

MEMOIR

Playing God

I sold my wife's clothes to build a Christmas village in my parents' basement

BY RICHARD KELLY KEMICK
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I CAN'T REMEMBER not wanting a miniature Christmas village. It's like how I can't remember when I first realized I have bad posture: some things you never have to learn about yourself but rather just have to accept.

I moved out of my parents' house at seventeen, but my heart has never left—not out of some romantic notion of remembering my roots, but because the idea of renting an apartment with enough room to store my Christmas village borders on lunacy.

So now I am back in Calgary, hauling an unending line of boxes out from my parents' basement and into their dining room. My mother has already resigned herself to hosting next week's dinner party for twelve around the kitchen counter.

Once all the boxes have emerged from their summer hibernation, I begin.

I move west to east, starting with my six houses, the bourgeois ones placed closer to my church. Then there is my public park, which includes a hockey rink and two-dozen towering conifers.

If you're lucky, you'll spot the deer. To make your way downtown, you'll have to traverse the Kemick Canal, its crinolined torrents now fully frozen. To cross, you have two choices: the Voltaire Viaduct, stony and austere; or the Pont de la Paix, wooden and ornate and fragile.

Once you're downtown, the street lights will guide you. First comes my gift shop and then my bank, both of which boast extended weekend hours. Sovereignty Street is bustling with shoppers. On the corner is a string trio busking. Then there's my theatre, my hotel, my millinery. When I unpack my restaurant, I am awash with nostalgia. It was my first piece; I was in grade nine, and it was a gift from my mother. My parents were hesitant to buy it for me, thinking I didn't understand what I was asking for. But I knew exactly what I was getting myself into.

Look at me now, at twenty-five. Gaze on the world I've created. Just past my restaurant is my butcher. Next is my fire hall,



my school, and my post office: public monies at work. At the far end of the village is my department store. And sitting in its display window—brace yourself—is a miniature miniature Christmas village.

Rising behind the department store is a modest hill. Rising behind that is a full moon, upheld by an adjustable stand. The moon is the first piece I bought for myself; I wanted to give my village a certain gravitas, and it did just that. It is, by far, my most commented-on piece. In fact, I am so intoxicated with it, I hardly notice that when it turns on, it emits a faint but constant squeal.

Once the buildings are in place and the villagers are snug in their beds, I link my eighteen adapters into one long chain of industrial power strips. Then, aiming the metal prongs of the master plug at the socket, I take a deep breath and look at my dark city. It is so close to being alive. And I am filled so full with wanting; it is all I know.

MY WIFE, LITIA, and I live in Vancouver. From our apartment, it is a forty-five-minute bus ride to Christmas Traditions, the nearest pop-up holiday shop. As I ride the bus, I mentally scroll through the Rolodex of things Litia and I can cut in order to bank even more of our paycheque. Here, of course, I use the word *our* in its most liberal sense, since Litia is the only one who receives a salary.

I like to think of our one-bedroom, 396-square-foot basement apartment as a museum exhibit on the lengths my generation has to go in order to stay debt free. I've rescued all of our plates from alleyways; our cutlery comes from the spillover sections of Salvation Army drop boxes. And I try not to make eye contact with our dog, Maisy, while I sneak dried rice into her kibble.

My wife doesn't realize that I've been selling articles of her clothing for the past three years. We've been living together for only two. "Where'd that striped top go?" she asked once. I feigned ignorance and then inconspicuously checked our

Kijiji account to make sure I'd deleted the ad. I got a whole \$23 dollars for it.

By the time I get to my bus stop, I've settled on cutting out grapefruit, coffee cream, and Halloween candy. We can also disconnect the land line; I'll use Litia's cellphone to make my fortnightly call home to Calgary. If we're being robbed while Litia's at work, I won't be able to call 911, but then, we don't have anything to steal.

At the strip mall, the Christmas store is near a Mongolian grill and a now-defunct Magicuts. I arrive twenty minutes before it opens, which gives me time to pace the windows and vow to not spend more than \$20—plus tax, of course.

