

# **KRAMPUS**

A Christmas Tale

by Ed Kurtz

© 2011 by Ed Kurtz

<http://edkurtzbleeds.wordpress.com>

**THERE WERE** four and a half feet of snow blanketing eastern Radcliffe County, a veritable winter wonderland from which Jason Sommer was strictly forbidden. Instead of flouncing in the snowdrifts, building snowmen (boring) or engineering deep tunnels and caves (how he craved this!), Jason sat on the plastic-covered settee beside a sputtering fire and did everything in his power to avoid the accusing eyes of Oma Zimmer.

Oma was a stern, fat woman of seventy-two, an immigrant of what she only ever called The Old Country, but which Jason understood to be a place called Austria, somewhere faraway on a continent called Europe. She spoke English more or less fluently but almost never did, electing instead to force her deep, guttural German on the boy who only understood every sixth word and always pretended to understand none at all. She sat in a wicker chair into which she only barely fit, her knitting between two massive red hands that worked by muscle memory and had no need for her squinting, opalescent blue eyes. The eyes were trained on the boy.

Jason's eyes were on the small black and white television set, a machine three times older than him and by some remarkable miracle still working. Its dusty, convex screen showed Jimmy Stewart in the role of George Bailey and George was really letting mean old Mr. Potter have it. Jason wished he had a little of George's spunk, enough that he might let mean old Oma Zimmer have hers, too. But Jason Sommer was only eight years old, only half

Oma's mass and one ninth her age. She had him outnumbered on every front and besides that, she scared the living shit out of him. She always had.

So fright overtook indignity, and though the boy knew for an indisputable fact that the fat old woman was very much in the wrong to keep him inside the musty, boring old house when a complex universe of rare, once-a-year fun was to be had out of doors, he remained still and silent, his hands in his lap and his angry little eyes glued to *It's A Wonderful Life*.

Yet for Jason, it quite assuredly wasn't so wonderful at all.

His father dropped dead in the garage two Christmases ago, when Jason was six. He'd gone out for a smoke in the freezing morning cold while the boy and his mother assessed the mess of torn wrapping paper and dirty Christmas breakfast dishes, and while those two smiled and laughed and enjoyed the warmth of the den, Mr. Sommer clutched his chest and made a squashed, purple face before he collapsed on the cold, oil-stained floor. By the time the next Christmas rolled around, the widow Mrs. Sommer was nowhere to be found—she'd met a motorcycle mechanic named Clyde in the smoky tavern she had started to frequent four or five nights a week, and now she and Clyde were riding easy somewhere in North America. Jason was dropped off on his grandmother's doorstep without so much as a kiss goodbye.

As far as Jason Sommer was concerned, it was a monumentally crappy life and he didn't care what Jimmy Stewart or Frank Capra or anyone else had to say about it.

Oma erupted into a wet cough that left spittle on her prodigious chin, whereupon she hefted her substantial bulk from the wicker chair, laid her knitting on the seat, and waddled out of the room. Jason made a face behind her back, his eyes scrunched up and his tongue stuck way out. He wished he had the courage to do it to her face, but this was a woman who

was content to ruin a child's Christmas for the sake of one stray cat nobody in the world even cared about.

Just a nasty, mangy old thing—yellow where the fur wasn't already matted with mud or torn out from some tomcat battle royale, its eyes cloudy and mean. It was Colum, the Canadian kid across the alley, who pointed it out and suggested in that funny way he talked that it would be a hell of a thing to bombard the filthy little bastard with M-80s just for shits and giggles (whatever that last part meant). And naturally, good old Canadian Colum just so happened to have a paper sack full of M-80s.

*"Verdamnte Kälte!"* Oma grumped from the kitchen. She stamped her gnarled feet and banged around the pots hanging over the stove, in all likelihood getting ready to prepare another unpalatable European concoction in her daily endeavor to starve Jason to death. She'd thought it a serious punishment to withhold a supper of pörkölt and sauerkraut the night the cat died in an acrid cloud of blue smoke and bursting firecrackers, but Jason was glad. The stuff was pure poison as far as he was concerned and he was pleased as punch to go to his room without it.

