

The Christmas Potluck

Gray clouds blanketed the mid November sky. There was a smell of snow in the air - a perfect day for Marsha and Frank Taylor to decorate their home in preparation for Christmas.

Marsha loves Christmas. When the calendar turns to November, excitement starts to build inside her. She can be caught humming a Christmas tune or two under her breath. Marsha loved Christmas long before she met her husband Frank. She came from a family fraught with tradition. She remembers the feel good vibes of Christmas from childhood. It was Marsha's mission to keep that childhood feeling alive long into her adult years. In order for the feel good spirit of the season to last as long as possible, she starts prepping for Christmas six weeks before the BIG day.

Today was kickoff to the holiday season according to *Marsha Stewart* as Frank likes to call her. Marsha decorates the inside of the house and Frank is responsible for the outside. Marsha was looking forward to the main event later that day - the Marshall Lane Neighbourhood Christmas Potluck. Marsha started it a number of years ago as a way for the

neighbourhood adults to connect as their children grew up and moved away.

"Frank, I can't wait for tonight's annual neighbourhood Christmas potluck to kickoff six weeks of feeling good," sang Marsha as she clasped her hands together.

"I don't want to feel good for that long," balked Frank.

Even if he protested Marsha's ideas, there is one thing that could be said about Frank - whatever Marsha wanted, he agreed to it. Each year Marsha coaxes Frank to the neighbourhood potluck. Part of the reason Frank is less than enthusiastic about attending is *who* he has to see there. Frank is a good man; however, he has a habit of getting entangled in unforeseen circumstances. Some of his entanglements have involved the neighbours. Most neighbours have a pretty sense of good humour about it ... with the exception of Maggie O'Reilly.

Before they head to the potluck today, Frank's job is to finish decorating outside while Marsha puts the finishing touches on her baking.

Marsha looked through the living room window and watched Frank wrestle the giant blow up of Frosty the Snowman. He looked like he was dancing with Marsha's Aunt Bernice. Frank would agree that both were filled with hot air.

With stiff, cold fingers, Frank tapped the last steel peg with his hammer into the firm, cold November ground then looked to the window where Marsha was standing. He gave her a frozen thumbs up. The eaves of their bungalow were trimmed in red and white lights to give the look of candy cane - "pepperminty fresh as you approach the house," is how Marsha described it. "Yes, I'm sure that's the first thing people will think of," expressed Frank.

The three trees at the corner of the house were each decorated in solid colours of red, white and green. A large artificial wreath with a big, red velvet bow from the dollar store adorned the front door. Lighted candy canes lined the front walkway. The finishing touch was a plastic Santa bought years ago on a shopping trip to Calais, Maine when the dollar was good. Santa was strapped with his back to the chimney. Santa looked less like he was going to climb

down the chimney and more like he was being held hostage on the rooftop. From a distance, neighbours couldn't tell how weathered Santa was, but it signalled to passersby that Christmas season was officially underway on Marshall Lane.

Now that Frank's Christmas jobs were done, he could go inside and get warm. As he passed by the hydro meter, he took a quick look to see how fast the silver disc was spinning. He expressed a grunt of disapproval as the silver disc whipped like a spinning top on a table.

Frank ascended the stairs to go inside. As he stepped indoors and before he could get undressed, Marsha met him at the door with a crock pot full of meatballs.

"Frank, run these across the street."

"But Judy and Barry aren't home," protested Frank.

"I know," acknowledged Marsha wearing her Rudolph apron with a blinking red nose, "Judy left the door unlocked. She said we could bring some of the food over early so we don't have so much to carry later. Just set it on the counter and plug it in." She shoved

the warm crock pot into Frank's frozen limbs wrapping the cord around his arm so he wouldn't trip on it.

As Marsha held the door open for Frank to make the trek to the neighbours, she warned, "And for heaven's sake, Frank, don't touch anything. Frank flatly responded, "I'm not a child, Marsha. I don't need to be reminded about touching stuff." Marsha begged to differ.

