

Have Yourself A Merry Little Christmas: A Monument to the Walking Dead Christmas Special

(Set between chapter 10 and chapter 11)

Maria Espinosa

Maria and Danny left through the northern gate of the Laredo community at 09:15 riding rusted bicycles that wouldn't survive a trip of particular length, but served their crosstown excursion well. Maria led the way down the cleared streets. They left the frequented roads for ones that were still crowded by vehicles that had not been towed and shattered glass which hadn't been swept up. They weaved between abandoned cars and scatterings of glass until both became too dense and impassable and they were forced to dismount, chaining their bicycles to a parking meter.

"It's not far now," Maria whispered solemnly, a puff of vapor escaping her chapped lips.

Danny cast her a worried glance. "Are you sure about this?" he asked again. "It's okay if you've got cold feet."

She nodded, then licked her lips nervously. "It's not like it's haunted. Let's get a move on. It's a little more than a block ahead."

They stuck to the glass-strewn sidewalk. Shards that reflected the clouded sky cracked beneath their sneakers but were otherwise harmless. Maria didn't hold Laredo in too high regard, nor did she like to think of it nostalgically, but it was still the city she'd grown up in, and it pained her to see vast sections still in such a ruined state. It was a small comfort to know they'd be working toward further restoration of the city, but there was still a long way to go and so much that was irreparable.

"We'll here," Maria announced rather suddenly after about five minutes of walking.

Danny had come to a stop several paces ahead and now sidled up next to her to look at the unassuming ruin. It was an apartment complex. It seemed like it was a little ratty even beforehand. The buzzer appeared to have been tampered with, hanging on by a mere two wires. The window in the door's frame had been smashed, and when Maria twisted the doorknob, the door opened without a hitch.

Neither of them said anything as they slipped inside. Maria led Danny to a flight of stairs, up to the second floor, and down a short hall. They arrived at a door of muted red. She stood there for a moment in contemplation, and Danny cast her another look of concern before she reached out and pushed the door open.

It slowly creaked opened, revealing the near pristine interior. It had been searched thoroughly, quite evidently to Maria's eyes, but was nowhere near ransacked. A frown crossed her expression—like she was picking up an unpleasant scent, though the air was only stale and dusty—and she entered warily. She took it all in with a strained glance, from the stout entryway to the living room which transitioned to a cramped kitchen.

"Have you visited since you came back?" he asked, following behind her.

"Once," she replied. "Just to be sure."

He nodded understandingly, not pressing for details. A hallway broke off from the living room and presented several closed doors. She stopped there, opened one and grimaced at the near empty closet. Once again, she wondered if the various jackets and shoes had been looted, or if her family had bugged out with them in tow.

She hoped dearly, all things considered, that it was the latter. Even her mother—her mother, who had harboured a deep disdain for her due to the turbulence her birth had caused between her mother and father, which had ultimately resulted in her father's departure because her father believed her mother had cheated on him, which Maria knew to be true regardless of whether she was born from that. Her true father still remained a mystery, but it was, in all likelihood, not the man her mother had married. But despite all that, Maria still hoped they were all alive and well. Or, if passed away, at peace.

She took a cardboard box from the top shelf of the closet, sat it on the living room floor and stared at it for a prolonged moment. In the dead silence, in the stale air, Danny put a hand on her shoulder. She smiled glumly, terribly thankful for his presence but not facing or saying anything to him. She was sure the coming evening would be something special.

Josephine Harper

She watched him work with a wary smile on her face while she put on a jacket. She shouldered her backpack, noted how light it was at the moment, and suspected she would never be able to fill it in today's world. Especially in and around Laredo, where things had been picked clean by the previous occupants. No form of government had yet been established. They were picking up the pieces of the fallen safe zone and were in the process of assembling the puzzle... but all the pieces had been chipped and warped.

Jake looked up from loading a magazine and gave Josephine a small, wry smirk, and she diverted her eyes to the only window of the armory, suppressing a larger smile, feeling a strange brightness and levity despite handling an activity that usually unsettled her. Scavenging tombs (which was what they were, in her mind) wasn't her idea of a good time. And she doubted it was his either. So why, she wondered, were they in such a positive mood?

Was it because of Christmas Eve?

It was possible. Tonight was to be special.

Josephine unholstered her inherited revolver, popped the cylinder and inspected the unspent rounds. Her thoughts drifted down the rabbit hole of memory that was almost as distant as a past life. She thought of her early Christmases at her parents in Harvest Hills. But mostly, she thought of Anthony, and she wondered with a sudden pang of sadness what her brother would have thought of Jake.

