



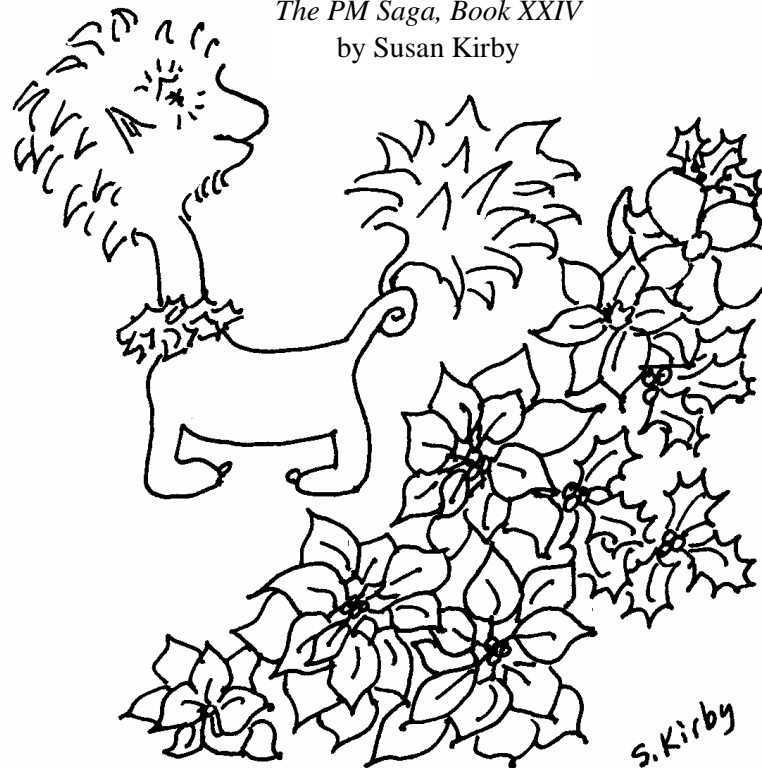
**IN SERIOUS SEARCH OF
THE CHRISTMAS SPIRIT**

Another Chronicler's Tale



The PM Saga, Book XXIV

by Susan Kirby





Have you seen the Macy's Christmas windows? They've got the history of the Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade, from 1924 to today. Totally cool.

Here's the first window. There's the Felix the Cat balloon, introduced in 1927, and a Santa balloon, and a couple of elephants. Now on to the 40's. The parade was suspended from 1942 to 1944, to save helium that might be needed for the war. When the holiday hoopla returned, the Superman balloon blew in (he blew up years later, but that's not in the windows).

Here's the 50's and 60's window, and here's Roy Rogers and the Snoopy balloon, and Elsie the Cow sitting on a swing suspended from a big round balloon. And the 1970's and 80's display, where Betty Boop and Raggedy Ann have entered the parade as the first female balloons.

Great, here's the 90's-2001 window. It's got this year's parade, with the Rockettes and Big Bird, and lots of patriotism.

But here's what I've come for: the last window! Santa's driving his sleigh, flying into New York pulled by the reindeer, whose heads bob up and down, up and down, up and down, up and down ...

What's that furry fuchsia creature bobbing up and down and up and down? Was she there before? PM? Is that you?

The mauvette Monster seems to be screeching something, but I can't hear her behind the glass. What'd you say?

She's attracting a crowd. Oh dear, that grand jeté she just jumped smashed her smack against the window pane. That must have hurt.

See ya, pal. Gotta run! Much as I'd love to stay and chat, I have a schedule to keep.

O.K., now I'm walking on 34th Street, not all that much Christmas decorations, but look up! There's the Empire State Building! I can see the green lights, but I'm too close to see the red lights on the top.

BOING! PM's just teletransported herself right in front of me. My, she seems particularly peeved and positively perturbed.

"Chronicler! Halt!"

Purple Monster! Hail and well met! What are you doing in town?

The lovely lilac Christmas Critter is glaring at me. Ah, now she's smiling, but those teeth look a bit menacing. "I came to find you. What are you doing?"

I'm taking my annual Christmas walk. First I go check out Santa's helper at Macy's, buy a couple of ornaments, and then shiver in front of the windows.

I'm strolling again, as PM lopes alongside.

"Chronicler, do you know what day this is?"

Yep. It's the day before the day before the day before the day



before the Night Before Christmas, or something like that.

“And?”

And what?

“And where is my Christmas Saga? Where is the annual authoritative account of my life?”

I give up.

We’re now in front of the animated Lord & Taylor windows. Very cute. There’s one window showing the first White House Christmas tree, when Franklin Pierce was president in 1856. And another of a party for employees when L&T first opened 175 years ago, with a tree decked with glimmering candles. And another window illustrates a London scene at the time when the first Christmas card was economically printed in 1813 so that people could afford to send them out.