I'VE OFTEN WONDERED how my parents really feel about my village, the ceramic sprawl that's been growing with the force of manifest destiny and that now occupies the entire dining room table. I think my mother likes the village, not only because the woman is insufferably supportive of everything I do, but also because I'm fairly confident she takes credit for it when I'm not around. "Oh, this?" she tells her friends, gliding her hand over the houses despite my strict no-touching policy. "This is just a little something I've been working on over the years."

But I'm less sure about my father. I find it difficult to believe that the man who implored me to reuse duct tape and not to throw out asparagus elastics can look at my village and think anything other than, Doesn't he still owe me \$4,000 for the car?

Still, he cannot be blind to the positives. Unlike my brother, who misspent his youth, I frugally saved mine. While Tress was out burning tire treads in the Presbyterian church parking lot, I was at home, polishing my miniature bird bath. While he was out having unprotected sex with his on-again, off-again girlfriend, I was crazy-gluing wreaths onto micro-lampposts. And the very night he ran a red and T-boned a minivan, I was in the dining room, dusting my cityscape with fake snow.

My village was also the impetus for the only time my father accompanied me Boxing Day shopping. How else could he ensure I not spend more than the minimum on things with, as he put it, "absolutely no resale value"? When the sliding doors at Canadian Tire opened, we quickly became separated in the churning crowd. I wound up blocked in by shoppers on the far side of the Christmas clear-out section, completely opposite the village display. The two tallest people in the store, my father and I, were able to make eye contact as he stood right where I wanted to be. Over the heads of shoppers, I hollered, "Get the chocolatier." But my father is completely deaf in one ear and 75 percent deaf in the other, and confusion darkened his face. In response, I scrambled up onto the side of a shelf and cupped my free hand around my mouth: "Get the motherfucking chocolatier!"

THE NIGHT LITIA found out about the village was the night she first met my family. My parents were in Vancouver for my brother's birthday, and we all met downtown for dinner. Litia and I had been going out for only a month, but we'd been sleeping together for three. Upon introduction, my mother—seeing her greatest chance at grandchildren miraculously appear before her eyes—began to talk, and never stopped.

"I'm sure you must love to read," she told Litia. "Richard loves to read. When he was small, we would always go to the library. But he only ever wanted teeny little books."



"Pardon me?" Litia said.

"We'd wander the aisles," my mother continued, "and I'd ask him if this one or that one was small enough and he'd scream, 'No, they need to be *teeny* little books!'"

As my father, brother, and even the waiter laughed, I sat there, debating whether or not it would be possible to slit my wrists with the teeny little cheese knife. But my mother was not done.

"It must be why he loves that village," she said.

"What village?" Litia asked.

Like I said, it had been just one month since I'd stopped getting the milk for free, and I was still unsure whether Litia was "village material."

"Oh, Richard has a Christmas village," my mother said, and began to explain it in painstaking detail. And while I listened to her confuse my post office and library, gloss over my recreation area, and completely fuck up my all-embracing vision, I became assured that there was only a teeny little chance that Litia and I would ever have sex again.

I'VE STOPPED TELLING people about my village. Not because I'm ashamed of it. All I have to show for my quarter-century on the planet are two worthless arts degrees, my job as a self-employed dog walker, and a book of poetry destined to sell fewer than twelve copies. My Christmas village—bustling with eighteen buildings, more than sixty people, and countless accessories—is probably the most impressive thing I'll do with my life. And I'm okay with that.



What cash-strapped young man can look himself in the mirror and proclaim, Today I am finally going to buy that \$22 miniature hedge with the two raccoons poking out? How do I explain to my mother-in-law, when she asks how the writing's going, that I wrote only 120 words today while her daughter was teaching grade six French, because I'd spent the afternoon cruising an Internet thread about mini-trees? Why, at 2:30 a.m., when Litia stumbles out of bed to the bathroom, do I find myself slamming my laptop closed, leading her to assume I had been watching porn rather than a speculative video on whether master creator Cynthia Shalev would release a synagogue that shines and shimmers with LED lights?

