

The Christmas Hat

A feel-good geeky Christmas short story

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The Christmas Hat

Not for the first time that day, Olive wished she had worn a different cosplay costume to the convention or at least made a smaller hat. It looked fine at home. Oversize was funny, she thought.

'Are you okay?' she said, her face as red as Rudolph's nose. The brim of her hat had just smacked straight into a furious looking Princess and knocked the tiara clean off her head. 'It's the hat, so sorry,' mumbled Olive as she attempted to bend down to pick it up.

The Princess snarled, 'Don't bother,' picked the tiara up for herself, glaring daggers, then flounced off in a huff.

'How rude,' muttered Olive, just as someone else crashed straight into her. In a flash, she raised her hands to steady the cumbersome beast of a hat. An ice-cold chill ran through her making her shiver.

'Watch where you're going!' spat the thin man. He reminded Olive of a frost giant, sporting spiky white-

blonde hair, a pointy goatee like an icicle and a definite bluish tinge to his skin. He vanished before Olive could even blink.

'Deep breath, Olive,' she muttered through gritted teeth. 'In and out ...'

Glancing at her venue map to regain her bearings, Olive set off again, doing her best to avoid bumping into anyone else. Finally, she found the room for the first event on her agenda, the Computer Animation panel, to find the room packed. Conveniently, Olive spotted a seat in the back row.

'Should have used a smaller hoop,' she muttered amid apologies as she wrangled the hat past the visibly irritated people seated in the row.

Wouldn't you think the organisers must have realised people in costumes needed some extra room? It was a geek convention, after all. She threw herself into the vacant seat, the guy seated next to her tutting loudly. Olive held her head at a weird angle, the awkward hat now encroaching on the person seated on her other side. She wished the hat would just swallow her whole. It's not like she could take it off either, as it was held in place by at least a hundred bobby pins.

Applause resounded as the MC and panellists took their seats at the long table on the stage. For months, Olive had looked forward to seeing her idols who worked in the world of animation and illustration, her dream job. Shuffling in her seat, she was conscious of annoying her neighbours, and as her neck began to ache, she found it impossible to concentrate on the guests talking. Feeling flushed, she tried to fan herself, clutching at the necktie of

her costume to try to catch some air and sipping from her water bottle. Desperately trying to listen to the speaker, Olive gripped her neck muscle to massage a tension knot. With panic rising, swirling white noise thrummed in her ears. The thrumming grew louder, her breath grew shallow, her heart thumped, and the room began to spin.

The crowd broke into applause for the next guest speaker. Olive stood abruptly, seizing the moment to escape and hurried along the row to the exit door, barreling past the staff member, muttering a belated apology as she fled down the deserted hallway.

A foyer scattered with bright green lounge chairs and boasting a vast window overlooking the showgrounds provided a welcome respite. Olive plonked herself down, the acute panic subsiding, grateful to rest her hat-cladded head against the back of the chair. Although the temperature was cooler, the hat made her head feel like a pressure cooker about to blow its valve. Taking measured breaths to calm herself, Olive recited her mental checklist:

Are we in physical danger? No, we are safe.

It's just exaggerated feelings from the adrenaline coursing through your body.

She remembered some simple advice she recently heard on a podcast by a guy named Kelvin that her Auntie Betty suggested might help her.

Breathe in, breathe out. Calm, calm, calm.

She reasoned with herself that sitting in a stuffy, crowded space with no fresh air and holding your head funny because of a stupid oversized hat unsurprisingly resulted in extreme agitation leading to a panic attack. And

she hadn't eaten any breakfast in her haste to get to the convention on time.

'Are you okay there?'

Olive jumped, realising there was an older man also seated.

'Oh, I didn't see you there! Thanks, yes— I think so ...' replied Olive. 'Just couldn't breathe. It was so hot in the panel room, and this hat is not helping ...'

'It does look a little awkward to wear,' he agreed. 'Nice touch with the holly tinsel and fairy lights around the brim.'

