

RICHARD ANDERSEN

Melchior's Gift

—For Flore

WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW about Christopher Newman can be covered in less time than it takes a cockroach to find shelter when a light is turned on. He's over thirty, twice married, recently fired from his sixth job in ten years, and living in a four-storey walk up that gives new meaning to the words 'studio apartment.' Everything is in one room except for the toilet. The reasons for his failed marriages he's still in denial about; the jobs he knows all about because he lost every one of them for the same reason: bad attitude. He started developing this attitude on his first job and has been honing it to perfection ever since. A thirteen-year-old delivery boy working for twenty-five cents an hour plus tips, he carried meds from a pharmacist who never referred to him as anything other than "Shmuckface." At first, Christopher thought Shumuckface was some kind of special pet name that meant he was cute or something. When he found out what it really meant, he started calling Mr. Shapiro "Mr. Malaka," an expression he picked up from the Greek kids in his neighbourhood that can't be translated into English. When Mr. Shapiro found out what he thought "Malaka" means, Christopher became the Brooklyn Pharmacy's ex-delivery boy.

This scene replayed itself in Christopher's life as he terminated his way through ditch digger, lathe operator, strawberry picker, carpet loomer, dishwasher, deckhand, garbage man, school teacher, and most recently: bicycle messenger. Each job he lost sharpened his tongue for the next one. By the time he was a graduate assist-

ant correcting student essays for lazy professors at New York University, he was a pro at responding to people who thought their mission in life was to make him miserable. His last essay came the day he saw the head of the writing program blow the contents of his nose onto a patch of lawn in Washington Square and commented that now he knew what Walt Whitman meant when he wrote that grass was the Lord's handkerchief.

From all these jobs Christopher learned the same two lessons: people in charge can't take jokes and he can't take work—at least not the kind of work that has nothing to do with who you are as a person, reduces you to little more than the hours you've exchanged for a paycheck, forces you to cram what's important in your life into your time off, and leaves you relieved to have been fired even when you don't know where your next month's rent is coming from.

Enter Bloomingdale's. It's no secret that every fall department stores all over the country hire thousands of people at the lowest possible wages only to fire them once the Christmas shopping crunch is over. Christopher applied at Bloomingdale's because it was the easiest department store to reach from his apartment on the Lower East Side. Biking to his interview to save three dollars from that day's allowance, he calculated how much money he might accumulate if the city's Indian summer held through December, but this was a short-lived glimmer of hope in an otherwise *Annus Dilapidatus*. In addition to having to chop vegetables on a Happy Face cutting board, Christopher was out of work, behind in his rent, without cable, and recently informed by the Department of Unemployment that former bicycle messengers are independent contractors and don't qualify for compensation. If he wanted New York to subsidize his newly launched writing career, he needed to work for two weeks or earn \$200 at a place that contributed to the state's unemployment fund.

The interview at Bloomingdale's went well. Substituting "English teacher" for "bicycle messenger" on his application turned out to be a good idea. English had been human resource associate Jenny's major in college. Her favourite writer was Spencer Johnson, and she and Christopher chatted about his work easily despite Christopher's thinking Jenny had forgotten the learned Dr. Johnson's first name was Samuel. In fact, they hit it off so well that within ten minutes of their meeting, Jenny knew Christopher was perfect for

the Perfect Gift Ideas Department. All he had to do was pass the math test.

Christopher's checkbook gives him more trouble. He was even able to repay the kindness of former fellow students by allowing a current fellow applicant to copy his answers: a tall, thin, black man who sported an outdated Afro, a gold tooth with a diamond star in the middle, and painter pants that covered more of his sneakers than his behind. Christopher expected the man to thank him when he left the test room, but instead the man asked him for money for the subway. Christopher handed over two of the three bucks he'd saved by biking to Bloomingdale's. The man then asked Christopher if he could spare enough change to pick up a slice of pizza on the way.

Christopher gave the man the last of his dollars and told him it was his last dollar just to see what the man would do. The man said, "Thanks, man" and stuffed the cash into his pocket.

Biking home pissed and penniless, Christopher wondered how long this particular drama has been running in New York. You leave your apartment to run a few errands, and while you're walking down the street, some seemingly desperate person asks you for money. You hand over what you can spare only to discover it's not enough. The down-and-out wants more. Then, after you've finished your errands and you're on your way back to your apartment, the same person, without any sense of recognition, asks you again to spare some change. You may be out of work, behind in your rent, and eating tuna fish out of a can every night for dinner, but are those any reasons for the less privileged to suffer?

The Perfect Gift Ideas Department turned out to be an alcove stuffed with junk that Bloomingdale's hadn't been able to unload during the previous twelve months. Gold ashtrays with birds poised to hold cigarette butts in their beaks, silver bookends made to look like the heads and tails of dachshunds, porcelain dinner plates featuring scenes from *Gone With the Wind*. Those sorts of things. And the people who bought them—mostly husband-subsidized wives for whom spending was a form of recreation—were worse. Their favourite item this year is a Plexiglas couple that looks like an eight-inch clothespin. By pressing or not pressing the legs, you can make the couple simulate either kissing or screwing. Christopher has no idea what the lovers are used for, but "Mrs. Dr. Klugman" bought thirty of them at \$39.95 each to hold placecards at a dinner party she was throwing.