Frank approached Judy and Barry's side door. There was a sign taped to the door, *Come on in and leave it on the counter*. He lifted the crock pot up to doorknob height with the pot teetering on his knee. He reached for the doorknob, he turned it then pushed on the door with the weight of his shoulder. He was in. It smelled Christmasy good - a delicious mix of cinnamon, butter and brown sugar. Frank had a sudden change of heart about the potluck. His stomach grumbled a little. *If there was one thing about this time of year, food was the highlight* thought Frank. There were pots on the stove and spoons on the counter perfectly lined up like soldiers reporting for duty. Not a dish in the sink. *Of course not* thought Frank. Frank set the crock pot on the counter. He unwrapped the cord from around

his arm then plugged it in. Standing back, he took a good look around observing all the recent renovations Judy and Barry had completed: new countertop, fresh paint, and wallpaper in the dining room. Frank looked down...and new flooring.

"Fudge," cursed Frank. The bit of early November snow that clung to Frank's work boots had transformed itself into a puddle on Judy's floor. He couldn't leave water on the floor.

"There must be a mop around here somewhere," speculated Frank. "Don't touch anything," Marsha's words echoed in his head. Near him was the door to the basement. He opened it to check for a mop. No mop hanging there. He tiptoed across the kitchen and into the dining room making his way into the hallway. He saw a slender door. A-ha a utility closet! He quickly made his way to it and opened it in a hurry. Success! He grabbed the mop hiding in the corner of the closet mopping up wet prints as he made his way back through the dining room. As he mopped, something shiny caught his eye. On the dining room table was a modern day candle carousel. The base was silver plated metal with laser cut images of Joseph leading Mary on a donkey. A

lit tea light would illuminate their figures. The heat from the lit candle would rise making the suspended blades with several attached Christmas stars spin. He was curious. He held the mop handle tight under his armpit like Marsha held her purse. He leaned in to touch the delicate blades when the side door suddenly flew open. Frank jumped back startled. He responded by pointing the mop at the intruder like he was wielding a pitch fork to defend himself. He stood on guard with his left hand holding the shaggy end of the mop pointing toward the door and his right hand supporting the wooden handle. He pulled the mop handle back with force ready for battle.

Regan O'Malley, the local florist, stepped into the kitchen. Frank exhaled. Regan was delivering a bouquet of flowers Judy had ordered for tonight's potluck.

"Sorry to scare you," apologized Regan, "the sign on the door said, come on in and leave it on the counter."

"No problem, j-just dropping something off myself," defended Frank. Regan placed the flowers on

the counter. "Happy Holidays," he said. With a wave, Regan scurried out the door.

Frank waved back at him then turned his attention to his weapon. He had heard the thud of the mop handle against the wall when he reacted to Regan entering the house unexpectedly. Frank slowly turned to inspect the wall behind him. He was speechless. His quick reaction to Regan caused Frank to pull the wooden mop handle back with such force he punctured a hole in Judy's newly wallpapered dining room!

Frank slowly examined the damage with his fingers. His eyes opened wide in disbelief. "Oh no!", exclaimed Frank as he exasperatingly covered his mouth with his hand as reality then panic set in. "What do I do?" mumbled Frank. Judy was a private person. She wouldn't like Frank in her house for the length of time he had already been there. He clearly had overstayed his welcome. He spotted the Ficus tree in the corner of the dining room. As a solution, he grabbed it and placed it in front of the hole. "Nooo," hissed Frank, "Too obvious."

"Glue!" shouted Frank like he was buzzing in on a time sensitive Jeopardy question, "maybe I can fix it

with glue!" He ran into the kitchen and searched Judy's drawers frantically. "I suppose Judy doesn't have any junk drawers," complained Frank. No glue to be found. Frank ran back to the utility closet where he had found the mop. It was a perfect place to find glue. He hurriedly opened the closet door once more. He peeked into baskets and moved items to see past them - still no glue. Then Frank saw his solution staring at him at the bottom of the utility closet. Leaning against the wall was an extra roll of wallpaper from the dining room renovations.

He stared at the wallpaper roll pondering the situation. If he worked quickly he could re-wallpaper just that one section where the hole was before Judy and Barry returned from town. It was Seniors Discount Day so they would likely be delayed encountering line ups at many of the stores.

