



HUGO AWARD FINALIST

# OVERTIME

CHARLES STROSS



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*illustration by*

CARL WIENS



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All bureaucracies obey certain iron laws, and one of the oldest is this: get your seasonal leave booked early, lest you be trampled in the rush.

I broke the rule this year, and now I'm paying the price. It's not my fault I failed to book my Christmas leave in time—I was in hospital and heavily sedated. But the ruthless cut and thrust of office politics makes no allowance for those who fall in the line of battle: “You should have foreseen your hospitalization and

planned around it” said the memo from HR when I complained.

They’re quite right, and I’ve made a note to book in advance next time I’m about to be abducted by murderous cultists or enemy spies.

I briefly considered pulling an extended sickie, but Brenda from Admin has a heart of gold; she pointed out that if I volunteered as Night Duty Officer over the seasonal period I could not only claim triple pay and time off in lieu, I’d also be working three grades

above my assigned role. For purposes of gaining experience points in the fast-track promotion game they're steering me onto, that's hard to beat. So here I am, in the office on Christmas Eve, playing bureaucratic Pokémon as the chilly rain drums on the roof.

(Oh, you wondered what Mo thinks of this? She's off visiting her ditz of a mum down in Glastonbury. After last time we agreed it would be a good idea if I kept a low profile. Christmas: the one time of



year when you can't avoid the nuts in your family muesli. But I digress.)

\* \* \*

Christmas: the season of goodwill towards all men—except for bank managers, credit scoring agencies, everyone who works in the greeting card business, and dodgy men in red suits who hang out in toy shops and scare small children by shouting “*ho ho HO!*” By the time I got out of hospital in September the

Christmas seasonal displays were already going up in the shops: mistletoe and holly and metallized tinsel pushing out the last of summer's tanning lotion and Hawaiian shirts.

I can't say I've ever been big on the English Suburban Christmas. First you play join-the-dots with bank holidays and what's left of your annual leave, to get as many consecutive days off work as possible. Then instead of doing something useful and constructive

with it you gorge yourself into a turkey-addled stomach-bloating haze, drink too much cheap plonk, pick fights with the in-laws, and fall asleep on the sofa in front of the traditional family-friendly crap the BBC pumps out every December 25th in case the wee ones are watching. These days the little 'uns are all up in their rooms, playing *Chicks v. Zombies 8.0* with the gore dialled to splashy-giblets-halfway-up-the-walls (only adults bother watching TV as a social activity

these days) but has Auntie Beeb noticed? Oh no they haven't! So it's crap pantomimes and Mary Poppins and re-runs of *The Two Ronnies* for you, sonny, whether you like it or not. It's like being trapped in 1974 forever—and you can forget about escaping onto the internet: everybody else has had the same idea, and the tubes are clogged.

Alternatively you can spend Christmas alone in the office, where at least it's quiet once everyone else has gone home. You can get

some work done, or read a book, or surreptitiously play *Chicks v. Zombies 8.0* with the gore dialled down to suitable-for-adults. At least, that's the way it's supposed to work . . . except when it doesn't, like now.

Let's rewind a week:

I'm pecking away at a quality assessment form on my office PC when there's a knock at the door. I glance up. It's Bill from Security. "Are you busy right now?" he asks.

"Um." My heart just about skips a

beat. “Not really . . . ?”

Bill is one of our regular security officers: a former blue-suiter, salt-and-pepper moustache, silver comb-over, but keeps trim and marches everywhere like he’s still in the military. “It’s about your Christmas shift,” he says, smiling vaguely and hefting a bunch of keys the size of a hand grenade. “I’m supposed to show you the ropes, y’know? Seeing as how you’re on overnight duty next week.” He jangles the key ring. “If you can

spare half an hour?”

My heartbeat returns to normal. I glance at the email on my computer screen: “Yeah, sure.” It’s taken me about five seconds to cycle from mild terror to abject relief; he’s not here to chew me out over the state of my trainers.

“Very good, sir. If you’d care to step this way?”

From Bill, even a polite request sounds a little like an order.

“You haven’t done the graveyard shift before, have you sir? There’s

not a lot to it—usually. You're required to remain in the building and on call at all times. Ahem, that's within reason, of course: toilet breaks permitted—there's an extension—and there's a bunk bed. You probably won't have to do anything, but in the unlikely event, well, you're the *night duty officer*."

We climb a staircase, pass through a pair of singularly battered fire doors, and proceed at a quick march along a puce-painted corridor with high wired-glass



windows, their hinges painted shut. Bill produces his keyring with a jangling flourish. “Behold! The duty officer’s watch room.”

We are in the New Annexe, a depressing New Brutalist slab of concrete that sits atop a dilapidated department store somewhere south of the Thames: electrically heated, poorly insulated, and none of the window frames fit properly. My department was moved here nearly a year ago, while they rebuild Dansey House (which will

probably take a decade, because they handed it over to a public-private partnership). Nevertheless, the fittings and fixtures of the NDO's office make the rest of the New Annexe look like a futuristic marvel. The khaki-painted steel frame of the bunk, topped with green wool blankets, looks like something out of a wartime movie—there's even a fading poster on the wall that says CARELESS LIPS SINK SHIPS.

“This is a joke. Right?” I'm

pointing at the green-screen terminal on the desk, and the huge dial-infested rotary phone beside it.