*"Kälte, kalt!"* the old woman muttered. *"Dieser Winter ist untragbar!"*

She was right, of course—it *was* intolerably cold, and Oma's frugality with the heat bill didn't much help the issue. So Jason kept close to the fire, the house's sole source of warmth, and he closed his eyes to imagine all the warm, bright, Christmassy things his mom would have brought into the house but which his Oma austereyly disdained. There were no candles or wreaths, no lights, no holly, no mistletoe. She would not bring a Christmas Tree into the house if her life depended on it—*"Ich hasse Weihnachtsbäume!"* she once bellowed in a rage upon Jason's insistence upon getting one—and worst of all, there

were no presents. The boy was positively forbidden from celebrating or even acknowledging Christmas in Oma's house, and there was to be no discussion about it. It was Oma's law.

Thus how strange it was when *It's A Wonderful Life* came on Channel 7 and Oma had not said one word about it, good or bad. Jason was certain she would throw a fit and switch the ancient teevee off the second the announcer proclaimed the next show, but she had merely looked up from her knitting for the briefest of moments and proffered the queerest smile...

George Bailey was screaming about something or another and Oma was clanging away in the kitchen, cooking something vaguely resembling hot vomit. Jason switched the television off himself and curled back against the plastic on the setee to watch the fire die out. He knew better than to toss another log on it—Oma would not permit the fire to be restarted until both she and the boy had icicles hanging from their nostrils. So he pulled the small red blanket from the back of the setee and wrapped it around his shoulders and sat sullenly in the dim light of the smoldering embers in the fireplace.

"Jason?" Oma called from the kitchen. She pronounced his name *Yah-sohn*. He looked up to find her waddling back to the den. "Vy heff you turnt off der movie?"

"It's old and stupid," Jason said grumpily. "Besides, it's about Christmas, isn't it? And we don't do Christmas here."

"Oh, dat's okay," Oma said, bringing that same queer smile back to her puffy red face. "I doan mine it so much, not now. Ve vill heff a little cheer, ja? Doan be so gloomy, boy. Vatch your Christmas show."

She gave a throaty little laugh and vanished back into the kitchen.

Jason arched an eyebrow and grunted. What was the mean old crone up to? Then Oma got to humming to herself, only occasionally breaking into chuckles as she did so, and Jason stomped off to his bedroom.

It was Christmas Eve.

\* \* \*

Jason had fallen asleep with the light on, burrowed deep under a mountain of blankets with his clothes still on. He awoke shivering all the same, a metallic chiming sound clinking away just outside the bedroom window. He retracted into a tight ball and wrinkled his nose, which was numb with cold. The Daffy Duck clock on the nightstand told him it was just past midnight.

He held his breath and listened to the silence of the room and the contrasting crunch and creak of breaking snow outside. There was a particular kind of quiet in winter that did not exist in any other season, a foreboding stillness that the creaking steps and crinkling chimes shattered in a way that somehow dropped the temperature even lower. Jason scooted up against the wall and hugged his pillow tight.

The creaking stopped abruptly, but that was when the plaintive mewling started. It was high and desperate, fraught with anguish. That it was a shrieking cat Jason had no doubt. He pulled the blankets up over his head and squeezed his eyes shut. The mewling grew louder, shriller, as if endeavoring to penetrate the wall of blankets to reach Jason's frigid ears. He let loose a small whimper and was instantly ashamed of it. After all, it was only a stupid cat.

Imbued with the courage only shame can bring, the boy threw the blankets off and sat up in the bed, his face pinched and fists clenched. The cold, static air of the room encased him like a fog, stung his face and drowned out the noise of the cat. Now there was only the white noise of winter, the awful frozen silence of Christmas morning at a few minutes past midnight.

