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A Story and Its Telling

There is a startling variance in truth. This is a fact. Yet, this is true in certain cases only. In fact, there is a marked variance in these cases, one that can be quite startling.

One truth insists that the angelic Cinderella breathed through the keyhole as the glass slipper was forced unsuccessfully upon the heels of hags. Later, her body and the prince's intertwined upon the flagstones of the palace, where the sweat of her breasts soaked the other's tongue and drowned out the bluebirds' chirping (the film has run out long beforehand, albeit). Some insist that Cinderella, that "whore," left her cottage to ride alongside the prince's vassal with her lips all caked with ill-applied gloss. Behind her, two women writhed upon the floor in their own blood and portions of bones and shredded toe.

The two cripples claimed they were always crippled, of course. And no one ever said: "whore." One person claims he knew someone who knew someone who did. That person, alas, had been cut from ear to ear and dumped in the alley where he was located, so the accuracy of such a statement is rendered unassailable and hence unresolvable.

There is a glass slipper, though, within the palace. It rests upon a little pedestal and not in the closet with the other shoes (no pair, no little partner—quite impractical! Hardly socially acceptable!). There's a tiny bloodstain on the inside of the slipper, at the bridge. Usually, however, the sun bathing through the great stained-glass windows etched with saints and prophets is far too bright to notice this.

Enough. The kingdom is happy now. The prince is married. The king will have a second heir. And—how convenient! Spring-time! A long one, I might add. Then the summer baskets are

brimming with fever-scarlet apples. Every cobbler's hammer is tapping, tapping, tapping. There is no dearth of warbling songbirds. Waking to every day reveals a crystallized village in a miniature glass globe (sans snow), with the occasional pluralistic hacking and syphilitic whore, tiny midst the green foliage and endless horse-drawn carriages. Here there is simply too many dutch-cottaged glass windows (and nary a stone tossed).

An old bitter woman with her two maimed daughters, long before vacated the little house where the Lad lived with his Ma and Pa. Villagers would sometimes stop and point at their little house, but Ma and Pa knew it was their little Lad they pointed at with his cute little dimples (that or the cooling apple pies upon the mantle, surely). He was a good Lad, who played when time to play and played at learning when time to learn. He liked living in the cozy little house with his parents.

Now, there were some very strange stains on the floorboards in the sitting room. Ma and Pa, not natives to this quaint duchy, had to ask where they could find a suitable rug maker. When they did, they found a fine-sized one. Now, the strange stains are covered by a floor tapestry of Saint Ursula and her virgins open-armed to the barbarian captors-cum-slayers. Perhaps it's a little out of place in the cottage. In fact, it's probably very much out of place—later, they traded it away and sanded all the floorboards clean. That was after Christmastide had come and gone.

The Lad was very excited about Christmas: snow-flecked cobbles and holly-berry wreaths and sugar apples and candy sticks and wooden toys freshly painted beckoning behind frosted windows. The winter sun was less evident. At noon, the glass of the city would burn less brightly and the castle took on a duller hue. Once in a while the princess would inspect the glass slipper upon the pedestal, and clench her dainty fists. Visitors to the castle would oft-times do that also when they viewed the slipper. She was thinking of breathing through a keyhole, and they were thinking of her thinking of that.

Now, when Christmas was said and done, the Lad received the toys he wanted and turned his thoughts to snowmen and studies (and

pig-tailed girls), while Ma and Pa turned to brace the winter to embrace the spring. And so on. You see, their yarn has already ended. This little crystal house in the little crystal kingdom is a pirouetting ballerina for other music boxes (surely you understand). In fact, the story is quite over, all the characters and settings and conflicts neatly packaged and sealed with a bright ribbon. It rests pretty upon the mantel. Fine. And now a digression, to provide a short Christmas tale. After all (didn't I tell you?) this is a Christmas story.

THE END

The Lad was sitting by the fire chomping chestnuts when his Grandfather pulled up a stool and leaned his face to the Lad, the fire lighting his sculpted furrows, "I've been making my own way here sixty blue moons and one green one, my boy." (Lad: giggle, giggle). "I know a tun-full of things that would put a rosy color back in your cheeks—things you wouldn't nary believe. And tonight's the most magical night of the year...let me tell you all about Father Christmas."

THE STORY OF FATHER CHRISTMAS

Every year, on that special day when the moon is an anecdote to that glorious star of the East, and the world slumbers in dreams of sugar fruits and steaming meat, Father Christmas rises from his stone crypt and unwraps the funeral cloth that binds him. He slips like a shadow, down the passageways of that dead castle that lies locked in the wind tortured teeth of the icy Northern Mountains.

First, he rummages through the huddled and mephitic masses on their shelves - the gaping sockets and loose jawbones - to find his wonderful red sack. Then, he hobbles to the courtyard where he climbs into his great black carriage of brass bars and purple tassels. He nicks the champing creatures, patiently tethered and stamping. The sprawling crenelated tomb disappears behind them. With his black cape billowing like a wind-snared sheet, he plunges from the

forests of the night to deliver gifts to all the dead sleepers, each according to their worth.

When the first ray of morning lights the scattered globes of tiny dew, Father Christmas is already back in his coffin, his arms crossed on his chest, the funeral cloth wound round, his face a frozen rictus. The black carriage has vanished. His deeds are done*; the clock begins ticking to the time when he will rise again. He and his sleeping companions sink to their dream-locked depths, carried by the wind's ceaseless howling.

Once upon a time, on a Christmas morning, an old reclusive woman, her eyes red from a sleepless night of prayer, came downstairs. She came down to see if her exhortations on behalf of her poor maimed daughters had gained a merciful glance from the Redeemer on this, his day. She found them at the chimney. Their tangled bodies stuffed the brick shaft, as they dripped piecemeal upon the hearth and ashes.

* They wake to his gifts, his verdicts, his deeds.