“No sir.” Bill clears his throat. “Unfortunately the NDO’s office budget was misfiled years ago and nobody knows the correct code to requisition new supplies. At least it’s warm in winter: you’re right on top of the classified document incinerator room, and it’s got the only chimney in the building.”

He points out aspects of the room’s dubious architectural

heritage while I'm scoping out the accessories. I poke at the rusty electric kettle: "Will anyone say anything if I bring my own espresso maker?"

"I think they'll say 'that's a good idea,' sir. Now, if you'd care to pay attention, let me talk you through the call management procedures and what to do in event of an emergency."

\* \* \*

The Laundry, like any other

government bureaucracy, operates on a 9-to-5 basis—except for those inconvenient bits that don't. The latter tend to be field operations of the kind where, if something goes wrong, they really *don't* want to find themselves listening to the voicemail system saying, “Invasions of supernatural brain-eating monsters can only be dealt with during core business hours. Please leave a message after the beep.” (Supernatural? Why, yes: we're that part of Her Majesty's government

that deals with occult technologies and threats. Certain abstruse branches of pure mathematics can have drastic consequences in the real world—we call them “magic”—by calling up the gibbering horrors with which we unfortunately share a multiverse [and the platonic realm of mathematical truth]. Given that computers are tools that can be used for performing certain classes of calculation *really fast*, it should come as no surprise that Applied

Computational Demonology has been a growth area in recent years.)

My job, as Night Duty Officer, is to sit tight and answer the phone. In the unlikely event that it rings, I have a list of numbers I can call. Most of them ring through to duty officers in other departments, but one of them calls through to a special Army barracks in Hereford, another goes straight to SHAPE in Brussels—that's NATO's European theatre command HQ—and a third dials direct to the COBRA briefing

room in Downing Street. Nobody in the Laundry has ever had to get the Prime Minister out of bed in the small hours, but there's always a first time: more importantly, it's the NDO's job to make that call if a sufficiency of shit hits the fan on his watch.

I've also got a slim folder (labelled TOP SECRET and protected by disturbing wards that flicker across the cover like electrified floaters in the corners of my vision) that contains a typed list



of codewords relating to secret operations. It doesn't say what the operations *are*, but it lists the supervisors associated with them—the people to call if one of the agents hits the panic button.

I've got an office to hang out in. An office with a bunk bed like something out of a fifties *Carry On* film about conscript life in the army, a chimney for the wind to whistle down (the better to keep me awake), a desk with an ancient computer terminal (shoved onto the

floor to make room for my laptop), and a kettle (there's a bathroom next door with a sink, a toilet, and a shower that delivers an anemic trickle of tepid water). There's even a portable black-and-white TV with a cheap Freeview receiver (this is the first year since they discontinued analog broadcasting) in case I feel compelled to watch reruns of *The Two Ronnies*.

All the modern conveniences, in other words. . . .

The Office Party is scheduled to take place on Wednesday afternoon, from 1 p.m. to 5 p.m. sharp.

As civil servants, however irregular, we're not paid enough to compete with the bankers and corporate Tarquins and Jocastas who fill most of the office blocks in this part of the city; even in these straitened times they can afford to drop a couple of hundred notes per head on bubbly. So we don't get a

posh restaurant outing: instead we have to tart up the staff canteen with some added tinsel, fake snow spray on the windows, and a molting pine tree in a pot by the fire exit.

Pinky and Brains kindly installed their home stereo—homemade, not homesized—in the number two lecture theatre, for the obligatory dance; Elinor and Beth (with a nod and a wink from Oversight) hit on an outside caterer for the sort of comestibles essential to a party and unheard-of in a civil service

canteen (which could manage cupcakes and sherry trifle if push came to shove, but whose idea of pizza or curry is ghastly beyond belief).

There's a Dunkirk spirit to the whole affair: with the new government in the driving seat, wielding the chainsaw of budget cuts, there's not a lot of luxury to go round. But we're good at make-do-and-mend in this department—it's bred in our bureaucratic bones—and with the aid of a five hundred

quid ents budget (to cover the hundred odd folks who work here), we make it work.

There is a humdrum ritual for an office Christmas party anywhere in England. The morning beforehand, work takes on a lackadaisical feel. Meetings are truncated by 11 a.m.; agendas updated, email filters set to vacation. Some folks—the few, the lucky—begin to clear their desk drawers, for they know they shall not be coming back to work until the new year. A wilted air of festivity

wafts through the corridors of power, like a slightly moist crêpe banner.

“Bob?” I look up from my Minesweeper session: it’s Andy, my sometime manager, leaning in the doorway. “You coming to lunch?”

I stretch, then mouse over to the screen lock. “Is it that time already?” I don’t work for Andy these days, but he seems to take a proprietorial interest in how I’m doing.

“Yes.” His head bounces up and down. He looks slightly guilty, like a schoolboy whose been caught with his hands in the sweets jar once too often. “Is Mo . . . ?”

“She’s off-site today.” I stand up. Actually she’s over in Research and Development, quaffing port with the double-domes, dammit—an altogether more civilized session than this one. “We were planning on meeting up later.”

“Well, come on then. Wouldn’t want to miss the decent seats for the



floor show, would we?”

“Floor show?” I close the door behind us.

“Yes, we have a visitor from Forecasting Ops. I got the email a couple of days ago. One Dr. Kringle has condescended to descend and give us some sort of pep talk about the year ahead.”

“Kringle?” My cheek twitches. The name’s unfamiliar. “From Forecasting Ops? Who are they . . .” I’ve heard rumors about them, but nothing concrete: it’s probably one

of those vague backwaters  
beavering away in isolation. Why  
on earth would they want to send  
someone to talk to us now?

