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The Christmas Party

The boy was twelve. They were all going to a Christmas party at his father's office. "No way," said the boy, trying it out. "I'm staying home." As far as he was concerned, Christmas parties belonged with training wheels and *My Weekly Reader*; he had put all that behind him.

"You most certainly are not," said his mother. She was ironing his Christmas shirt, an odious item with fake red and green suspenders embroidered right into the shirt front. He had been given it the year before and was dismayed to find that he had not outgrown it. "How would you like it if your father didn't come to PTA night?" she asked him, nuzzling her iron against a suspender. She was wearing a shiny blouse and high heels and her slip; her face was polished with various colors, and she was humming. She always put her skirt on last. The boy worried that sometime she would forget it entirely, and take off her coat in some department store where the clerks would giggle and call the police.

"We never went to any before," he said.

"That was the branch office, before," she told him. "This is headquarters. Your father wants to show off his beautiful family."

"Why?" said the boy, secretly weakening at the fine sound of "headquarters."

His father came into the kitchen then, tightening a bright red tie around his neck. "Because a beautiful family helps a guy get ahead," he said. "Hey, fella, don't you want to come along and check out what your dad does all day? See what it'll be like when you grow up and start playing on the old nine-to-five team?"

Although he could not admit it, the boy was interested in this. He had never seen where his father worked. Around the house his father rewired a lamp now and then, and once he had built some porch steps. The boy knew his real work had nothing to do with things like that, but he could not imagine what it was. Well, he would go; probably they would have made him go anyway. To preserve his honor he warned them, "I'm not talking to any stupid Santa Claus."

"I sure am," said his father, "and I know just exactly what I'm gonna ask him for." This seemed to be a joke, since his mother smiled. She handed him the Christmas shirt, so stiff with starch that it could have stood alone on the kitchen table. There was

a joke to be made about that, something about how the shirt could go to the party all by itself, it didn't need him in it, something like that. It was an adult joke and he could not quite manage it. The television on the counter roared out some Carly Simon song the girls in his class were always singing, as a sports car went skidding over a mountain road. His father grabbed his mother around the waist and they began to dance around the ironing board. The boy watched, torn between annoyance at the fox trot or whatever it was, and deep, amazed pleasure at their extraordinary mood.

"Put on your green pants," said his mother over her shoulder, "and your green-plaid tie."

It was raining as they drove into the city. His two little sisters, dressed in matching red pinafores, crouched on the seat next to him and pulled red bows out of each other's hair. His father at the wheel was talking fast to his mother, trying to make her understand something. "I mean I've positioned myself," said his father. "I've got all the credentials." The words were too slippery; the boy lost hold of them and watched the raindrops spring up over and over in the wake of the windshield wipers. ". . . if you play your cards right," he heard after a while. It wasn't a real card game he was talking about; the boy knew that much. His mother leaned over the back seat and retied the bows in his sisters' straight flat hair. "How are you gonna help Daddy get ahead if you look like that," she said, trying to pin them under the car blanket. The boy saw that under their cocktail-party cheer his parents were nervous.

"Sit still, creeps," he said to his sisters, reaching for his low notes; to his surprise they did. He licked a finger and smoothed the hair on either side of their parts, then did the same on his own head. Were they a beautiful family? He tried to feel grown-up nervousness, although he could not guess what there was to worry about.

The lobby of his father's building was huge, with no place to sit down. A strobe light flashed on a Christmas tree made of pink polyester snowflakes. His father raced them up to a security guard, a black man with one earring and the name "Fred" stitched in script onto his shirt. "Hey, Fred," his father said, "here's my gang." He put one hand on the back of the boy's head and the other on his mother's waist, and with the two little girls in front like bumpers they moved toward the elevators. "Merry Christmas to your family, Fred! Wife's got another one on the way, am I right?" Fred the guard sat quietly under the pink beat of the strobe light. "That's right, sir," he said.

The elevator was crowded and stank of cologne and wet wool; gusts of Christmas music blew in as the door opened at several floors. The boy watched a muscle flicker in his father's cheek. At the nineteenth floor they got out.

They were in a vast space, bigger than the A & P, filled with hard, beige light and smelling faintly of magic marker. Desks and cabinets surrounded by low plastic walls wandered away across the floor in patterns like the letters on a Scrabble board.