Jason threw his legs over the edge of the bed and slid his feet into the well worn slippers waiting on the floor. He shuffled over to the window and paused at the drawn curtains, once again holding his breath and listening closely to the snowy night outside. He heard the mewling cat again, but distant, and not beyond the window. It came from the other side of the bedroom door.

His breath hitched in his chest and his heart jerked, missing half a beat. The clanging chimes sounded outside again, but the mewling continued from beyond the door, somewhere inside the house. Jason shuddered in spite of himself.

He went across the room, certain that the temp was dropping steadily, until he reached the door. The mewling continued uninterrupted, as did the jangling chimes outside, but there was something else now: music. And not just any music, but Christmas music. Oma's disused old record player was playing "O Holy Night."

Jason gasped, and it came out in a visible puff of steam. He had never even *heard* of anyone who hated Christmas more than his Oma, and yet the old woman was playing a Christmas record. In the middle of the night. While a cat screeched pathetically in the hall outside her grandson's bedroom door.

The boy frowned. He was onto her.

This was clearly all a trick, a big ugly ruse to further Jason's punishment. The cruel old woman was pulling a lot of old Halloween tricks on Christmas! The frown became a sneer, which itself turned into a kind of smile. Of sorts.

Jason listened to the mewling sound in the hall for another few seconds before he turned back toward the window. Cat sounds in the hallway and crunching snow accompanied by—what, jingle bells?—in the side yard. Oma, Jason decided, was really working her nasty little ruse. He steeled his nerves and set his jaw before reaching to seize the doorknob. "O Holy Night" rose to the high-voiced chorus as he pulled the door open to look upon the wrapped present at his feet.

The paper was red and green, striped with intricate white snowflakes sprinkled all over. The package had a ribbon over it crosswise, also red and green, and a bouncy silver bow on top. A small card was affixed to the ribbon, which was splayed open for the boy to see the inscription inside—

**FROEHLICHE WEINACHTEN JASON**

Merry Christmas, Jason.

The boy could not help himself; his eyes misted over and a small sob broke past his lips. There was no ruse, no Halloween trick. This was real, Christmas as he remembered it from when he was little and his dad was still alive and his mom still loved him. Sweet seasonal music and a surprise present from Oma and was that rich piney smell a Christmas tree? Had Oma brought in a *Weihnachtsbaum* after all?

It all seemed so incredible, like a dream, but then came the unmistakable aroma of cinnamon sugar cookies wafting into the hallway, brought along with the calming melody and the crackling noise of the fireplace in the den. The fat old witch Jason had hated for taking Christmas away—for a dead alley cat, no less—had turned around at the last minute like Ebenezer Scrooge, or the Grinch. Tears spilled down the boy’s cheeks. They felt hot against his chilled skin, for despite the roar of the fire the house remained frightfully cold. But Jason didn’t care. He wiped his cheeks with the sleeve of his sweatshirt and knelt down by his beautifully wrapped present on the floor.

His small, trembling fingers, pink from the cold, touched the flouncy bow on top. The box shook beneath, and for a second Jason guessed that there was something mechanical inside, a toy robot or something like it. Jason found the ribbon’s end and gave it a sharp yank. The bow unraveled and the ribbon fell away as the present once more quivered and shook. Jason’s heartbeat quickened and he could feel the blood rise to his wet cheeks.

The mewling that came next, from inside the wrapped box, sent the hot blood retreating from his cheeks and his skin crawled with cold.

*A cat? Wrapped in a box?*

A cursory examination of the present revealed no holes in the wrapping paper to Jason, who now wondered how the animal could breathe in there. “O Holy Night” gave way to “Silent Night” and the box wobbled again with a fresh spate of pathetic meows. Jason leaned out into the hall and gazed down to the end, into the den where the firelight pulsed and the firewood snapped.

