

Baby New Year by Lesley L. Smith

I waved hello to Lisa at the front desk as I breezed by on the way to my cubicle.

"Hold on, Nicole. Someone left a baby for you in the break room."

I skidded to a stop. "What? A baby?" Who would leave me a baby? And why?

Lisa giggled. "Oh, that didn't come out right. A toy baby, for the party. You know, Baby New Year. I still can't believe EEC didn't have a Christmas party this year."

I sighed. I was sick of hearing how the Employee Enjoyment Committee dropped the ball by not having a party in December. "Lisa, if you joined EEC, you could plan whatever party you wanted." I paused. "What do you say? Would you like to replace me on the committee?"

Lisa snorted. "No way. I'm not that stupid."

Sadly, I was. In my defense, they shanghaied me my first week on the job when I didn't know any better. And I couldn't resign until I found someone to replace me. "You know the Christmas/Ramadan/Bodhi/Chanukah/Kwanzaa party got cancelled after the atheists complained last year. Instead, we're having a fabulous New Years party!" I smiled. "Hurray, right?" Was I trying to convince her or myself?

"Whatever," Lisa said and snapped her gum.

I turned toward my cubicle.

"Baby," she called after me.

Oh yeah. I ambled into the break room, only to see a tiny moving arm sticking out of a box in the corner. "Lisa!" I bellowed.

She stepped out from behind the front desk and scurried over to the break room. "What?"

"I thought you said it was a toy baby!" I pointed a shaking finger at the box.

She stepped to the box, leaned over it, and picked up a very life-like, but definitely-not-moving toy baby. "Yeah." She cracked her gum again.

"What's the prob?"

I sidled over to her, checking out the toy. "Nothing. Sorry. I'm caffeine-deprived, I guess."

She put the doll back in the box and muttered something under her breath. I'm probably glad I couldn't make it out.

As she went back to her desk, I started the coffee.

"Whew, that was a close one," someone said behind me.

"What?" I whirled around and didn't see anyone.

"Yoo hoo! Nicole, down here." Over in the corner, the toy baby appeared to be waving at me. What the hell? Was I sick? I felt my forehead; it did seem a little warm.

"Nicole! Yo' babe!"

Reluctantly, I lurched over to the box and set my eyes on ...a toy baby doll. Then suddenly it blinked and smiled at me. Its wisps of hair stirred as if in a breeze.

I flinched.

"There you are," it said, waving its arms and kicking its legs. "What took you so long?"

I pinched myself. Ouch. I was definitely awake. "What are you?"

It grinned. "Would you believe Baby New Year?"

"No way." I shook my head.

"How about Father Time?"

"Nope." I stepped away from it. "Lisa!" I hollered.

She slowly ambled into the break room. "What? This better be good."

I pointed at the box. Glancing inside, I saw the inanimate doll was back. "Uh, who brought this in?"

She crossed her arms. "How should I know? You emailed everyone and asked them for a doll for the party." She tapped her foot. "Is that it?"

"Uh, no. I made coffee. Would you like some?"

She uncrossed her arms. "Yeah. That would be nice."

Lisa and I helped ourselves to coffee and hurried out of the break room. I left the baby doll or whatever it was in its box in the corner. I resolved not to be alone with it again.

The day flew by. Everyone came back from Christmas vacation wanting webpage updates right away. Lack of planning on their part apparently did lead to emergencies for me.

Matthew, one of the system administrators, stopped by my cubicle at noon. He stood in the doorway and shuffled back and forth. "Uh, hi, Nicole, so, I was wondering if you would like to go out to lunch with me?" He ran his hand through his brown hair and messed it all up.

"Sorry, Matthew. I'm buried in work." I turned back to my computer screen. When I glanced back at my doorway he was gone.

After that the server crashed not once, but twice. Both times my co-workers complained bitterly to me that their various web pages were down, and both times, I told them to contact Matthew. I was only the webpage designer-- which sounds fancier than it is.

I was still working hard at 7:00 p.m. when the phone rang. Caller ID said it was the break room. Gingerly I picked up the phone. "Hello?"

"Nicole? It's Matthew. We have an EEC meeting now, remember? In the break room."

I sighed in relief. "Hi, Matthew. Anything weird going on in the break room?"

"Well, we're all here waiting for you, and you're late. That's weird. Is that what you mean?"

"No. Sorry. I'll be right there."

I jogged to the break room. When I got there, the lights were on but it appeared to be empty. Now that was weird. Where did Matthew go?

"Nicole! Yo' babe!" came from the cardboard box in the corner. My skin crawled as the creature crawled out of its box. It stood up and suddenly a cigar appeared in its mouth. It took a puff and blew a smoke ring into the room.

"Did you just call me?" I pointed at its cigar. "And you can't smoke in here."

"Why are you still at work, Nicole? You should be out enjoying yourself. It's the holiday season."

"Hey, wait a minute; you didn't have anything to do with those computer crashes this afternoon, did you?"

It wiggled its eyebrows up and down.

I wasn't going to be ordered around by some kind of bossy baby. "Who are you to criticize me for being here? You're here."

A martini appeared in its hand. "But I'm not working. I'm enjoying myself." It took a sip.