“Yes, exactly.” Andy spares me a  
sidelong glance. “Don’t ask me, all  
I know is what I found in my inbox.  
Mail from HR, let him give a little  
motivational pep talk at the party.  
Don’t worry,” he adds quietly, “it’ll  
all work out for the best in the end.  
You’ll see. Just sit tight and bite  
your tongue.” I get it. Andy is  
wearing his bearer-of-bad-news

face while steering me towards the junior officer's bench. Something is about to come down the chute, and all the Christmas cheer in the world isn't going to cover up the stench of manure. As a management-grade employee—albeit a junior one—I'm required to show solidarity. Hence being tipped the nod and a wink.

I begin to wonder what it can possibly be.

\* \* \*

The Duty Officer's room is upstairs, just under the gently pitched roof of the New Annexe. There's a wired-shut skylight, and the wind howls and gibbers overhead: occasionally there's a sound like gravel on concrete as an errant gust flings a cupful of freezing cold water at the glass, followed by a hollow booming noise from the chimney. The chimney is indeed warm, but it's cooling fast: I guess they've shut down the incinerator over the

holiday period. It's just past eleven at night, and there's no way in hell I'm going to be able to sleep while the storm is blowing.

When the holiday falls on a weekend day (as Boxing Day does this year) everyone gets a day off in lieu at the beginning of the following week except the Night Duty Officer, who is in it for up to four days at triple pay—as long as he doesn't go mad with boredom first.

I've been on duty for six hours

and I've already caught up on my work email—at least, I've replied to everything that needs replying to, and am well into ignoring all the Powerpoints that need ignoring—and gotten bored with gaming. The TV's on in the background, but it's the same-old family-friendly fare. I don't want to start on the two fat novels I've stockpiled for the weekend too early, so there's only one thing to do. I abandon my cup of tea, pick up my torch, iPhone and warrant card, and tip-toe forth to

poke my nose where it doesn't belong.

*'Twas the night before  
Christmas, the office was  
closed,  
The transom was shut, the staff  
home in repose;  
The stockings were hung by the  
chimney with care,  
But St. Nicholas won't be  
coming because this is a Designated  
National Security Site within the meaning  
of Para 4.12 of Section 3 of the Official  
Secrets Act (Amended) and unauthorised*

*intrusion on such a site is an arrestable offense ...*

Had enough of my poetry yet?  
That's why they pay me to fight  
demons instead.

One of the perks of being Night  
Duty Officer is that I can poke my  
nose anywhere I like—after all, I'm  
responsible for the security of the  
building. In fact, I can go into  
places where I'd normally get my  
nasal appendage chopped right off  
if I had the temerity to sniff around  
without authorization. I can look



inside Angleton's office, tip-toe between the dangerously active canopic jars and warded optical workbenches of Field Service, walk the thickly carpeted, dusty corridors of Mahogany Row, and pester the night-shift zombies (sorry: of course I meant to say, *Residual Human Resources*) in the basement. In fact, I'm pretty much encouraged to keep an eye on things, just as long as I stay within range of the Duty Officer's Phone.

You might think that's a catch, but

the Duty Officer's Phone—once you unscrew the huge lump of Bakelite—is a remarkably simple piece of fifties-vintage electronics. It's not even scrambled: the encryption is handled at the exchange level. So after a brisk fifteen minutes programming a divert into the PBX so it'll ring through to my iPhone, I'm free to go exploring.

(Did you really think I was going to spend three days and nights nursing a land-line that hasn't rung in sixteen years?)

*Recipe for Office Christmas  
Party in the Season of Cuts:*

Take:

28 junior administrative and  
secretarial staff

17 clerical and accounts officers

12 management grade officers

4 spies

5 human resources managers

9 building security staff

6 technical support officers

9 demonologists

(optional: 1 or more double-agents, ancient lurking horrors from beyond the stars, and zombies)

Add crêpe paper hats, whistles, party poppers, tinsel decorations, fairy lights, whoopee cushions, cocktail snacks, supermarket mince pies, and cheap wine and spirits to taste.

Mix vigorously (blender setting at “pre-Disco”) and pour into staff canteen that has been in urgent need

of redecoration since 1977. Seat at benches. Punch repeatedly (not more than 10% alcohol by volume), serve the turkey, set fire to the Christmas pudding, discover fire extinguisher is six months past mandatory HSE inspection deadline, and suppress.

Allow to stand while Martin from Tech Support drunkenly invites Kristin from Accounts to audit his packet (during that gap in the hubbub when every other conversation stops simultaneously

and you can hear a pin drop); Vera from Logistics asks Ayesha from HR if her presence at the party means that she's finally found Jesus: and George from Security throws up in the Christmas tree tub.

And then . . .

Andy tings his knife on the edge of his glass repeatedly until everybody finally notices he's trying to get their attention, at which point he stands up. I look wistfully at the tray of slightly stale mince pies in the middle of the table, and withdraw

my hand.

“Quiet, please! First of all, I’d like to take this opportunity to thank Facilities for organizing a party at short notice and under considerable budgetary constraints—a budget which is unavoidably much tighter than for last year’s festivities. Thanks to Amber and Lee for organizing the external catering, and to Dr. Kringle here for kindly approving our request for an entertainments budget—very generously, in view of the current

Treasury strategic deficit reduction program.”