Unfortunately, not many bought much else, and the Perfect Gift Ideas Department soon fell \$2,600 behind what it was at the same time the previous year. Christopher's supervisor told him to get more aggressive with the customers. Get more aggressive? Christopher hates it when salespeople approach you the minute you walk into a store. You don't even get a chance to see what's on the shelf before they're after you to buy something. Christopher told his supervisor his idea about giving what Bloomingdale's calls its 'guests' time to look over the merchandise before pouncing on them, but she looked at him as if he'd been living all his life in Nebraska.

When his sales improved only slightly, Christopher's supervisor told him she was looking for someone to make an example of—other departments were down too—and he had become her leading candidate. If he didn't sell something big and something soon he'd be pedalling messages again for a living. Desperation being the mother of creativity, Christopher convinced the people at the Terrific Texts Desk to give him a few choice hardcovers to demonstrate how the dachshund bookends worked. Then, in a lame attempt to raise his sales, he bought the only book that didn't have to do with success skills—a biography of Marilyn Monroe. He didn't even use his 10% employee discount.

WARNING: There are people in department stores—vice presidents and the like—who pose as 'guests' to make sure you're doing your job. They can do anything from give you a \$100 bill and try to get you to cash it without your supervisor's okaying it to pretend to be shoplifters to make sure you use the right language when alerting security. At Bloomingdale's, where shoplifters are referred to as 'customers'—as in 'There's a customer in Perfect Gift Ideas who may need some help choosing an ashtray'—Christopher's last day came when one of these watchdogs asked him what he'd recommend for someone who played cards all the time. Before Christopher could stop them, two words leapt from his mouth: "A shrink." Two hours later, he was on the street.

The problem now was what to do there. He'd earned enough money to qualify for unemployment but was far short of what he'd planned to spend on Christmas presents. He could give the unread Monroe biography to his brother—a certified member of the Celebrity Worship Club—but that left everyone else. What to do?

The answer was staring him in the face: Bloomingdale's Food Emporium. A quick reconnaissance past several shelves was all Christopher needed to realize he could get all his gifts there without eating up the money he needed to last until his first check from the governor arrived: an eight-ounce jar of Tiptree's Little Strawberry preserves for his grandmother, a six-piece box of Neuchatel chocolates for his mom, a four-slice package of sultana cake from Harrods for Uncle Mike, a can of eight bags of Christmas tea from Fauchon for Aunt Rosemary—the kind of small, pricey, European presents they'd never heard of, appealed to their Brooklyn need to feel superior, and made up in quality what they lacked in quantity.

"Yo, man, where you been?"

It was the fellow who copied Christopher's answers on the math exam and then had the nerve to ask him for money for the subway and pizza. Only now the man was wearing a shirt and a tie and an apron that said, "Bloomingdale's for the Gift that Counts."

"How you doin'?" the man asked. You'd have thought he and Christopher were old friends.

"Not so good; I just got fired."

"No shit! That's bad, man. An' you shoppin' after you just got fired?"

"I gotta buy presents. Which reminds me, remember that five dollars I"

"Forget that, man. That's history."

"That isn't history. You owe me"

"Hey, what you so uptight about? I'll get you what you want and pay you back on my store discount."

"You'd do that?"

"You just tell me what you need an' leave the rest to me."

It took Christopher less than thirty minutes to find and list the smallest sizes of seven gifts, mostly jams and chocolate. "Now" the man told him, "you get lost for an hour an' your stuff be here when you get back."

Christopher walked to Bergdoff's, the only place in Manhattan where you can see real live tropical fish. Big ones too. They live in tanks on the second floor. And because so few people know about them, you usually have the fish all to yourself. He often dropped by when he was a bicycle messenger and needed a break from the noise and congestion of the street.

But this time is different. The place is so packed with people, he can't sit in one of the overstuffed chairs against the wall and watch the fish like he would a movie from the back of an empty theatre; he has to get right up to the tanks to keep people from walking between him and the fish. And he's still distracted from much of what he wants to see by the reflection of all the shoppers in the glass. He wonders if he will ever look so confident and comfortable, if he will ever be able to hold onto a job long enough to make enough money to buy Christmas presents for his family in a place like Bergdoff's.

This may be the last year they'll celebrate the holiday together. At least in the way they're used to. On December 27, Christopher's mom is taking her parents to a nursing home not far from her house in Oregon, and Christopher's aunt and uncle are moving to Arizona to open a retail business. Christopher's brother lives in the West Village, but he might as well live in West Virginia for all they see of each other. That leaves only Christopher and his sister, and she's looking for an overseas teaching job because she wants something other than money for babysitting unruly teenagers while their parents are at work.