"Blue work-station is first level," said his father, slapping an L-shaped blue wall. "Green is second-level," he continued as they passed a slightly higher green wall. "Color-coded cubicles. That way nobody can forget what level they're at." The boy walked fast to keep up, to make sure his father knew he was listening.

The place was filled with people. There were men, smooth-chinned, light-eyed men like his father, wearing red corduroy vests and smiling with all their teeth. There were women in suits with little Christmas balls hanging from hooks in their earlobes; and there were children, screaming and giggling and racing around the cubicle walls. He was, sure enough, the tallest child there, with the exception of one who towered a full head and skinny neck above the green walls; but she was a girl. He should have made them let him stay home. He felt hot with irritation and began to take off his jacket but then remembered the suspenders.

"This is Dede's cubicle," said his father.

"Dede is your father's secretary, you all know that," said his mother. "Say hello to Dede."

Dede had tremendous black hair and golden fingernails. Her cubicle looked like the cockpit of a jet plane. There was a large computer screen, a lighted console, and a typewriter the size of a small raft. On the wall above the screen were several snapshots of people holding beer cans in a motorboat, and a sign that said "ADESTE FIDELES MEANS REMEMBER THE NEEDY." His mother gave Dede a kiss.

The boy glanced away, embarrassed. A chewed-looking, silver garland had been draped along the tops of the cubicle walls, and there were little plastic Santa Claus hats and baby angels set here and there on file cabinets. They were like the Christmas decorations in a first-grade classroom, he thought; no, worse, in the Woolworth's where his mother bought stocking fillers. On Dede's desk a green cake lay like a wide foam rubber cushion between the typewriter and the terminal, with the words "MERRY XMAS SYSTEMS" staggering across the top in red icing. Dede was cutting the cake. His mother began to turn it after each cut so that Dede could go around the edges, leaving the words till the end. His mother's face was frozen with helpfulness. His sisters were carrying slices of cake on paper napkins to people nearby. Dede licked her fingers after each cut.

With his sisters suddenly so cute and his father nowhere in sight the boy felt bored and awkward. It was childish to be hungry for such a silly cake, he decided, and slid along a blue wall until he found himself back at the bank of elevators. Two little boys in navy blazers with brass buttons were holding a toddler in a ruffled smock between a pair of closing elevator doors. The child began to cry and they ran away, punching each other. The elevator doors strained together, pinning the child, whose screams were drowned by the party noise. The boy went to pull her out and held her clumsily till she stopped crying. She had curly hair that smelled like toast. Her right thumb was

red and wet and wrinkled.

His father was behind him then. "Hey, son, I want you to meet some people," he said. "Why don't you put down your pal and come on over." The boy could not remember ever hearing his father say "son" or "pal" or seeing his cheek muscle wink in that way. He put the baby down and followed his father toward a group of people, abashed at whatever was so busy between them all, at being there, at his fresh haircut. He buttoned his jacket.

"Ed Stemmler," said his father. "Timmy Williston. Peyton Farr. My boy."

The boy held out his hand and they each shook it as his father pronounced their names. He registered them only dimly—Ed Stemmler a thick palm and a dimpled chin, Timmy Williston a little man in white shoes, Peyton Farr a woman, with knuckles so large he could not imagine how she got her rings on. He realized they were talking to him.

"So how do you like Ward Nineteen, kid?" said the little man. They all laughed.

"What grade are you in?" asked the man called Stemmler in a clipped, matter-of-fact way, as though he and the boy were doing business.

"Seventh," said the boy.

"Favorite subject?"

"Science," he answered, and the man nodded.

"Sure," he said, "and I'll bet you're miles ahead of the other bimbos in the class, aren't you?"

The boy felt his face grow warm. "You never told me," said the woman with the strange name to his father, "what a handsome young man you had at home."

"Uh-oh, watch out," said the little man. "There goes Farr chasing younger men."

The boy flushed again and looked away from her face. Her arms were tan with little blonde hairs, and her yellow blouse had very short sleeves which fell in soft folds along her smooth, freckled skin. She smelled violently of perfume. "I'll bet you need something to eat," she said.

