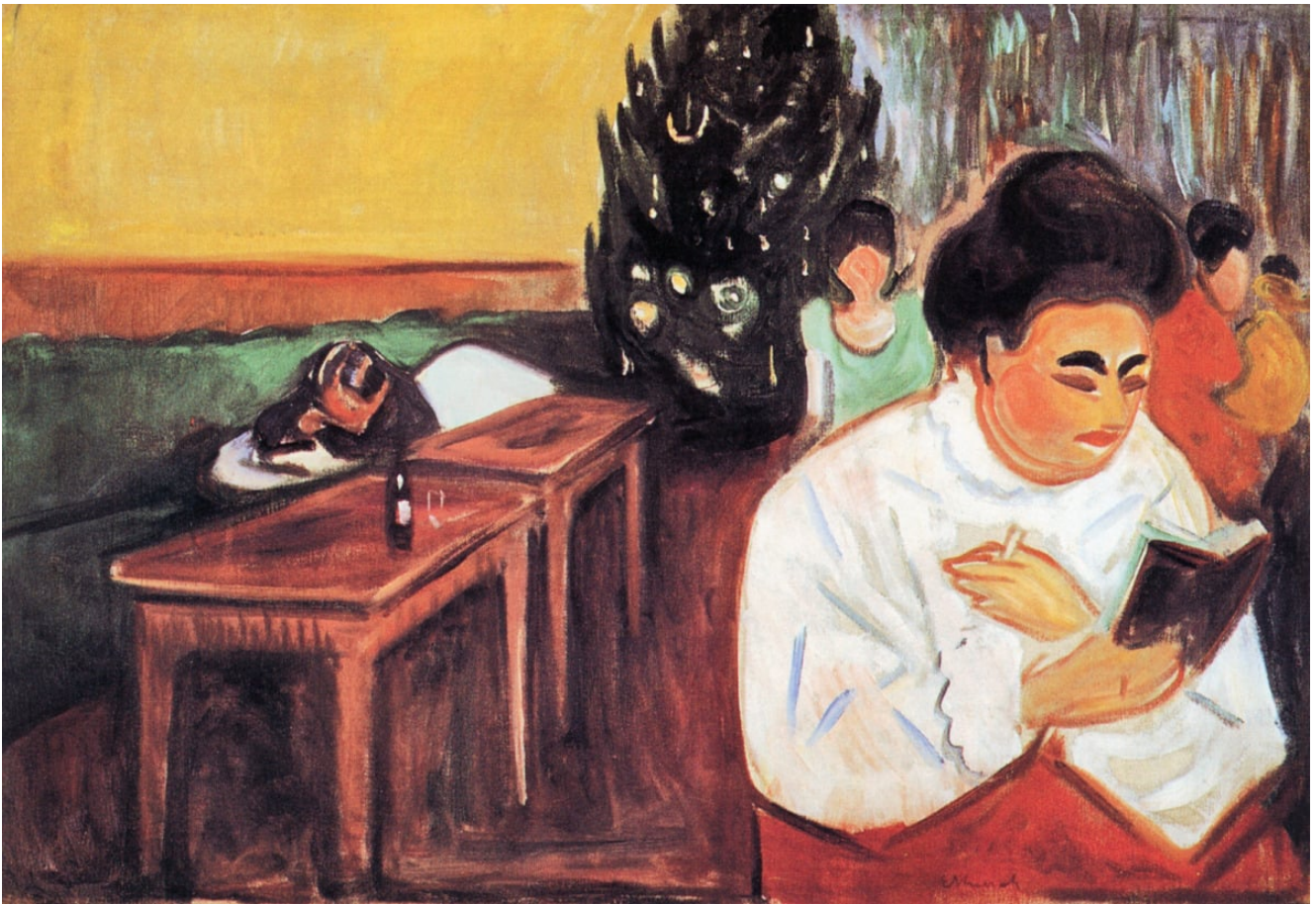


Christmas Coal



Christmas in the Brothel, Edvard Munch, 1903-04

It is that most especially magical time in the year. When it is just past Christmas Eve, but not yet Christmas Day. Just a moment of time that is thinner than tinsel, when a jolly man delivers all the gifts to all the good little girls and boys. A year of being good can fill the land under a tree with wrappings of hopes and dreams and desires. Rewards for the nice. But what for the naughty? Coal in a stocking? Is that justice?

