

T H E
**PRACTICAL
CHRISTMAS**

A SHORT STORY BY
BILL CAMERON

The award-winning author of **COUNTY LINE**



The Practical Christmas

by Bill Cameron

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Growing up, my sister Vicki and I bestowed a special name on every Christmas. There's the Toy Sequence: *Hot Wheels Christmas*, *Strange Change Christmas*, *Talking GI Joe Christmas* (also known by Vicki as the *Shut That Damned Thing Up Christmas*). Then there's the Big Bummer Sequence: *Salmonella Eggnog Christmas*, *Emergency Appendectomy Christmas*, and *Multi-Color Underwear Christmas*.

Of greater notoriety is the Oft-Retold-in-Horror Cycle: *Electrical Fire Christmas*, *Turkey with Larvae Stuffing Christmas* and *Aunt Nell's Affair Revealed Christmas* (followed eleven months later by *Aunt Nell's Second Affair Revealed Thanksgiving*.) Finally, there's my mother's Epoch of Let Us Never Speak of This Again, or what Vicki and I refer to simply as the Year of Danny Coots.

Danny was a fellow who drew a second glance. Long stringy hair, pointed chin, square gap where his four front teeth had once again. He claimed to have lost them in a bar brawl, and *you shoulda seen the other guy blah blah blah*. But Mom told us his face bounced off the steering wheel of his pickup when he rammed into a culvert. Seems he'd been paying more attention to his 8-track tape player than the gentle curve of the road ahead. Most of the time you couldn't tell about the teeth though—he had a pretty good bridge, as well as a habit of politely cutting apples into bite-size chunks or slicing his corn off the cob.

Mom had a thing for fixer-uppers. Vicki and I didn't know it at the time, but she met Danny about a week after his release from county jail: six months for car theft. He was the cousin of a neighbor's sister-in-law's uncle, something like that, who insisted Danny was all right, just a little wild around the edges. All he needed was the stabilizing influence of a settled woman. And besides, he hadn't exactly *stolen* the car, just borrowed it without permission. The only reason he got caught at all was the cops

happened to be there talking to the car's owner when Danny tried to return it.

In spite of his history, that first Christmas with Danny was pretty quiet. Mom wanted to call it the *Lookit the Pretty Kitty Christmas*—her gift from Danny. But Vicki and I dubbed it the *Aunt Nell Forgets Her Digestive Enzyme Christmas* and that name stuck, despite the fact a pure-bred Persian kitten was a definite attention-getter. Mom didn't want to accept such an extravagant gift, but Danny insisted he got it for a pittance from some guy on second shift at the call center where he worked. Fellow's wife was a breeder, allegedly—it would be a year before we'd come to suspect Tanya might be hot. So our new pretty kitty clawed her way onto the dinner table while Danny delighted and horrified us by popping the bridge out of his mouth onto his dinner plate. Both helped distract us all from the aromas Aunt Nell was emitting.

Mom and Danny ran hot and cold throughout the next year. He didn't take to the stabilizing influence of a settled woman nearly as well as advertised. He liked to stop for a beer or six on his way home from work, which didn't bother Mom if it happened every so often. But if it was gonna be frequent and it was gonna be six, she'd just as soon he went to his own home afterwards. Vicki and I were impressionable children after all.

Yet Danny obviously liked us, and wanted to be around. When my bike frame snapped, he took me to a shop to get it welded. He would read aloud to Vicki while she painted her nails, and he even let her braid his hair. Most Friday nights he took Mom out for dinner and movies or dancing. Vicki and I were old enough by then that they could leave us for an evening without a baby-sitter, and Danny ordered us a pizza and pop. Who could beat that?

But then in May, on his way home from one of his after-work jaunts, Danny got stopped by the police and had more than a little trouble with the field sobriety test. Sentence: 90-days in the county workhouse and six month suspended license. He got out after 65 days for good behavior, and his first stop was our apartment. Mom didn't bite. She was already in the hunt for other fixer-uppers. "Men with promise, Danny. Men without *jail*

time in their futures.”

“That’s over,” he pleaded. “Think about the good behavior.”

“Let some other woman think about it. I got kids.”

September and October came and went with no sign of Danny, but then in November he showed up near Vicki’s birthday with a dozen bottles of nail polish and a boxed set of Nancy Drew mysteries, plus a grocery sack of gourmet cat food for Tanya and Mom. He tried to give me a pocket knife but Mom vetoed that. Still, it was a warmish reunion and Mom agreed to let Danny take her to dinner that Friday. Pizza night was back on.