Of the few people I have told, each has a different theory. My mother—she of the goddamn “teeny books” story—thinks it is a fascination with scale. My cousin Alice, ordained with a

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human resource-management degree, informed me once that it is the ritual of collection that draws me back. My friend Alex and his boyfriend, Garry, both think it's because I'm gay. Each argument has its merits: scale is fascinating; I obviously enjoy amassing these things; and Maisy has often heard me wonder aloud why there's no such thing as Olympic synchronized swimming for men.

But none of those theories captures the visceral force that propels me.

A few years ago, before I met Litia, I was in a store at a Christmas shopping extravaganza in Edmonton. It was deserted when I heard the sleigh bells jingle above the front door. I turned to see a young woman, copper coils of hair bouncing off her shoulders.

I was struck into stillness as she walked straight to the villages. I watched her peruse the accessories section, gliding her delicate hand across the treetops, finally coming to rest on a small bundle of firewood. Seeing my in, I complimented her on the piece. “The reality of heating,” I told her, “is often overlooked.”

“Do you have a village?” she asked.

“Yes, I do,” I said. “It boasts a population of nearly 200.” Sure, I was lying—but who doesn't fib about size?

“Mine's much more modest,” she said, blushing slightly. “But I recently found a three-storey brick apartment building with a café beneath.”

“It's so rare to find porcelain brick,” I said.

“And I found a pub with a straw roof,” she added.

“That's beautiful,” I said. “I hope someone doesn't blow it down.” And we laughed together, breathlessly. “Tell me,” I said, “what does your skyline look like?”

“I bought some mountains last year,” she replied, “as a backdrop. They're cragged and plunging.”

“Mine has a moon,” I said. “It's full and white and throbs with song.”

It is the closest I've come to having sex without ever touching the other person.

“Why do you collect?” I asked, desperate for clarity, hoping that her answer would reveal my own. “What drives us to this?”

She ran her fingers through her hair. “I'm expanding my mother's collection. She died of lung cancer a couple years ago.” She paused, then opened her eyes wide to dry them. “What's your story?”

If only I could've been lucky enough to have lost a loved one to a horrible disease and then channelled that inconsolable grief into miniature streets of snow-tipped cedars.

“Oh, you know,” I said. “Pretty much the same.”

THE TWENTY MINUTES finally pass and Christmas Traditions opens up. Every holiday store is laid out the same. You're greeted by a sign that proclaims how many days are left until December 25. Today it's seventy-three. There's a clerk who greets you, usually an octogenarian. She asks if you need help, but if you're like me, you know where you're going.

At the front of the store, there are the tree ornaments. Past the ornaments is the tree lighting, and past that is the nativity section. Why anyone would ever need a pocket-size Baby Jesus just to remember whose birthday party this is, is beyond me.

(If, however, it's a *miniature* pocket-size Baby Jesus, set within a village square nativity, then show me to the checkout.)

The villages are always set up at the very back, the hundreds of porcelain faces all frozen with Christmas love. And here, bathed in the dim lighting and cocooned in the airtight silence, the display holds the forbidden grace of a tabernacle.

An elderly woman walks up beside me. Her snow-white hair is freshly permed. Two gold chains hang around her neck. She is eyeing the gin distillery. I can tell she's unfamiliar with the piece because she raises an eyebrow when the water mill actually rotates. As I pretend to appraise a picnic table's paint job, I watch her; I want to see her reaction to the distillery's three-figure price tag. I've yearned for that piece for years, my porcelain white whale. But I can't get a distillery until I get a police station, and I can't get a police station until I get a city hall. Instead, there's a Batman tree ornament atop the church spire. For now, vigilante justice is the only justice my village needs. I fear a distillery will upset this delicate balance.

On this October morning, Christmas songs crackle through the speakers. At the front of the store, the cashier is grinding her chin into her chest, hopefully just sleeping.

The more the woman looks at the distillery, the more in love with it she falls. The stone-and-mortar smokestack. The light bulb inside that flickers like fire. Her hands shake slightly as she places it into her basket. She never even checked the price.