(Applause.)

“And now, Dr. Kringle has asked if he can say a few words to us all about the year ahead . . .”

\* \* \*

I walk the darkened halls.

The New Annexe predates the fad for rat-maze cubicle farms in offices, but that never stopped anyone. The result is a curious architectural mixture of tiny locked



offices hived off artificially lit corridors, alternating with barnlike open plan halls full of cheap desks and underpowered computers, their cases yellowing with age.

Here's the vast expanse of what used to be the typing pool—so-called because in the old days there used to be officers here who couldn't use a keyboard. These days it's our administrative core, a place where civil servants come to die. The Laundry, perforce, must find work for many idle hands—the

hands of everyone who comes to our attention and must needs be made a job offer they're not allowed to refuse. Luckily bureaucracy breeds, and it takes many meetings to manage the added complexity of administration required by our chronic overstaffing. There are people here who I only know of through their Outlook calendars, which are perpetually logjammed. Entire departments beaver away in anonymous quiet, building paper

dams to hold the real world at bay. I shine my torch across empty in-trays, battered chairs, desks that reek of existential pointlessness. *I could have been trapped here for good*, I realize. I shudder as I move on. Being part of the Laundry's active service arm brings hazards of its own: but dying of boredom isn't one of them.

I turn left and take a short cut through Mahogany Row. Here the carpet is thick, the woodwork polished rather than painted over.

Individual offices with huge oak desks and leather recliners, walls hung with dark oil paintings of old hands in wartime uniform. Nobody is ever *in* any of these offices—rumor has it they all transcended, or were never human in the first place—these sinister and barely glimpsed senior officers who ran the organization from its early years.

(I've got my own theory about Mahogany Row, which is that the executives who would be here don't

exist yet. In the depths of the coming crisis, as the stars come into cosmic alignment and the old ones return to stalk the Earth, the organization will have to grow enormously bigger, taking on new responsibilities and more staff—at which point, those of us who survive are going to move on up here to direct the war effort. Assuming the powers that be have more sense than to fill the boardroom with the usual recycled corporate apparatchiks, that is. If they don't, may Cthulhu have mercy

on our souls.)

As I turn the corner past the executive lavatory and approach the fire door I have a most peculiar sensation. *Why do I feel as if I'm being watched?* I wonder. I clear my throat. "Duty Officer." I reach into my pocket and pull out my warrant card: "Show yourself!"

The card glows pale green in the darkness; nothing stirs.

"Huh." I palm it, feeling stupid. The night watchmen are about, but they're not supposed to come up

here. The wind and rain whooshes and rattles beyond the office windows.

I push the door open. It's yet another administrative annexe, presumably for the executives' secretaries. One of the copiers has a print job stacked facedown in the output tray. That strikes me as odd: given the nature of our work here, Security take a dim view of documents being left lying around. But Security won't be making their rounds for a few days. Probably

best to take the printouts and stick them in the internal post to whoever ran them off—or in a locked safe pending a chewing-out if it's anything confidential.

I flip the first sheet over to look for the header page, and do a double take. *Buttocks!* Pretty damned hairy ones, at that. *So someone was enjoying the party.*

The next page features more buttocks, and they're a lot less male, judging by the well-filled stockings and other identifying



characteristics. I shake my head. I'm beginning to work out a response—I'm going to pin them on one of the staff notice boards, with an anonymous appeal for folks to wipe down the copier glass after each use—when I get to the third sheet.

Whoever sat on the copier lid *that* time didn't have buttocks, hairy or otherwise—or any other mammalian features for that matter. What I'm holding looks to be a photocopy of the business end of a

giant cockroach.

Maybe I'm not alone after all. . . .

\* \* \*

After Kringle drops his turd in the punch bowl of seasonal spirit, the party officially ceases to be fun, even for drably corporate values of fun. My appetite evaporates, too: they can keep the pies for all I care. I grab a bottle of Blue Nun and tip-toe back towards my cubicle in the Counter Possession Unit.

*Fuck.* Mo isn't here; she's already

headed off to see her mum. She'd understand, though. I'm on duty from tomorrow through Monday morning, and not supposed to leave the building. I was going to go home tonight—run the washing machine, pack a bag with clean clothes for the weekend, that sort of thing—but right now the urge to get blind falling-down drunk is calling me.

Because this is the last Christmas party at the Laundry.

I pull out my phone to call Mo, then pause. She's got her hands full

with mum right now. Why add to her worries? And besides, this isn't a secure voice terminal: I can't safely say everything that needs to be said. (The compulsion to confidentiality runs deep, backed up by my oath of office. To knowingly break it risks very unpleasant consequences.) I'm about to put my phone away when Andy clears his throat. He's standing right behind me, an unlit cigarette pinched between two fingers. "Bob?"

I take another deep breath.

“Yeah?”

“Want to talk?”

I nod. “Where?”

“The clubhouse . . .”

I follow him, out through a door onto the concrete balcony at the back of the New Annexe that leads to the external fire escape. We call it the clubhouse in jest: it’s where the smokers hang out, exposed to the elements. There’s a sand bucket half-submerged in scorched fag-ends sitting by the door. I wait while Andy lights up. His fingers

are shaking slightly, I see. He's skinny, tall, about five years older than me. Four grades higher, too, managing the head-office side of various ops that it's not sensible to ask about. Wears a suit, watches the world from behind a slightly sniffy air of academic amusement, as if nothing really matters very much. But his detachment is gone now, blown away like a shred of smoke on the wind.