Two weeks later, a few days after *Aunt Nell Gets Hold of the Mulled Wine Thanksgiving*, Danny arranged to pick Vicki and I up after school. Danny’s big plan was Christmas shopping at the mall, followed by Chinese take-out. He asked Mom to loan him her station wagon—didn’t want to haul a big load around in the back of his truck. “A big load of what?” Mom muttered, but she gave him her car.

Danny, as it turned out, wanted to shop alone. We agreed to meet him at the fountain in the center of the mall around six o’clock. Vicki and I didn’t have much money to spend, but we usually only bought gifts for Mom anyway and we took care of that in a matter of seconds at the Earring Hut. The two of us wandered around for a little while together until Vicki ran into a couple of her friends and abruptly remembered she was an only child. While looking for something to spend my last coupla quarters on, I saw Danny in the checkout line at Penney’s buying a vacuum cleaner. I prayed it wasn’t for me. Talk about an ignominious addition to the Big Bummer Sequence: the *Hoover Upright Christmas*.

Danny was in high spirits when Vicki and I finally caught up with him at six. He had a big sack of wrapped packages slung over his shoulder. He grinned at us and wiggled his bridge in and out. “Let’s go get dinner!” At the car, we saw that he’d already made one or two drop-offs. I looked at Vicki and I could see what she was thinking—*Humongo-Haul Christmas*. The three of us barely fit in the car.

Back at the house, Mom showed less excitement. “How did you pay for all this, Danny?” she asked.

“Oh c’mon! Christmas bonus!”

“Yeah, right.”

The build-up to Christmas was almost unbearable. For the better part of a month, Vicki and I had to live with a mighty mountain of loot, none of which we could touch until the big day. Mom was tight-lipped. She implored Danny to return some of it, but he refused. *It’s too much*, she insisted. *Nothing’s too much for my babies*, Danny replied. Back and forth. Meanwhile, Vicki and I brainstormed on the perfect title for what was obviously going to be the best Christmas ever. Vicki advocated, simply, *The Best Christmas Ever*. “Bo-o-o-oring,” I said. I proposed *Justice At Last Christmas*. We argued for weeks, right up until Christmas Eve, when fate settled the debate for us.

Stolen Credit Card Christmas.

I have to admit, the police were pretty nice about it. They didn’t arrest us or anything. But they didn’t let us keep the loot either.

A cop came over and helped us load everything into Mom’s car, then followed us as we drove to the police station. When we carried the packages into the squad room we saw Danny sitting at a desk, his hands cuffed and hanging loosely between his knees. He looked up and tried a smile, but it came off sickly and hollow. They’d taken his teeth.

Christmas morning, Vicki and I opened packages of notebook paper and underwear. “It’s the Practical Christmas,” Mom declared. Vicki rolled her eyes in that *Yeah, right* way of hers, but neither of us said anything. If Mom wanted it to be the *Practical Christmas*, then that’s what it would be. So long as she was in earshot, anyway.

A couple days after *Practical Christmas*, Danny made bail and showed up at the door all weepy and begging forgiveness. Mom was having none of it. “I never should have let you come back, Danny,” she said. “We’re finished.”

“I just wanted you all to have a nice Christmas.”

She closed the door on him. We later read in the paper that this latest stunt netted Danny ten months in the state penitentiary. The only thing that kept it from being three years was he’d shopped for bargains.

Mom lost her interest in fixer-uppers after Danny. Her next beau was a solid citizen. Insurance agent. Decent enough fellow, I guess, but dull as dry toast. She ended up marrying him. Vicki and I found ourselves with a matter-of-fact step-dad who never understood our need to title the holidays. He thought we were being mean when we christened the *Aunt Nell Thinks She Can Drive a Stick Shift Easter*. “The poor woman did eighteen hundred dollars damage to your uncle’s Miata,” he said. Whatever.

A few years later (*Aunt Nell Isn’t Taking Any More of Our Crap Christmas*), I asked Mom if she ever missed Danny. “No!” she said, and turned away. But a little while later, over a glass of mulled wine, she murmured, “Danny did have spirit. And he sure loved you kids.”

“You too, Mom,” Vicki said.

“I suppose,” she said, scratching the now fat and sassy Tanya on her soft grey neck. “You gotta admit, *Stolen Credit Card Christmas* beat the hell out of *Multicolor Underwear Christmas*, didn’t it?”

About the Author

BILL CAMERON is the author of dark, gritty mysteries featuring Skin Kadash: *County Line*, *Day One*, *Chasing Smoke*, and *Lost Dog*. Bill's short stories have appeared in the anthologies *Portland Noir*, *First Thrills*, *Deadly Treats*, *West Coast Crime Wave*, and *The Lost Children 2*.

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*Skin Kadash Short Stories

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