'Feel like I have a whole bloody Christmas tree on my head,' said Olive.

A great belly laugh burst from the man. Olive couldn't help but chuckle too, strangely comforted by this gently spoken man.

'Guinan and Tenth Doctor cosplay crossover, right? And the hat's Tardis blue!'

'Oh, you're a Trekkie and a Whovian! Me too!' Olive gushed, delighted that the man recognised her costume.

'I always thought she was a Time Lord...' said the man.

'Yes!' said Olive, surprised. 'Picard hints at it in that time travel episode to the wild west ...'

'Now *that* episode was a heap of fun,' said the man, smiling. Then, as if lost in a daydream, he murmured, 'It most certainly was ...'

They sat in companionable silence for a couple of minutes.

'Well, you look a lot brighter,' said the man, getting to his feet. 'And I better get to my next one.'

'Thank you for chatting with me. I feel fine now,' said Olive, sad to see him go, adding, 'You are very kind.'

With a twinkle in his eye and a grin, the man ambled off.

Olive glanced at her watch. Even though there was still some time left of the panel, she couldn't face going back into the stuffy room. Perhaps some food would be a good idea, she thought, making her way to the catering area. Hot chips and cinnamon doughnuts hit the spot nicely. Olive decided to stroll around the merchandise stalls with all thoughts of panic forgotten.

The hat came in handy to keep a little room around her in the crowded aisles. By far, Olive's wasn't the most oversized costume. Some clever folk had built a couple of Dalek's, and a 7-foot tall Bumblebee Transformer caroused around the pavilion as well. Olive saw so many things she wanted to buy— she *needed* the fancy slippers with golden unicorn horns and rainbow manes ... and a communicator badge from the newest Star Trek series ... and a new Tardis hoodie ... and who didn't need more bobblehead dolls? But— Olive reminded herself of the strict budget she was committed to following. Her new job at SugarSpun Cafe paid more than her last job, but she did have outstanding debts to be addressed before unicorn slippers. Though her Aunt did slip her a fifty dollar note to buy herself an early Christmas pressie, she decided to think about her purchase until a little later in the day.

It was kind of her new boss to let her have the day off for the con— Saturdays are busy at SugarSpun, especially with Christmas looming. Her Auntie Betty helped her get

the job there a couple of weeks ago; they needed someone well-versed in pop culture, and as Olive dabbled with baking and had artistic flair drawing fan art, her Aunt suggested she go in and see them, just for a chat.

'But I've never painted on a cake,' whined Olive at her Aunt.

'It's the same thing, I'm sure,' said her Aunt. 'And they said they'd train you up. Someone with your talent would be perfect! Poor Ivy has to make a Tardis wedding cake in a month— She's beside herself. You can draw a Tardis in your sleep! Plus, you need a new job. Working in that boring shop is not helping your social life at all ...'

Olive got the job and so far loved it. Making Christmas fare was fun, decorating the cake toppers with cute illustrations. Ivy, impressed with Olive's work, showed great interest in extending the toppers' range to include Olive's versions of popular characters. Olive also suggested she could easily incorporate Christmas flair into her designs by adding a Santa hat, and edible glitter never hurt. People loved representations of their favourite characters, especially at Christmas.

A Dalek whirred by, resplendent with a Santa hat and hung with Christmas baubles. Olive could see the image on a Christmas cookie.

'I love your baubles,' said Olive as it passed by her.

'We-dec-or-ate!' said the electronic voice. Olive burst out laughing at the delightful rewording of the "ex-ter-min-ate" catch-phrase of the screen counterpart. The Dalek rocked from side to side as if laughing as well.

Olive noted other folk added festive touches to their costumes. A Darth Vader wore a black Santa hat with silver tinsel wrapped around his Lightsaber, and a fat Thor donned a Christmas Hawaiian shirt. A cranky green-faced Grinch Dad held a squirming Cindy-Lou Who, wearing a glittery frock and mini candy canes in her pig-tailed beehive hairdo. But Olive didn't see anyone with working fairy lights. Should have bought a stock of the battery-powered units, she thought. Could have sold them and made a small fortune!