Back on the bus, I lovingly place the \$29 juniper tree onto the seat beside me. And I say a small prayer for the elderly woman; I ask that the distillery turn her village into Sodom and Gomorrah and that her smiling citizens, hopped up on liquor and lust, eat one another.

THERE ARE THREE unshakable tenets that inform the creation of any proper Christmas village: scale, functionality, and style. The first is easily upheld by not switching between manufacturers all willy-nilly; having an elephantine flower vendor sitting beside a cart half her size will make it seem as if the vendor has an inoperable thyroid condition. Choosing a size is like driving in Toronto: once you pick a lane, you're in it for life.

Functionality, by contrast, requires a more seasoned eye. "What kind of town has this many fucking pharmacies?" I once asked my friend's mother, who had recently begun her own collection. "A town populated by meth addicts, Sharon. That's what you've built here." (Truth be told, you could get away with the three pharmacies Sharon had—especially as one of hers was clearly labelled an apothecary. I was just hoping that she'd be humiliated and offer me one.)

The final tenet, and by far the most important, is style. There are many different styles to choose from. Classic brands include Disney, Rudolph, and A Christmas Carol. They're referred to as sets because, like Happy Meal toys, there is a finite number of pieces you can acquire. Each year, Disney creates a few new ones, while the companies that make Rudolph and A Christmas Carol annually release a small number of scenes from the holiday films for which they're named: Rudolph learning to fly, Bob Cratchit carrying his son. Last year, there was a piece depicting the Bastille-like liberation of the Island of Misfit Toys, and one of Scrooge bowing to public pressure and squandering his life's savings.

For those who collect the sets, the appeal is that there is an end in sight. After your initial buy-in, you need only a couple of new pieces each year for your village to be the best it can be. Sets are the equivalent of the kid's table—somewhere safe to sit, where everything is served to you.

In the land of Christmas villages, what separates the kids from the grown-ups is moving out from the structure of the set and into the chaos of the classic.

Classic villages are bound not by theme but by era—Victorian, 1950s America, modern—all produced by a variety of manufacturers. Such villages have no structure and can sprawl forever. They're where the big boys go to play.

The 1950s era revolves around boxcar diners, Coca-Cola, and an obsession with painting everything checkered orange. There is also a terrifying prevalence of motorcycles, whose riders are all helmetless. (I've yet to find the piece depicting the stacks upon stacks of human bodies that such a village's icy roads must claim each year.)

The modern era is loosely modelled on the skyline of New York but also features monuments from around the world, giving it a tawdry Las Vegas feel.

I've chosen the Victorian era for three reasons: First, it's the classiest. Second, since I'm not a James Dean enthusiast, McCarthy sympathizer, or closet racist, I have no interest in the 1950s. And third, if I were satisfied with living in the modern era, I wouldn't need a miniature Christmas village in the first place.

The Victorian era boasts taverns with names such as the Smoking Bishop and the Dirty Owl. There's even an ornament shop called Lily Bros. Gazing Balls. But there are two downsides to collecting this era. The first is that, just as real-life Victorians

had to struggle to pay extortionate rents, I too have to wrestle with unfettered inflation. A top-end Victorian building will run you between \$100 and \$200, while a person comes in between \$20 and \$50. The second downside is that, just as real-life Victorians had to heat their homes with coal mined by children, I too have to live with the unsettling necessity of child labour. This is not unique to the Victorian village but is spread across all eras, as ubiquitous as Christmas. Sometimes on Christmas Eve, I lie awake and think of sooty hands toiling in Sichuan factories, fingers delicate as tinsel, the paintbrushes like magic wands, touching life into blank human faces.

LITIA AND I used to travel quite a bit for school. Now we travel quite a bit for her work. And something I've noticed—whether we're in Vancouver, Toronto, or Montreal—is that a city is made alive by its flaws. A corrupt mayor, an overeager police force,



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things the world really takes note of. Play your cards right, and you might even get terrorism. All the interesting places have scars on them. And I like to think my village does, too.