"Thank God for the elderly," mumbled Frank.

He convinced himself he had time to re-wallpaper that one section. He grabbed the roll, returned to the dining room and he ferociously unrolled the paper on the dining room floor to find a pattern match to the piece he would replace. He then ran to Judy's kitchen

and rounded the corner like a marathon runner heading into the home stretch. He quickly filled the kitchen sink with warm water while he searched for some kitchen utensils to use as make-shift wallpaper tools: a pair of scissors, a small brown plastic scraper that came with a recently purchased pizza stone at Maggie O'Reilly's Pampered Chef party, and a cake edger that made grooves in frosting which would work great to chew at the edges of the old wallpaper during removal. He grabbed Judy's *Peace on Earth* tea towel hanging on the stove handle to help wipe away the excess water and glue that would seep out. Frank set to work quickly chipping away at the edge of the wallpaper and pulling off whatever bits his fingers could grab. The wallpaper came off in itty, bitty strips then big chunks. Oh boy! He was all in now. He stood back and looked at the wall. He cringed. It looked like a grizzly bear took a swipe at the wall. It was messy, but Frank hoped he had removed enough of the old wallpaper so the new strip would stick well. "Good enough," Frank convinced himself. Next he took the cut strip and ran it through the warm water in the kitchen sink. He held the strip up high in the air in front of the kitchen window. As he lowered the wallpaper to

begin folding it accordion style, Monte, Maggie O'Reilly's black cat peered through the kitchen window. The cat turned his head from side to side inspecting Frank inquisitively. Startled, Frank jumped back and dropped the wallpaper. He quickly shut the curtains on Monte. He now knows too much. Monte roamed the neighbourhood daily. *Nosy as Maggie* Frank thought, *she probably sent him out on a mission.* He refolded the dripping wallpaper and carried it back to the scene of the crime. He stepped up onto Judy's hardwood dining room chair and started pasting the cut strip over the now ripped wallpaper working fervently with the small pizza stone scraper. The paper was sticking! He could feel the excitement bubbling up inside him. Down the wall with the scraper, he moved in a crisscross motion working to remove any air bubbles. He used Judy's *Peace on Earth* tea towel to wipe off any excess liquid. He stood back momentarily admiring his finished work with his hands placed on his hips. No time to fuss over it. He did the flight of the bumblebee. He worked quickly to clean his makeshift tools, pulled the plug in the sink, quickly returned his tools to the drawers and wiped any excess water off the counter. He heard a car door slam. Frank

froze. He opened the curtains over the sink. He looked down at Judy's crumpled *Peace on Earth* towel in his hand. Frank opened the tea towel drawer, crammed it in and slammed the drawer shut.

Judy came in the house followed by Barry carrying grocery bags. Judy was surprised to see Frank standing in her kitchen.

"M-Marsha just sent me over with the crock pot of meatballs for tonight," Frank stuttered referencing the pot over his shoulder. "Well, I should be on my way," said Frank making his way past Judy and Barry.

Frank put his hand on the doorknob, quickly glanced over his shoulder at his handy work and like Santa down a chimney, he disappeared into the late, increasingly gray November afternoon.

Frank clomped through the back door of his house knocking snow off his boots.

"I thought you got lost," muttered Marsha hunched over her cooled gingerbread people.

"No, just putting a few finishing touches on things for tonight," admitted Frank.

Marsha also finished putting the final touches on her special treats for the potluck, decorated gingerbread representing each of the neighbours in attendance tonight. Frank reviewed the plate of gingerbread. To represent Frank, Marsha placed a small gingerbread hammer in his little gingerbread hand representing his handyman abilities and Marsha's gingerbread wore an apron made of frosting. Judy and Barry, the gracious potluck hosts this year, had matching frosted vests with edible praying hands. Gordie and Nellie Cho's gingerbread people held little gingerbread hockey sticks frosted in blue to represent their beloved Toronto Maple Leafs with a little black puck on the end of Gordie's hockey stick. Both Nellie and Gordie were big hockey fans and both were children of Chinese immigrants. As it was often a common practice, they were given Canadian names. Nellie was named her after the fearless Nellie McClung, a famous Canadian suffragette who advanced the cause of women in Canada. Gordie's father knew the importance of hockey in this frozen land so he was named after Gordie Howe, the great Canadian hockey player.