She didn't cry then, but she damn near did.

It was almost humorous: Had he survived, Anthony wouldn't have liked Jake. At least not at first. Jake's involvement with Zafir would have severely complicated things. And perhaps, had her brother lived, she wouldn't have even gotten together with Jake.

She found it hurt to think about. Whenever she thought of it, she found herself balancing the pros and cons of reality and something nonexistent. Still, she wished he could see her now, could see them all now.

Her sadness must have shown because she heard muffled footsteps crossing the small room toward her. She didn't turn, even as a hand came to rest on her far shoulder, an arm wrapping around her back.

"You gonna be sad every Christmas?" Jake asked softly, kissing the side of her head. His tone was sarcastic, but there was a clear layer to his voice that told her he'd listen if she needed a shoulder to cry on or a place to vent.

Her smile returned. And she knew, with absolute certainty, where the warmth in her heart that cold winter's day had come from.

"You know, I've kept a dastardly secret from you, Josie."

She turned a little, narrowing her hazel eyes and faked an accusative glare. Her brow furrowed.

"I used to rob banks," he whispered into her ear.

"But you're still a horrible liar, it seems."

He grinned. "Think what you will, Josie. But I was a grade-A criminal."

"Sure thing, sweetie."

She looked back to the gray window with its melancholic lighting and pretended to ignore him, stealing a glance as he shrugged and went to find his pants. She smirked a little as he bent to slip them on, watching while his back turned. He wasn't so much a slow dresser as he was a rambunctious undresser.

She snapped the cylinder in place, holstered the revolver, then tied up her sneakers.

Anthony was dead, but his brotherly love still lingered like the persistent ember of a candle wick that glowed in the encroaching darkness despite have been snuffed out, killed, and it was only getting brighter now. Brighter and stronger.

If Anthony could see them, even in death, she imagined with certainty that he'd be happy.

Jerry Stewart

Jerry had all but exhausted his options of exploration of the Gilbert Hotel. He had wandered the corridors for a solid month following his rehabilitation, which had followed his operation, and now knew it as if he'd worked there himself. Physical therapy had gone by with relative ease after he'd gotten back into the motions, and when he wasn't reading or sleeping, he was making use of the exercise and weight rooms. Mental therapy, on the other hand, was much more tedious because neither himself nor Calvin were prepared for the task.

And it was the mental stuff which scared him the most, and perhaps his frequent occupation of the weight room was an attempt to compensate for that. He was in better shape than he had been in forever, even before the onset of the apocalypse. He could curl a heavy dumbbell with ease for hours at a time, but drop him in a room with more than three other people and he was usually beset by anxiety. There was also a kind of social ineptitude which, to his frustration, he couldn't help and didn't always notice until after the fact—he often came off as outspoken, and at times, he feared, rude.

He knew his suffering and mental fumbblings could be traced back to the pull of a trigger. And if you looked back further, you'd see it originate with a bunsen burner that had a chemical compound suspended above it, and a once handsomer man not thinking straight as he turned up the heat.

Jerry lowered the dumbbell and went to find a drink, massaging the side of his forehead in a vain attempt to clear away a piercing pain (and perhaps the reminiscing) which came and went as it pleased, becoming especially prevalent when he exercised. Calvin, much to Jerry's dismay, wasn't entirely sure it would ever go away completely.

He could feel along the rim of a small metal plate which protruded from his skull but remained under a slightly raised and paler patch of skin.

He stopped rubbing and prodding the differently textured and discolored protrusion, knowing Calvin had advised strongly against it, and resisted the ever present urge to scratch at it. The stitches were out, but he it was still healing.

He consulted his wristwatch and confirmed the time. 05:42 PM, Christmas Eve. He had almost an hour and a half to get ready to leave—he would use that time to take a much-detested sponge bath with frigid water and change out of his pajamas he wore around the hotel. He returned up the stairs, disappointed that his visit to the weight room hadn't eased his jitteriness and had only served to reignite his headache, and began to climb. He scratched the beard he'd grown for the occasion, anxious to be rid of the damned thing.

Daniel Martinez

The fact that today was Christmas Eve was a very difficult thing for Daniel to grasp to such a degree that it worried his adoptive parents. He didn't refuse to accept the possibility that, just maybe, the tides of the reanimated corpses had relented just enough to allow for a holiday, but he was extremely skeptical.

