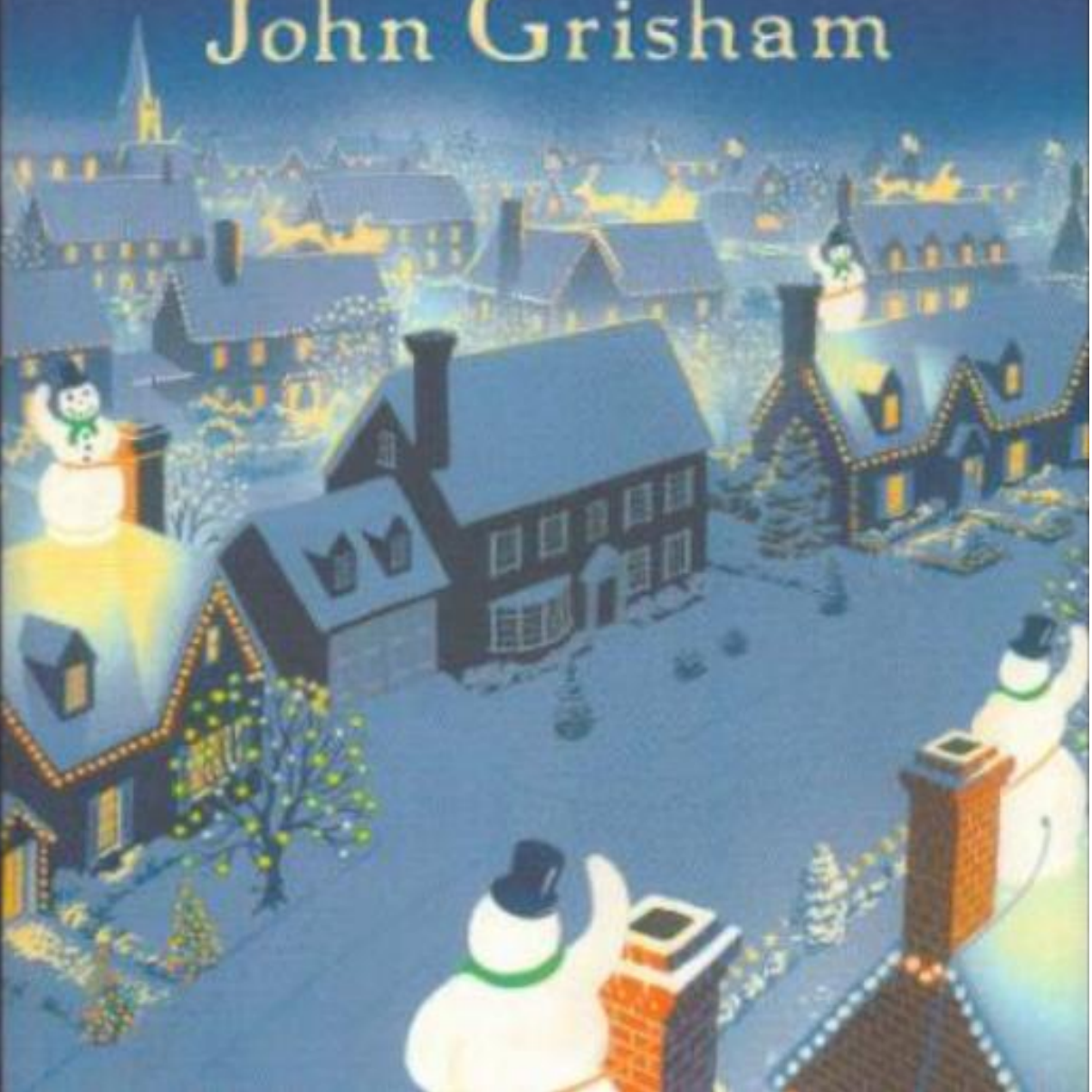


SKIPPING CHRISTMAS

— A NOVEL —

John Grisham



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US \$19.95 /\$29.95 CAN

ISBN 0-385-50583-3

51995



9 780385 505833





PUBLISHED BY DOUBLEDAY
a division of Random House, Inc.
1540 Broadway, New York, New York 10036

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Book design by Maria Carella

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data applied for

ISBN 0-385-50583-3 (Hardcover)
ISBN 0-375-43162-4 (Large Print)
ISBN 0-385-50624-4 (Limited Edition)


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Printed in the United States of America

November 2001
First Edition

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2



Skipping
Christmas

Twenty

After yet another foreign carol, and during a boisterous round of applause for the Enrique and Marty duet, Luther slipped unnoticed from the kitchen and eased through the darkness of his garage. Dressed in snow attire-overcoat, wool cap, muffler, boots, gloves-he shuffled along, aided by the plastic cane he'd vowed not to use, trying not to wince with each step, though both ankles were swollen and raw.

The cane was in his right hand, a large envelope in his left. The snow was still light, but the ground was covered.

At the sidewalk, he turned and gazed upon the gathering in his living room. A packed house. A tree that improved with the distance. Above them a borrowed Frosty.

Hemlock was quiet. The fire truck and ambulance and police cars were gone, thankfully. Luther looked east and west and saw not a single person moving about. Most of them were in his house, singing along now, rescuing him from an episode that would undoubtedly be remembered as one of his more curious.

The Scheel house was well lit on the outside, but almost completely dark within. Luther crept up their driveway, his boots rubbing his wounds, the cane making the entire venture possible. On their porch he rang the doorbell and looked again at his house directly across the street. Ralph Brixley and Judd Bellington came around the corner, hurriedly stringing lights on Luther's boxwoods.

He closed his eyes for a second, shook his head, looked at his feet.

Walt Scheel answered the door with a pleasant "Well, Merry Christmas, Luther."

