

## Wonderful Life

By Lesley L. Smith

Someone knocked on the open door. "Hey, you lab rats. It's party time."

I looked up from the computer where I was trying to figure out why the images kept diverging.

Our secretary, wearing a garish red and green plaid sweater, stood in the doorway like some roving Christmas tree. "Oh, hi, Liz. What's up?"

She sighed in exasperation. "The party. Remember the holiday party I slaved over? You guys are coming, right? We need some people under sixty to liven it up."

"Here, daddy, paste it," came from the sound system of our holo-movie project. I looked at the imaging area and could almost make out a 3-d man sitting on a 3-d bed.

"Party?" Ted poked his head out from behind some equipment. "Why didn't I hear anything about a party?"

Liz grimaced. "Beats me. I only sent out about ten emails about it. Anyway, now you've heard about it -- so I'll see you there, right?"

"Count me in!" said Ted.

Liz smiled and went on down the hall.

"We can't afford to go to a party," I said to Ted. "We don't have time."

He got up and came over to me. "All work and no play makes Cassie a dull girl." He stood right next to me and looked at me with those twinkling blue eyes of his.

In the background I heard, "George, why must you torture the children?"

I shook my head and then had to brush my hair out of my eyes. "We have a deadline, in case you forgot. The clients aren't going to be happy if we don't deliver."

"C'mon, Cassie, don't be such a Scrooge." He touched my wrist.

I quickly withdrew my arm and put my hand in my lab coat pocket. "But the deadline...." I was weakening and Ted could read me like a book.

He gave me an encouraging smile, which emphasized the cleft in his chin.

"Oh, what the hell," I said and turned for the door. "Let's go."

We walked down the hall at a brisk pace, passing empty labs, many of which had twinkling lights strung around their doorways. We went outside through the double doors at the end of the hall.

I was surprised to see it was snowing and had been for quite a while by the looks of it. There were mounds of snow pooled here and there, and where the lights from the covered walkway hit them they sparkled. I hugged my lab coat more tightly around me. "I guess we should've got our jackets." Puffs of snow hit one side of my face and melted instantly, leaving tiny wet spots. I wiped my cheek with the arm of my lab coat.

Ted shrugged and pointed down the sidewalk. "We're almost there."

We picked up the pace as more fluffy snowflakes surrounded us.

Ted reached the doors first. As he opened them, a gust of hot air rushed out, carrying with it laughter, muted conversations, and the clink of glasses. I stepped in and he followed. It was nice and warm inside.

Liz met us at the door. "Nice outfits."

I looked down at my lab coat. "Oh, yeah, I guess we didn't need...."

Ted poked me in the ribs. "Look around Cass, we aren't the only ones."

Sure enough, almost everyone in the room had on a lab coat.

"Whatever." Liz laughed. "There's a bunch of snacks over there and the bar's over there." She pointed to the opposite side of the room.

"All right." Ted rubbed his hands together and started walking that way.

I said "Hey, get me a...."

He turned and said, "A Fat Tire. Yeah, I know," and continued on with his quest.

I turned to Liz. "Thanks for putting this party together."

She took a swig of her drink. "You're welcome. It was actually easier to get the party together than it was to pry you scientists out of your labs." She looked towards the bar. "So, how are things going with Ted? Have you guys hooked up yet?" she asked quietly.

"What? What are you talking about?"

"I've got eyes, haven't I? You light up like a firefly whenever he's around," she said.

"Me ... and Ted? We're just colleagues. I don't know what you're talking about."

She chuckled. "She doth protest too much. It's okay. He's hot -- for a scientist. I can tell he likes you too."

I didn't know what to say. Was I that obvious?

Ted appeared with two beers. "Here." He handed one to me.

I blushed as our fingers touched. "Thanks."

Liz took pity on me. "So I was just asking Cassie how your project was going. Have you got the 3-d video system working yet? I'm just dying to see it. I'm getting a prototype system when you're done, right?"

I was still flustered and took a drink of beer.

"We're still having problems with the focusing," Ted said. "I don't know about those micro black holes we got from the high-energy group. They don't seem to be working right." He ran his fingers through his wet hair, leaving it a bit spiky.

Judy sidled up beside Liz. "Hey, I heard that! Don't blame our black holes. I bet you don't have the confinement system set up correctly." She shook her finger at us.

Ted said, "I've checked the system backwards and forwards, and Cassie's checked it too, right Cass?"

I nodded. "Yes. We're following your specs to the letter. It should be working." I started to take another drink of beer and someone jostled me. It was Adrian. I should have known. Those cosmologists can't hold their liquor. "Hey!" I brushed at the wet spot on my lab coat that I was suddenly glad I was wearing.

"Oh, Sorry." He grinned.

He didn't seem sorry to me.

He looked around our group. "Oh, hi, Judy. Thanks again for the micro black holes. They're working great."

She beamed at him. "See. I told you they were first rate."

"Adrian what are you guys doing with them?" I asked.

He burped in my face and rubbed his graying beard. "Excuse me. We're doing a dark energy study."

Ted and I looked at each other over our beers. He raised his eyebrows.

Liz said, "Dark energy? What's that? I forgot."

"Oh, you know...vacuum fluctuations: virtual particles forming and annihilating," Adrian said.

Liz still looked blank.

He continued, "It's sort of like anti-gravity. We think it's causing the expansion of the universe to accelerate."

Run-amok expansion sounded suspiciously like the cause of our focusing problem. We hadn't taken dark energy into account! I started chugging my beer. In record time I was done and said, "Sorry. We have to go. C'mon Ted." I grabbed his arm, and started dragging him towards the door.

He seemed reluctant to go. "Aw, we just got here."

I said, "Don't you get it? The dark energy is probably messing us up."

"I get it. I just think we could have a few more drinks before we get back to work, or even better...." He looked at me sideways as we stepped outside. "How about some passionate necking?" He started humming. "Buffalo gal won't you come out tonight?"

Outside the snow was coming down harder than ever.

"Take it easy, old building and loan pal," I said. "Of course, who knows what'll happen if we finally get it to work."

"Hot dog!" he said with a big grin.

We reached our building and hurried in. "Brrr." I brushed snow off my arms. When we got to our lab I said, "So can we move some of the micro black holes around the room to balance out the effects of any dark energy?"

The soundtrack said, "It was Mary. She scattered all over town...."

Ted was already messing around with the equipment. "Yeah, I think so, we have enough confinement systems." He started rearranging the equipment.

I concentrated on the computer and brought up the focusing protocol. We worked silently for a little while. "There. I'm ready. How's it coming at your end?"

Ted grunted and adjusted one last thing. "That should do it. I'm ready too." He came over and sat down on the stool next to me. "Let her rip."

The soundtrack said, "It's a miracle, a miracle."

"Okay. Here it goes." I initiated the new focusing sequence, and held my breath. We peered at the imaging area.

Slowly a 3-d Christmas tree came into focus, along with a woman and a man holding a child. They looked like tiny people actually standing in the lab.

"Mr. Martini, how about some wine?"

Ted jumped up. "All right! We did it! This is great! We should celebrate!" He looked down at me with those enticing blue eyes of his.

With a big smile I said, "Why don't you just kiss her instead of talking her to death?"

And after that, we were too busy to say anything.

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