Yes, I have both a bakery and a chocolate shop. The public school is obviously well funded. Families are carolling, and judging by the Sold Out! sign, the local theatre is doing surprisingly well. But I also have a hockey rink upon which one of the players is missing an arm. Most people would've thrown the piece away. At the very least, the glue gun would've come out. But I welcomed the change. Overnight, mine became the only Christmas village I know of to have a kid whose arm was chewed off by a wheat thresher.

I've got a horse with a chipped ankle who is unaware that he's being trotted back to the stable to be shot. There's a bridge with a cracked foundation. There's a house with a blinking light: the tenants can't afford the unregulated cost of coal, and it's going to be a long winter.

And it's not just the pieces that have had a hard off-season that add an element of realism. I've started shopping for pieces that lend themselves to unfortunate backgrounds.

There's a woman looking out a hotel window and thinking of jumping. There's a man feeding ducks, forlorn because he's in love with his brother-in-law. There's a chimney sweep who looks like shit and should've unionized years ago but instead drinks his paycheque and goes home to a wife who doesn't love him and kids who don't respect him. Wolves lurk in the Christmas tree lot.

"Excuse me," I once asked a clerk in Moncton's Winter Wonderland Park as I held up a small hydrant. "Do you have any buildings that are actually on fire?"

Mine is not a village that keeps the joy of the season in its heart the whole year round. Mine is a city that understands the true weight of mortality—its fleeting and fragile nature—and has grown accustomed to closed-casket funerals. Mine is a city that embraces the true spirit of Christmas only because its citizens so desperately need a holiday from the lifelong process of dying.

THIS PAST SUMMER, Litia drove Maisy and me to New York. Since we could stay with her friend, she promised that little to no money would be spent. As we wandered around the low-rises of Brooklyn, we stumbled across a Yule Tides store. "What luck," I said. Litia sighed and said she'd wait outside with the dog.

I was surprised to be greeted by a cashier who was the same age as me, his face covered with piercings and a thick beard. He nodded as I walked to the back.

I was lost in the world of the village, enamoured with the seafood shop's surprisingly busy waitress, when I realized that the cashier was standing beside me in the otherwise empty store. He leaned back against the table. "Did you know," he began, "that this store used to be a front for bootleggers? And back here was where the dogfighting happened."

I was startled by his honesty. For all he knew, I could've been in there doing early Christmas shopping, or killing time, or looking to see where my demented grandmother had wandered off to. But he could tell that I wasn't. He could tell that my being inside a Yule Tides at 10:30 on a Tuesday morning in May somehow connected with this brutal story.

The cashier's hands outlined where the pit used to be. "Sometimes," he continued, "when a dog was unbeatable, they'd put it

up against a man with a baseball bat." As I listened, I found myself coincidentally fidgeting with a figurine of a German shepherd, the breed that Maisy most resembles, and imagined it leaping into blood lust.

For a moment, we both stared at the village, its pristine world untouched by the grim history of the building that housed it.

I waited until I couldn't anymore. "What'd they do with the bodies?"

"The dogs or the humans?" he asked.

"Both."

The bell above the door chimed, and we both turned to see Litia popping her head in, Maisy panting happily beside her. How much longer, she asked. I held up the German shepherd figurine and said I was seeing if he took credit. The cashier nodded, complicit in the lie.

AS DECEMBER GRADUALLY DESCENDS, Christmas stores welcome their seasonal shoppers, their fair-weather friends. Suddenly, the village section loses its monastic silence as the loved ones of village collectors stumble around, haplessly buying the wrong pieces. I want to tell them that if their grandmothers don't already have a town tree, they are beyond help.

But one year, in a Christmas miracle, Litia got it right. I do all of my holiday shopping months in advance, scoping out the best deals. Litia, however, leaves hers until reindeer hooves are touching the roof. As usual, I wasn't expecting much, hoping for something only slightly better than my father's annual gift card for the Keg (I've been a vegetarian for five years).