"Hey, tell you what," said Ed Stemmler. "You come to me in three or four years and I'll give you a summer job you can't turn down. A real job. I'm not talking play money. Your dad can't do it, we call that nepotism. But I can. Give you a leg up in this business. When you graduate college you'll beat all those fancy-schmancy MBA's hands down."

"Yes, sir," said the boy, overwhelmed. He turned to make sure his father had heard.

"Want some food, like the lady said?" his father asked.

The boy wanted to show Ed Stemmler how far he was from being a bimbo or an MBA, whatever they were. "No, thanks," he said. "I'd just like to see your office."

"Office?" said Ed Stemmler. "Your dad's been telling you he's got an office here? Heck, we've got the old man on floor-washing duty."

"Ed here, we keep him around to go for coffee," said his father, his face tense. The boy tensed too, with effort; this was his chance to understand once and for all how grownups joked.

"Your boy though," said Ed Stemmler, "seriously now, there's some good corporate material. I know it when I see it." He put his big hand on the back of Timmy Williston's neck as the boy's father had done on his neck, in the lobby. "Come on, Williston," said Ed Stemmler, "let's go stuff our face."

The boy watched them move away, Stemmler's hand resting on the little man's neck as though on a gearshift, his digital watch wide with blinking panels. In four months at his new school the boy's teachers had not appreciated him the way this man had in ten minutes. "Nice guy," he said to his father, trying for the tone of tough casualness his father liked.

"Oh, Ed, listen, Ed's the best," said his father. "We have a good time. Ed's one great guy."

They went to this father's office, through one of the doors that opened off the side of the great room. For a moment the boy was silently disappointed. There was only a wide desk with nothing but a telephone on it, a cabinet, and two chairs facing the desk as in a doctor's office. Dede's cubicle had been a lot better. He wondered where all the papers were, all the memorandums and documents and contracts or whatever it was. There was no window. On the wall there was a tremendous framed picture of two huge purple circles rolling down the sides of a huge green pyramid, and on the cabinet stood a framed picture of the family taken when the boy was ten.

His father unlocked his desk and took out a ball-point pen. Then he opened the cabinet, and the boy saw what seemed to be dozens of blue, plastic photograph albums. "Binders," said his father. "That right there is the whole system. The whole thing. Lose those binders, the joint falls apart." The boy stared at them. "The whole system," said his father again, running his pen along the backs of the albums.

"I guess you use 'em a lot, huh," said the boy carefully, trying not to ruin his father's exceptional mood by asking a direct question. He wanted to hear his father talk.

"Use 'em," said his father, flinging the cabinet doors shut with a force the boy had never seen him use at home, "I know those things backwards and forwards. Somebody in the company wants a particular input code, this is where they come. I can put my finger on it in two seconds. Then you've got your updates. You've got your system checks. You've got your cutover modes. What we do, we monitor." The boy strained to understand. "Control function," his father added. "See what I mean?"

The boy began to see. The picture was vague in his mind but gradually became more definite, a picture of his father at work, sitting with half a dozen binders open on his desk, the phone in one hand and a stop watch in the other, talking to someone

in a branch office across the country, someone begging for an input code. Ed Stemmler was there, leaning over his father's shoulder, pointing silently to a number or something in one of the binders. Dede was there too, turning pages with the golden tips of her fingernails. There were other people in corners, whispering together and studying diagrams. Time was running out. A tremendous project was on the line. The boy could not see the project, but he could feel how important it was. The whole joint could fall apart but would not. The team was pitching in and his father was in charge. "Yeah, I see," said the boy.

Now he wanted his father not to say any more. He held the image in his mind perfectly still, as though he had pushed the pause button on a video machine, and in a spasm of happiness ran around and sat at his father's desk. He picked up the phone receiver and punched some buttons. Leaning back and putting his feet on the desk, he said into the receiver, "Dede, get me seven hundred binders by tomorrow."

"Cut that out, now," said his father, smiling, irritated. "Listen, somebody's coming. Get away from there."

Timmy Williston was in the doorway. "Henway's here," he said.

The boy got up hastily and stood by his father. The muscle danced in his father's cheek. "Is that right," said his father.

"Think he's got a Christmas present for somebody, or what," said Timmy. The boy could not tell if it was a question.