*Froehliche Weinachten Jason...*

He sucked a deep, frozen breath into his lungs and tore into the wrapping paper. When all the paper was ripped away, Jason was faced with a cardboard box, its top flaps folded in on one another. In stark contrast to the sweet pine and sugar and cinnamon in the air, the box emitted a dank, rotting odor, like moldy leaves in the woods after a summer rain. Jason wrinkled his nose and crumpled his brow.

And with no little trepidation, he pulled open the flaps.

He leapt back instinctively, almost certain that the creature within would attack, but after a moment of quick-breathing terror Jason stared at the box and saw that nothing was coming out of it. He stepped forward, craned his neck to look down into the shadowed interior of the box to see his Christmas present.

The cat looked up at him inquisitively with its one yellow eye. Where the other eye once had been was now only a scabby pit, crusted over with dried black blood and dirt. Its nose was also mostly gone and the hairless skin around the cat's face was burned and peeling. It cocked its head to one side and an ear, only tenuously attached, flopped loose and swung like a pendulum. The animal opened its largely toothless maw then and meowed sweetly. A thin wisp of gray smoke came floating out with the sound.

Jason yelped and shot up like a man out of a cannon. From the den he heard Oma call out his name.

"Ya-sohn? You are awake?"

The boy stammered as he backed away from the mutilated animal in the box. He flattened out against the hallway wall and felt a shiver work its way from the top of his spine to his tailbone.

“Come to der den, *schatz*,” Oma said in a sing-song voice. “Come here. Is Christmas now, ja?”

“Christmas,” Jason whispered. Somehow the word had taken on a vaguely ominous hue. He swallowed hard and edged along the wall, keeping as far from the cat in the box as possible, and made his way slowly to the den.

The cat chirped and mewled and purred all the while.

Jason emerged from the hallway to find Oma squashed into her little wicker chair with her knitting in her lap. Behind her, a fragrant green fir tree towered, its top bent slightly against the ceiling. Between her and the plastic covered settee a plate piled high with cinnamon sugar cookies rested on the low coffee table. Jason gawped.

Oma looked up from her knitting, narrowed her eyes at her grandson. A plume of blue-white smoke erupted from the general direction of the settee, and when Jason moved further into the room he was startled to find an old man seated there, smoking a long-stemmed pipe.

The man was at least as old as Oma, if not older, though Jason found his age difficult to determine for all the scraggly white hair that hung like Spanish moss from his deeply lined, alabaster-white face. He was dressed warmly in a mangy scarlet cloak and he had a sort of stocking cap on his head to match. Jason thought he looked like a bum, or maybe an old-timey mountain man. The hoary old fellow turned his small, piercing blue eyes on Jason and expelled a stream of smoke from a yellow grin.

“Hello, *boy*,” he rasped, his voice like broken glass. “Happy Christmas.”

“Happy Christmas, sir,” Jason said almost too quietly to hear. He wondered why the old man said *happy* instead of the usual *merry*.

“Dis ist my friend Nicolaus,” Oma said, her great shoulders suddenly shaking as though she might explode with laughter at any second. “He brought you a *gift*, boy. Did you see your gift?”

The cat, Jason knew. The horrible, maimed creature in the box. The one he was sure he’d killed with Colum’s M-80s, and hadn’t he? Isn’t that what he had been punished for all along?

“Yes,” Jason said, averting his eyes to his slippered feet.

Instead of Oma, it was the rumped old man who erupted in peals of phlegmy laughter. Jason recoiled.

“Bring the animal here, boy,” Nicolaus commanded between heaving chuckles. “Hurry up, bring it here.”

He clapped his gloved hands, which kicked up a small cloud of dust that mixed with the smoke from his pipe. Jason coughed dramatically and hustled back to the hallway for the revolting cat. It remained crouched in the box, its sole remaining eye glued to Jason as he peered down at the miserable thing.

