

## Holidaze

By Tim Lewis

Perry Winkle has always disliked this time of year. It wasn't necessarily the holidays themselves. He loved Thanksgiving: a time where someone could engorge themselves into a veritable food coma. And he loved spending time with his family. They would get together and share old stories, listen to music, watch football, play games, and generally enjoy being together after a year of living in the grind of everyday life. It was Christmas he hated, or rather it was the frenzy of shopping associated with Christmas.

Perry waded through droves of shuffling consumers, all bleary eyed from their early start, and all growing weary from their waning attempt to attack the good deals. So many of them felt the rush of victory with each purchase, a euphoria brought on by the successful hunting experience. Tomorrow the adrenaline excitement would wear off, replaced with emptiness and regret and bloated credit lines. At least these were the things that Perry said to himself as he looked into their hurried insane eyes, pushing his way through what always seemed to be the wrong direction of holiday shopping traffic. *Going to the store the day after Thanksgiving*, Perry said to himself as he shook his head. *I should have known better.*

Perry chose what he considered to be the shortest line,

with twelve shoppers shuffling in place with impatience. The pock-marked cashier in Perry's line lurched the items over the bar code scanner with indifference. Perry was quickly followed by six more customers with overloaded carts. The growing line of people inched closer together as the checkout process became backed up by the sheer quantity of customers, who grew more and more irritated with the caffeinated teenage cashiers. Perry sighed, resigned to his fate to wait. He looked down at the items in his hands: a half gallon of milk, an eight pack of batteries, and a toothbrush. *What was I thinking?* he thought to himself as he lurched forward.

He closed his eyes and shuddered because of the screaming child behind him in line to whose cries his parents were indifferent. He took a deep breath and opened his eyes. His vision began to blur, the displays of Christmas tinsel and wreaths in soft focus. *Maybe I should have had some coffee before I came here,* he thought. He squeezed his eyes shut again, and then opened them. The store began to spin, causing him to stagger and grab the display of discount movies for support. The edges of his vision grew dark, quickly filling to the center until everything went black.

He snapped out of this daze to the sound of an explosion that shattered the automatic doors at the front of the store, and was even more surprised with the destruction of a large amount of the wall where those doors had stood. Many of the customers stood where they

were, guarding their carts as if they had already purchased the items, while others abandoned their finds to scatter to parts of the store farther away from the damage. Several closer people knocked to the ground by the blast were now regaining their feet with confusion on their faces, mirroring those of everyone else in the store. A solitary male cashier with bad acne continued to ring up the items coming down the conveyor belt, oblivious to the situation.

Even more confusing was what happened next; half a dozen strange-looking men wandered calmly into the store through the damaged opening they had just created. At this sight, the crowd grew silent. Six inhuman things that appeared to be men, but not quite, slid and glided as a group into the store appearing to look for something in particular. They were all four feet tall with skin color only subtly the wrong color that it was slightly disturbing. They wore robes that hid their legs, or whatever it was they stood upon. The inhuman thing in the center and front appeared to be the leader of this group, for he spoke in a strange tongue to everyone but to no one in particular.

"Suwetir," he said.

Everyone remained silent.

"Suwetir," he said again for good measure.

A muscular man in a checkout stand near to where the doors used to be spoke up. "Welcome. Peace to you." He held up a hand as a gesture of pacifism and approached the strange creatures.

"Be careful, Frank!" a terrified woman shrieked at him. He motioned to her to be quiet.

"Where are you from?" Frank said slowly and loudly, as if these strangers were deaf.

"Suwetir," the thing said again.

"Veedogam," the one to his right said. Everyone, both human and inhuman, seemed to now be confused.

"Suwetir," the first thing said.

"Veedogam," again said the second thing.

Each of the six now began to speak simultaneously, and each had something different to say.

"Kumptor."

"Veedogam."

"Skeetiburd."

"Chuus."

"Fernytoor."

"Suwetir," again said the leader.

Frank scratched his head, considering what to do. He extended his hand in friendship, assuming the custom of shaking hands might be one that is universal. The leader of the strange men lifted his hand in return. He did not shake Frank's hand. In his hand was a small object that appeared harmless, but what appeared harmless to him vaporized Frank into a pile of dust.

This caused the people who had remained in the checkout lines guarding their things to go into a complete panic, which in turn caused the group of inhuman things to scatter throughout the store, each hoisting weapons similar to their leader's and chasing the frantic customers through store aisles. The only person who remained in place was Perry, still holding his milk and batteries and toothbrush possessively, only crouching behind the counter slightly each time someone came running past.

A family of four raced to the door to see if they could escape through where the exit used to be, but they disappeared into vapor before Perry's eyes. Two of the strange men glided into view where Perry stood.

"Veedogam," one of them said to Perry. He seemed to understand for he lifted his arm and pointed to a place near the back of the store. The creatures turned and slid to where Perry had pointed without another word.

Perry looked to the door when more of the strange beings came pouring into the store. Each of them held identical weapons and each had an identical appearance as the others, except one. There was one who was slightly taller than the rest, more slender and human-looking if only in appearance. Perry's previous observation of who was their leader was apparently incorrect, for this thing began to bark orders at the other inhumans. They hurriedly scurried around following whatever commands it had just given, trampling the pile of Frank on the way.