"I think," said his father, "it's a very nice gesture. In fact, maybe I oughta go say Merry Christmas to Henway. You stay here a minute with Uncle Timmy," he said to the boy, tightening his tie as he left.

"You know who, or should I say whom, Henway is, right?" said Timmy Williston.

"My dad's boss," answered the boy, although he could not find a place for Henway in the nerve-center control room.

"Everybody here's boss, kid," said the man. He walked around behind the desk. "Mr. Henway is a very fine man, but he never comes to the Christmas party."

"He's here though," said the boy.

"Exactly," said Timmy Williston, sitting down in his father's chair and opening the top desk drawer, "which is why there's visions of sugarplums dancing in everybody's head, if you catch my meaning." He put his thumb delicately against a stack of papers in the drawer and riffled through them. "Your dad, he is one hell of a guy," he said. "Organized or what? Everything neat as a pin." He closed the top drawer and pulled open a file drawer at the side. "Your dad talk much about Henway, around home?" he asked.

"No, sir," said the boy. If he told the man to leave his father's things alone he would only get laughed at, he knew. But Timmy Williston was scrawny, and hardly taller than the boy; his pasty skin looked as though it could be crumpled like paper. "Don't

you go near those binders," thought the boy darkly. But Williston was still. After a moment the boy said, aloud, "I better go meet Henway."

"Mister Henway to you," said Williston, smiling. "Sure, come on. I'll introduce you."

Outside the office the party was noisier than before. He saw his mother across the room next to an artificial Christmas tree, beckoning to him as though she needed to tell him a secret. There was no secret, he knew; she could look like that when she wanted to comb his hair. He looked away; he had had an offer from Ed Stemmler and a private talk with his father, and he felt free to ignore her. He glided in the opposite direction from Timmy Williston and picked up a piece of cake lying on a napkin, then went toward a group of men near the desk where the punch was being served.

One of the men wore a dark, blue suit and nothing red or green. Even his necktie was dark, with thin silver stripes. He stood slouching a little, smiling into his cup of punch. His face was nearly expressionless, and it occurred to the boy that this was Henway. The boy's father was talking to him, talking hard, and he was nodding a little.

The boy stopped, uncertain whether to go up to them. Next to Henway's stillness the boy's father appeared slightly drunk. Someone else started to talk, interrupting his father; Henway continued to nod with his eyes nearly shut. His father put a hand briefly at his belt buckle as though to hitch up his pants, and looked around the room.

The boy looked around too. The shape of the party seemed to be changing, gathering towards the punch desk, as though Henway's nodding head were gradually tightening a string that connected them all. Ed Stemmler appeared from somewhere and joined the group of men. The boy's father threw an arm around Ed Stemmler's shoulder.

They were all drinking punch. The boy wanted urgently to be among them, and especially to get closer to Henway. The man's long beige face did not have a handsome chin like Ed Stemmler's or a shadow where he shaved like his father's, but the hardness in it scared and attracted the boy.

He waited, concentrating on trying to make his father look at him. He could almost feel the room getting smaller. His mother, by the Christmas tree, was clapping her hands like a kindergarten teacher and shouting "Everybody come open their presents under the tree! One here for everybody!" The two little boys in blue blazers were racing from cubicle to cubicle, waving toy pistols and screaming "Zap, zap." Then Timmy Williston said very loudly, "Ho, ho, ho, and here's Santa himself, a personal appearance, to what do we owe the honor," and the room grew suddenly, totally quiet, and everyone looked for the first time directly at Henway.

"Well, I'm happy to be here," said Henway, "and I'd like to take this opportunity to make a li'l toas." The boy wondered if this was a new kind of joke, if he was

making fun of someone with his soft, shy drawl; but no one laughed, and Henway went on, "Now this isn't gonna be official for a few days, so don't you all get so good and full of the Chris'mas spirit you go spreadin' it around, I mean I don't wanna hear it on the ten o'clock news tonight." He stopped and took a quick sip of punch. "But thought you all might like to know that come January One you won't have Ed Stemmler to kick around any more. Ed here's bein' promoted to Assistant Vice President for Systems Management. So cheers, Ed, you're a fifth-level big shot now. Merry Chris'mas, everybody." He raised his punch cup and drained it.