Atticus Franklin Harper was a naughty boy. Atticus could make The Grinch cry. He could make Mr. Scrooge feel fear. He sat with a bat so that he could take a swing and knock Santa out flat. He had a big problem with the big toy maker. Santa delivered gifts that were equal to a family's social stature. Rarely did a poor child get something like a laptop fresh in

the box, or a baby doll stain free complete with tags. The children living like royalty with rich parents never receives a fixed-up bike or re-painted toy car. Atticus found that unfair.

Last Christmas, Santa left under his tree a box of busted action figures and a radio that still used tubes to play. The knobs were missing too. They were gifts a thrift store threw out. He wanted revenge. He waited with club in hand hiding behind the Christmas tree. Christmas Tree?

Christmas branch was more accurate. The branch had empty beer cans as ornaments with empty cigarette packs as garland. His parents would drink a beer and hang it with an ornament hook that they bought at the dollar store. There were some homemade bells and stringed popcorn. One set of uncolored lights illuminated the room like a dirty headlight on an unlit street. He knew his parents wouldn't wake from their whiskey-spiked eggnog toasts a few hours earlier. They will sleep soundly. He will have to face his nemesis alone.

His father worked at a bowling alley fixing things. His mother was a cashier at a run-down grocery store in walking distance. Both places stopped any holiday cheer. The Christmas parties and holiday bonuses were as dead as Marley with a ghost of a chance of ever visiting this planet again.

Yes, Atticus is a naughty boy, but he is living in a nasty world. Atticus is 12 years old.

Atticus Franklin Harper, spent the months leading to this night, causing grief and fright from morning to night. It started on the first day of the new year. A police car was hiding behind a sign waiting to pull over any speedsters. The cop hung his head to relieve the hangover pain from the New Year's Eve bash he attended. Atticus snuck behind the car where there was a discarded eight-foot Christmas tree from the Dawson's place. He tied the stump with a forgotten strand of

lights and tied the other end of lights to the hitching post on the squad car. Afterwards he crossed the street and waited.

After twenty minutes a chugging dull blue Prius went speeding by. The policeman turned his lights on and stomped on the gas. Slush and mud went flying. An ice patch grabbed the tires causing a fishtail with the vehicle. Once straightened the squad car barreled down the street dragging a dancing twirling Tannenbaum.

February, Atticus was able to send his teacher, Mrs. Epilly, to the hospital and a student, Mickey Martini to a week of detention. The prank was simple. Switch the student's Valentine's gift of a chocolate bar in a gift basket, with a ghost pepper chocolate bar. It was easy to alter the candy's wrapper with the other. During lunch an ambulance was heard screaming to the school. Mrs. Epilly was rushed to the hospital with breathing problems. Since the candy was in the gift basket from the brown-nosing Mickey, he got detention.

In spring Atticus mowed down all his neighbors newly planted flowers while getting paid to cut their grass. In Summer he found five cases of jellybeans behind a store in a dumpster, and some jars of food coloring. That night he snuck into the community pool area, liberating all the colorful jelled eggs into the clear chlorinated water. He poured the food coloring into the filter system. The next morning the top of the pool looked like a pastel rainbow of splotches. When the filters were turned on, jets sprayed purple foam into the pool.

When Autumn came, Atticus stopped being bad. Not because he ran out of ideas, but because the town was expecting him to be bad. Mayhem spread through the town as people made their own accidents. Copycat troublemakers created mischief on every street. Atticus always had an alibi by being with someone all the time. He was biding his time for Christmas. It was a difficult period for him, especially Halloween when tricks were pretty much mandatory. Atticus stayed good.