“Chronicler? What’s wrong with you?”

Nothing, PM. I’m just doing my New York Christmas thing.

Ah, we’ve made it to the New York Public Library, where Patience and Fortitude, the two lions, have their wreaths on. Did you know that the lions used to be called Leo Astor and Leo Lenox, then Lady Astor and Lady Lenox? In the 1930’s, Mayor Fiorella LaGuardia named them Patience and Fortitude, for the qualities he felt New Yorkers would need to survive the economic depression, or so says the NYPL. Look, they’ve got red, white and blue ribbons this year — very appropriate.



Isn’t the Big Apple wonderful? Here I am, walking up Fifth Avenue, talking to a mythical magenta Christmas Monster, and nobody takes more than a passing interest. Oh, maybe there’s a double-take here and there, but New Yorkers do give celebrities their space.

“Chron, you’re not paying attention. What about my Saga?”

I’ve designed and printed the cover. I’ve started painting. I’ve

bought lots of Czech crystal doodads, at great expense. It's going to be quite beautiful. Oh, we're almost to the Saks windows! And look at that crowd. There are hundreds and hundreds of people here! It's good the weather got a bit cooler, otherwise you'd be suffocating with your fur and all.

"But when do you plan to write my story?"

I don't. PM, you're distracting me from the yearly ritual. What a great group of windows! It's the story of a little tree that's searching for the perfect home. So cute.

"What do you mean you're not planning to write my story?! You're a writer! It's what you do! Who you are!"

"Not any more."

"Where's your laptop? You always swear a writer never leaves home without it!"

I'm not allowed to swear. You know that. It's *your* rule. But I'm no longer a writer. O.K., PM, time to count to three and turn around! One! Two! Three! Wow, it's magnificent! The Rockefeller Center Christmas tree! I think it's the tallest ever, but I could be wrong. It's got red, white and blue lights on it! Everyone's taking pictures and oohing and aaaahing and enjoying the holidays!

I cross Fifth and drop a buck in the Salvation Army bucket, tipping my cap to the bell-ringer. I'm elbowing my way through the crowds, trying not to step on little tykes' tootsies.

"Since when aren't you a writer?"
PM gasps, chasing after me.

Since Sept. 11. Our Dear Readers expect a story that has wit, wisdom and humor. And for the last three months I've been witless, humorless, and I haven't a clue about anything.

I'm willing to dab gold gouache on the cover, but I can't pen the parable. Look at all the fluttering American flags atop the staffs. Oh, the ice skaters are having so much fun! Say, isn't that Relicta? And Dove? And Crystal Camellia? And there's



Carmine Poppy and Peppermint Paunch! Did you know they were here?

“I teletransported them down with me, and Lapis Snowflake and Geranium Amethyst linked tails and BOING!ed Alabaster and Clyde with them. They wanted to wait here while I found you. There they are! Yoo-hoo!!! Hallooo! Up here!”

Oh, what a lovely spin Lapis just executed. I can’t believe he and Geranium are almost 16 years old. Time flies when you’re a Chronicler. Oops. I guess I’m not a Chronicler any more.

“Chronicler, we’ve got to talk.”

No, I have to walk. I’ll meet y’all at the hovel in a half hour.

With that, I toddle north on the avenue, Fifth Avenue, ogling the Tiffany windows with the snowmen and snowwomen with their diamonds, goggling at the gigantic snowflake hanging over 57th Street. On to the Bergdorf windows, but they’re pretty serious and depressing, with dead animals and stuff. Yuck. Better head to Lincoln Center, where the plaza tree’s bedecked with lighted musical instruments. Much better. Ah, New York at Christmastime! I love this city!

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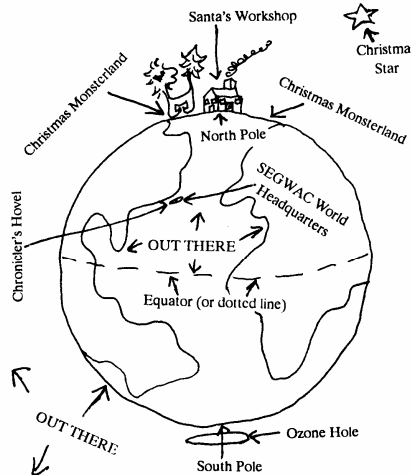
Dear Readers, I’m sorry you’ve had to witness this unsuccessful attempt by a Chronicler of Christmas Characters to find a plot for this year’s epic. Before we go any further in this anemic effort at a yuletide anecdote, I want to remind you who the cast of characters are. They are quite a wonderful group, and I really did intend to tell you all about their doings in the past year. But it’s not my fault.