His somber reaction to the Christmas tree (bare for the time being of decorations) erected in their living room, a few presents beneath it, was also a subject of concern for Atlanta, who wished to try to remedy the situation; Ashley, on the other hand, advocated that they didn't push and just let Daniel warm up to the return of the concept of Christmas on his own, and she was sure he'd open up once their guests arrived.

Daniel stood at the end of the hall on the second floor. He stood in front of the window located there, a hand pressed against the cold glass, his breath creating a film of condensation in which he drew shapes with a finger from his other hand. His expression was a reflection of the dull gray sky and drab, empty neighborhood below. His eyes seemed a little unfocused.

He continued to create shapes in the fogged glass despite the cold which permeated the area near the

window. His finger created the thickly lined silhouette of fox, which was startling well proportioned for the simple doodle it was. He gave it a small nose, beady eyes, and a maw which turned upward into an unintentionally leery grin.

The window overlooked the street. Daniel was watching for their guests.

He began on another doodle, but stopped upon seeing the two bicycles cruise down the street and arrive at their driveway. The fox doodle's grin encapsulated one of the figures as they crossed the yard toward the front porch, several droplets of condensation cascading down the glass and over its face and maw, as if it was salivating or crying.

That thought disturbed Daniel. As he turned to leave, his hand swiped across the glass, brushing away most of his unintentionally creepy doodle and getting his hand significantly damp in the process. He wiped his hand on his pajamas bottoms and walked on. He stopped suddenly.

Philip the Cat was sitting outright with his forepaws placed in front of him at the precise threshold of cold caused by the poorly insulated window, his narrowed gaze looking somewhere past Daniel. Daniel failed to reassure himself that faulty insulated was the reason and wondered for a tense moment if Philip knew something that he didn't.

Ghosts? he thought, shuddering. It wasn't a stretch, it seemed to him, since the original owners of the house were most certainly dead... or perhaps they were reanimated. All the more worse. All the more supernatural.

Then Philip looked up at Daniel, with no evidence of his previously rigid gaze, and meowed insistently.

Daniel scooped Philip into his arms and held him close, warming his cold fingers by digging them through Philip's soft orange fur. He negotiated the steps while looking over the large mass in his arms, planting each sock with care as not to slip while holding the cat.

Daniel slowed before the stairs ended and leaned out from behind the corner. Philip peaked out with him, and they watched his parents greet the first two guests.

"It's Maria and Danny!" Daniel exclaimed in whisper, and he ducked back behind the corner, realizing there was a slim possibility that Maria had glimpsed him.

Philip twisted his head around at him at the sound of Daniel's voice and sudden movement, casting him a confused, agitated glance. Daniel gave him an apology pat (because Philip was the coolest cat) and the cat was contented, having never stopped purring.

In deciding whether or not to hide from the newly arrived guest, and a little worried by a sudden silence, Daniel (and Philip) took another peak. Maria, having had the nerve to shed her boots, stood just beyond the corner in socks, smiling maniacally. Daniel squealed as she grabbed and pulled him into a hug, the bundle of orange fur purring happily despite being sandwiched. Daniel continued to struggle as she carried him into the living room.

"Let me go!" he cried.

"Nope!"

"You mean sure!"

"Only," she told him, laughing a little as she held him, "if you promise not to run off!"

"I won't!" he replied, having difficulty keeping his face straight. "I promise!"

She set him down gently in the living room, where Ashley and Atlanta were standing at the far side, smiling. The moment Daniel's socks touched the floor, he made a break for the doorway... where Danny stepped out from behind the corner and caught him before he could utter more than a surprised gasp.

"You don't break promises," his captor scolded lightheartedly.

Danny was grinning as he brought him back over to Maria. He put a hand on Daniel's shoulder, reached down and rubbed Philip's chin, the cat still in the boy's arms. The cat extended his neck and rolled back his head to follow Danny's moving finger, his purring intensifying.

"If you hang in the living room," Danny told Daniel, "you can open your present from us."

Daniel narrowed his eyes with suspicion and looked up at Maria. She nodded, saying, "Yeah, but you have to make good on that promise. Trust me when I tell you it's worth it."

Daniel turned his torso from side to side for a moment, his barely suppressed grin betraying his curiosity. "What is it?" he asked at last.

"Why don't you find out?" Danny picked up a large, decoratively wrapped box from where it was sitting on the couch and presented it to Daniel after getting an approving nod from both the boy's parents.

Daniel sat Philip on the arm of the couch, where the cat tucked his paws in and sat happily, his tail wrapped around him. After tearing off the paper to find a giant Lego City set, Daniel, the foreman and Danny and Maria, the crew members, all sat around the coffee table, spread the separate baggies of bricks on the table, and poured over the instructions as they began assembling the base of a building.

