

Maybe you were right

Festive Flash Fiction

By

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The crew had drawn straws and Martine had lost. I hadn't bothered, I was happy to stay and let someone else go.

It wasn't as if I had anyone special to go home for and I honestly couldn't be bothered with Christmas, all the commercialism and repeat movies, it was for families and kids. The rest of the crew were on their way back to Earth for the holidays, I was the one who was stopping in orbit to watch the show with the reluctant loser.

I hadn't been lucky with that, or so I thought. It was typical; Martine was the one person that I had hoped was going home; she was the one who was stopping. I reckoned that the psychological profilers had slipped up with her when they had selected the crew. If I could have chosen someone else to share the fortnight with before the new crew arrived, it wouldn't have been her. She was the awkward one.

Still, we had to make the best of it.

"Why did you offer to stay?" she asked me, as we watched the shuttle depart. "Don't you have any family on Earth?"

A lot of us were unattached, the agency preferred it that way, there was less potential for problems as far as they were concerned.

"No," I said. "And before you ask, I'm not bothered with all the festive stuff. But that doesn't mean that I'm going to enjoy being up here..."

"...With me?" she finished. "I know we don't really get on but I don't want to have a lousy fortnight with you and a load of 'bah humbug' bitching."

She smiled, she had a nice smile; it was a pity that it hadn't been on show more.

“Truce?” I said.

She smiled again. “I hope so. Let's have a happy Christmas.”

We were in low orbit and passed the whole northern hemisphere twice a day. As there were only two of us we had plenty of work to keep us busy. And as the time had passed we started to get on much better. She opened up, she was very upset to be here, and not because of me. She told me that she loved Christmas and all the festive activities with her family. Her enthusiasm got through to me and I even started to see why people celebrated. I dropped my Scrooge persona for her sake; it was bad enough that she was here without me making it worse.

We had agreed to stop work on Christmas Eve and relax for forty-eight hours, apart from the essential safety stuff. The agency had supplied us with vacuum packed festive treats, but to be honest liquidised mince pies weren't exactly enticing. But as we couldn't have crumbs floating around in the cabin everything was made to be eaten through a straw.

As the day drew to a close we chilled and watched the night creep across Europe, we could see the snow clad peaks of the Alps, the sky was cloudless and the twinkling lights of the cities made a living map.

“We're in a perfect position to watch,” Martine said as we sipped our non-alcoholic festive drinks, at least that was what it said on the pouch. It tasted like spiced apple juice to me. We were strapped in to stop us bumping around; even lifting the drink to our lips was enough to change our centre of gravity and move us around the cabin.

“To watch what?” Over the last few days I had got to know her better, she wasn't really awkward, just quiet and intense and I had to admit the profilers had got it right after all; it

was me that had been out of step. I had learned to get on with her and was glad that she had stayed. Her reply still surprised me though.

“To see Santa on his sleigh; we have a perfect view.”

I thought that she was joking. “We could film it; record it,” she carried on. “Prove it once and for all.” Surely she was a bit old for all that?

“It would all be a bit of a blur,” I said, joining into her train of thought. “He would have to move really fast; all those houses in one night.”

“My nieces would love it though,” her eyes shone. “They still believe. I think I still want to, because of them.”

“I think we all want to believe,” I said. “It’s better than the real world with all its cynicism.”

Had I really just said that? It showed how much being with her had changed me.

There was a rattle from the hull, we had grown used to the occasional piece of dust or whatever bouncing off us, relative motion meant that it was unlikely to do us any serious harm but this sounded like a lot more than usual.

Martine looked at me and raised an eyebrow. “A few bigger pieces, perhaps we should swing the cameras around and have a look.”

“Perhaps it’s reindeer,” I said. She leaned across and punched me on the arm.

“Don’t mock,” she advised; a flash of the old Martine. “Just when I thought you were going all mellow.”

The station suddenly rocked violently from side to side, Martine screamed, or perhaps it was me. All the loose objects bobbed around, creating a blizzard of motion, it was like being in a snow globe that had been rapidly shaken.

“What was that?” I shouted over the wailing alarms.

“There,” she pointed through the port, heading away from us towards the centre of a sleeping Europe was a dark shape. It must have been moving fast, it was already glowing in multiple colours from the heat of re-entry, green and red and gold as it hit the top of the atmosphere.

We both unstrapped and floated around the cabin, cancelling alarms, catching and stowing all the floating objects. As we competed to grab things in the confined space we kept bumping into each other. It turned into a game and we couldn't stop laughing.

The last alarm to cancel was by the airlock, as I pushed the button, silence fell on us, broken only by Martine's breathless giggles. I glanced through the inspection window.

“Did you put them in there?” I said.

Martine floated across to me; she looked through the clear panel at the collection of coloured boxes sitting on the deck.

“Maybe you were right about the reindeer?”