Gordie and Nellie live next door to Marsha and Frank. Gordie has a good sense of humour being a bit of a prankster himself. They are owners of a restaurant called *The Rose Garden* which was owned by Nellie's parents before them.

Lastly, on the Christmas plate and far away from Frank's gingerbread character, was the gingerbread of Maggie O'Reilly. Marsha decorated Maggie's gingerbread woman with two googly eyes representing her beautiful blue eyes. Frank says it represents her nosiness. He calls her the original Facebook.

Maggie lives alone across the street from Marsha and Frank - a single woman most of her life. You can find Maggie peering out from behind her living room curtain at any given moment especially moments that involve Frank's movement. It's not that Frank dislikes Maggie. It's just they get in each other's way. The mutual distaste for each other started when Maggie first moved to the neighbourhood to retire in peace. *The incident* as it was referred to from that day forward has caused friction between them ever since.

"It's time to go Frank," shouts Marsha from the kitchen. Frank closed the medicine cabinet in the

bathroom revealing his nervous face in the mirror. He heard once that if you practice a fake smile that it can actually make you feel happy. He forced a toothy smile in the mirror. It didn't work.

Marsha and Frank made their way up Judy and Barry Stanford's walkway, their door trimmed in coloured lights. They stood on the doorstep after ringing the bell. On the front porch to their right, a spotlight shined on baby Jesus who stared up at Frank from his manger. Frank quickly looked away.

Judy opened the door.

She greeted them cheerily "Come in neighbours." Maggie was already inside sipping eggnog. The Cho's were just coming up the walkway behind Marsha and Frank. Once inside and when the coats were hung up, the men congregated around the eggnog station in the living room. Marsha, Nellie, Maggie and Judy gathered around the Christmas tree admiring Judy's decorating ability. Frank nervously shifted from foot to foot with arms folded. He glanced nervously in the dining room at his handiwork. All was well, then he did a double take. He noticed something about the wallpaper strip he had hung. The pattern wasn't quite right. The

blue wallpaper strip with the tiny pattern was hung upside down. "Oh,no!" bemoaned Frank, his heart sinking. Maggie had her eye on Frank. She could sense Frank's uneasiness. She was like a shark detecting blood in the water.

Barry came up behind Frank handing him some eggnog and sang "Rum pum pum, my Lord," sending Frank a sign that he added a little dark rum to their drinks. Barry wasn't as pious as Judy made him out to be. He too did what made his wonderful wife happy. Judy didn't like drinking alcohol, but Barry liked a little nip especially at Christmas. He didn't make a big deal of it. He just slipped a little in the eggnog. Frank appreciated it. He took a BIG gulp.

Judy announced the food was ready and that everyone can get a plate and take a seat around the table.

"We are not fancy," said Frank, "we don't need to sit at the dining room table. We can eat anywhere. Casual Christmas."

Marsha glared at him. Judy didn't allow her guests to eat just anywhere. Plus she had gone to a lot of

effort to set a festive dining table. Frank knew his attempt to overthrow Judy's rules was impossible, so he did the next best thing. He rushed to be first in line to get food so he could pick the first seat at the table directly across from the newly wallpapered strip. "One less set of eyes staring directly at it," hoped Frank. Marsha wondered what was wrong with him to rudely bolt to the front of the line before offering the others to go first.

Miffed Marsha sat next to Frank's right. She looked at him with an air of caution. He smiled back with his eyes stretched open. The Cho's sat to Frank's left. Maggie O'Reilly sat right across from Frank. In front of the suspicious wallpaper strip sat Judy Stanford. To her left sat her doting husband, Barry.

Judy asked everyone to hold hands so she could say grace. Frank pulled the fork from his mouth swallowing hard leaving behind a little of Marsha's sweet and sour meatball sauce on his lips. He rested his fork on his plate with a slight clank. He reached for Marsha's hand. Maggie rolled her eyes.

