



ABC CLARION

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Namesakes and Birth Dates

by Sydney Peng

The man gazed upon the distant lights of the decadent shopping center. He had been named Claus, a product of his mother's sense of humor. As he waited, the man thought back upon the chain of events that had led him here.

Checking his expensive new watch, he sighed as the traffic jam crawled forward, slowly but surely hauling itself over to the strip mall. Long lines, snow falling, bags under the eyes—it really was Christmas Eve, with Christmas and his birthday quite literally on the horizon. He loved his family, he really did, but his gifts had been getting so extravagant as of late, he'd been so busy that he'd honestly forgotten about the holiday and ended up focusing more on the break, and he hadn't been able to see his relatives in such a long time, that...

How could he top the cruise trip that he'd given his mother and father last year, the iPad and laptop he'd wrapped for his sister, the new console he'd delivered for his nephew? He had been supposed to buy gifts weeks and weeks ago, but every time he clicked on a website or walked by a mall he just shivered. And now what? What could he find in the seedy shops right outside of his old neighborhood that could ever compete with his past presents? They probably didn't even have a jewelry store there, let alone some sleek electronics emporium.

The car behind him honked, and he stabbed the pedal with his foot. He tapped his other foot nervously, watching the clock—the store would close at midnight. One more hour. Sighing, he sat back, stewing in the silence.

Fine. He jabbed at the button for the radio, and the intolerable jingling of Christmas carols assaulted his eardrums.

He tried to listen to the chorus of demon-children and concluded that the song playing was "Santa Claus Is Coming to Town", which had always unnerved him from the ripe old age

of ten.

"Santa's a busy man, he has no time to play; he's got millions of stockings to fill on Christmas day," the voices finally said, ending the torment, and he shut the radio off. He sympathized with old Saint Nick. Too much work, too many papers and files, too many schedules and meetings and time-tables, and then he had to drive three hours down south to his parents, show up with no gifts to show for himself, in the snow. His tie was a rumpled mess, his hair even worse, and oh look, it was eleven-thirty now. No time to buy anything.

He was doing a very bad job of living up to his namesake, and possibly an even worse one with the Son of God whom he shared a birthday with.

At this rate, he wouldn't even

make it to his own celebration in time. The minutes ticked away, and he wanted to... he wasn't sure. Maybe just go to sleep, find himself tucked in bed, then run downstairs to find a present. Or delight in no-school and just fling himself into a snow pile. Catch a cold. Drink hot chocolate. Eat cookies and get sick and throw up and cram more down his gullet because they were just that good.

The homesickness and nostalgia roiled in his stomach, and he had the sudden urge to apologize, apologize for everything, apologize for being a horrible son who'd fled up north to a city the first chance he got and never visited except for once a year and now couldn't even bring gifts or make it on time on that one rare occasion.

Los Reyes

by Nicole Cheng

The man gazed upon the distant lights of the decadent shopping center. He had been named Ray, a product of his mother's sense of humor. As he walked toward the shopping center, the man thought back upon the chain of events that had led him here.

It was Three Kings' Day. The bustle in the shopping center had died down, now that all the stores were closed for the night. The sun had gone down about two hours ago, leaving the glistening street lights and the moon light to guide Ray through the barren roads. Step, by step, he dragged his worn-out black leather combat boots across the snowy road. Each step left a perfect footprint on the untouched layer of snow.

Where were they? Where were the three kings - "reyes", as they would say in Spanish - after whom he was named? El Día de los Reyes was only a couple of days away, and he needed to speak to them. He had never seen the kings in person before, but Ray, being Mexican and growing up with heroic tales about them, valued them immensely. This year, he knew he

was going to see them. A couple of days prior, he had been visited by them in a dream telling him to meet them in the shopping center. He was going to finally meet them.

At the shopping center, everything was closed except for a small pizzeria. He went in and sat down at the corner table, facing the storefront window - hot pepperoni pizza in one hand, and a mug of coffee in the other.

He looked at his pizza. He watched the steam rise and the three large slices of pepperoni swim through the sea of mozzarella. He saw three faces on the pepperoni. He blinked hard and shook his head a little bit. He looked back down at the pepperoni. The faces were not there. He was tired. He was tired and was seeing things. He chugged down his coffee and stared bug-eyed out the window as he waited for his pizza to cool.

On the other side of the shopping center, Ray saw a figure - not that of any of the kings, but one of a woman. She stood there as if she were staring right back at him, but she was too far away to tell. He couldn't quite make out her face

He punched in his parents' number, feeling as hollow as an empty stocking.

"Hello?" his mother said, a little sleepily.

"Mom," he said, tiredly, half-heartedly stepping on the pedal. Whoo. A whole foot. "It's me. Claus. I'm so sorry. I'm... I really wanted to make it... and I couldn't even bring anything because I'm such a terrible son and it's late and I miss all of you and I'm so sorry I couldn't be there on time. Or bring presents. I'm so horrible,

but I was just so scared that... that I couldn't top last year, and now I have nothing to show for it because I'm so stupid..."

"Oh, no, honey, that's fine! We'll wait! And there's no need to top last year, Claus."

His father's tinny voice joined in. "Anyway, son, you can't beat the best Christmas present we've ever received, so don't try."

"Huh?"

"You, dear boy! Oh, look, Maureen, it's twelve! Happy birthday, Claus!"

because the fog and snow were clouding the view. But man, Ray could've sworn that he'd seen that coat before - the long blue pea coat with the double-breasted collar. It was a beautiful coat that sent chills down his spine. He closed his eyes as the sensation rushed through him, and when he opened his eyes again, she was gone.

He looked down, realizing that he had completely forgotten about the pizza. His hunger had strangely subsided. "One, two, three slices of pepperoni," Ray whispered to himself. The more he stared, the more he saw the faces again. "One, two, three," he repeated in his head. The faces became clearer and clearer - the three kings. Ray blinked and took a deep breath, but when he opened his eyes again, they were still there. He cocked his head to his right, for the faces did not move one bit. He looked up again, this time seeing the woman in the blue pea coat outside the shop window. He moved his eyes up along the length of the figure, finally reaching her face.

"Mother," he said under his breath. His mother had passed

away when he was twelve years old, but he did not hesitate to jump from his seat, run outside, and give her the tightest hug he had ever given in his life.

"Ray," she started. Ray looked into her eyes. "Come with me."

Ray nodded, and turned around to get his coat, for he had left it inside the pizzeria. He walked back to his table to see himself there, with his head on his pizza, and the mug shattered on the ground. Confused, he looked around and saw the cashier on the phone frantically saying, "Please, send an ambulance. I think he had a stroke."

The cashier was trying to find a pulse, but he stopped, and said, "Forget it. He's gone." The cashier hung up the phone and sat down with his head to his knees. Ray sat down next to him, still lost for words.

"Ray, it's time to go," his mother said.

"Mother, I don't understand," replied Ray.

"Los Reyes have brought you home."

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