

Christmas on the Christmas Tree
Assembly Line
9/12/17

Sunday, April 23, 2017

I don't care what anyone says.

It's exciting – I'm starting my new job tomorrow at CTI (that's what the old-timers that work there call it). To the rest of us, it's more commonly known as Christmas Tree Industries, and they are the single largest manufacturer of Christmas Trees in the country. I'm the first to say that making the right first impression is of paramount importance. That's why I spent the biggest part of the evening deciding what to wear. I want my outfit to say everything about me that I might not get the opportunity to say myself.

It's pretty hard to find Christmas outfits on the shelf this time of year. I mean, I have plenty of outfits that I've worn around Christmas, but not many of them are Christmas. You know the kind I mean, with reindeer, candy canes, or Christmas trees on them. It took some doing, and the last of my disposable budget on expedited shipping expenses, but I worked it out.

The only thing I can say is thank goodness for the internet. I'd been worried that the reindeer on the green sweater would be too much, but it went with the red skirt and white leggings just like I'd hoped.

Monday, April 24, 2017

I'm taking 'Elf' as a compliment. Surely it's just a pet name for a new person on the floor. How could anyone work in a place that basically celebrates Christmas every day and be hateful? See? It's just not possible to even conceive such a thing.

After all, the guy that was assigned to onboard me was 'Papa'. Any fatherly manner seemed a little forced, to be honest. We walked down a red-bordered pathway with a green stripe down the middle of it, passing disinterested-looking workers slaving away building implements of the season. He stopped here and there, introducing me as 'the new elf' to people I assumed were his fellow team leads before we finally stepped into one of the work areas.

“This is your new home,” he said, acknowledging the space around him.

“We’re going to start you off needling.”

“It’s a pretty *sticky* job, I guess?”

He looked at me, completely nonplussed. “Marv, Helen, Reg, this is your new elf, Lisa. Try to keep her out of trouble.”

“What’s wrong, Paps? Aren’t you going to *stick* around a bit?” Marv grinned.

“The needle jokes were old fifteen years ago, people,” Papa said as he turned and left with a shrug.

I know I looked a little confused.

“Don’t mind him, Dear,” Helen said as she took my hand and pulled me forward. “He’s more of a ghost of Christmas past.”

“We’d call him the Grinch, but at least the Grinch was redeemed in the end,” Reg agreed. “That’s a great sweater. Where did you find that?”

“Thanks,” I said with maybe too much smile. “I got it at Christmas Everyday dot com.”

Reg smiled. “I love that site. Did you get in on the sock sale?”

“All right, we better at least act like we’re doing something,” Marv said. “You know the quota is high on garland day.”

“I thought they just made Christmas trees here,” I said, excited to already be learning.

“Back in the old days, that was it, but the industry has been expanding the last ten years or so,” Helen explained. “We do six different sizes of trees, three types of garland, all of them both lighted or non-lighted. We also have a wreath department, and a small artificial mistletoe operation, although rumor has it it is on its last legs.”

“Why would that be?” I asked, shocked.

“There was a big sexual harassment lawsuit that we got named in last year. Some fool in Hollywood landed a kiss on a supermodel and she turned him in. He blamed the mistletoe and said he had to follow tradition, and she blamed us for manufacturing it. It seems like bunk, but you know how stuff like that works anymore,” she said.

“They always blame the holiday,” Reg said from behind us. “Never the merry-maker.”

Tuesday, May 2, 2017

It was an innocent mistake. They let me run the sticker – the machine that wraps the artificial tree branches in synthetic pine needles – by myself for a while today. I thought I had the hang of it, but it turns out there’s good reason why they tell people to keep their hair tied up. There’s really no doubt that I could have been hurt, but I passed it off as something I’d done on purpose when Papa showed up.

Really, I think it looked pretty good. I’ve never seen anyone with a braid wrapped in pine needles, but it looked like I had a really ornate garland crown. After they got me out of the machine, Reg called me the ‘Queen of Christmas’.

We all had a good laugh about it once it was over and done with. Me? I’m just wondering if it would be too much to wear with my red dangle-ball earrings.

Thursday, May 11, 2017

I just couldn’t help it. The last song I heard on the radio before work was Mel Torme’s ‘White Christmas’, and it was stuck in my head. I was securing twinkle lights in premium six-foot spruce branches and the words just started coming out. I was so tied up in what I was doing, I really didn’t even notice when Helen started singing with me.

No one could miss Reg’s voice when he jumped into the solo. It really was amazing – I really am dreaming of a white Christmas now that I’ve heard him. A lot of the plant must have felt the same way, because everyone was singing along before the third verse started.

I'll be honest – I never read the employee handbook. I just signed the receipt for it that Mrs. Clause in Human Resources asked me to.
Can you imagine working in a place like this with a name like Mrs. Clause? Poor thing... No wonder she's always so hard to get along with – the jokes must never end.