Everyone dug into the delicious variety of food with sounds of clanking forks and murmurs of "It's

delicious", around the table. Everyone discussed how they intend to spend Christmas.

As Judy described in great detail her Christmas family plans, Frank zoned out and chased the last bits of salad on his plate, but suddenly he started paying attention again when he saw the top corner of the wallpaper pop away from the wall like a button that sprang loose on a pair of pants holding in a Christmas turkey dinner. In response, Frank jumped up quickly jolting the table spilling his water.

"Frank!" exclaimed Marsha.

Gordie laughed, "You look like you saw a ghost, Frank."

"Dessert!" blurted Frank, "A great time for dessert."

Judy jumped up to get a tea towel to sop up the water. Frank was already in the kitchen searching for Marsha's plate of gingerbread cookies to deliver to the table. Judy was looking for her Christmas tea towel, but it wasn't hanging where she had left it. She quickly opened her tea towel drawer. Piled on top of the fresh towels was her *Peace on Earth* tea towel.

Confusingly she grabbed the crumpled fabric. She shook it out, but the excess glue from Frank's earlier cleanup activities made the fabric stick to itself. It now read *Pea on Ear*. Judy was bewildered. She looked at Frank. He looked away removing the plastic wrap from the plate. Judy heard Maggie's cat, Monte, scratching at the door. She let him in out of the cold as she had affection for the neighbourhood cat. She grabbed the crumbled tea towel and followed Frank into the dining room. Monte sashayed behind them.

Frank stood in front of his seat holding the tray of goodies. Judy bent over the table across from Frank sopping up the water. Frank felt life shift into slow motion. Monte circled the feet of the potluck guests.

You may not know this, but cats like Monte are often allowed to live in nursing homes as a comfort to the senior citizens. It is said when a senior is near passing away, the cat will stay with the senior for days until they die. Monte settled himself at Frank's feet.

As Judy finished sopping up the water placing the towel on an empty plate, she settled herself back in her chair just as the blue wallpaper that Frank was

hoping had held steadfast to the wall, let go. Very slowly and methodically, the strip peeled off the wall and covered Judy in her entirety. The blue wallpaper lay atop of Judy's head and cascaded down her back like a trailing cape of the Virgin Mary.

Frank stood like a *not so Wiseman* bearing gifts. He reached across the table extending the tray of gingerbread toward Judy.

"Cookie?" offered Frank. Judy looked at Frank from underneath the strip of wallpaper. He reached across the table with one hand attempting to flip the wallpaper from Judy's head accidentally tipping the tray. He recovered quickly, but not before the jolt of the plate made both Gordie's gingerbread hockey puck and one of Maggie's googly eyes fly off the plate. The hockey puck plopped into Judy's eggnog.

"Score!" cheered Gordie pumping his arms above his head in celebration.

From the table, Maggie's googly eye stared straight up at Frank. Around the table there was a mix of quiet, wry smiles and complete awe at what had just transpired, but everyone was looking at Frank in deep

knowing. Frank smiled weakly around the table as he picked up Maggie's loose eye and dryly stated, "You know, it isn't a good party until someone loses an eye."

Frank had to come clean with what happened earlier in the day. Marsha was mortified. Frank tried to justify his actions by saying he didn't want to ruin the Christmas potluck.

That evening Marsha was speechless as she lay next to Frank in bed. The glow from the outdoor Christmas lights on the eve shone in their bedroom window.

"I re-wallpapered it for Judy. I was trying to do her a favour," said Frank, "make her Christmas ... you know..easier."

"Easier. That's not a word associated with Christmas, Frank. I'll say this, you don't make it easier, but you definitely keep surprising me."

"Got to keep it fresh, Marsha," chuckled Frank as he stared at the ceiling reaching for Marsha's hand in the darkness. "Surprises are what keep life interesting," justified Frank.

Stifling a yawn, Marsha agreed, but made a request, "Do me a favour, Frank. Keep the surprises to a minimum until we get to the New Year, will you?"

"Oh definitely," said Frank. "Definitely. Can't wait to see what the New Year brings."