



***Three toasts
for Christmas***

Three high-octane Christmas stories

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Foreword

When I wrote these short stories, my motivation was a competition that ran came to nothing. I heard nothing further about the project; but the stories were by then completed and I loved each of them.

However, as I re-read and remembered anew what connected me to these three stories in my life, I came to believe that my Christmas memories should be published as a collection.

My family life is very unusual, and if I were just writing my biography, everyone would think it was a work of fiction.

In the first short story, a man experiences an unusual night before Christmas. In the second, Aunt Wilma charms us with her prejudices. By the way, such an aunt did exist, although she has already left us. However, I still have loving memories of her, despite her intolerant views. Finally, three sisters and a disturbed relationship with their mother, which is not uncommon, complete my collection.

All the characters are fictional, and all situations are made up, even if some experiences of my life have inspired me to some passages.

I drink very little these days, but in my youth, which is now somewhat distant, I enjoyed whisky very much.

Enjoy my three drinks for Christmas.

Paul Riedel

Just one drink

Let's raise a glass to those dreams

The heavy scent of old wood and several layers of furniture polish over a pub counter were drowned out by the roar of a decadent air conditioner. I looked at my hands and saw dry, cracked skin that had been crying out for attention for a long time.

"What can I get you?" asked a young man behind the counter monotonously and uninterestedly, without directly looking at me. However, there were no other patrons in the bar, so it had to be me he was addressing.

"I need something reassuring to make me forget about Christmas and the mistakes made in life. This holiday rush drives everyone's nerves breaking point." I didn't feel like drinking, but the fuss surrounding the break was giving me the shakes.

The dark blond man moved skilfully behind the bar, inspected the bottles on the beechwood shelf and reached for a single malt. He wore tight jeans and a leather cowl over a T-shirt depicting some rock band. Some swing was playing in the background, which clearly did not please the barman.

"Hard day or a divorce?" He smiled kindly at me; meanwhile the liquid flowed into a superb tumbler with a harmonic sound like syrup from a creamy fountain. It was clear to me that with such an empty bar, the boy had to be professional in his job, and engaging with patrons was part of it. I wasn't particularly looking out for conversation, but it seemed to me that a chat wouldn't hurt.

I smiled back. "Christmas is so depressing, isn't it? And a car breakdown." I pointed to the car park outside.

"Do you need help? I'm happy to..."

"No need. I just wanted a drink, and I'm not driving any further tonight." I am a so-called Christmas grouch, and I

rarely visit friends and relatives at Christmas. I felt sorry for the poor barman and his attempts to entertain me.

"I have to take a bath. I smell like a skunk before mating." I don't like to sweat, so I avoid gyms.

"Wise decision. I like to drink my single malt at room temperature. Eighteen degrees is perfect for consumption. What did you wish for Christmas?"

I was amazed at his question. "I never wish for anything. The disappointment of never getting what you wished for can be more depressing." The words came out of my mouth uncensored, and I blushed slightly.

"Man, you're good at your job. I never talk so much to strangers," I thought, delighted with his conversational skills.

"In moments like this, it always helps to enjoy a drink and think about how life should have gone differently, doesn't it?"

He sat down on a stool on his side of the counter. I saw the worn-out knees of his jeans and elegant boots made of something that looked like leather but certainly wasn't. They were of superior quality and unusual design.

"Certainly. There's not much going on here today," I remarked and looked round as if to remind myself of the emptiness of the bar.

"If you're a bit depressed anyway, this is the right place for you. Does my drink recommendation work?" He pointed to my single malt.

"Oh yes. I thought you always drank it with ice. Thank you. When do you close?" I was looking for a continuation of our conversation and spoke all sentences without a single comma or full stop. I found it pleasant that he refrained from being formal. That's just the way the young people are. Well, as I once was.

"You are my only customer today. Please don't tell anyone that you drink single malt with ice. Some Scotsmen might take this amiss. All the other regulars are with family and