“What do you make of it?” he asks, bluntly.

I look at his cigarette, for a moment wishing I smoked. “It’s not looking good. As signs of the apocalypse go, the last office Christmas party ever is a bit of a red flag.”

Andy hides a cough with his fist. “I sincerely hope not.”

“What’s Kringle’s track record?” I ask. “Surely he’s been pulling rabbits out of hats long enough we can run a Bayesian analysis and see how well he . . .” I trail off, seeing Andy’s expression.

“He’s one of the best precognitives we’ve ever had, so I’m told. And what he’s saying backs up Dr. Mike’s revised time frame for CASE NIGHTMARE GREEN.” (The end of the world, when—in the words of the mad seer—*the stars come right*. It’s actually a seventy-year long window during which the power of magic multiplies monstrously, and alien horrors from the dark ages before the big bang become accessible to any crack-brained preacher with a



yen to talk to the devil. We thought we had a few years' grace: according to Dr. Mike our calculations are wrong, and the window began to open nine months ago.) "Something *really bad* is coming. If Kringle can't see through to next December 24th, then, well, he probably won't be alive then."

"So he stares into the void, and the void stares back. Maybe *he* won't be alive." I'm clutching at straws. "I don't suppose there's any chance he's just going to be run

over by a bus?”

Andy gives me a Look, of a kind I've been beginning to recognize more since the business in Brookwood—infinite existential despair tempered with a goodly dose of rage against the inevitable, dammed up behind a stiff upper lip. To be fair, I've been handing out a fair number of them myself. “I have no idea. Frankly, it's all a bit vague. Precog fugues aren't deterministic, Bob: worse, they tend to disrupt whatever processes they're

predicting the outcome of. That's why Forecasting Ops are so big on statistical analysis. If Kringle said we won't see another Christmas party, you can bet they've rolled the dice more than the bare minimum to fit the confidence interval."

"So preempt his prophecy already! Use the weak anthropic principle: if we cancel next year's Christmas party, his prophecy is delayed indefinitely. Right?"

Andy rolls his eyes. "Don't be fucking stupid."

“It was a long shot.” (Pause.)

“What are we going to do?”

“We?” Andy raises one eyebrow.

“I am going to go home to the wife and kids for Christmas and try to forget about threats to our very existence for a bit. You”—he takes a deep gulp of smoke—“get to play at Night Duty Officer, patrolling the twilight corridors to protect our workplace from the hideous threat of the Filler of Stockings, who oozes through chimneys and ventilation ducts every Dead God’s

Birthday-eve to perform unspeakable acts against items of hosiery. Try not to let it get to you—oh, and have a nice holiday while you're at it.”

\* \* \*

My appetite for nocturnal exploration is fading, tempered by the realization that I may not be the only one putting in some overtime in the office tonight. I reach for my ward—hung around my neck like an identity badge—and feel it. It

tingles normally, and is cool. *Good.*  
If it was hot or glowing or  
throbbing I could expect company.  
It's time to get back to the NDO  
room and regroup.

I tiptoe back the way I came,  
thinking furiously.

*Item:* It's the night before  
Christmas, and backup is scarce to  
nonexistent.

*Item:* You can fool everyone at an  
office party with a class three  
glamour, but you can't fool a  
photocopier.

*Item:* Kringle's prophecy.

*Item:* We're in CASE

NIGHTMARE GREEN, and things that too many people believe in have a nasty tendency to come true; magic is a branch of applied computation, neural networks are computing devices, there are *too many people* and *the stars are right* (making it much too easy to gain the attention of entities that find us crunchy and good with ketchup).

*Item:* Who or what kind of uninvited entity might want to sit in

on Kringle's little pep talk. . . . ?

I'm halfway down the corridor through Mahogany Row, and I break into a run.

\* \* \*

“Good afternoon, everyone.”

Kringle wrings his hands as he speaks; they're curiously etiolated and pale-skinned, like those of a Deep One, but he lacks the hunched back or gills: there's only the pallid, stringy hair and the thick horn-rimmed glasses concealing a



single watery blue eye—the other is covered by a leather patch—to mark him out as odd. But his gaze . . .

“It *will* be a good afternoon, until I finish speaking.” He smiles like a hangman’s trapdoor opening. “So drink up now and be of good cheer, because this will be the last Christmas party held by the Laundry.”

Up to this point most folks have been ignoring him or listening with polite incomprehension. Suddenly,

though, you could hear a mouse fart.

“You need have no fear of downsizing or treasury cuts to comply with the revised public spending guidelines.” His smile fades. “I speak of more fundamental, irrevocable changes.

“My department, Forecasting Operations, is tasked with attempting to evaluate the efficacy of proposed action initiatives in pursuit of the organization’s goals—notably, the prevention of incursions by gibbering horrors

from beyond space-time. Policies are originated, put on the table—and we descry their consequences. It's a somewhat hit-and-miss profession, but our ability to peer into the abyss of the future allows us to sometimes avoid the worst pitfalls.”

Kringle continues in this vein for some time. His voice is oddly soporific, and it takes me a while to figure out why: he reminds me of a BBC radio weather forecaster. They have this slot for the weather

forecast right before the news, and try as I will I *always* zone out right before they get to whatever region I happen to be interested in and wake up as they're finishing. It's uncanny. Kringle is clearly talking about something of considerable importance, but my mind skitters off the surface of his words like a wasp on a plate glass window. I shake my head and begin to look round, when the words flicker briefly into focus.

