



THE  
CHRISTMAS  
TURKEYS

and Other Misadventures  
of the Season

GERALD R. TONER

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## CRIMES OF CHRISTMAS

**W**hen her parents named her Jane, their last name being Dough, they exhibited a rare burst of wit. Since Jane didn't share their humor, realizing as she did that their whimsy was at her expense, when she graduated from college and accepted the job at the law school, she changed her last name to Dougherty. So at moments like this, although there had been no moments precisely like this in her vanilla life, Jane was almost gleeful to give her now legal name, Jane Elizabeth Dougherty, to the authorities. This moment was unique because she sensed that she might be inching towards incarceration, and that was a totally new experience for Jane.

She had often wondered what the dingy, basement headquarters of the campus police would be like. Now she knew. Squeezed behind a vintage, World War II issue conference desk, dusky green and rimmed by a dull, brown brass beading, Jane sat upright in an equally drab folding chair. She knew she was under suspicion. And well she should be, since she was guilty.

Chief of Campus Police James Shue IV, with whom Jane had often shared communion over his “joke” name, had excused himself to take a phone call in the other room. What had been promised to take “just a moment” had turned into several. That gave Jane time to look around, to catalogue her surroundings, to organize its dimensions in her mind, and to create little, imaginary computer windows, one layered within the next, of the steps that would lead to her final arrest and conviction. Time was a commodity of which Jane was abundantly endowed. Time came with her station as the law school’s head librarian and her status as a single woman. And too much time was one of the reasons that had led to her sorrowful, late life introduction to crime.

Even for a good-sized, but modestly endowed, state university, the offices of the campus police were spare. And the interview room into which she had been ushered was downright Spartan. Beige walls were adorned only by a few certificates verifying that Chief Shue was recognized by the state as a law enforcement officer. Brown blinds, stained by time, hung down from the single, rectangular window near the ceiling. Light, such as it was, crept in from a window well. The room had one door, one desk, two chairs. There were no lamps. Fluorescent tubes, fixed within an old metal grid, were centered within a checkerboard of yellowing, pressed-board, ceiling tiles. Not very high-tech, to say the least.

Jane leaned back as far as she could in her creaking, metal folding chair. Her long, spindly legs slid forward and

her too knobby knees hit the table's leg. She extended her lean arms forward, using her thin fingers to maneuver her legs free. If only she had taken the piano lessons urged on her by her mother some thirty-five years before. Then her elongated frame, her less than modest bosom, high cheeks and prominent chin would have defined her as exquisite, elegant or even exotic diva of the keyboard, beautiful and mysterious. Since she played no instrument, other than the computer keyboard, she was nicknamed "Slim" by her colleagues, male and female alike.

The room's only other furnishing was a wall clock, which in the silence created by Chief Shue's departure, clicked away the seconds in its steady, quartz cadence, resounding almost as noticeably as pealing, Christmas bells. Ah yes, she thought, Christmas. Christmas and too much time. The two elements that had led her down this path and ultimately to this basement.

Actually her life of crime began at Thanksgiving. The Thanksgiving rush is not nearly as dramatic nor ostentatious nor crass as that surrounding Christmas, but it is there, just the same. People hurrying to bring closure to projects at work, desperate to say "that's done" about almost anything. Professors hurrying to prepare final lectures, law students hastening to catch up on casebook outlines, staff frazzled over the entire process. No one with enough time, let alone extra time. No time to take stock, to do something extra, to make some special effort. Jane, on the other hand, had plenty of time. And that reality is what started her thinking.

Jane knew that she possessed a talent never fully appreciated. As far back as grade school, Jane was imbued with the art of mimicry. She could copy a fairly complex watercolor, or even oil painting, before her peers were mastering horses and flowers and skies and trees. Even better, she could study another student's handwriting and with a stroke or two for practice, make it her own. Of course, the problem was that it wasn't her own.

So through the years she had done well in school, but never excelled. She could organize and catalogue and place into progression images, thoughts, words and collections of almost anything. But somehow, though it seemed to build inside of her like single drops of water behind a massive dam, originality continued to collect and yet never be released. Until this year.

It all started with a box of Christmas cards. Fifty to be precise. Jane purchased them the year before at a quarter of their original price. Beautiful, gold-pressed, Christmas cards featuring a shining star and a collection of exquisitely rendered men, women and children from around the world. Black and white, western and eastern, all reaching out to the star for warmth and light. The cards bore the simple statement: "One Light, one world." The weekend following Thanksgiving, after her Dough parents had repacked and returned to their second home in South Carolina, Jane sat down, as she did every year, to carefully pen her Christmas messages to friends and family. At the end of the morning she had exhausted her list, dispensed with care and thoughtfulness, from Joe Abbott to Linda

Yost. She had fifteen cards remaining and, as always, time to write many more.

Her excess inventory bothered her all day Sunday. Waste always bothered Jane. Yet the list was completed and Jane was a thorough and precise archivist, not given to either adding names or discarding cards. That Monday, watching Professor Donald Hall breeze through the library turnstyle, in a rush as always, eyes down, his mind fixed on some point moments or even hours in the future, a flash of fancy hit her. Hall needed more time. From observation and a keen mind for history, Jane knew that Hall had a family, a wife and two grown children living out-of-state. She knew their names from his online curriculum vitae, she knew their addresses, and she knew that he seldom spoke of wife or children. And she knew from brief snatches of conversation which he permitted when coming by her office to pick up a new publication or a volume obtained from another library that he yearned for them in a sort of hopeless limbo. Somehow, allowing his profession to possess him, he had simply grown estranged from their lives. Lack of words and expressions of love and simple time together had created a solid prison wall of separation between them.