What happened to them? Even after Christopher's father died, the family continued to eat dinner together on Christmas Eve, decorate the tree, and go to midnight mass. That most of them had stopped believing in a god let alone a church didn't matter. After mass, they'd go to Christopher's grandparents' place for breakfast and open all the gifts they'd bought each other. It was hokey and Norman Rockwellish and very un-Manhattan, but that feeling of doing something together as a family didn't exist in any other part of their lives at any other time of the year.

This year, like last year and the years before that, Christopher and his sister will take the train to Brooklyn, where their uncle will meet them and their grandparents on the street so he won't have to park his Lexus and risk its not being there when he returns. Then it's off to Croton-on-Hudson for Butterball turkey and television football. The seven family members will exchange gifts after the final gun of the final game, but it will be obvious to each one of them that their hearts are no longer in it. And talk about perfect gift ideas! Ugly ties, gaudy pins, dull socks, and books no one's heard of let alone wants to read. Several years ago, Christopher's uncle made such a hit with what he gave his nephew, he's been giving

him the same thing ever since: an inflatable woman to keep him company until he finds someone who'll stay around long enough to replace her. Christopher still unwraps the paper, but he no longer opens the box.

Then it hits him. He had come to look at the fish in Bergdoff's when he lost his job as a graduate assistant at New York University. He was back six months later when he got fired from his bicycle messenger job. Now he's with the fish again after being let go at Bloomingdale's. Is this becoming a pattern? Or a rite of passage? Christopher's read that being fired is as much a going to as a leaving from, but it always leaves him feeling stagnant. As if he can't get off Square One. And stagnation, as we all know, is not really a standing still but a deterioration. A kind of rotting. And the more Christopher deteriorates, the more isolated he feels. It's almost as if all the people passing to and fro in the reflection of the fish tank are rushing for some train that's going to leave its station without him. And what is Christopher left with each time he finds himself standing alone on the platform? A sinking kind of feeling that would border on pain if he hadn't long ago learned to numb himself against what he deep down sees as another failure.

Christopher's family used to support him in these times of need. Though none ever offered any help of the green variety, they were always there to nod their heads in sympathy. Now most of them are lighting out for new territories. Christopher tells his uncle and aunt they're crazy to move to a state where the people refused to recognize Martin Luther King Day until their chance for a Super Bowl was in jeopardy, he warns his mom that moving her parents to a nursing home in Oregon will kill them sooner than anything on the streets of Brooklyn, and he cautions his sister that the person who wakes up in Rome or Paris or London is the same one who woke up in Manhattan. Nobody listens. They may be missing the boat as well as the train, but he's still the one left watching fish.

On his way back to Bloomingdale's, Christopher sees one of the store's Santas walking toward him from Lexington Avenue. He tells the Santa he just passed about some loose reindeer grazing on the islands that separate traffic on Park Avenue. "Fuck the reindeer," Santa replies.

The juxtaposition of foul words with the image he had in mind—even if it was a joke—hits Christopher harder than his be-

ing sacked. Without being fully aware of his need, he'd expected Santa to act like, well ... Santa. What he got was a cold-blooded vertebrate not much different than the pretty but insensitive fish at Bergdoff's.

Sinking into what was once called "The Basement" but is now "The Terrace Level," Christopher notices the attempts of the people at Bloomingdale's to cloak the store's nature in costumes: "Start your Dream in a Pair of Polo Slacks," "The Wine for People Who Know a Sprat from a Mackerel," "You Can Do it in a DKNY Dress," "Why Go To London When You Can Be In Nirvana?"

"Where you been?" It's the man with the Afro, gold tooth, and Bloomingdale's apron. He hands over a shopping bag that Christopher almost drops with the weight. A quick glance inside reveals the largest rather than the smallest sizes of everything on Christopher's list. "I can't afford this. I told you"

"Forget about what you told me, man. Merry Christmas."

"You mean ...?"

"I mean Merry Christmas, Bro."

"But I don't even know your"

"You tryin' to get me in trouble, or you just naturally slow?"

Because the bag is too heavy for even a former professional bicycle messenger to carry without tearing, Christopher leaves his bike chained to the pole of a "Don't Even Think About Parking Here" sign and heads for the downtown track of the Lexington Avenue subway. Able to sit down after the usual mass exodus at 42nd Street, he takes a closer look at what's in the bag: two ten-pound boxes of Neuchatel chocolates, eight jars of Tipree preserves, several flavours of tea cakes from Harrods, and more than a few tins of tea from Fauchon to serve as packing. There's even a bottle of Dom Perignon.

Christopher imagines his Christmas in Croton: the usual turkey dinner at halftime of the college game followed by the usual fruit pie dessert at halftime of the pro game, the annual exchange of acrylic socks and polyester scarves, and his third inflatable woman in as many years. The image of this year's body pillow is immediately followed by a picture of people in need waiting for him when he gets out of the subway: a gauntlet of extended hands, pitiful faces, and prefabricated excuses for why they need help. By the time he surfaces at Cooper Union, Christopher knows how he's going to celebrate the season, and when the gifts run out, he's got some unfinished business back at Bloomingdale's.