Her German accent was honestly a little hard to understand, but... It kind of added to the whole thing. I couldn't help but envision her in a red dress with a white apron, making cookies while waiting for Father Christmas to come home.

Evidently, I smiled when she started chastising me for causing such a disruption. I didn't mean to, but the memory of Chet over in red glass balls taking the bass part was just too wonderful.

Oh well, it's just a one day suspension.

I'm going to make cookies tomorrow.

Sunday, June 4, 2017

I never really thought about Christmas in July actually being a thing, but I guess it is. At least enough to trigger mandatory overtime. We've been at it for about a month straight, and have on more week to go before we get a day off, if production holds.

Even I'm ready to go find something else. I signed on for a forty hour a week job, Monday through Thursday, Six to four-thirty. We've been burning through seventy hours a week, and we're still not quite keeping up. It's not that big of a deal for me – I mean, sure, Mr. Bob and Felix both miss me when I'm gone, but I really don't have anyone depending on me.

I feel bad for the people with families, particularly little ones. Laurene in stockings was telling me about her kids at lunch the other day. Between her six and nine-year old kids and taking care of her mama, she averages about two and a half hours of sleep at night. I couldn't help it, I had to say something....

I mean...

I can't function on less than four hours of sleep, and I'm better with nine.

"How do you do it, Laurene? You're always so happy."

"There's no reason not to be, is there? I might be dealing with some things, but at least I have things to be dealing with. Still having my Mama means she hasn't left me yet, and having kids, well... My babies are the most frustrating best thing in my whole world."

"What happened to their father?" I asked the question before I thought better.

Laurene didn't look the least bit taken aback. "The usual. Some little spike-heeled pink-panty wearing little tramp turned his head."

"I'll bet you'd like to meet her in a dark alley."

"Sure would," Laurene said. "And thank her."

I'm sure I looked taken aback this time. "How does that work out?"

"Honey, I'm all about commitment. Believe me, I'm committed to taking care of my family, otherwise, I wouldn't spend ten hours a day sewing fake fur and monogrammed names into stockings. Him leaving leaves room in my life for someone that actually is committed to me. I don't have time for anyone that's half in... Or less..."

"That actually makes perfect sense."

Laurene smiled. "That's the only extra thing I have time to do, Lisa."

Monday, June 5, 2017

I'm worried about Laurene. I heard Papa lead her off of the floor in the middle of shift today. As busy as we've been and as short as the crew is, I can't believe she's been fired. The only other possibility is that something happened to her mama, and...

It makes me so sad.

Laurene isn't like me – everyone likes her. I swear she spends half of lunch just greeting everyone she passes by. If a celebrity had a good heart, she'd be like a celebrity, because everyone just seems to want to be associated with her.

That doesn't even sound right. She brightens everyone's day. She knows that asking after Papa's grandson makes him happy, and complimenting Reg on his socks makes him feel special. She knows Melissa over in hook bending is worried about her little girl's schooling, and she even talks about comic book movies with Winter.

Winter... Isn't that an appropriate name for someone working in a Christmas tree factory?

Well, the point is this... Why do bad things have to happen to good people?

I truly don't understand that one. Why wouldn't it be okay for the best of us – the most humble, kind, and caring, to face nothing other than the absolute best things in the world? What would be lost by the truest of hearts facing no loss? No fear? No hate or anger?

I just hate watching people suffer.

If you get murdered by someone with a knife, I'm sure there's pain. There's a stab and fear and all manner of hurting – I get that. But it only goes on for a few hours maybe before you die.

Laurene is going to carry the loss of her mama for the rest of her life. One day, she'll learn to work around it – but that stab of pain will be there, hiding, but willing to jab her again whenever she least wants it to.

After all, I ought to know.

Wednesday, June 7, 2017

I'm proud of who I work for and who I work with.

They shut the plant down so we could go to stand with Laurene at the funeral. I think every single person that Laurene has ever touched in this

world showed up. We didn't even get out of the parking lot – there just wasn't any room inside.

But we were there for her.

It was one of the best feelings I've ever experienced.

Wednesday, July 5, 2017

The company started off with a meeting to report 'the state of the business' to us after we got back from the Fourth of July holiday. It was, honestly, really hard to sit through. If you were to think that sitting through an hour's worth of spreadsheets on the existing and predicted sales of every Christmas appliance from elf statues to Yugoslavian imported nutcrackers would be a bit on the boring side, you'd be right.

Moreover, it was the first time that I realized Christmas is a business to these people. Every unit of every product line that we build is planned for every day of the year. Expected overtime, inventory overruns, labor cost per unit – it's all managed on a daily basis. The various assembly areas are monitored from one minute to the next. The company even conducts competitive market analysis – there are people that do nothing other than watch to see what the competition is up to.

I felt foolish sitting there with everyone else, playing absently with my Rudolph the Rednose Reindeer earrings. The truth was that I loved Christmas. I loved everything about it – the music, the food, friends, family (back when I had some). I loved the stories and the decorations. Going to church and Christmas caroling were things I looked forward to all year long.

