

# **The Christmas Sisters**

**Howard Firkin**

**73 Mooltan Street  
Travancore, VIC, 3032**

**0413 386 894**

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Shaving makes me think of the execution of Tsar Nicholas II and his family. Blood on the snow, that sort of thing. In 1983 I was still a Socialist, so I don't know why I was shaving on Christmas Eve. I certainly wasn't going anywhere special, and being a Socialist I used to try to treat Christmas with disdain, but there's no denying it, I got myself spruced up that day. I have to accept some responsibility for what happened.

Looking pretty snappy in a down-at-heel way I went for a stroll along Chapel Street to watch the last minute Christmas panic. What a hoot! You could throw a side of beef into a shark pool and not get the sort of action Chapel Street provides on Christmas Eve. They were buying everything! Tearing into shops, clearing shelves, thumping their money down on the counters, throwing their purchases into cars – any open car – and dashing off and into the next doorway. I kept moving, smiling in my smug, Socialist, out-of-work, oh-you-poor-unthinking-worms-of-the-Capitalist-State way I used to cultivate, spreading the pitying condescension liberally about; the Xmas Antidote, I used to call it. Enjoying myself, you know.

So what happened? What came over me? I can't say. I can't explain it. I'm not an incautious sort normally. Given my social position of those days, I couldn't afford to take any unnecessary risks. And I didn't. Not normally. I was really very careful, but I suppose I just had a momentary lapse of concentration, a moment of Christmas stupor, and I stopped. Yes, it was stupid of me, especially being shaved and all and looking a bit of a spunk, but right out in the open, to one side of a fashion boutique, I stopped to watch the lunacy all around me. I never thought of the danger involved.

It was all over in seconds. I caught sight of a dark-haired woman in an expensive knitted top. She threw a credit card through the doorway of the shop I was standing next to and bundled me into the open boot of a red Merc sports. The days of my Socialist dreaming were over forever. I'd been bought for Christmas.

My first Albert Park Christmas Eve party was a pretty dull affair, I can tell you. I'd been wrapped first in a metallic gift paper and then in a layer of red cellophane and it was stifling in there next to the tree. All I could hope was that they would open their presents at midnight. I was dying for a drink. But I could tell from the sound of

the party that they were all enjoying themselves too much, dancing around to old Kinks' records, singing bits of the lyrics in the wrong places loudly, getting drunk and discovering new content in old friendships again. It was all right for them. The party had clearly got to that stage when the men don't talk to anyone without first putting at least one hand somewhere on a woman's body. That stage when the subtitles that only God and fuming gift-wrapped Socialists can see read: "Don't misunderstand me—I don't mean this to have any sexual connotations, you know—but how about a bit of the other sometime?"

And no one's going to waste time on presents when there's all that touchy-feely stuff going on. I just had to wait.

It must have been around three in the morning when I heard one of them suggest distributing the presents. And then some creep puts Lola on again. Jesus H. Christ! It was so hot, and I felt so dry I was ready to scream. L-O-L-A LO-LA! I started swaying unsteadily, passably in time with the music. LA-LA-LA-LA LO-LA-HA! I passed out and knocked over the tree and they decided to unwrap their presents, leaving me until last, the bastards.

"Oh Annie! He's just gorgeous! Where did you get him?"

"In Chapel Street this morning."

"He's beautiful! He looks a bit wobbly still... There, there... Oh, the poor thing! What breed is he, Annie?"

"Unemployed, I think. He's definitely got a bit of Socialist in him."

"A red-cross? He's beautiful, Annie, thank you so much."

And the two sisters kissed. I knew at once they were sisters: the dark-haired Annie who'd bought me and Wendy who was fairer and plumper and who now owned me.

"Where should he sleep do you think?"

"Could we lock him in the laundry?"

"But that's got a concrete floor."

“Easier to clean if he makes a mess...”

The laundry it was. With an old tartan blanket and the ham bone from the party. All in all it wasn't so bad, but I felt a bit miserable thinking about my wife and the baby. I mean, no matter how cynical you become, everybody likes to be with their children at Christmas time. I'm not overly sentimental – never have been – but I've got to confess I did get a bit weepy that first night and on a few subsequent nights. Wendy came in to check me and gave me an old alarm clock wrapped up in one of her mohair jumpers to comfort me. It did help a bit, even though our baby was usually dressed in towelling, but I managed to pretend it was the baby and I sang the alarm clock to sleep in my arms.