I unwrapped a four-inch town clock, and my eyes stung with water. It was something that I didn't even know I needed—a discovered need—and something the village had been blind without. A piece both powerful and understated, something that everything could revolve around. What the sun is to the earth, the clock is to my village. And I would place it beneath the light of my full moon.

But more often than not, village gifts are kind gestures offered by those who have no fucking clue. My mother has bought me two churches in the past two years, decimating my tax base. My friend Lindsay got me an ice cream shop. Why would you have an ice cream shop in a town that is locked in eternal winter? For some questions, there are no answers.

By far the worst piece, though, was from my brother. It was the first Christmas after we had put down our family dog, Buddy. I was fifteen at the time, Tress a year older. He got me a figurine of a woman opening a wrapped box while a man watches behind her. Inside the box, a dog pants happily. Tress thought this piece would remind me of Buddy each year when I set up my village.

There are two things I hate about this piece. First, both the woman and the man are wearing Gore-Tex jackets. Second, it is completely improbable. That dog is lucky to be alive. It isn't panting because it's happy but because nobody bothered to poke air holes in the box.

Why do I keep such horrendous pieces? Because you can either be small and perfect like Monaco and sit in the back of the room during international dealings, or you can be colossal and hungry like the Soviet Union and watch the sun set on one end of your empire only to see it rise on the other.

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I KNOW THAT many things about my relationship with the village seem illogical: the sweatshop tolerance, the fiscal foolishness, the fact that I don't even really like Christmas. What can I say? Picasso's cubism, Eliot's modernism, Gandhi's view of the human soul—each, in its way, disconnected from logic. But that is what happens when you try to create something beautiful in an unbeautiful world.

I've never asked Litia what she thinks of the village, but not out of fear that she would say something mean. My dread is that she'd say she loves it because it is the one thing that makes me human: my tender and nonsensical affection.

As for her saying she hates it, that's not even possible. She's too weak for hate, though she would say too strong.

I want to give her everything this side of the solar system, but the only lives I can offer her right now are the ones barely worth having—hard and rigid, delicate and inflexible. We've started to talk about having a kid, and I become paralyzed with fear of what those sticky fingers will do to my empire. But I'm also afraid that I'll be heartbroken when Litia loves this new thing more than she loves me. And the two of them will be living their lives in so large a fashion, while I'll be trapped inside, keeping company with my petty fears, looking out at them through my tiny little window.

I SHOULD ADMIT that mine is not the largest village in the world. Not even close. Like most of my boyhood dreams, the Internet has destroyed that illusion. Eighty-nine-year-old Milt Hildebrant from Mendota Heights, Minnesota, is famous for a superstate that slinks through fully two rooms of his bungalow. It is an 1,100-piece collection, many times larger than my own.

I once took solace in the belief that, at least in Canada, I was a big fish in a small polyresin duck pond. But in March 2015, a major Christmas village brand posted a photo on its Facebook page of a deceptively modest ten-piece set. The buildings are spaced out, the streets peppered with people. There is a pastry store and a jeweller. There is a portrait painter on the corner and a wooden fence that encircles a merry-go-round. But what caught my eye was the moon, the same one as mine, its treasonous face glowing with pride.

Usually, I would've met the photo with pity, even outright derision. But the caption beneath the photo sent shivers down my spine: it explained that the builder of the village was a Canadian teenager.

When I was fourteen, my set had only seven pieces, one being my hockey team with nineteen arms. This kid had just a handful of buildings last year, and you can tell by the way he talks that he's got big city plans. If his village progresses at the rate I expect, this kid will surely overtake me by his twenty-fifth birthday. I needed to know: Who is this prodigy? And thanks to his shockingly relaxed Facebook security settings, I was able to find out.

He is indeed a teenager, and owing to a post he made about his report card, I know he is an excellent student. I know that he's into cake decorating in a big way. I know he likes bike riding; I know his older sister is a total babe and his father rocks sunglasses in formal portraiture. And also, because of a sickeningly sweet photo of the family in their front yard, I know that he lives nearby.