“I killed you,” the boy whispered accusatorily. The cat meowed in response. It was not quite as sweet and innocent a meow as before, but something bordering on sinister. There was sandpaper and rancor in the cat’s little voice now. Jason hesitated.

“The *animal*, boy,” Nicolaus grumbled from his place in the smoky den.

Jason bent at the knees and hefted the box up. The cat hissed a long, sibilant hiss which Jason did his best to ignore as he carted the box out to the elderly people in the den.

Nicolaus sucked at the stem of his pipe, narrowing his eyes to slits as he did so. He sucked for several long seconds until the smoke leaked out of his hairy nostrils, and then

held his breath for a moment before spewing a hateful column of smoke into the surprisingly cold air of the den. The cat was beginning to grow restless inside the box, making tight circumlocutions and growling deep in its burned throat. The old man gestured with his stubby fingers, said, "Bring it here."

Jason did as he was told. He hauled the box over to the settee and laid it beside the old man, who was now close enough for the boy to tell that he smelled of bad milk. Then, as if reading Jason's mind, Nicolaus said, "Go you into the kitchen and bring me a jug of milk."

Jason gave a sharp nod and backed away, keeping his eyes on the repulsive old bum as he reached into the box to stroke the mangled thing inside.

*"Mit ihnen ist es immer Milch,"* Jason heard his Oma say as he turned into the kitchen. *It's always milk with you.*

The milk was in the refrigerator door, a half gallon of the whole stuff that Jason detested. He pulled it out and took a glass down from the cupboard, into which he poured the old man's milk. While he did so, he worried. Things were not normal at that particular moment in time, and there were a lot of things going on. The cat, of course, topped the list—not only had he most definitely killed the stupid thing, he'd been punished for it, had Christmas taken away. Now Christmas was back. And so was the cat.

And then there was the old man, this Nicolaus who Oma called a friend though Jason had never heard of him before now. He was ugly and dirty, and he *smelled*, and the boy felt sure he had some kind of power over his Oma, something that made her stay up past midnight and decorate her typically drab house, and play Christmas records of all things. It was crazy, that was all. Just plain crazy.

With the cold glass in hand Jason returned to the den. The old man drew the pipe from his mouth and licked his lips as the boy drew near, and he snatched the glass from him with all the etiquette of a wild boar. He guzzled the milk without so much as a thank you, all the while stroking the disfigured, dead-but-alive cat in the box with his other hand. Oma smiled appreciatively as she looked on. The cat purred.

“Good,” the old man sighed, stretching the vowel far beyond its normal boundaries of acceptability. The purring in the box continued unabated, and to Jason’s ears it seemed to deepen in pitch as it gradually grew louder.

“Oma,” Jason said, turning to face his grandmother. “Can I go back to bed now?”

“Ach, no, child,” said Oma with a mischievous grin. “You’ve been much too naughty for dat.”

“But—but the cat,” Jason stammered, his eyes wide and brimming with tears. “It’s alive, Oma! I didn’t kill it!”

“Are you so sure, boy?” Nicolaus put in, once again sucking at his pipe and quivering all over with laughter. “Come look.”

He displayed the palm of his hand and gestured with it at the box. Jason remained still, frozen. The old man pulled more smoke into his lungs and gave a low, gravelly chortle. He then launched himself from the settee at Jason, seized the boy by his sweatshirt and flung him at the box.

“*Look!*” Old Nicolaus bellowed, his breath sour and nauseating.

Jason sobbed and he looked. He looked at the dead, torn-up carcass at the bottom of the box, its yellow fur singed and patchy, its head a red and black jumble of blisters and scars

and burns. This was the cat he killed with Colum's big bag of contraband firecrackers, this was the incontrovertible evidence of his naughtiness.