Purple Monster, as most of you know (but some of you may not, if this is your first viewing of the PM Saga, and if so, I apologize that it’s not the best one — those new to the story can request back copies, which will be more to your liking, I’m sure), is Santa’s lead sleigh puller. The Macy’s window might lead you to believe that that reindeer pull the Clausman’s sleigh (well, I sup-

pose they do, sometimes), but on the yearly circumnavigation of the earth that begins at the midnight magical moment when Christmas Eve turns to Christmas Day, Christmas Monsters are the driving force, or the forces that are driven by the jolly fat man. And each year since the mid-1970's, PM has occupied the first harness, because she is the most talented Christmas Monster — she sings! she dances! she spreads joy and love around the world as the North Pole Ambassador! — in all of Christmas Monsterland.

Christmas Monsterland is located in the more remote reaches of the world, somewhat east of Hollywood and north of Broadway. It surrounds the North Pole, and both Christmas Monsterland and the North Pole are covered with an invisible protective shield that protects the Holiday Helpers from the nefarious machinations of SEGWAC, the Society for the Elimination of Good Will and Christmas. SEGWAC is a malodorous malevolent organization that every year concocts some awful scheme to incapacitate the Christmas Crew and bring misery and despair to all humanity.



So here we are in my West 76th Street hovel. I'm surrounded by a cast of Christmas Characters, but have nothing to say about them. Lapis has flipped on my computer, and the gregarious gang is making me type this while they slurp hot cocoa and gobble up the leftover Velveeta Shells & Cheese congealing on my stove.

Let me introduce you properly. Here's Alabaster Eggshell, PM's husband. She met him 20 years ago in the San Diego Zoo (the keepers thought he was an "Alpaca?").

And their twins, Lapis and Snowflake, who would be horrible





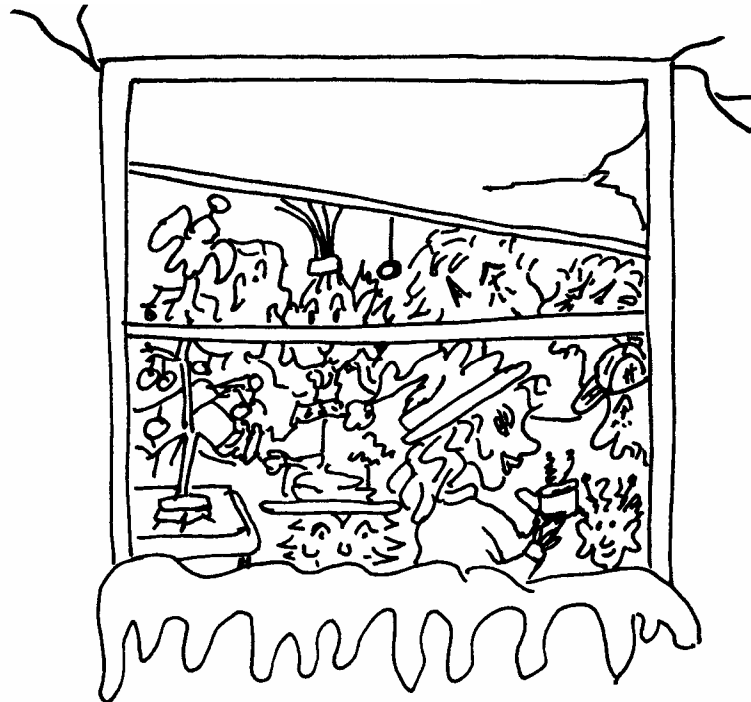
teenagers if they were people, but since they're Christmas Monsters, they got all that rebellion out of them in their first year, so now they're exceptional young Monsters.

And here's Peppermint Paunch, the striated Sherlock, of Peppermint Paunch and the Detectives fame. He's also PM's cousin. In our last episode, he had a very bad experience with love, but he seems to be recovering nicely, since right now he's holding paws with Carmine Poppy, one of the Paunchettes, as we hinted might happen last year.



"Don't tell that! You're embarrassing us," grumps Peppermint.

Sorry, already





saved it. And here's Clyde Elf, Santa's major factotum, who does digitized maintenance on Santa's Naughty & Nice list. (Isn't he cute, with his tiny green hat and teensy elf shoes?)

"Oh-Ho! Once again, you've failed to give me your revisions," Clyde chimes in.

Later. Tell you what — just put down that I think everybody's nice. Except the bad people.

Anyway, Relicta and Dove and Crystal Camellia are also crammed in my living room. Relicta is an extra-terrestrial intergalactic traveler (ET IT), and Dove's an ex-SEGWACian who discovered Santa and the joy of Christmas. Crystal, their daughter, is now, what, almost 10 years old? Her antennae do quiver so when she giggles.



PM is scouring my six-foot-by-six-foot abode while everyone's getting

settled. She's searching for the Godivas I usually have tucked away for my Mom, but I've fooled her! I've ordered by Internet this year, and they're on the way to St. Louis by U.P.S.

PM, why are you twitching your tail? Where are you going?