That was then, this was now. The clock on the cable box was radiating 12:02. Atticus's grip on the bat moistens. A dampness fills his forehead like dew on the morning's unraked leaves.

12:05 ...12:06 ...12:10.

Atticus Franklin Harper relaxes. He says, "Santa is not coming. Of course, Santa is not coming. Santa only visits good kids. And I am naughty." Atticus rides his train of thought in whispers. "What about the coal? Who delivers the coal?"

"I do." A jolly voice boomed.

Atticus views a man of thinness and height. His skin blends in the darkness. His teeth glisten white. Where Santa sported perceptible scarlet and white, this man before him dresses in Earth tones. In the person's hand is a smudged shoulder bag. What astonishes Atticus the most is that the man never stops smiling. An unbiassed smile, but oozing with warmth and fellowship.

"My name is Pete. Take a seat for we shall now meet and greet each other."

Unconsciously Atticus adds, "Neat."

"Pretty much." The gentleman had an odd accent. One Atticus was sure he never heard before, but he is only 12 after all. "You sir, must be one Atticus Franklin Harper. Pleased to meet you. Santa gives his regards. Well?"

"Well, what?" Atticus asks.

"Are you not going to place the bat down and ask me to sit?"

Forgetting he held a bat; Atticus limply drops it on the floor. He motions to an upholstered chair. Atticus drops himself to the floor leaning against a wall. Pete sits down.

“Well! Have you not been a busy child this year? You are a mischievous one, are you not?” The smile broadens. “I was too in my time. I am from Belgium. I traveled with Santa a long long time ago. He passed out toys and gifts. I tossed out candy and sweets. A silly notion was used to scare the children back then. I would stuff bad kids in my bag and take them away. Why would I surround myself with such people? I assure you that I would not. I use this bag to give special gifts to special children. I give the gift of coal.”

The mesmerized Atticus shakes his head to find reality. A small sense of danger entered his thoughts. “Coal is a dumb gift. It’s nothing more than a dirty rock.”

“Haha. You know so little of life child.” Pete looks around the room. “I see life is not easy or kind to you. You have to figure your own way through it. You wear disappointment like another would wear a hat. That is a gift my friend. Hardship creates greatness. You’re like coal.”

Pete tosses a chunk of coal to Atticus. “Atticus you have a choice to be what that coal is. Do what it can do. Or give what it could give. If you stay as you are, you will darken everything you touch. You will spread gloom wherever you go. If you fuel a fire in you, you can brighten people’s lives. You can share your warmth with a purpose to help others. You can be someone’s comfort.”

Pete grins, “And if you keep taking the pressure life has been giving you, that shell you created around you will bust revealing the diamond in you. And you will learn that not only is a diamond a beautiful gem, but it is also one of the strongest substances on this World. What do you think of that?”

Atticus Franklin Harper picks up the coal and examines it passing it from one hand to the other. “What if I just throw it at you and beat you with my bat? What do you think of

that?"

Pete opens his bag where an echoing sound bursts out. Children screaming. "Remember Atticus. I did warn you I was mischievous too ..."

Christmas morning Atticus made breakfast for his parents. He left the house early to try to make amends to those he hurt. He started by apologizing to the neighbors and shoveling their driveways. As the years passed, Atticus turned from a lump of coal to a furnace of helping all. He finally developed into a diamond to society. Christmas coal is not a punishment. It is a reminder to all that there are no bad children. Under the right circumstances, any child can be the diamond inside them.

A month after Christmas, Santa caught up with Pete. "Hi Pete. Can I have my *Baby Screams A-Lot* doll back? I want to put it back in the failed toys room."

"Sure Nick. Thanks for letting me borrow it. It gave me just the right pressure I needed."