

Everybody Knows a Turkey

Richard C. Leonard

They say church singles groups can collect some quirky types. I don't know about yours, if you're in a group like that. But I sure think our church's bunch has a few — well, I won't call them losers, exactly, but you know what I mean.

Such as my buddy Thomas Sterkel. Now there's a quirky turkey, if you ask me. And, with a name like his, you can see why we call him Tom Turkey. You never know what goofy thing he'll come up with next.

Like the time he got fired from the best job he ever had, working for an outfit that made parts for outboard motors. For P.R. they gave out beanies with plastic boat propellers on top. He gave me one while he was working there. I still wear it sometimes.

But I digress. He got fired when he ripped a Victoria's Secret lingerie ad out of a magazine and taped it to the time clock, to pull a stunt on another guy who worked there. But some gal who didn't like Tom Turkey punched out first, and got him fired for sexual harassment.

He got another job okay, but that didn't stop his general goofing around. Like what happened last Christmas.

I'm relaxing in my place after work watching reruns of the A Team and my cell phone rings. I know it's the Turkster, because I have him set to ring with the theme from "Lost in Space." Fortunately the commercials had only started.

"Hey, dude, I just got off work and I have to go to the mall. You wanna go with me?"

"How come you're going to the mall?"

"It's almost Christmas, Maynard!" My name isn't Maynard, but this turkey just invents names for people. "So I gotta get Mildred a gift."

Mildred, that's his girl friend. And her name's really Mildred. No, Tom couldn't pick a girl named Heather or Terri or Amanda. He has to pick one named Mildred, like she's a hundred years old though I bet she's only thirty-something. Well, whatever turns you on.

"Okay," I say. "But the commercials are over and I gotta see if Hannibal's plan is really gonna come together. Give me till eight."

"No prob, see you then."

Well, Hannibal's plan worked like it always does, so at 8:05 I'm out the door shivering in the December chill and looking for the "Flamethrower." That's Sterkel's '87 Lincoln Town Car. Pretty soon the sound of his leaky muffler tells me he's coming up the block. So after he opens the door for me — the handle on the passenger side doesn't work — I get in next to him.

"Hop in, Geek," says Tom. "Let's book." Of course, "booking" with a boat like the Flamethrower is like revving up the diesel engines on a Mississippi barge tug. It makes a lot of noise but you don't see much of a result at first, except more foam.

So we're cruising down Hamilton Av toward the mall, and the Lincoln starts to jerk and shake. Finally the Turkle pulls over to the curb just as the engine quits.

He looks at me. "Must be a loose plug wire."

"Don't think so," I opine. "If a wire pulled loose, the motor wouldn't just quit like that. Look at your gas gauge."

He checks the gauge, and it's below empty. "Yeah, I guess you're right. Rats."

"Didn't you get gas this week?"

"Yeah, I sure did. I shouldn't have run out so quick."

"Did you fill it up?"

“Heck, no. Not with prices the way they are. I only put in half, to save money. I figured I would make it stretch.”

I close my eyes and sigh. “You turkey! You can’t just put in half a tank and try to eke it out. It’s not like dieting, you know. It’s gonna burn just as much per mile, regardless. Especially a Sherman tank like this beater.”

Tom folds his hands in deep thought, then turns to me. “You know, I never thought of that. I guess you’re right.”

“Duh!”

“You’re the geek, Melvin. You can figure out stuff like that. Not me.”

Another “duh” won’t help matters. The main thing is to get some gas so we can get this bomber going again.

“Listen, Thomas, we passed one of those Quick-Stop places a few blocks back. You stay with the car and I’ll go for some gas.”

He doesn’t object too strenuously to my generous offer, so away I go back along the Av toward the Quick Stop. It’s one of those places that’s run by an Indian — not the kind with the feathers and wigwam but the other kind, from Asia, that’s always named Patel. The “P” section of the Bombay phone directory must be half the book. Unless, of course, they’re all over here now, which could be the case.

Anyway, I’m freezing all the way to the Quick Stop and when I finally get there Patel tells me “Vely solly, we are not having any petrol cans here.”

So I’m wondering what I’m going to do. I think of buying a gallon of milk and emptying it out to hold the gas, but there’s that warning sign on the pump about “approved containers” and I don’t want to get into trouble.

Then, lo and behold, help arrives in the person of Augustine, from our singles group. He’s a big black guy, and how he got stuck with that name I don’t know. But our preacher’s always quoting something from a Saint Augustine that lived in Africa, so I guess the name fits an African-American. That Augustine was bishop of Hippo, so guess what we call this one.

Anyway, Augustine finishes gassing up his Monte Carlo and comes in to pay Patel, and sees me.

“Hey, mahh! High dune, bro?”

“Doing okay, Hip. But the Turkster’s done it again — run out of gas a few blocks down the road, so I came to see if this place had a can, but they don’t.”

“He send you to git da gas? You da mahh! Hey, I got a can in da trunk. I’ll git yuh down there!”

So Augustine the Hippo fills his can at the pump, and after I pay Patel I get in the Monte Carlo. The Hip lights up and puffs up a storm all the way over to where Sterkel is, like he’s practicing for the priesthood and incensing the altar. And I don’t smoke, so by the time we get there I’m highly incensed. But I don’t say anything because the Hippo’s doing us a big favor.

The Gobbler is standing next to the Lincoln with the gas cap unscrewed. Augustine pops out and starts to light another smoke, but Tom grabs the lighter and holds it over the gas intake like he’s going to flick it on. Fortunately the Hippo snatches it back right away, or the Flamethrower might have lived up to its name and taken off on an unscheduled flight to the moon.