"*Do you see?*" the old man seethed, shaking the boy so hard that he ripped his sweatshirt. "*Do you seeeee?*"

"Yes!" Jason cried, his nose dripping and his lips blubbering. "Yes, I see it! I'm sorry, okay? *I'm so sorry!*"

"Sorry?" Nicolaus asked, incredulous.

"*Sorry?*" Oma parroted.

Nicolaus chuckled. "The boy, he says he is sorry."

"Tsk, tsk," Oma clucked. "Too little, too late."

Her hands still worked the knitting needles in her lap, but faster and more aggressively than ever before. They tore at the yarn and hooked strange, unsymmetrical shapes.

"But I *am* sorry, Oma!" Jason protested, crying even harder now. "Really I am!"

"Too little," the wretched old man rasped. "And much, much too late, boy."

Nicolaus exhaled a thick plume of smoke, though he hadn't drawn it from the pipe, which rested on the low-slung coffee table. Jason blanched and his Oma giggled and the cardboard box on the settee shook violently as a deep, rumbling growl arose from within.

"To the *good* children Nicolaus comes bearing *gifts* and *sweets*," the old man wheezed through the mist rolling from his grinning lips. "But to the *bad* children—"

The carcass in the box seemed alive again, thrashing and keening as it struggled to claw its way up and out...

"To the *bad* children—*KRAMPUS!*"

The cat burst forth from the box in a hot blast of impossibly dark light, but Jason could see at once that it wasn't the cat at all, not anymore. Though scraps of skin, some of which sported tufts of burned yellow fur, still dangled from the thing that came crawling out of Jason's Christmas present box, this was something entirely different. This was jet black and shiny like marble, tightly muscled with a face like the Devil and long, serrated claws jutting from its gnarled fingertips. Its mouth stretched wide exposing triangular white teeth and a blood-red tongue that wagged grotesquely. The ears on either side of the creature's head were almost comically large and pointed at the tips, and each lobe was pierced with a heavy iron ring that tugged at the obsidian flesh. It wagged its hands at Jason and cooed and burbled the way grown-ups often did at babies, and Jason whimpered at the way the firelight sparkled in the monster's enormous, cat-like eyes.

*"Jaaaaaason,"* the abomination hissed cruelly.

The thing—Krampus, according to the horrible old man—stepped out of the box one twisted, hooved foot at a time, knocking the box over with the second leg and sending something tumbling out onto the floor. It rolled across Oma's rug and came to rest at Jason's feet. The flames in the fireplace suddenly blazed and flooded its light on the severed head of poor Canadian Colum, whose mouth was screwed up into a rictus grin and whose eyes stared with the dead boy's final moments of heart-stopping horror.

Jason shrieked so long and loud that his voice ratcheted down to a sharp whistle before he was done.

Krampus scooped the head up by the hair and tramped on its hooves past Jason and past Nicolaus and Oma to the towering Christmas tree by the windows. Each step scraped at the floor and the beast rasped and hissed with every terrible breath.

Oma rose from her chair and leaned down to plug in the lights, whereupon the tree lit up in a brilliant display of snowflake-white and ice-blue lights that illuminated the splayed-open torso hung on the center of the tree. The ribs glistened pink in the firelight and dripped with abandon on the sweet-smelling green needles beneath. Oma pressed her hands together and sighed with a grandmother's satisfaction. Jason pressed another scratchy whistle from his throat that would otherwise have been a scream. His head swam and his eyes leaked endless tears. Krampus reached up and placed Colum's head at the top of the tree, from where his dead, glaring eyes could view whatever came next.

The demon spun around then, agile as an alley cat, and threw his hands out like Fred Astaire while a grin played at his slavering mouth.

*"Haaaaapy Chrissstmas!"* Krampus screeched.

Jason yanked himself free of Nicolaus's grip, tearing his shirt from the neck to the waist, and ran wildly from the den, down the hall and into his bedroom where he slammed the door shut and locked it. His heart hammered in his chest and he could feel the pulse in his neck like a hammer pounding at him. Oma and Nicolaus laughed and laughed, the kind of laughter that brought tears and made people slap their legs. Jason shed tears, but there was no laughter or merriment to accompany his. Only fear.

