fool than myself.

To be honest, it wasn't my apparel that struck him as being so idiotic; it was *how* I wore it. It appeared that although I had endeavored to make the best of a poor job in putting on the Christmas sweatshirt over my legs, I'd overlooked the fact that all sweatshirts, no matter how they're worn, have a rather large neck opening.

In the end, as the saying from those days of our youth went, I had "let it all hang out."

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About the Author:

Thom has published five plays, including his most performed work “Dark Rituals” and the thrillers “Club Dead” and “Ravens Cliff”. Others include a stage version of the Anthony Hope classic “The Prisoner of Zenda” (co-authored with Elizabeth Ferns), and his popular family fantasy “Return to Wonderland”. Book publications include “The Death Merchants”, the illustrated Halloween collection “13 Tales from the Dark”, and a presentation edition of “Ravens Cliff”.