“What you doin’, mahh? You wanna get us all fried?”

“I just wanted to check to see if the tank’s really empty. I still think it could be a loose plug wire.”

“Why dintcha look under the hood first, goofball?”

“I can’t, the hood release is shot.”

I remember Tom mentioned that when he bought the car the seller told him the trick for getting the hood open. But I guess this turkey forgot where you’re supposed to pound and where to pry.

Anyhow, we finally get the gas into the tank and send Augustine the Hippo on his way. We make it to the mall later than we planned, but because it’s Christmas they’re still open so no harm is done. Well, not till Tom Turkey starts buying gifts for Mildred.

The first gift’s not too bad, just a sweater. But then the Turkle spots a cute dress in the window of the Petite Boutique.

“Hey, Herkimer, Mildred would look great in that!”

“Only one problem, Young Turk. That’s a seven-P and I don’t think Mildred can get into it.”

Now, I don’t know women’s sizes very well. Unlike some in our singles bunch, I’ve never been married. But Mildred’s no emaciated fashion model. Once I was almost going to meet this gal I had been e-mailing through one of those Internet dating clubs, but I couldn’t tell how big she was because the photo she sent showed her in the back row of her Sunday school class. So I managed to get her to tell me her dress size was an eighteen, and I went to Wal-Mart and looked at women’s size eighteen jeans and was intimidated. That was the end of that as far as I was concerned, because I’m not a large guy. And Mildred must be at least an eighteen.

But Sterkel buys the dress anyway, like an idiot. Then he asks me, “Don’t you have any gifts to buy?”

I sigh. “No way. I already sent the gifts to my folks, and there isn’t anybody else.”

“What about Melissa?” Now Melissa’s this girl in our group that I like, but I’ve never dared to ask her out. I’m not very good at that sort of thing, which is why I’ve never been married, I guess. Or maybe the propeller beanie has something to do with it.

“Give me a break! Me get a gift for Melissa? She doesn’t know I exist.”

“Don’t be so sure, Charlie. Mildred thinks she kind of likes you.”

That was news to me.

“Listen,” Tom goes on. “There’s our singles party tomorrow night, and Melissa’ll be there. Why don’t you ask her out when you see her?”

I’m not very sanguine about the prospect. I guess Tom figures that out, for once, because he drops the subject.

So I get to the party next evening at some girl’s apartment who belongs to our group, and the first one to meet me is Mildred. She pulls me into a side room.

“Listen, Duncan.” That *is* my real name. “Melissa’s coming, and this would be a good time to do what Tom told you to do last night.” Evidently they had a conversation about me.

“Where would I ask her to go with me? I have no clue what she likes.”

“You’ll think of something. Anyway, I need to make sure Tom gets that sparkling cherry to the kitchen so they can make the punch.” And off she goes.

The party cranks up, and Melissa comes in. And from that time on I can’t think of much else except what I’m supposed to do when I get the chance.

All of a sudden I hear Augustine the Hippo bellowing, “Hey, mahh! Who spiked this punch?” And he sets his cup down quick, because after one DUI he can’t take another chance.

I have a good idea who’s responsible, so I find the Turkster and confront him. Supposedly he doesn’t know anything about it. So we go to the kitchen and look through the dead soldiers in the recycle bin and, lo and behold, we find some cherry wine bottles.

Tom Turkey looks at me and spreads out his hands. “I thought it was sparkling! I must have pulled them off the wrong shelf. Come to think of it, I wondered why they charged me so much.”

It turns out the gal mixing the punch had just come over from Poland and couldn’t read English too well yet. So when Tom laid the brown bag on the table and said, “Shoot the juice, Bruce!” she just poured the stuff in with the rest of it.

That doesn’t spoil the party, because they make up more punch. Then when the Mannheim Steamroller CD ends somebody puts on a CD of Christmas songs.

*. . . Yuletide carols being sung by a choir
And folks dressed up like Eskimos.
Everybody knows a turkey and some mistletoe
Help to make the season bright . . .*

I’m nervous and I can’t take my eyes off Melissa. She’s wearing that same red dress the Gobbler bought for Mildred. Tom must have given it to her early and I hope he wasn’t offended when Mildred passed it on to her friend. At least Mildred has some sense.

Finally I have Melissa in a corner, trying to make small talk about flat screen monitors and the latest Linux build and other things any girl ought to be interested in, but somehow I’m losing her. Or maybe I’m just too distracted by her bright brown eyes and her slim figure. But finally I bring myself around to asking.

“Um . . . they’re doing the Bach Christmas Oratorio at First Presbyterian on Sunday night, and . . . uh, Mildred said I should ask you if you wanted to go with me.”

She stares at me for half a minute while my heart keeps racing. Then she smiles.

“I’m sorry, Duncan. I’m afraid I have other plans.”

I mumble a few apologies of my own, but I’m like the math teacher who couldn’t add — he was nonplused. This was supposed to be a no-brainer.

I don’t get a chance to ask Mildred about it till a couple days later, between Sunday school and church. I catch up with her and the Turkster in the lower hallway.

“Help me out, here. What happened with Melissa? You said it was a sure thing.”

It’s Tom who answers first. “Boy, you blew it big-time, Dork.”

“I blew it? what — ?”

Mildred interrupts. “Yes, I’m afraid you did. ‘*Mildred said! Mildred said!*’ Like you were going to ask her out only because *I* told you to. Do you think she’d say yes on that basis? Don’t you imagine she’d rather go out with you because *you* wanted to take her out?”

I think I begin to see the light at that point. Like maybe it’s time to toss the propeller beanie and get a life.

As the Christmas song says, “everybody knows a turkey.” I guess I’m the turkey.