They had constructed about half of first floor when there was a loud knock on the door and Atlanta and Ashley went to answer. A moment later, Josephine and Jake entered the living room, each carrying a large stack of presents that they left under the tree, and were followed into the room by Daniel's adoptive parents. Daniel's mood had regressed to a more somber tone in the past fifteen minutes, becoming quiet and deep in concentration, but his smile was nonetheless broad when Aunt Josie crossed the room and put an arm around his shoulders.

"We'll gonna decorate the Christmas tree now," she was telling him as Jake was giving Maria a giant hug. Immediately afterwards, Jake pulled Danny's outstretched hand (who had it presented with the intention of merely shaking) into a hug as well. When Jake was through with Danny, he plucked Daniel off the floor and spun him for a bit, depositing him a little roughly onto the couch, the young boy giggling happily regardless.

The general mood was bright and cheery—a surprising breath of fresh air and thankful departure from the

recent hardships ushered on by winter—and Daniel probably wouldn't feel the melancholy descend upon him again for some weeks. Together they plundered a box of decorations brought by Maria and Danny and set about decorating the tree with strings of colorful tinsel and sparkling ornaments.

Calvin arrived a little later and contented himself with watching the activity. When Daniel asked him why he arrived so late and where Uncle Jerry was, he was suspiciously tight-lipped, but a glowing air of anticipation pervaded him. Growing tired of dressing the tree, and physically tired as his usual 8 o'clock bedtime approached, Daniel returned his legos to his room before returning to the living room himself.

The Christmas tree glistened with—and a few particularly pretty ornaments prised—the fireplace's flames and the flickering lights of candles which were spread across the living room and, to a lesser degree, all around first floor of the house. Maria and Danny were helping Atlanta and Ashley make the last preparations for dinner.

There came a knock from the back of the house and the night's proceedings paused abruptly. Atlanta and Ashley approached the threshold across the hallway, while Maria and Danny continued from it and down the hall. For a second, to Daniel, it was oddly ominous, but then Josephine and Jake rose from the loveseat in the corner and there was absolutely nothing fearful about their expressions.

"Who could that be?" she whispered to Daniel while passing him, not able to contain a wide grin.

The couple left the living room and entered the hallway, and being clad in festive socks, their muffled footsteps disappeared a moment later. The only sounds were the soft creak of floorboards, the licking flames from the fireplace, and Philip's meowing as he climbed into Daniel's lap. Feeling a tad nervous, he scooped Philip into his arms again and pulled the purring furball close.

Daniel turned, putting his knees on the couch, and watched the hall intently. There was some commotion out of sight, a rattling of bells, and several whispered curses. Soon, the loud rattling coincided with more creaking boards and muffled footfalls, drawing closer and en masse.

Aunts Josie and Maria and Uncles Jake and Danny—dressed in hastily thrown on elf costumes, joking with and jostling and teasing each other at their own expense—parted in twos to either side of the threshold to allow a bearded man dressed in red adorned with white fur entry into the living room. It was Santa.

Daniel squinted past the poor dye job that was the white beard and through the lensless glasses into Uncle Jerry's brown eyes. Daniel cast Calvin an uncertain look, received an encouraging nod, and returned the old man's cat before he climbed over the back of the couch ran into his uncle's arms.

Jerry was a little taken aback, but smiled and returned to the act, saying ho ho ho and lugging Daniel to an easy chair. He sat the boy on the arm of the chair, then sat in the chair itself. Jerry felt, for the first time in a long while, at ease.

The preceding dinner was delicious, and helpings were refreshingly normal for a change, not rationed as of late (though, in keeping with a growing list of mandates, it would return to the new normal as soon as the following morning). At about ten, the night dissolved into an exchange of gifts. Daniel received a multipurpose wristwatch from Jerry. He couldn't even begin to guess the uses of some of its many dials and needles, and stared at it in wonderment. He was told, by Jerry, that it was waterproof. He could only

recognize the clock itself, a compass wrapped with small numbers (different degrees?) and a turnable dial, and very little else.

That night, everyone wore smiles of various intensities. Daniel felt he probably smiled more than he hadn't ever smiled in his life (so much so that his face would be sore the following morning), and the levity it provided wasn't anything but fleeting.

Their first Christmas together, as a strange and new family, was strangely normal. Daniel wondered if they would have Christmas next year, but didn't ask any of the adults, nor Maria and Danny.

Have Yourself A Merry Little Christmas