He sped across the room to the window where he threw open the drapes and looked out at the dark, crystalline winter night. The mounded snow in the yard sparkled in the faint moonlight and icicles like glass hung in rows from the branches of the naked black trees. Jason unlatched the window and hefted it open. The cold air did not blast him as he expected; rather, it crept in like ghosts, quickly and efficiently enveloping him in its grip. He expelled a steamy breath and remembered his shoes—they were on the other side of the

house, beyond the den and the tree and the ink-black devil that tore Colum apart like a crab at Larry's Crab Shack. But between cold feet and his head perched on a Christmas tree...

Jason climbed through the window and jumped down into the cold, wet snow.

Behind him and just above him, the door in his bedroom buckled and splintered. The wood snapped and scraped, a distinctly inhuman voice cried, "*Jaaaaason...!*"

The boy ran. It was not easy in his slippers and through the snow, but he pumped his arms and lifted his legs high and even when his chest burned and the breathing became difficult, he ran.

"*Jaaaaason,*" Krampus bellowed, and by the time Jason reached the alley between Oma's house and Colum's (poor Colum!) the window through which he'd crawled exploded as if rigged with dynamite. Glass and wood and Oma's aluminum siding shot forth like shrapnel from the explosion, and in the center of it was Krampus, two massive leathery black wings bearing him into the air as he screeched and cackled.

Jason spun around to behold the airborne horror and its great, flapping wings as it arced high enough to vanish in the darkness. Then, absolute stillness.

Silent night.

But far from a holy one.

The boy teetered on his soaking, tingling feet and examined the house from the alley. The window was still a ragged, gaping hole. It had *really* happened, and not just in a bad dream. It had happened because Jason was not a good boy, he was a rotten kid, he killed animals, all sorts of animals—a chipmunk with an air rifle, a nest of baby sparrows with a ball peen hammer, and the puppy he found behind Wizard's Arcade, what a mess soccer

cleats could make!—and finally, *finally*, he'd been caught with the mangy yellow cat because that goddamn Canadian's M-80s made so much damn noise...

And bad little boys who got caught, Jason knew too well now. Bad little boys got punished.

A thick black branch above him shook and shed a couple dozen icicles before he even heard the snap of the wings—Krampus was coming back.

"JAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAASON!!!"

Jason fell into a crouch and covered his cold head with his arms.

"No!" he screamed pitifully. "No, no!"

The demon dropped out of the still night sky like a missile and dug its talons deep into the boy's shoulder blades, hooking into the muscle and scraping bone. Jason bawled with horror and pain, but the pain only increased tenfold as Krampus pushed off with his hoofs and resumed flight, dragging the naughty boy along by the claws in his flesh.

And as they soared into the bitter heavens, Krampus brought his fawning, fanged mouth close to Jason's ear, whispered, "Happy Christmas, Jason—it's your *last!*" and sank his teeth into the boy's throat to drink deeply of a rotten child's lifeblood.

\* \* \*

Oma awoke late in the morning, past ten o'clock, and cursed the time as she pushed herself out of bed and shrugged into her terrycloth robe and shuffled off for the kitchen. It was much too late and there were sweets to make, sugar cookies and Stollen and Dunkel gingerbread with chocolate chunks. There were not very many children left in the old

neighborhood anymore—most had grown and gone away—but still, Oma knew, there were some good boys and girls for whom Christmas should bring some manner of reward. She loved the good children so, Oma.

...and a very Happy Christmas to you and yours, free of Krampus and full of love. Thank you for reading my tale!

—Ed Kurtz

<http://edkurtzbleeds.wordpress.com>

On Twitter: @Ed\_Kurtz\_Bleeds

**Also by Ed Kurtz:**

*[Bleed](#)*