



Source: Haitham Tamimi, 'Pilgrims flock to Bethlehem for Christmas', *The Australian online*, 25/12/07.

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Writer/s: [Jordan Peimer](#)

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He drinks his \$5 macchiato and savors the heady aroma of fair-trade social consciousness. It used to be that Americans could happily graze among the aisles of the world and enjoy the bounty of neo-colonialism. Wal-Mart was filled with \$22 DVD players from China, \$5 polo shirts from Vietnam and all the cheap goods anyone could desire. Sure the poor used to fight them, now they're clothed by them. Consciously, he doesn't allow the words 'Victor or Spoils' to enter his brain. Those concepts have become too ambiguous.

Things had been getting tighter. The dollar wasn't worth that much when it came to the supermarket. One feel-good Christmas Eve radio broadcast explained that rising food prices were directly linked to Chinese laborers moving from the country to the city in search of higher wages. Of course they were underpaid, but in a perversion of guns and butter economics, the workers not only could afford more they also produced less. That meant higher food prices in China were sending staples skyrocketing across the globe. In Venezuela clean water cost more than gas, and in Argentina tomatoes were beyond the grasp of most people. The story went on that American foodbanks couldn't afford the supplies they once could. This year there were 750,000 pounds less food in one Saint Louis shelter; another in Toledo was short half a million. The list went on and on. What was helping were the efforts of local philanthropists. It seems that the spirit of the holidays was actually moving the rich more than the middle class. One of the city's best restaurants was completely financing all of one Albuquerque shelter's meals. iGrilled Quail Breast Tamales for everybody!

Today he was an outsource, paid an inadequate amount to work before the holiday so that across the dateline all could sleep in heavenly peace. Wasn't this a reversal of roles? Wasn't Oz decidedly Third or at least Second World? When did America start begging at the coal scuttle of the likes of them? He was feeling decidedly Sub-Continental.

But tonight, with the promise of Aussie lucre in hand he joined the frenzy of 'good will toward men.' To tell the truth, the whole thing was a bit Christmas Carol-y. Marley's ghost would approve of his Cratchit-like toil. He was facing down the hordes at the last-minute late-night sale at Target, running up what he hoped would be temporary debt. He was piling up the trolley with the comfort and joy sought on one family's wish list from 'helpthehomeless.com'. At the check out, he found that one wish-list just wasn't buying him as much self-righteousness as he had hoped it might. Then again, what could he reasonably expect from the dollar?

He Googled the Shelter's address and trundled off to a part of town he had never been to before. It sounded like a sunny cul-de-sac or a hill town in the south of Italy.

When he arrived, the sharp shadows cast by the slightly waning moon made everything seem like a Hollywood stand-in for Hell. He kept himself from looking down to see what it was that he stepped in as he got out of the car, scraping his shoe on the curb before opening the trunk. He could feel unseen eyes watching as he loaded out his bundles. 'God, make this quick', he thought. He juggled armloads of Bangladeshi goods, as he struggled to keep himself steady while he skidded in what must be urine. Once his equilibrium was sure, he turned back and saw movement reflected in the glare. For a second he panicked, but quickly strengthened his resolve. He could see salvation in the mission doors just ahead.

When he entered, it wasn't what he had expected. The first thing he noticed was the strange dark yellow light and then the suffocating quiet. Even at 11:30pm, he expected it to be busier. Granted it was Christmas Eve, but he couldn't be the only one doing this. He set the bundles down on a worn table and remembered an interview he had read with an Israeli photographer who was recreating renaissance paintings of Biblical scenes, setting them in a chiaroscuro world of the homeless. It could take weeks creating a scene: gathering props and costumes, setting the lights and styling the models. A drunken Noah was passed out on a urine-soaked street like the one outside. Jacob tricked Isaac into giving him the blessing meant for Esau on a set much like this shelter. The effects were sublime even if the efforts incomprehensible.

He rang a bell and called out. 'Here are some packages.' He paused, 'They're for a family from your website.' His voice was met first by an echo and then a scuffling. He couldn't make out the hidden source of the noise. From an unseen door a woman's voice answered, 'The forms are on the desk. Be sure to include the case number.' Obeying but not finished, he was startled as three heads lurched towards him from the shadows of the room's perimeter. He jumped back from the dogs, afraid that they may be carrying god-knows-what and fled out the door.

As he approached his car he heard someone call out: 'Santa! Hey, Santa!' He quickened his pace and realized that he had left his headlights on. Again: 'Santa? Motherfucker!' but he got into his car and slammed the door. There was a hesitation in the starter as it strained. Finally, the engine turned over.

'Santa, you goddamn cocksucker, listen to me!' As he put the car in drive a figure knocked at the driver's window with a gun. 'Your wallet. Now!' But the transmission engaged and the car lurched forward. The last thing he saw and heard was the brittle ice of safety glass flying towards his face as everything went black.

*Adapted for performance by Barbara Campbell from a story by Jordan Peimer.*