Julia Ward Howe Composes “The Battle Hymn of the Republic” (1861)

BY GEORGE ELLIOTT CLARKE

Untrammelled roads admit no unbridled horses:
Violence outpaces prayer.

Apple blossoms vanish violently:
Beauty just gets blown away.

Ideally, we plant trees, not corpses;
prefer husbandry, then harvest.

But, during *War*, even poets shatter
into factions of lines.

The bloodiest *Chaos*, sung in *The Iliad*,
flaunts patriotic bugles, imperial flutes,

nothing peevish.

Consider blown-apart presidents:

Their carcasses torn open, their blood
suddenly enthusiastically everywhere,

no defiance of enemy guns possible;
wives instantly widows beside.

Mothers! Temper all hallucination:
The Army schemes to injure thy sons!

Vengeance directs *Eternity*.

Tools count less than armaments.

Massacres are gory *Indulgence*,
but this vice (of “civil combat”) is ours.

Unfathomable armies—
untethering slaves—

unhinge *The Republic*,
undo the *Constitution*.

[Cambridge, Massachusetts; 29 *mars* mmxiv]

I think back to my teenage self and all the money I wasted on comic books and guinea pig food and trying to date girls who were obviously never going to go out with a boy who revered the key differences between ceramic and porcelain.

My young rival’s village has perfect aesthetic balance; mine has villagers who can’t even keep their arms attached to their bodies. He is coming for me. And his part-time job is only hurrying things along. My wasted time, my wasted life.

If I had the courage to reach out to him, what would I say? I would say that, for the rest of his life, people will tell him a miniature Christmas village is a childish thing. But I would also tell him that the people who say this have no appreciation for the finer things, for the small flourishes of beauty—and that, when you get right down to it, they don’t know shit about the fragility of the human heart. I would also tell him that they are 100 percent correct.

But adulthood is nothing to write home about. Yes, it’s true that there are credit cards and cigarettes, which are pretty great. It’s also true that people will stop being embarrassed when you ask them to explain the lyrics of “Hotel California.” You can get a dog; you can watch *The Godfather*, parts one and two. There’s no point in lying; there is a lot to be said for being a big person.

But then you’ll keep growing to the point where you no longer grow, and you are what you are, and the oyster-shaped world adults promised you will be revealed as a preamble to their pyramid scheme, something they’d stupidly bought into and now need you to as well. There’s nothing wrong with wishing for a different world. But one day, wishes won’t matter—or rather, you’ll realize they never mattered and were just one of the Santa Claus lies told to you by parents, teachers, and the elderly obese. By then, the end of the merge lane will have cornered you, and you’ll have to weave yourself into the traffic, seat-belted into unfathomable speed; but you’ll still wish for a perfection so still and silent, like rainbow trout in a frozen-through lake. My greatest fear? That this world will pass me over like I would a miniature man in a top hat, like something it has seen 1,000 times already and will see 10,000 times more.

But of course I’ll never say this. There’s only so much you can put in an unsolicited email to an adolescent boy.

MY BROTHER, MY PARENTS, and Litia are all drinking eggnog at the kitchen counter, Maisy curled up at their feet. I am alone in the dining room. The stereo switches CDs and “Carol of the Bells” comes on, building to its crescendo. My pillars of boxes are empty; my hand is still hovering the plug’s prongs over the socket. In the bay window, I catch my reflection, hunched and scowling and shrouded in darkness. But the plug enters the socket and suddenly I am bathed in light as power surges through my fingers and into my streets, the banks of lampposts like an airstrip guiding me home. The frozen eyes of my villagers are bright with desire; their houses are consumed by radiance. My theatre, my hotel, my millinery: All of it shines with a light so bright, it is pure colour. An apocalyptic fire. And above it all is my moon, now shrill with operatic pain.

Here I am, surrounded by my city and its inhabitants, feeling like a god. And I bless them, every one. ◀

👉 **ONLINE** Christmas, it turns out, has much in common with Halloween, at thewalrus.ca/black-christmas.