"And Merry Christmas to you," Luther said with a genuine smile.

"You're missing your party."

"Just have a second, Walt. Could I step in?"

"Of course."

Luther limped into the foyer, where he parked himself on a matt. His boots had accumulated snow and he didn't want to leave tracks.

"Can I take your coat?" Walt asked. Something was baking in the kitchen, and Luther took that as a good sign.

"No, thanks. How's Bev?"

"She's having a good day, thanks. We started to come over and see Blair, but the snow

started. So how's the fiancé?"

"A very nice young man," Luther said.

Bev Scheel entered from the dining room and said hello and Merry Christmas. She was wearing a red holiday sweater and looked the same, as far as Luther could tell. Rumor was that her doctor had given her six months.

"A pretty nasty fall," Walt said with a smile.

"Could've been worse," Luther said, grinning, trying to enjoy himself as the butt of the joke. We won't dwell on that subject, he declared to himself.

He cleared his throat and said, "Look, Blair's here for ten days, so we won't be taking the cruise. Nora and I would like for you guys to have it." He lifted the envelope slightly, sort of waved it at them.

Their reaction was delayed as glances were exchanged, thoughts were attempted. They were stunned, and for quite a spell couldn't speak. So Luther plowed ahead. "The flight leaves at noon tomorrow. You'll need to get there early to get the names changed and such, a slight hassle, but it'll be worth it. I've already called my travel agency this afternoon. Ten days in the Caribbean, beaches, islands, the works. It'll be a dream vacation."

Walt shook his head no, but just slightly. Bev's eyes were moist. Neither could speak until Walt managed to say, with little conviction, "We can't take it, Luther. It's not right."

"Don't be silly. I didn't purchase the travel insurance, so if you don't go then the entire package is wasted."

Bev looked at Walt, who was already looking at her, and when their eyes locked Luther caught it. It was crazy, but why not?

"I'm not sure my doctor will allow it," she said feebly.

"I've got that Lexxon deal on the front burner," Walt mumbled to himself as he scratched his head.

"And we promised the Shorts we'd be there New Year's Eve," Bev added, sort of musing.

"Benny said he might drop in." Benny was their oldest son, who hadn't been home in years.

"And what about the cat?" Bev asked.

Luther let them shuffle and strain, and when they ran out of their flimsy excuses he said, "It's a gift from us to you, a sincere, heart-felt, no-strings-attached Christmas offering to two people who are, at this very moment, having a difficult time finding an excuse. Just go for it,

okay?"

"I'm not sure I have the right clothes," Bev said predictably.

To which Walt replied, "Don't be ridiculous."

With their resistance crumbling, Luther moved in for the kill. He shoved the envelope at Walt. "It's all here-airline tickets, cruise passes, brochures, everything, including the phone number of the travel agency."

"What's the cost, Luther? If we go, then well reimburse you."

"It's a simple gift, Walt. No cost, no payback. Don't make it complicated."

Walt understood, but his pride got in his way. "We'll just have to discuss it when we get back."

There, they were already gone and back. "We can talk about everything then."

"What about the cat?" Bev asked.

Walt pinched his chin in serious thought and said, "Yes, that's a real problem. Too late to call the kennel."

With uncanny timing, a large black furry cat sneaked into the foyer, rubbed itself on Walt's right leg, then gave a long look up at Luther.

"We can't just leave him," Bev was saying.

"No, we can't," Walt said.

Luther hated cats.

"We could ask Jude Becker," Bev said.

"No problem. I'll take care of him," Luther said, swallowing hard, knowing perfectly well that Nora would get the chore.

"Are you sure?" Walt asked, a little too quickly.

"No problem."

The cat took another look at Luther and slunk away. The feeling was mutual.

The good-byes took much longer than the hellos, and when Luther hugged Bev he thought she would break. Under the bulky sweater was a frail and ailing woman. The tears were halfway down her cheeks. "I'll call Nora," she whispered. "Thanks."

Old tough-as-nails Walt had moist eyes too. On the front steps, during their last handshake, he said, "This means so much, Luther. Thank you."

When the Scheels were once again locked away inside, Luther started home. Unburdened by the thick envelope now, shed of its pricey tickets and thick brochures, freed of all the

self-indulgence contained therein, his steps were a little quicker. And, filled with the satisfaction of making the perfect gift, Luther walked straight and proud with hardly a limp.

At the street he stopped and looked over his shoulder. The Scheels' home, dark as a cave just moments earlier, was now alive with lights being flipped on both upstairs and down. They'll pack all night, Luther thought to himself.

A door opened across the street, and the Galdy family made a noisy exit from the Kranks' living room. Laughter and music escaped with them and echoed above Hemlock. The party showed little signs of breaking up.

Standing there at the edge of the street, light snow gathering on his wool cap and collar, gazing at his freshly decorated house with almost the entire neighborhood packed into it, Luther paused to count his blessings. Blair was home, and she'd brought with her a very nice, handsome, polite young man, who was quite obviously crazy about her. And who, at that moment, was very much in charge of the party along with Marty Whatshisname.

Luther himself was lucky to be standing, as opposed to lying peacefully on a slab at Franklin's Funeral Home, or pinned to a bed in ICU at Mercy Hospital, tubes running everywhere. Thoughts of snowballing down his roof, headfirst, still horrified him. Very lucky indeed.

Blessed with friends and neighbors who would sacrifice their plans for Christmas Eve to rescue him.

He looked up to his chimney where the Brixleys' Frosty was watching him. Round smiling face, top hat, corncob pipe. Through the flurries Luther thought he caught a wink from the snowman.

Starving, as usual, Luther suddenly craved smoked trout. He began trekking through the snow. "I'll eat a fruitcake too," he vowed to himself.

Skipping Christmas. What a ridiculous idea.

Maybe next year.