BOING!

So much for the Saga, if she doesn't want to hang around.

BOING!!!

PM, what's that gold box hanging from your muzzle? And is that chocolate I see on your whiskers? You didn't???? You did. You mugged the delivery guy? What's my Mom supposed to do?



(Munch, crunch, deep, long swallow as a morsel descends the long, long hyacinthine gullet.) “Yummm. Busted. You know about me and chocolate,” PM mumbles.

I do, indeed. You should be ashamed.

Now, Dear Readers, you’ve met everyone who’s here, and that’s as far as I can go. There is no story. There will be no Christmas Crisis. And as you know, a crisisless Christmas makes for happy holidays, but lousy literature. So talk amongst yourselves, look at all the art on the walls, check out the new art books, and I’ll see you all next year.

“Chronicler!”

Yes, PM?

“You’re not getting off that easy. You are going to explain why there is no story. And you’re going to do it immediately.”



Alabaster nuzzles his mate’s burgundy, chocolate-smudged muzzle and lectures me. “This is what is known as crisis intervention — or crisisless intervention, under the circumstances.” Alabaster has many Ph.D.’s and M.A.’s, and unfortunately one is in psychology, so he thinks he’s got me pegged. “Explain yourself.”

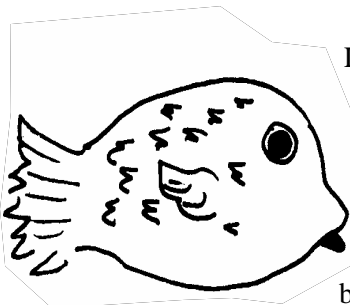
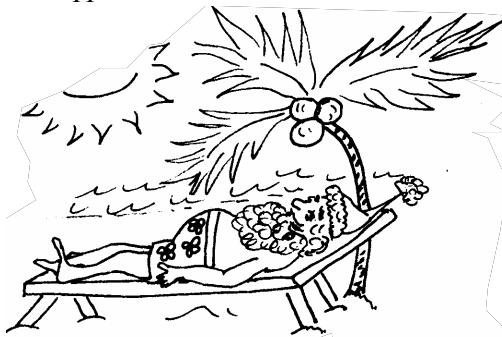
Look, guys, I’ve been thinking about the Noëllic novella all year. In March, when the mauvette minister, Dr. Arké and I spa’d away at Elizabeth

Arden, PM and I discussed possible plot twists while the masseur pummeled us. (Dr. Arké still won’t tell me if PM has any bones, but PM seemed to relish the pounding. I, of course, have bones, osteoporetic though they be, which the massager pushed and prodded into silly putty.)

And at the end of July, when PM and Al joined Mom, Dr. Arké, JB and me on our cruise to Bermuda (PM and Al continued on to the hidden island in the Bermuda Triangle to join Santa at his summer hideaway), we perused the potentialities of parodying the tax cuts for the rich and the technological silliness of a missile shield, while rocking up and down and up and down and turning green (a purple Christmas Monster turns a vile color when seasick). While we snorkeled, I contemplated the poetic possibilities of incorporating a new character

based on the Bermuda chub.

At the beginning of September, barely a month after docking back in New York, I flew to Switzerland, full of plans to peck away at a blockbuster bare-all of PM's exploits. On Sept. 10, I was in

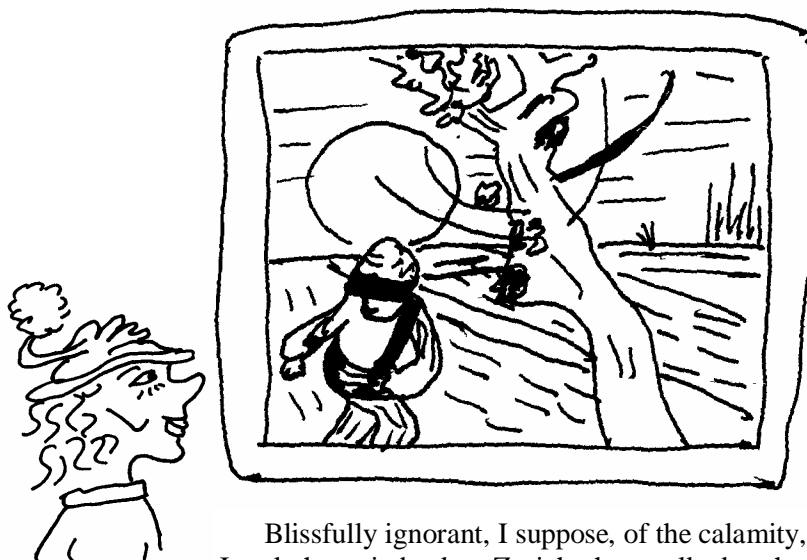


Lucerne at a performance by the Vienna Philharmonic, with Sir Simon Rattle conducting, of Beethoven's Fifth. TUM-TUM-TUM-tummmmm. TUM-TUM-TUM-tummmmm. Transcendent. I closed my eyes and grabbed the notes darting in the air in front of my third-balcony seat. That hall has amazing

acoustics. And afterward we went to a party for the orchestra, then drove back to Zurich.