"You can't drink in here, either." I glanced at the clock. "I stayed late because I thought we were having an EEC meeting to decorate for the party tomorrow. But, it looks like no one else is coming." I crossed my arms. "Crap. Now, I'll have to do all the decorating myself."

The baby or whatever it was, smiled and blew another smoke ring. "At least you won't be working."

"What are you, anyway?" I demanded.

"Have you heard of the Ghost of Christmas Present?" It smirked at me.

"What, like the Ghost of Christmas Yet To Come, from Dickens?"

It swirled its martini in its glass. "Yep."

"First of all, you look nothing like Dickens' glorious, jolly giant. Where's your green robe, and holly wreath? And second of all, Christmas is over."

It frowned. "It is regrettable I must take this form, but people are curiously lacking in holiday spirit now days." It gestured at its diaper and blew another smoke ring. "Baby New Year is more, what do you all call it, politically correct. But I'm gratified you are familiar with me. Maybe all is not lost."

"I read *A Christmas Carol* on-line." I sighed. "I might as well get this over with." I went over to the cabinet and opened one of the boxes of decorations. "Well? Are you going to help me, then?" I asked him. "Let's see some holly and mistletoe, Ghost."

It didn't answer. When I turned around, it was gone, leaving only cigar smoke lingering in the air.

"Sorry, sorry," someone said from the doorway. "I got all the way home before I remembered the meeting." Matthew rushed into the room, looking around. "Where is everyone?"

"I guess you weren't the only one who forgot." I shook my head. "But I'm glad you came back. Can you help me with the decorations?"

Matthew shuffled his feet and looked at the floor. "Sure! I'd be happy to, Nicole."

As we emptied the boxes of garland and twinkly lights, he said, "Do I smell...cigar?" He looked at me in surprise. "Have you been smoking in here?"

"Of course not." I peered into the box in the corner. The baby doll was back. "Maybe somebody overcooked something in the microwave."

"That reminds me, I haven't eaten yet. I wonder if there's any decent food in here." Matthew went over to the refrigerator. "Score! Some of the refreshments for the party are in here." He reached in and took out a beer. "Would you like a beer, Nicole?"

"You can't drink in here," I said, starting to untangle the twinkly lights.

Matthew popped the top off and took a sip. "Oh, come on. No one else is around." He gave me a big smile. "Lighten up, Nicole."

"Thanks, I'll pass." I still wanted to get through some more work tonight. I stood up. "Can you try to untangle these lights? I'm going to look for the step-ladder."

Matthew shrugged and reached for the pile.

Of course, I couldn't find the step-ladder anywhere. It wasn't in the break room. It wasn't in the coat closet. It wasn't even in the maintenance closet.

When I got back to the break room, Matthew had untangled the lights, and ferreted out a party tray of cheese and cold-cuts. "Look," chewing, he pointed at the tray on the table. "It's pretty good."

"Matthew! That's for the party! Stop eating it all."

He took another swig of beer and grinned at me. "Sure you don't want some?"

I was wavering; I was pretty hungry, myself. I put my hands on my hips. "I can't find the step-ladder. Do you have any ideas?"

He set down his drink on the table. "I might know where it is. I'll be right back."

As soon as Matthew left, the cigar smell intensified. The Ghost crawled out of its box in the corner. "You should have a beer and chill out, Nicole," it said. "Where's your Christmas spirit?"

"I'll have a beer, if you help with the decorations and refreshments," I said. "If you're really the Ghost of Christmas Present that should be no problem for you."

It picked the olive out of its drink, put it in its mouth, and shrugged. "Okay." It waved its hand around.

Suddenly the room was decked with sparkly silver garlands and jewel-toned balloons. The counter and table were covered with cakes, pies, platters of fruit, bowls of punch, plates of sausages, and a roast turkey.

I sank into a chair. "Wow!"

"Is this sufficient?" it asked.

"Yes, very nice. Thank you."

"I couldn't find the step-ladder, but--" Matthew stopped short in the middle of the break room, as the festive food and decorations registered. "Wow. What happened in here?" He turned to look at me. "How did you do all this?"

I held up my hands. "Would you believe it was the Ghost of Christmas Present?"

"Sure." He smiled at me.

I smiled back at him.

"That reminds me, I came across my Secret Santa gift for you when I was looking for the step-ladder." He handed me a small box wrapped in garish green and red plaid paper.

"But we weren't allowed to do Secret Santa." I untied the ribbon, and started unwrapping the box.

"Bah, Humbug, on that." He handed me a beer.

I opened the box. Inside was a piece of paper. It said: 'Get out of the EEC free'. I looked at Matthew. "What?"

He lifted the piece of paper out of the box. "I found someone to replace you on the EEC, so you can quit." He paused. "I know you were trying to get out of it."

"Are you staying in it?" I opened my beer and took a swig.

"Sure. I like it."

"Then, I'd like to stay in it, too." I reached for a piece of cheese.

"Is that okay? I really appreciate the gift, but I think it would be more fun to stay on the committee--with you."

Matthew smiled as he held up his beer. "I'll drink to that."

Smiling, I clinked my bottle against his. "Cheers!"