“—Claus, or *Santé Klaas* in the mediaeval Dutch usage, a friendly

figure in a red suit who brings presents in the depths of winter, may have a more sinister meaning. Think not only of the traditions of the Norse Odin, with which the figure of Santa Claus is associated, but with the shamanic rituals of Lap antiquity, performed by a holy man who drank the urine of reindeer that had eaten the sacred toadstool, *Amanita Muscaria* —wearing the bloody, flayed skin of the poisoned animals to gain his insight into the next year—we, with modern

statistical filtering methodologies, can gain much more precise insights, but at some personal cost —”

*Eh?* I shake my head again, then take another mouthful from my paper cup of cheap plonk. The words go whizzing past, almost as if they're tagged for someone else's attention. Which is odd, because I'm trying to follow what he's saying: I've got a peculiar feeling that this stuff is important.

“—particular, certain facts appear

indisputable. *There will be no Laundry staff Christmas dinner next year.* We can't tell you why, but as a result of events that I believe have already taken place this will be the last one. Indeed, attempts over the past year to investigate outcomes beyond this evening have met with abject failure: the end of this party is the last event that Forecasting Operations is able to predict with any degree of confidence. . . .”

I arrive back in the Duty Officer's Room with a chilly sheen of sweat coating the small of my back. The light's on, casting a cheery glow through the frosted glass window in the door, and the TV's blathering happily away. I duck inside and shut it behind me, then grab the spare wooden chair and prop it under the door handle. My memory of Kringle's talk seems altogether too disturbingly like a dream for my



taste: even the conversation with Andy has an oddly vaporous feel to it. I've had this kind of experience before, and the only thing to do is to test it.

I plonk myself down behind the desk and unlock the drawer, then pull out the phone book. Rain rattles on the window above my head as I open it, an electric tingling in my fingertips reminding me that the wards on the cover are very much alive. *Come on, where are you . . . .* I run a shaky finger down the page.

What I'm looking for isn't there: the dog that didn't bark in the night. I swallow, then I go back and search a different section for Andy's home number. Yes, *he's* listed—and he's got a secure terminal. Time check: it's twenty to midnight, not quite late enough to be seriously antisocial. I pick up the telephone receiver and begin to laboriously spin the dial. The phone rings three times.

“Andy?”

“Hello? Who is this?” It's a

woman's voice.

“Er, this is Bob, from the office. I wonder, is Andy available? I won't take a minute. . . .”

“Bob?” Andy takes the receiver. “Talk to me.”

I clear my throat. “Sorry to call you like this, but it's about the office party. The guy who spoke to us, from Forecasting Operations. Do you remember his name, and have you ever dealt with him before?”

There's a pause. “Forecasting

Operations?” Andy sounds puzzled. My stomach clenches. “Who are they? I haven’t heard of any forecasting . . . what’s going on?”

“Do you remember our conversation in the clubhouse?” I ask.

“What, about personal development courses? Can’t it wait until next year?”

I glance back at the phone book. “Uh, I’ll get back to you. I think I’ve got a situation.”

I put the handset down very

carefully, as if it's made of sweating gelignite. Then I leaf through the phone book again. Nope, Forecasting Operations aren't listed. And Andy doesn't remember Dr. Kringle, or his lecture, or our conversation on the balcony.

I've got a very bad feeling about this.

Like the famous mad philosopher said, when you stare into the void, the void stares also; but if you *cast* into the void, you get a type

conversion error. (Which just goes to show Nietzsche wasn't a C++ programmer.) Dr. Kringle was saying his department tests new policies, then read the future and change their plans in a hurry if things don't work out for the best. Throwing scenarios into the void.

What if there *was* a Forecasting Operations Department . . . and when they stared into the void once too often, something bad happened? Something so bad that they unintentionally edited themselves

out of existence?

I glance at the TV. It's movie time, and tonight they're running *The Nightmare Before Christmas*: Jack Skellington sings his soliloquy as he stands before the portal he's opened to Christmas Town—

And that's when I realize what's going on.

\* \* \*

It's Christmas Eve, and the stars are Right.

Parents the world over still teach

their children that if they're good, Santa will bring them presents.

There are things out there in the void, hungry things hidden in the gaps between universes, that come when they're called. Tonight, hundreds of millions of innocent children are calling Santa.

Who's *really* coming down your chimney tonight?

\* \* \*

It's distinctly cold in the Duty Officer's room. Which is odd,



because it's not that cold outside: it's windy and raining heavily, but that's London for you. I turn and stare at the aluminium duct-work that runs from floor to ceiling.

*That's the incinerator shaft, isn't it?* It's coated in beads of condensation. I reach a hand towards it, then pull my fingers back in a hurry. Cold air is spilling off the pipe in chilly waves, and as I glance at the floor I see a thin mist. I left a nearly empty cup of tea on the desk when I went on my

nocturnal ramble: now I pick it up and throw the contents at the chimney. The drops of ice crackle as they hit the floor, and my ward is suddenly a burning-hot weight at the base of my throat.

I'm on my feet and over the other side of the desk before I have time to think. There's an anomalously cold chimney in my office. Cold enough that the air is condensing on it. Cold enough that it sucks the heat out of a cup of tepid tea in milliseconds. But what does it

*mean?* (Aside from: I'm in big trouble. That's a given, of course.)