I was supposed to go home Sept. 12, so on Sept. 11, I started out early, to check off a couple more sights on my list. First was Museum Rietberg Zürich, with inspiring Asian art. Then off to Winterthur, a 15-minute train ride away, to Villa Flora, one of the many glorious small museums with Van Gogh's throughout Switzerland that I had found, so many that I lost count of the new V.G. notches on my belt. But I digress.

At 2:46 p.m. — 8:46 a.m. in New York — I was gazing at a special exhibition of the Nabis, with stunning paintings by Vuillard and Bonnard. Or I could have been gawking at Vinnie's "Le Semeur," the sower, with a lone man spreading seeds in a vast field. (There's another V.G. sower in the Sammlung Emil G. Bührle, which is near where I was staying in Zollikon, but there the man is close up, and the sun takes up a quarter of the painting and is so bright yellow it scalds your eyes. Yet again, I digress.) Maybe I was standing in front of Vinnie's "Le Café de nuit" or perhaps his "L'Enfant à l'orange," or it could have been a Redon or Cézanne. At any rate, I know I was standing in front of a beautiful work of creation in Winterthur, while at the tip of Manhattan there was an awful work of destruction going on. But I wasn't aware of that.



Blissfully ignorant, I suppose, of the calamity, I took the train back to Zurich, then walked to the Fraumünster to see the Chagall windows. Was I looking at the Prophet's Window, "Jeremiah mourning the destruction of Jerusalem and receiving new commandments from the Lord," when the twin towers collapsed?

I took the tram back to my friend's apartment (did I tell you what a devoted Michael Jackson fan she is? and that I met her in the lobby of Carnegie Hall, because she's also a big Martha Argerich fan?), and she was back from work early, talking to her neighbor. She said, "How are you?" I said, "Tired." Then she said, "You haven't heard?" And she broke the news, then turned on the television, because, of course, I couldn't believe it, and still couldn't absorb it even when I was seeing the video on CNN, the images playing over and over and over again.



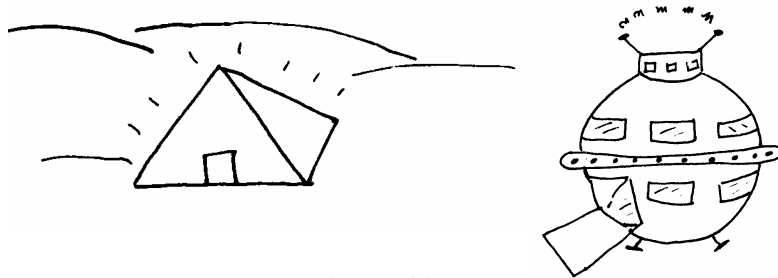
I couldn't get back to New York, and my friend was so kind to extend her exceptional hospitality for as long as I might need to stay. Do you remember, PM, when I was on the Internet sending a note to my family, and you Instant Messaged me?

PM nods. "I offered to BOING! you back to Gotham if you wanted, but you replied that since you left on an airplane,

you should return on one.”

It would have been hard to explain to the people at immigration why my passport showed me going to Switzerland, but not coming back.

Relicta adds, “Dove and Crystal and I were at our ice pyramid near the North Pole that day, and we couldn’t return in my spaceship, since they closed off the airspace. We felt helpless, too, for we couldn’t get to the Salvation Army to help.”



I spent the next day in my friend’s apartment, calling the airport, watching the news and trying to make sense of the senseless. At noon, all the churches in Zurich rang their bells. I stood on the balcony, facing the lake, while the bells tolled all around me, echoing across the Zürichsee. It was a sound I will never forget (nor will I forget the hens that pecked at the ground below me while the bells peeled, doing their chicken thing, oblivious to the peeling cacophony).

My last days in Zurich were spent calling the airport, crying, finding a church where I could light candles, and appreciating a small memorial outside the Grossmünster where some Zurich residents had written “We are with you, America.” I sought some solace in the Kunsthaus, revisiting the V.G.’s and the Monets, and walking around the lake, communing with the swans that squawked and begged for bread crumbs.

Finally, on Saturday, we went to the airport. And stood in line. And stood in line. And then waited and waited and waited. Twelve hours before my plane finally took off. My friend stayed with me most of the time, and there is a special place in heaven for her for all her kindness. After she left and I was at the gate, I did try to write something, PM. I did. But all I could do were a few drawings — I already knew what the illustration must be.