And this place was turning that all into the past tense – I didn't look at the holiday the same anymore.

It was easier to tune out the presentation and think about delivering care packages to the needy. When it got right down to it, I didn't need to know any of this stuff. As long as I did what they told me to when and how they wanted me to, my job was secure.

If I forgot about the corporate nonsense, I might even be able to keep my holiday spirit.

Friday, September 29, 2017

God Damn it.

Marv is dead, and it's my fault. He looked groggy this morning, and was complaining about being stiff around his shoulder. I thought he'd been working too hard – we all have. The last push for holiday supply is just about over.

And since I decided to pay more attention to the needler than I did Marv, I missed the symptoms until he fell over unconscious in our work area. It's my fault – if I would have been more interested in my friend (and colleague) than the daily production quota, I might have noticed things weren't going well and put two and two together before they equaled death.

As it is, I just have the memory of those last few minutes with Marv.

I hate this place.

Tuesday, October 3, 2017

So, on the first day back after Marv's funeral, Papa appears with a red piece of paper. We all knew there wasn't anything festive about the color – I was in trouble.

I just didn't know what for...

Even the old man looked a little hesitant when he walked up to me.
“Good morning, Lisa.”

A chill shot up my spine. “What did I do?”

“Lisa, it's just a fast-fix form.”

“Sure, and I get fired if I get another one in the next year. What did I do?”

“Quality found one hundred cases of blue-spruce tannenbaums with long needles on them. You were logged into the needler that day, Lisa.”

My heart skipped a beat. “What are they going to do?”

“Packaging had to re-label the boxes. It took about an hour.”

“Isn’t it possible that they put them in the wrong boxes in the first place?”

“Just fill out the form, Elf,” Papa said as he sat the red piece of paper on my work table and walked away.

“Merry Christmas to you too, Papa!” I called after him.

I hate this place.

Wednesday, November 1, 2017

I couldn’t wait to get out of work today, because it’s time! I actually cheated a little and got the boxes down over the weekend, but Halloween is now officially over, so it’s time for Christmas. The all-Christmas all-the-time radio station started at midnight, and I was there, by the radio, even if it was just for ‘It’s the Most Wonderful Time of the Year’ before I had to go to bed.

Being there when it started was important to me.

‘Carol of the Bells’ was still ringing in my mind when I stepped onto the line this morning. I might have been a little groggy, but I had music in my mind and my heart. There wasn’t anything that could have made my day any better.

“What did you just say, Spornwright?”

“I said I’m tired of doing everyone else’s work around here, Jackson.”

“You can kiss my ass, Spornwright.”

Well, you can guess what happened then. Spornwright ended up in the hospital, Jackson is in jail, and both of them are in the unemployment line on the first day of the holiday season. You know, the real holiday season – not the deadlines that we’ve spent all year working toward.

I've never actually seen two men fight before. Not like this, anyways, not where one was really trying to hurt the other. And, I see it for the first time on the first day of the holiday?

Happy Thanksgiving. Merry Christmas.

Sure.

Sunday, December 17, 2017

Heaven knows I tried. I was so excited when I got this job – I still think back to the first day and that ridiculous reindeer sweater. I loved Christmas. I loved every single thing about it. The music, the decorations. I loved that it was the one time of year that people were happy. I thought when I went to work here, it would be Christmas every day, so people would be happy every day. It seemed like a logical extension of thought anyway.

Beyond any shadow of a doubt, I have never, ever been so foolish in my life, and that's saying a lot.

I've seen more hatred, pain, death, fighting, and just difficulty in the lives of the people I work with than I'd ever thought possible. I really hadn't known there was so much hardship in the world, and again, that was saying a lot, because I'd seen plenty.

And this year, I'd seen even more.

I didn't want to see any more. I didn't want to go back. Not just tomorrow – never again.

Waiting tables wasn't so bad.

At least, once in a while, someone came through that was actually happy.

Saturday, December 23, 2017

It's late, or, early, depending on how you look at it.

Whatever you call it, it's something I wanted to sit down at the computer and remember, because it was an amazing day. The company gave us the afternoon off for our Christmas party, and it was an incredible experience.

I just got home.

I've felt horrible about work. I've felt horrible about Christmas, about life, and about people lately.

The thing I forgot to think about is, when you share in a person's pain or when you're there for them when things just aren't going as well for them as they should, you form a bond.

It's a strong bond.

It's one where you care about their sick mother, or their grandchildren's grades, or whether they're staying away from their cheating husband. It's a bond that just can't be broken by a fight next to the candy cane twister or an argument over who is going to run the needler. The bond grows stronger because you've gone through so much together, and know you'll face even more.

I've never felt closer to people than I did tonight. I couldn't have left sooner if I would have tried – there were just too many people to talk to.

Too many people to care about some more.

Smile

I love this place.