What it means is . . . there's an incursion. Something's coming down the chimney, something from the dark anthropic zone—from a corner of the multiverse drained of all meaning and energy. Let's steal a facetious phrase from Andy and call it the Filler of Stockings: Lurker in Fireplaces, Bringer of Gifts. (Odin, Jòlnir, the King in Red. Pick your culture: prepare to die.) All it knows is that it's *cold*

and it's *hungry*—and it wants inside.

These things gain energy from belief. This office, this organization—we're its first target because we know it's kind of old. If it can get a toehold anywhere, it'll be here, but I haven't seen it yet, so I don't have to believe—*damn* Kringle for coming and talking to us! If I can keep it out of the New Annexe until dawn it'll be too late for the Bringer of Gifts to claw its way through the wall between the

worlds, for this year at least. But if it's already in the incinerator chimney—

I pull the chair out from under the door handle, grab my torch, and head out in a hurry.

\* \* \*

Nighttime hijinks and explorations in the office take on a whole different significance when you know that it's eighteen minutes to midnight and—by tradition—that's when something hungry and

unspeakably alien is going to break out of the incinerator in the basement, expecting to find a stocking and some midnight snacks to appease its voracious appetite.

Here's the flip side of millions of sleeping believers-in-Santa providing an opening for something horrible to enter our cosmos: *they expect him to go away again after he leaves the toys.* The summoning comes with an implicit ritual of banishment. But you've got to get the ritual *right*. If you don't, if you

break your side of the bargain, the other party to the summoning is free to do whatever it wills.

Seventeen minutes to midnight. I'm in the admin pool again, and there's the stationery cupboard. It's locked, of course, and I spend a precious minute fumbling with the bunch of keys before I find one that fits. Inside the cupboard I find what I'm looking for: a box of pushpins. I move on, not bothering to lock it behind me—if I succeed, there'll be time to tidy up later.

I bypass Mahogany Row and the sleeping ghosts of management to come, and head for the canteen.

Maxine and her friends put some effort into preparing it for the party, and if I'm lucky—

Yup, I'm in luck. Nobody's taken the decorations down yet. I turn the lights on, hunting around until I see it: a red-and-white stripy stocking stuffed with small cardboard boxes hangs from the corkboard by the dumb waiter. I grab it and dig the boxes out, nearly laddering it in my



haste. The canteen's bare, but the kitchen is next door, and I fumble for the key again, swearing under my breath (why aren't these things clearly labeled?) until I get the door unlocked. The fridge is still humming. I get it open and find what I was hoping for—a tray of leftovers, still covered in cling-film.

*Ten minutes.* I run for the staircase, clutching stocking, pin box, and the tray of stale mince pies. In my pockets: conductive

marker pen, iPhone loaded with the latest Laundry countermeasures package, and a few basic essentials for the jobbing computational demonologist. I'm still in time as I leg it down two stories. And then I'm at the basement doors. I pause briefly to review my plan.

*Item:* Get to the incinerator room without being stopped (optionally: eaten) by the night watch.

*Item:* Get the stocking pinned up above the incinerator, and place the pies nearby.

*Item:* Draw the best containment grid I can manage around the whole mess, and hope to hell that it holds.

What could possibly go wrong? I plant my tray on the floor, pull out my key ring, and unlock the door to the basement.

\* \* \*

It's funny how many of the pivotal events of my life take place underground. From the cellar of a secret Nazi redoubt to a crypt in the largest necropolis in Europe, via

the scuppers of an ocean-going spy ship: seen 'em all, got the tour shirt. I've even visited the basement of the New Annexe a time or two. But it's different at night, with the cold immanence of an approaching dead god clutching at your heart strings.

I walk down a dim, low-ceilinged passage lined with pipes and cable bearers, past doors and utility cupboards and a disturbingly coffinlike ready room where the night staff wait impassively for intruders. No stir of undead limbs

rises to stop me—my warrant card sees to that. Forget ghostly illumination and handheld torches—I'm not stupid, I switched on the lights before I came down here. Nevertheless, it's creepy. I'm not certain where the document incinerator lives, so I'm checking door plaques when I feel a cold draft of air on my hand. Glancing up, I see a frost-rimed duct, so I follow it until it vanishes into the wall beside a door with a wired-glass window which is glowing

cheerily with light from within.

Looks like I've got company.

I'm about to put my tray down and fumble with the key ring when my unseen companion saves me the effort and opens the door. So I raise the tray before me, take a step forward, and say, "just who the hell *are* you really?"

"Come in, Mr. Howard. I've been expecting you."

The thing that calls itself Dr. Kringle takes a step backwards into the incinerator room, beckoning. I

stifle a snort of irritation. He's taken the time to change into a cowed robe that hides his face completely—only one skeletal hand projects from a sleeve, and I can tell at a glance that it's got the wrong number of joints. I lick my lips. “You can cut the Dickensian crap, Kringle—I'm not buying it.”

“But *I* am the ghost of Christmases probably yet to come!” *Ooh, touchy!*

“Yeah, and I'm the tooth fairy. Listen, I've got a stocking to put up,

and not much time. You're the precognitive, so you tell me: is this where you try to eat my soul or try to recruit me to your cult or something and we have to fight, or are you just going to stay out of my way and let me do my job?"

"Oh, do what you will; it won't change the eventual outcome."

Kringle crosses his arms affrontedly. At least, I *think* they're arms—they're skinny, and there are too many elbows, and now I notice them I realize he's got two pairs.



