

Vacancy: a Christmas story by Charles Keim

Editor's Note: Charles J. Keim, professor of English and journalism at the University of Alaska, Fairbanks, has written a Christmas story for the university to offer for use in Christmastime editions of newspapers.

VACANCY

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by
Charles J. Keim

The great river of cold flowed down from the North Pole, arced through eastern Siberia then found its channel across the Bering Sea. By December 23 the deepening cold had funneled through Isabel Pass and in the quiet of the night found the great Copper River Valley. At the massive dam of the Chugach and Wrangell Mountains the cold halted and it sank ever deeper to minus 64 degrees at the lowest part of the valley. Here at multi-roomed Goldy's Roadhouse all was in readiness for Christmas Eve.

"I lock the door at 11. Party goes till I say it's over."

Goldy's words reached to oil construction camps north and northwest as far as Fairbanks, south to Valdez, terminus of the \$8-billion pipeline that had brought great riches to the state.

So as the lonely men began arriving to find the Christmas Spirit at Foldy's, she pulled down britches over her fattening legs, carefully situated the parka hood over her wig and trudged outdoors among the many eager arrivals and over to the three-pump island which dispensed fuel to thirsty vehicles.

Above the pump canopy the red neon sign read VACANCY.

Happily, Goldy switched on the adjoining sign. Now the two proclaimed NO VACANCY.

Goldy looked higher to the large bulb-clustered plywood star she and the girls had constructed atop a 50-foot spruce pole. She punched another switch. The star blazed forth a far-reaching beacon for all who sought Christmas happiness at Foldy's.

Now Goldy's look became one of open-mouthed wonder, and the star reflected on her contact lenses and white-capped teeth as she smiled widely, savoring all the \$100 cover charges that were flowing into her green cash box.

Puffing a bit, she peered at the thermometer near the door.

"Holding steady at minus 64 degrees," she announced to well-wishers who solicitously helped remove her cold-weather gear and linked their arms affectionately about her as she steered them toward the bar festooned with a red plastic MERRY CHRISTMAS!

The nine o'clock floor show so attracted the viewers they no longer looked at each new arrival entering the door amid swirls of cold air and fog that set the tinsel Christmas tree to shivering.

By 10 o'clock the boisterous din all but drowned out the hard-working musicians, perspiring as greatly as the many windows in the densely packed and humid rooms. Giggles, laughs and shouts reached outward and heavenward, past the bravely twinkling star.

At 10:55 Goldy expertly extricated herself from clamoring men, waltzed through the press of dancing bodies and borrowed the drummer's brass cymbal. Arming herself with a

large kitchen spoon, she sub-marined past admirers to the door.

"Get in," she shouted to three latecomers, then peered through the ice fog. She saw only the glittering star.

The door closed grudgingly on icy hinges. Goldy repeatedly crashed the spoon against the cymbal until the noisy inn quieted.

"It's 11 o'clock. Place's closed. On with the party!" she shouted and shot the bolt home with a thud that brought loud yelps and pounding of tables until only the musicians' opening and closing mouths and gyrating bodies indicated they were singing the rock'n' roll Christmas song.

A short movie, acts and dancing quickly followed while Goldy happily visualized the profits and urged partygoers and makers to greater efforts and spending.

Near midnight an insistent pounding reached the ears of those nearest the door. At first the hearers ignored it, but four minutes later the pounding was continuing, so a tousle-haired man lurched toward Goldy and pointed to the door.

"Place's closed. No room," Goldy shouted into the darkness, then slammed the door. Cold, she danced involuntarily in the gauzy swirls of fog, then she heard appreciative whoops above the bump, bump, bump accompaniment of the perceptive drummer who'd watched her movement, too. Now she danced strenuously, sinuously until a thud, thud, thud on the door indicated the rejected latecomer was pounding with some instrument himself. And the band quieted so these players, too, could stare with the others at



the door.

Goldy looked at the great sea of glittering eyes, surprised then vaguely pleased that the stage had shifted from the far end of the room to the door and herself. She knew how to handle the latecomer, and she would. Her pride dictated that, yet there was reassurance of sorts that the focus of all these people had shifted momentarily from their own wants to Goldy and against the unseen stranger.

"You tell him, Goldy!" A great chorus of shouts followed the cowboy-like yell.

She half-opened the door. "Cantcha read? No vacancy!" This time a tall figure stepped inside before she could close it.

Goldy silenced the ripple of protest with a wave of her arm. She could handle this, but the man spoke first.

"Our old car engine quit. We coasted down into the valley, but I can't get it started."

"The place's closed. Tough," Goldy pushed the man. He turned sideways and her chilly arms slid off his chest and she stumbled slightly. But he'd moved only to provide space for another person to enter the door.

Several men near the door sprang up to toss them out, but Goldy shrilled, "No, I'll handle it!" and they sat down as someone near the band swiveled a spotlight to this new entertainment near the door.

"Name's Joe," the man said. "We left the homestead long ago, but with the bad engine and all, I know we're not going to make it to Faith Hospital at Glennallen in time now."

He threw back the frost-rimmed hood of the old surplus parka and his look of young concern reached out to the silent room. "Here, you better sit down." He helped the woman to a nearby table where she heavily and apprehensively sat down on its top. Even the most inebriated readily could see that their number was going to increase by at least one at any moment.

Goldy looked steadily at the young woman then she gazed the length of the room and far far back to a best-forgotten time when she'd needed such help and had found it. She knew what she had to do now and there was a fear. These 125 frustrated, angry men could reduce the roadhouse to rubble in that many seconds.

"Party's over," she shouted. "This lady needs attention."

"Do we get our hundred bucks back?" The questioner stood up, unsteadily at first, but supported by the certainty that he spoke for the others.

"Well...uh...yeah." Goldy's Christmas visions disappeared totally, all at once, and she found she really didn't care, learned with relief his question, her answer were an out that perhaps would avoid destruction. "But there'll be a New Year's party. Don't forget that. Pick up your C-note as you go out the door."

"Not so fast theah!" A six-foot four-inch behemoth stood up. "Excuse me, little lady. Ah've just got to have this heah table. You best sit down easy like in mah chaih." He pushed the table to the door and a wondering Goldy.

Behemoth removed his 10-gallon hat with a courtly flourish and placed it on the table. Then he lifted a \$100 bill from a speechless Goldy's cash box and placed it in the hat.

"Ah think this little lady's agoin' to need a Christmas present of sorts, so as all of you..." his arm swept the expanse of the silent room..."leave, ouah friend Goldy heah has requested that you just might like to make a transfer from heah to theah."

And so as the rooms emptied, the sombrero filled to overflowing while the stranger and his now tearful wife watched in silent wonder.

Behemoth directed two men to the ancient car. When they reported it was "sorta living again," he handed the hat to the woman and strode outside.

"Now honey, don't you move a muscle till I get back." Goldy waved an admonitory finger at the women and followed Behemoth as far as the gas pumps where the star still shone brightly above the great swirling clouds of ice fog from the dozens of coughing engines and strangely silent men. She punched a switch.

VACANCY the sign once more read, and as she hastened toward the door she paused momentarily, despite the first whimper of pain and fear from inside, to look once more at the thermometer.

"Only 60 degrees below," she said aloud to no one. "The valley seems to be warming up."

Goldy stepped inside the door and once more took charge of things.

Season's Greetings

**best wishes of the season
to all our friends and associates
with hopes for a healthy
and prosperous new year.**



Central Council

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