Jane stared into the suffused, fluorescent lighting overhead and sighed. She could hear Chief Shue trying to end his conversation in the adjoining room. And she thought back to Professor Hall and the beginning of her Christmas crimes.

That Monday evening after Thanksgiving she composed three cards, carefully drafting her text, one to Hall's son

and one to his daughter, and finally one to his wife. Each one bore a slightly different perspective, Jane fusing her mind into Hall's, enriching her message with the emotions she imagined he possessed somewhere deeply hidden within. In each she reiterated that he loved them, that he now realized he had allowed the years to dribble by without telling them, that he had been unwise in his expenditure of time, that he had been observant of his own needs and the needs of his students and colleagues at the expense of those whom he loved the most. And he asked their forgiveness. He also requested their confidence—secrecy in his message to them—and that they would simply accept his words and remember them in their hearts without revelation to another soul, even him. Jane's dam was leaking, even though she didn't recognize it at the time.

And though the words and expressions and handwriting were meant to be Professor Hall's, Jane deceived herself when she wrote them, thinking the emotions fueling them were solely his. The author is never completely divorced from her creation. Jane was a keen observer, a master forger, a Christmas chameleon of sorts, but in taking on another persona, she was revealing something of herself.

She held the cards for several days. Jane understood perfectly well the term "officious inter-meddler" and that it was not a phrase of endearment in the law. Though a part of her said "don't, his life isn't yours, you have no true perception of his conflicts, of the personal dynamics that make things work or not work in his family," there was the other side of Jane—the secret, edgy, gleeful side—that

thrilled at the risk of finally dabbling in the forbidden. So she wrote them, sealed them, addressed them, and under the cover of darkness as she left the library one night, mailed them.

Jane noted the gray of dark becoming the dimness of dusk.

Shue was still talking on the phone. The room's only voice was the steady heartbeat of the quartz clock. As she thought back on it, there was a hiccup in time when she could have let it go at that. For a brief respite her first foray into crime satisfied her. In fact, she retreated, temporarily resolved that her nefarious transactions were at an end. And then came Peter.

Peter, the bookish third year student whom she had befriended two years before. Peter, with a mop of blond hair and a florid complexion born of carrying around an extra fifty pounds far too early in life. Peter, the old soul, who always dressed like a lawyer, carried an old accordion-style lawyer's briefcase and seemed possessed of some past, prior life as a lawyer. Peter, who hadn't quite made it on the Journal, had placed second alternate on the International Moot Court team and, she was certain, would make a superb lawyer in his current incarnation. In her nearly twenty years of watching students come and go, she knew the ones whose cloth was cut for the law. Peter was one of them. But he lacked some nexus, some small, last collision between his effort to gain employment and an employer's recognition of his talents. Every new hire wasn't a law journal or moot court or Order of the Coif

type. Obviously, some students had to be in the bottom half of the class and most of those found jobs shortly after graduation. Peter's résumé was far more impressive. He was in the top quarter of his class. She knew because he had asked her to review his résumé in its first, handwritten draft, which was how she came to know so well Peter's almost too precise script, almost computer like repetition of "t's" and "s's" and various other letters that made one's handwriting distinctive.

Jane knew that another little communiqué with the hiring partner couldn't hurt. So she did what she had time to do and what Peter was too insecure to do. She wrote each of the hiring partners at each of the firms where Peter had been granted an "in" firm interview. Like everyone else, Peter knew that Jane had time to chat. So, in dribblets of conversation now and then, after class and sometimes on the way to another interview, Peter confided his hopes and fears to Jane. And like nuts to a squirrel, Jane gathered up information and stashed it away for an appropriate use.

Dear Mr. \_\_\_\_\_:

Thank you for the opportunity to meet the many lawyers at \_\_\_\_\_ and to see your offices first-hand. I have spent my entire life preparing to be a lawyer. I feel that my education in the law has, at best, just begun. I would like to continue it with you. I can not pretend that I will give you as much as I will receive in return. But over the years, I can assure you that I will give you everything I have. And I would be

proud to serve you and your clients and the law in a manner that would reflect well on my profession, my employer and myself. If I can do anything further to aid in your decision that I would be worthy of your employment, please call me. Again, it was a pleasure getting to know you and your firm and I hope our relationship has just begun.

Sincerely,  
Peter McCain

And so, within the week that Professor Hall's Christmas cards were sent on their way, Jane finished Peter's cards and carefully deposited them in the same slot at the campus post office. The slightly guilty thrill she had felt one week before when she half resolved never, ever to do such an illegal and unsolicited act again—was now part of her dim past.

Jane Dougherty was hooked. Like the high from some terribly illicit drug, her emotions soared up and then roller-coastered down. And she needed more. Though she fully realized that she may or may not be setting events into motion that might help or hurt, bring joy or anger, much good or potential harm, Jane was convinced that doing nothing was unacceptable. She was also feeling a strangely delicious thrill that was both altruistic and selfish, selflessly generous and unabashedly narcissistic. And she couldn't help herself.

So she worked at the selection process with even more zeal, giving up evening hours reading old legal thrillers by Erle