The incinerator is a big electric furnace, with a hopper feeding into it beside a hanging rack of sacks that normally hold the confidential document shreds. I park the pie tray on top of the furnace (which is already cold enough that I risk frostbite if I touch it with bare skin) and hang the empty stocking from one of the hooks on the rack.

Ghastly hunger beyond human comprehension is the besetting vice of extradimensional horrors—if they prioritized better they might

actually be more successful. In my experience you can pretty much bet that if J. Random Horror has just emerged after being imprisoned in an icy void for uncountable millennia, it'll be feeling snackish. Hence the tempting tray of comestibles.

I glance at my watch: it's four minutes to midnight. Then I eyeball the furnace control panel. Kringle is standing beside it. "So what's the story?" I ask him.

"You already know most of it.

Otherwise you wouldn't be here.” He sounds bored, as well he might. “Why don't you tell me, while we wait?”

“Alright.” I point at him. “*You're* here because you're trapped in a time paradox. Once upon a time the Laundry had a Forecasting Ops department. But when you play chess with the future, you risk checkmate—not to mention being assimilated by that which you study. The first thing Forecasting Ops ever forecast was the probability of its

own catastrophic capture by  
—*something*. So it was disbanded.  
But you can't disband something  
like that without leaving echoes, can  
you? So you're just an echo of a  
future that never happened.”

The spectral shade in its ragged  
robe bobs its head—or whatever it  
has in place of a head.

“The Christmas incursion—” I  
glance at the cold furnace again,  
then at my watch “—would have  
killed you. But without Forecasting  
Ops to warn us about it, it'd happen

anyway, wouldn't it?" *Three minutes.* "So you had to maneuver someone into position to deal with it *even though you don't exist.*"

I remember sitting through a bizarre and interminable lecture at the Christmas party. But *who else* remembers sitting through it? Andy doesn't remember Kringle's talk. And I bet that aside from my own memories, and a weirdly smudged photocopy—emergent outcome of some distorted electron orbitals on a samarium-coated cylinder—

there's no evidence that the ghost of Christmases rendered-fictional-by-temporal-paradox ever visited the Laundry on a wet and miserable night.

So much for the emergency phone book. . . .

*Two minutes.* “How far into the future can you see right now?” I ask Kringle. I take a step forward, away from the furnace hopper. “Move aside,” I add.

Kringle doesn't shift. “The future is here,” he says in a tone of such

hollow, despairing dread that it lifts the hair on the back of my neck.

There's a booming, banging sound inside the furnace. I squint: something writhes inside the tiny, smoke-dimmed inspection window. My watch is slow! There's no time left. I step close to the control panel and, bending down, hastily scrawl a circle on the floor around my feet.

“Wait, where did the pies come from?” Kringle asks.

I complete the circuit. “The kitchen. Does it matter?”

“But you’re doomed!” He sounds puzzled.

Something is coming down the chimney, but it’s not dressed in fur from its head to its feet, and it doesn’t have twinkling eyes and dimpled cheeks.

“Nope,” I insist. I point at the bait: “And I intend to prove it.”

“But it ate you!” Kringle says indignantly. “Then we all died. I came to warn you, but did you listen? *Nooo—*”

The trouble with prophecies of



your own demise is that, like risk assessments, if you pay too much attention to them they can become self-fulfilling. So I ignore the turbulent time-ghost and stare as the fat, greenish tip of one pseudopod emerges and, twitching, quests blindly towards the frozen pies on top of the furnace.

I stare for what feels like hours, but in reality is only a couple of seconds. Then, in a flashing moment, the tentacle lashes out and simultaneously engulfs all the pies,

sucker-like mouths sprouting from its integument to snap closed around them.

The Filler of Stockings is clearly no exception to the hunger rule. Having fed, its questing tentacle slows, perhaps hampered by the bulges along its length: it lazily curls over towards the gaping, ice-rimed mouth of the stocking. Waves of coldness roll from it. As I draw breath it feels like I'm inhaling razor blades. The temperature in the room is dropping by double-digit

degrees per second.

“*What?*” says Kringle. He sounds surprised: clearly this isn’t the future he signed up for back in time ghost central casting. “*Who* ate all the pies?”

I twist the handle of the main circuit breaker to the LIVE position, and stab at the green ON button with rapidly numbing fingers. “There were quite a lot left over,” I tell him helpfully, “after you spoiled everyone’s appetite with that speech.”

“No, that can't be—”

There comes a deep hum and a rattle of ventilators, and the incinerator powers up. There follows a sizzling flash and a howling whoop of pain and fury as the Filler of Stockings, thwarted, tries to disentangle its appendage from the gas jets. To a many-angled one, we impoverished entities who are stranded in three-plus-one dimensions are fairly harmless; nevertheless, even the inhabitants of flatland can inflict a nasty paper cut

upon the unwary on occasion.

My ward is alight, blazing like a flash bulb as it sears the skin on my chest: the tentacle sticking out of the furnace hopper combusts with a flash of fire and a horrible stench of burning calamari. Simultaneously, the shade of Dr. Kringle swirls and spirals from view, curling into the hopper even as a nacreous glow shines from inside, half-glimpsed things looping and writhing like colored worms within. The howling fades into a flatulent sigh, leaving a

faint ringing in my ears, as of distant church bells. I take a deep breath as my ward dims, trying to get my terror-driven pulse back down to normal.

There's something on the floor. I squint and bend forward, puzzled. And after a moment I see that the Filler of Stockings has left me a coal.



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