A thrill went through the boy. He felt as though it was his triumph too—Ed Stemmler was, after all, his future patron and his father's best friend. He sought his father's eye and gave him a thumbs-up sign.

His father's stare was blank; he must not have seen. He seemed to be holding his breath. There was applause in the room; the boy saw Peyton Farr put two fingers in her mouth and whistle. Ed Stemmler was holding a lit cigarette and talking to Henway. The two men giggled a little and Ed Stemmler's cigarette ash fell, a little gray worm on the carpet. People began to mill around Stemmler and shake his hand. Timmy Williston stepped carefully across the ash worm and stood with his right hand dangling at his side, waiting for a handshake.

On an impulse the boy went over and shook Ed Stemmler's hand himself, sidling in front of Timmy Williston. Stemmler gave him a quick firm shake, a single downbeat, dragging on his cigarette with his left hand at the same time. Proud of himself, the boy moved away and found his father. "One great guy is right, huh, Dad," he whispered.

"What?" His father was breathing as though he had been running. He looked down and seemed finally to see the boy. Then he called over to Timmy Williston, who still had not gotten his handshake. "Hey, Williston, what do you think? What do you think of my boy here?" He put a heavy hand on the boy's shoulder as Williston approached and the boy braced himself for praise. "My boy here," continued his father, "comes to the corporate headquarters of his father's company, and what do I find him? I find him playing with baby girl."

"No kidding," said Williston.

"Think he's a fairy, or what," his father said. His fingers tightened briefly on the boy's shoulder and then released it. "Let's get out of here, for Christ's sake," he said, and walked away toward the Christmas tree.

The boy stood still. For a moment he felt numb, pinned by Timmy Williston's stare. Then in a spasm of shock and pain he protested, "It's not true—" but stopped when he saw Williston's eyes wandering. He went after his father.

Both his parents were by the Christmas tree watching his sisters tear silver paper off presents. His mother shoved something into his hands. It was a tiny battery-run

Pac-Man game. "Take it or somebody else will," she ordered him. The red color in her face was in the wrong places now. He thought she might be crying. Behind her Ed Stemmler was handing silver-wrapped parcels to the two little boys in blazers. His father was jerking his sisters' arms into their coatsleeves. "Shouldn't we stay a little—" his mother began, but his father cut her short.

"Should nothing," said his father. "I don't owe these bastards the time of day. Not after this I don't. Make these kids get a move on, will you? Him, too," he finished, gesturing at the boy; and then he turned and went in the direction of the elevators.

They followed him, the boy going last, light-headed with confusion and shame. It seemed to him as they stood in the elevator that his father would turn any minute and call him "son" again and give him a thumbs-up sign, and then what his father had said about him would not have been said. But his father did not turn, and he remembered, mortified, how he had held the little girl and stroked her hair, how he had enjoyed comforting her. His hand on the child's head had been thin and white. "Dad," he said before he could stop himself.

"Shh," said his mother. "Don't talk to your father."

Riding home in the car, the boy watched his father's rigid face across the front seat. He thought of the moment he had felt himself welcome in his father's office, when he had fooled around with the telephone and his father had smiled. He tried to understand what had happened between then and now, what unspoken disgrace connected Henway's soft voice and his father's blank, breathless stare and the baby girl. It was the same as with a grown-up joke; he thought he did understand, but he could not say it.

He should have left that baby in the elevator. She wouldn't have died. Elevators didn't kill people. He should have hung around Ed Stemmler more and tried a couple of passes, somehow, at Peyton Farr. He should have had punch like an adult instead of cake like a child; he should have told off Timmy Williston. He should have gone right up and talked to Henway.

He groped for what he could say that his mother would not intercept. "Dad," he said, his eyes on the rain-streaked window, "could you bring me some binders home?"

For a moment his father did not respond. "Binders?" he said finally.

"Not that you're using," said the boy. "Just extra ones, maybe like with old stuff in them. Old input codes."

"Oh," said his father. "Well. Sure." There was silence, and then his father spoke again. "Seven hundred binders by tomorrow morning."

It was raining harder. Passing cars threw up raindrops like gravel against the windows. The boy pulled the car blanket very carefully over his sisters. They had gone to sleep.