The flight was late, and when we flew into Newark, I had no points

of reference. Most of the tallest buildings in Manhattan had turned off their lights, and the skyline looked as if it could be any suburban, flat city anywhere. When I finally got an airport shuttle to take me to my hovel, it was about 2 a.m. Sunday morning. As we drove toward the city, we could see the glow and smoke from the ground at the spot where I used to see the towers. It wasn't until right before the Lincoln Tunnel that I spotted the lighted Art Deco arches atop the Chrysler Building — only then did I know where I was.

I was back in my shell-shocked city, with a jet-lagged disconnection from the place I'd just left two weeks before. The day after I got back, a beloved cousin passed away. She was an exceptional woman, with such a generous heart. But I couldn't face getting on an airplane again so soon. I went into an emotional coma — all I could do was play computer games and work. The letters department at The New York Times had been devoting their space to the attacks, and I could be useful helping give voice to our readers' thoughts.

The city was eerie. Times Square was almost empty. Traffic was sparse. Nobody spoke in the subways. But people made eye contact on the street, and strangers reached out to other strangers. New Yorkers are good people, the world discovered, and it will take a long time to get our tough reputation back.

Some concerts I had tickets for were canceled, but on Sept. 20, the Philharmonic changed its opening night to a benefit for those killed in the attacks. We heard Brahms's "German Requiem," and the audience, after the somber "Selig sind die Toten," filed out in silent reflection.

Throughout that first month, every morning I woke up with a prayer that it had all been just a nightmare, that it hadn't really happened. But I'd turn on CNN, and it *had* happened, and everything had changed. And I didn't want it to change. I didn't want to think about what all this meant. So I just shut everything off.

"I remember joining you for the opening night of Carnegie Hall," PM recollects.

That's right. Mayor Rudy the Ubiquitous was there. He got a standing ovation from the full hall.

"We were both very moved by Thomas Quasthoff's rendition of one of Mahler's Rückert's lieder. I saw you cry then."

Yes, I suppose I did. And I cried after going down to ground zero on Sept. 24 — smelling the smoke, watching the gigantic cranes lifting

debris and hard-hatted workers hauling it away, and being there when the floodlights were so bright they turned night into surreal day. It rained that evening, forcing down the smoke as if it were fog. It might have been a normal construction site, if not for all the police and National Guardsmen. And the awful awareness that so many people had died there and that this was — and still is — a grave. We walked by a firehouse, where hand-written letters, flowers and candles paid tribute to New York's Bravest.

If this was not enough to make me anxious, some murderous coward began using the post office for germ warfare. For a long time, every "Achoo!" I heard as "Anthrax!"

Clyde pipes up, "Santa's mail has to be irradiated now, since it's opened OUT HERE by Santa's helpers before he sees the tots' wish lists UP THERE. By the time I get 'em, they're all brown and toasted."

On Oct. 7, the air strikes began. I was listening to Maurizio Pollini playing Beethoven's "Apassionata" while the first bombs were pounding Afghanistan.

More and more, with each new day, it seems that our world is falling apart, that we will never feel safe again.

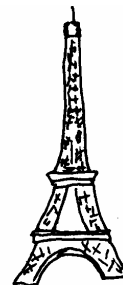
"You do know you never were really safe before, don't you?" Relicta points out. She's always seen things from a very realistic point of view. Probably because she saw her world explode before she crash landed on Earth and joined the North Pole contingent.

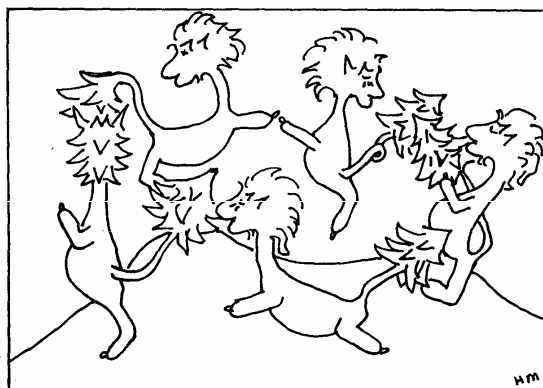
I have a tremendous capacity for denial, and for putting off until next year what I don't want to think about at all.

"But what has this got to do with batting out my biography?" PM insists. "After all, it is *my* story, not yours. Isn't it?"

Yep, but your story is based on Love, Hope and Peace. And this moment, I have loads of love, but not a lot of hope for peace. We're at war.

PM shakes her mane. "When you went to Paris in November, and I met you at Marmottan to marvel at the Monets, you had screwed your courage to the sticking place enough to get on a plane again and get on with your life. And getting on with your life means eating escargot, which you did, and drinking Beaujolais nouveau, which you did, going to the ballet, which you did, and the opera, which you did, and shopping, which





you did to excess, and visiting with your friend from Switzerland, which you did, and dining with a new acquaintance, which you did — and *creating a crisis!* — which you haven't done!"