More of the short creatures chased a rotund woman breathlessly still pushing around her cart full of merchandise. They fired repeatedly at her, but she somehow avoided their weapon fire and darted between aisles with skill. Another not quite human thing had

cut her off by circling around, but instead of firing at her it reached into her cart and pulled out a red sweater that she had chosen for purchase. The woman screeched to a stop, and with panic-stricken eyes she clawed at the sweater and the non-human to pry it from its grip. They struggled like this for several minutes until the inhuman had managed to gain control of the sweater and slid away.

"Suwetir," it said gleefully.

The round woman did not hesitate. Still driving her overflowing cart, she began to pursue the inhuman, who was now wearing the red sweater. She was now chasing the creature, who appeared somewhat dismayed by her persistence and sped away.

So went the scene as Perry stood motionlessly watching. Creatures continued to chase and vaporize customers (from which Perry happened to get some small amount of satisfaction) until they found the items each of them were looking for. The round woman continued to pursue her red sweater that was on sale for half price. Some customers huddled safely behind displays, having abandoned their own carts of merchandise, unless they happened to hide behind a display containing something that one of the inhumans desired. The taller, slender leader barked orders as its minions scurried to please it. Christmas lights blinked and trees toppled with the chaos created by these creatures. The acne-covered cashier continued to ring up items, his

caffeine obviously wearing off.

Frank was still a pile of dust.

The creatures seemed to have come to the conclusion of their mission, for they began to gather at the smoking opening at the front of the store. The leader stood at its place watching them and checking the merchandise they had gathered. The inhumans paused before the leader with their items as it nodded in approval to each of them, releasing each of them in turn through the gaping hole in the wall. After the last had struggled through the wall wearing a red sweater, a rotund woman dragging behind it gripping its robe, the leader turned to face the store and raised its arms.

In a higher-pitched voice than the rest, the leader said in awkward English, "Thank you all for your patience and for helping us to enjoy the holidays with these fantastic gifts. We wish you all a merry Christmas and a happy new year. Shop safely."

On these last words, the leader reached beneath its robes and withdrew a round metallic object the size of a tennis ball. It pressed multiple buttons on the object and dropped it on the tile floor before it leaped through the opening in the wall. A roar erupted from outside the building as if engines were being ignited, and more smoke billowed inside choking those nearest to the door. The

roar faded into the distance, leaving a silence broken only by the sound of a faint electronic beeping.

An elderly woman picked up the metal object and eyed it confusedly. She held it carefully in her shaking hands to the rest of the store and asked, "What is it?"

Another person said, "I think it's a bomb."

The woman froze and her eyes grew wide. There was another moment of panic in the store, just as people were emerging from their hiding places. There was a tug on the woman's pants leg.

"I can fix it grandma," said a tiny voice next to her.

A dark-haired girl stretched out her hand and fearlessly took the object from the elderly woman. She fidgeted with the metallic ball for a few seconds, studying it and taking in the buttons and flashing lights. She tested one of the buttons and it beeped and caused other lights to come on and others to turn off. She scratched her head and pressed another button. More lights came on and more went off. The little girl smiled and looked at the woman. She then began pressing buttons with confidence and without pause until all of the lights on the object were off and the beeping ceased. Everyone in the store exhaled in unison.

"Happy Holidays, did you find everything o.k.?" said a monotone voice near Perry.

Perry's head snapped up and he squinted, wincing at the bright lights and Christmas music playing through the store speakers. He looked around the store. It was still filled with shoppers, only none of them were piles of vapor or dust. The front doors were still intact and there was no hole in the wall. The rotund woman still showed off her red sweater in triumph. Customers buzzed around, searching through shelves for remaining bargains. The most surprising thing was that there was no trace in the store that strange, not quite human creatures had ever been there. Perry turned to the people behind him in line, who had an obvious look of irritation on their faces, all except for the child who was still screaming. One of them pointed to the cashier. Perry looked to where they pointed.

"Hm?" he said to the greasy cashier. The customers who had been in line before him were gone, and the line had dwindled without him noticing.

"Did you find everything o.k.?" the cashier repeated in the same monotone voice.

Perry managed to stammer, "Er...oh...yes...thanks."

The cashier scanned Perry's three items, shoved them into a plastic bag, and accepted his money. He offered a heartless "Thanks for shopping," and looked to the next customer. Perry stepped out of the family's way and allowed them to unload their bounty onto the conveyor belt while he blinked, still unsure of what had just happened.

Perry had apparently fallen asleep in line while waiting to pay for his items. He considered why he hated Christmas so much, and added this experience to the list as if it were Christmas' fault that he fell asleep in line and dreamed of alien shoppers randomly destroying everyone who got in their way. He smirked a little at this ridiculous thought.

*Are we much different?* he thought to himself. *Maybe there are inhuman things in here today, and we are them. We all lose track so easily and forget what is important.*

As Perry left the store, he saw the little dark-haired girl, who curiously held a small, round metal object in her hand. She looked at it with a perplexed look on her face, as if she had no idea what it was and as if she had never seen it before.