Over Christmas they didn't really have all that much time for me – Annie and Wendy shared a house, and although it was clear that I was to be Wendy's, right from the start they both took an interest in looking after me – but they were careful always to have a bit of a romp with me during the day and once they were sure I understood the use of the toilet and bathroom I was allowed a pretty free run in the house. They explained, however, that I would still have to sleep in the laundry until Wendy had time to take me for my shots. For a treat we sometimes went out to a park, but they kept me on a leash. I couldn't blame them. My breed does have a lousy reputation for taking off after the first friendly face. At first they couldn't think what to call me. I told them my name, but they decided Harry suited me better, and they did know about those sorts of things.

Early in the New Year Wendy packed me up in the big wicker basket and took me off to the clinic. They had told me I'd need some injections, but that was mainly to reassure me. I didn't know then how important the unsaid was in all their conversations. I did have a couple of injections at the clinic, but nobody bothered to mention they were the two-part, general anaesthetic. When I woke up I felt terrible. Sick as a dog. Headache, nausea, the works. Wendy took me home and made a fuss over me, but I was still feeling the effects of the anaesthetic and didn't work out what was wrong until next morning. My balls turned black and ached like stink. A bloody vasectomy. I consoled myself with the knowledge that I'd be allowed inside the house from then on, but it was a week of sheer hell. Worth it, I suppose, because I got to sleep on Wendy's bed, except when her drippy boyfriend stayed, and then I'd curl up with Annie.

The boyfriend never took to me. He was a solicitor and a bit of a dill and he never really liked the idea of Wendy taking me to bed with her. There was one disgraceful scene at a dinner party when he claimed that Wendy was putting too much garlic in the avocado sauce for the veal because I liked it and he didn't. She was shamed into dropping him. He claimed I'd given him herpes, too, but that's not right because I never had herpes until after I started living with Wendy and Annie. Anyway, serves him right. He used to go on and on and on about how much money Wendy wasted on me with clothes and food and things. But Wendy always said that if she was going to be seen out with me then she wanted me to look respectable.

"But you bought him as a bloody pinko-cross! They're meant to be scruffy!"

"Look, Brian, he's my man and I'll dress him exactly as I choose. He *is* a red-cross, but that doesn't mean he has to be dressed from an op-shop. I never wanted to show him."

And that was the end of dreary old Brian. Wendy could be pretty tough when she wanted to.

In general our life in Albert Park was very comfortable. A couple of Christmases came and went. Birthdays and dinner parties, picnics in the country; it was a pleasant life I shared with the sisters. Sometimes, when they went away on holidays together and went somewhere I couldn't be taken, I had to be boarded out and I never liked that much. But by and large it was pretty good. I was by far the most successful man either of them had ever had. Something had always happened to their others before six months had gone, but I was lucky somehow and they both grew very fond of me.

Couldn't last, of course. Wendy was ambitious, and she always talked about going overseas sometime. Well, the time came and I couldn't go with her. Quarantine problems in the U.K. I believe, although, to be honest, I don't think she would have wanted to take me anyway. I mean, you don't really need a man yapping around your heels when you're setting up in a new city, a new country. It caused a bit of a rift between Annie and Wendy. At least, Annie made a big song and dance about Wendy just up and leaving me for someone else to look after, and for a while Annie took exaggeratedly good care of me. She'd given me to Wendy in the first place, so I suppose she had reason to feel offended, but she was far more offended by Wendy leaving her than me, of course.

I started getting sick about this time. Annie made out I was pining for Wendy, as you might expect, but it was really the old virus coming good at last. All their men got it eventually and I'd lasted longer than most. Nothing necessarily terminal about it, but it was a tedious illness to nurse anyone through; so it was only a matter of time before I went the way they all went, and a few weeks after Wendy's departure Annie decided regretfully that I'd never recover with Wendy gone and although it was the harder decision to make, she knew I'd have to be given my final shot. She brushed me carefully and took a couple of photos and then drove me off to the clinic. She will send the photos to Wendy to make her feel bad.

As we drove to the doctor I happened to see my wife walking along the footpath with our little girl. I waved, but of course they didn't see me. I hadn't seen the child since she'd been a baby. She looked very pretty and had her hair in pigtails. It seemed such a long time ago. I barely had money for food in those days and here I was now in designer jeans and a hand-made shirt in my wicker basket in the front seat of Annie's red Mercedes. I thought how young I'd been when I married, when I fathered that little girl, and how unknowing I'd been, how naive.