Ah, yes, Paris was ... well, Paris, and it was *très magnifique!* But, while I was there, another plane crashed into my city. And then I had to come back. To my home. Which I love. Which was wounded. But which is slowly but surely recovering.

Which is why I went on my walk tonight, for as the commercial says, "New York is open for Christmas." I'm heeding the call to save America by celebrating the holidays

and spending all my money. During World War II, people waved the flag and bought war bonds. Now it's patriotic to max out my credit card, and I have been very, very patriotic.

The commentators say life is getting back to normal. But normal is relative. It's normal now to have my purse opened by security guards at the concert hall. It's normal to have my luggage searched at the airport. It's normal to scrutinize every item of mail before I open it. It's normal to have internal discussions about whether it's safer to take a bus (above ground, so I can run), a subway (faster), or a taxi (if I can get one). My desire for "normal" is that I will continue to be what a friend calls himself — an "arts consumer." (I've been called a culture vulture or an arts glutton.) Now that the arts groups are hurting for money, I will make a point of single-handedly supporting every museum in New York City — the Met, MOMA, Whitney, Guggenheim, Frick, Museum of Natural History. And I intend to go to every concert I can. And every ballet. And every Broadway show. And I intend to go to work, if I can fit it in.

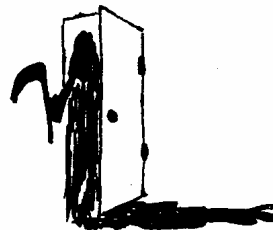
"You're digressing again, Chron. Please explain why you've not come up with a crisis!" I perceive PM's burgundy hue turning scarlet in frustration — I've learned to notice such color gradations.

Don't you get it? I refuse to give SEGWAC any opportunity to take away whatever Christmas spirit there is left. So there will be no more crises. SEGWAC will have to make do with Sept. 11. I'm sure the organization is reaping whatever rotten rewards it can from the attacks.

Dove shakes his head. "Actually, my father" (Viper Carrion, head of U.S. SEGWAC) "is quite unhappy, or let's say even more unhappy than he usually is. The

government has labeled SEGWAC a terrorist organization and has frozen its assets. Mom, Dad and my bro', Parasite, can't even sell their personal holdings, since they took such a bath on their Enron stocks. Dollar Don Trumpcard has sent them an eviction notice for their dungeon dwelling under the Trumpcard Tower."

Relicta adds, "Dove's family may live to make



people miserable, but they've never murdered anyone. When Dove and I made our annual reconciliation visit, we noticed a flag flying inside before they booted us back into the sewer. True, they're evil Americans, but they're Americans nonetheless. Besides, they slacked off on their own havoc-causing behavior after 9/11, absolutely negatively positive that there would be no Christmas cheer this year. How distressed and dismayed they were by the strong showing of sacrifice, support and charity that the country has demonstrated the last three months."

"But Lucifer Trinode," pipes in Crystal, referring to the evil ET IT



from Relicta's planet who has a destructive third antenna, which zaps an isolator ray that radiates doom and gloom, "has snuck out of the country, since the attorney general has been rounding up illegal aliens and Mr. Trinode doesn't have a green card. I think he's hovering over the planet in his spaceship, waiting for a hole in the NP IPS."

I won't allow a hole in the invisible protective shield, so don't count on that for a crisis. Face it, guys. I'm just not in a holiday-purveying mood.

Lapis and Geranium are holding their paws over their ears.

"You'd be in a more appropriate mood if you took 'Grandma Got Run Over by a Reindeer' off the stereo and replaced it with the 'Hallelujah Chorus,' " Geranium complains.

You try to expose young Monsters to a carolic masterpiece, and what do you get? Everyone's a critic.

Sorry, gang. I have to pack for St. Louis. I plan to enjoy my time with my family and friends — hug them all, visit Max and Prince, do the St. Charles walk. I know I can find my Christmas spirit there.

* * *

BOING!

I wish PM wouldn't just grab me and take me away. I never thought I'd admit this, but I actually prefer being centrifuged in Relicta's whirling spaceship to having my molecules pulverized and reconstituted in a teletransportation.

The North Pole Ambassador has just teletransported me and the

rest of the gang to Santa's living room. Mrs. Claus is handing me hot apple cider, and Santa is stoking the fire. He's wearing his crimson velvet smoking jacket, although he doesn't partake of his pipe much these days.

"Good to see you again, Chron," he says. "I hear you're not puffing coffin nails any more. That's very good news."

For more than a year, but I'm still chewing Nicorette, Santa. (Clyde has placed a laptop on my lap, so I'm now tapping away once again.)

"What's this I hear about no Christmas Saga this year?"

Santa, no disrespect intended, but I'm not gonna do it. There's just no merry missive in me. You know what it's like. Remember, you once had that dreadful case of *apathia sowhata*.

"But I recovered. Thanks to your help — and PM's, of course. But let's see if I understand your problem. You think America's had enough crises for one year, and you don't want to imagine another one?"

Yep.

"Since your country is at war, you've been struggling with your desire for the U.S.A. to avenge its loss, but you also know that one of the most basic messages of Christmas is Peace on Earth."

Right on, Santa. You remember last year, when Emeraldalda fooled everyone and tried to turn you over to SEGWAC so you couldn't make



your ride? And remember when PM forgave her and said that's what Christmas Characters do? I'm having real trouble with the forgiveness thing. There is no way on this earth, or on any planet anywhere, that I will forgive Osama bin Laden and his ilk for what they did.

"That's certainly a problem," Santa muses. "After all, in our prayer we say, 'And forgive us our sins; for we also forgive every one that is indebted to us' (Luke 11:4). Pretty cut and dried, isn't it?"

I've been hearing how we're not in a war of religions. But we are in a war of beliefs. The bad guys believe that if they don't like the way we live, they can kill us. We believe we have the right to live the way we want. I really, really object to people who want to blow me up. I have never believed that killing others is a way to solve problems, either for personal or national reasons. But I find myself supporting the war in Afghanistan, and I really, really want our soldiers to catch the terrorists and bring them to justice — and I know what our government considers justice.

"Ah, a crisis of conscience," Santa agrees. "I have seen two millennia of terrible wars and horrible torture done by one human against another. For you, Sept. 11 changed the way you view your world. But I've seen way too many 9/11's. Each time such an act of cruelty occurs, I rediscover the necessity of what I do. I must deliver the toys to the little boys and girls, for it's a way of taking them the meaning of Christmas — when I give, it teaches the children to give. When I offer hope, they can hope, too. And when I strive for peace, they can believe peace is possible. Each year, when the nativity is narrated, new young'uns learn how much God loves this world. No one evil man can destroy that message. Not if we hold the Christmas spirit inside us and follow the Christmas Star."



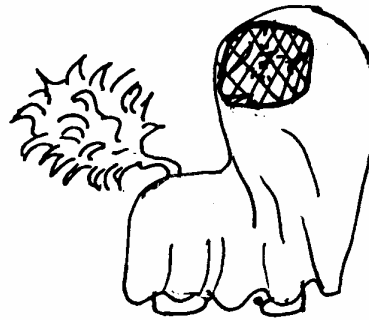
Don't tell me that if I don't write this Christmas story, the terrorists will have won. The terrorists don't even know about the Sagas. And if they did, they wouldn't care. They don't care about anyone. Or anything. They don't see that a dancer's outstretched hand can touch a soul. Or that a great symphony can reach the ears, then captivate the heart. Or that each and every life is precious, and they have no right to decide who lives and who dies.

Before Sept. 11, I could imagine a world that could get better, and

I had a part in it. Now, I don't know what my role is.

"I think Chronicler's got a case of Purpose In Life Syndrome. PILS is a devastating condition," PM commiserates, for she had a bad case of it early in the Sagas and required consultation with Pimento Poppy, her child psychologist, and Freudinella Jung. "But your midlife crisis has been going on now for way too long, ever since you failed to perform your penmanship duties five years ago."

So you're all convinced that I should ink a narrative? I guess — well, I *could* send PM to Afghanistan in a burka and have her distribute aid and pirouette for the troops. She'll love that!



Santa's grinning. "If you can't come up with a crisis, then just send out this transcription. Your audience will appreciate the sparkling doodads and shining glitter glue. Let your cover be your message of love to New York, and to all those who have suffered."

"Ho-No, No, Oh-Ho." Clyde has just run in.

A crisis, after all?

"It's almost time for the Night Before the Night Before Christmas Concert," he announces as the clock cuckoos the hour. "I still don't have landing permission from La Guardia for Relicta's spaceship. And I've been trying to reach the St. Louis airport and the Denver tower and a few others that haven't given us permission to land on the roofs in their burbs tomorrow night!"

Peppermint is strapping on his bass guitar, and Alabaster is twirling his drum sticks. Carmine, Geranium and PM are tra-la-la-ing in warmup for the Madison Square Garden benefit in support of needy children everywhere. Relicta is cracking her knuckles (she's the keyboard player).

PM's giving marching orders. "Lapis and Geranium, you teletransport half the group, and I'll take the other. Chronicler, no time to take you to the hovel. You can catch a cab on Eighth Avenue and do the drawings on the way uptown. You don't have much time to format my story and get it to the printer!"



So, Dear Reader, I guess this will have to be the annual PM Saga. It is what it is, and my job is done. This year we saw horrifying brutality, but we also saw inspiring heroism and unity. I hope we all can find the strength to keep loving and giving.

Love. Hope. Peace.

Merry Christmas, and a Safe and Happy New Year