*

Olive checked the time. She had promised her Auntie Betty that she would do her a favour whilst at the con.

'Could you just meet Ryan and give him the USB?' her Aunt asked last night. 'The file was too big to email, and the courier doesn't work Saturdays.'

'Can't it wait until Monday?' replied Olive.

'Ryan said he needed it urgently, and as you are both going to be at the con, I hoped you wouldn't mind? Only take you five minutes, for your favourite Aunt?'

'You're my *only* Aunt!'

Of course, she would do her this favour. Auntie Betty always helped her, no matter what. She arrived at the designated meeting spot near the main entrance with plenty of time to spare. She found a space to sit on the garden wall, feeling thankful for the shade the hat provided and gratefully rested awhile. Olive enjoyed watching the passing parade of costumes, delighted in people's clever ideas and even received compliments on her costume.

'Great Ten suit!' said a fellow Whovian with a red Fez, dressed as the Eleventh Doctor. 'But not sure who the crossover is?'

'The bar-keep, Guinan from Star Trek Next Gen,' replied Olive.

'Oh, of course! Wonderful work!'

It was lovely to receive acknowledgement for her efforts. Friends among strangers, she thought. Bit different to earlier at the panel when they were cursing at her! Pondering the diversity of the fandoms, Olive felt like she belonged in this world of like-minded folk. *This* was her real world. People didn't quite get her at school, at work, even with her family. Her father often told her she should stop wearing kids t-shirts, get a proper job, and grow up. Mum just shrugged. Auntie Betty got her, though.

Auntie Betty introduced Olive to her vast video collection, a geek's paradise. She took her to the new release movies every school holiday and always bought thoughtful, quirky gifts from the various fandoms Olive followed. Best of all, she made Olive crocheted mittens and hats based on her favourite characters.

To her amusement, life-sized characters of the two old men from the Muppets took a seat on the wall next to her and commented raucously on the folk walking by before they shuffled off. Whether they were roving buskers or patrons, Olive did not know, but their performance was brilliant.

Olive glanced at the time. Where was this Ryan? Suddenly, Olive realised she had no idea what this Ryan looked like; how stupid of her not to ask! Hopefully,

Auntie Betty described her to this Ryan person. She would wait for ten more minutes, but if he hadn't shown up, she would have to go. She didn't want to let her Aunt down, but she refused to miss Number One's talk.

A shadow fell across her.

'Excuse me, are you Olive?' said a deep voice.

'Maybe,' she said, squinting up at him, the sun in her eyes.

The man chuckled.

'I'll take that as a yes. Betty said you'd be in a big blue hat that looked like a flying saucer. I'm Ryan, her accountant. Sorry, I'm late — the forum ran over....'

'I am Olive,' she said with a wry grin.

'Guinan and the Tenth Doctor, right?' asked Ryan. 'Time Lord! Well done!'

'Thanks!' replied Olive, pleasantly surprised. 'Guessing you're Will Riker? Number One?'

'Jane, my secretary, bought me this costume for my birthday. Thought it was a bit mad at the time ...' he trailed off, embarrassed.

'Jane? My Auntie Betty's friend?'

Ryan nodded, still looking uncomfortable.

'It's a great pressie!' said Olive reassuringly. 'Auntie Betty buys me geek stuff all the time!'

'Those two are like twins separated at birth,' said Ryan.

'Well, here's the USB,' said Olive, standing up and handing over the device. 'It was nice to meet you, but I'd better be getting to the Jonathan Frakes talk. Probably be no seats left now ...'

'But didn't your Aunt tell you? I have VIP tickets for us! And we get to meet Frakes after the talk, too! Betty said you're a mad Trekkie— she thought you might like to join me?'

Olive stared at him, gobsmacked.

'But it's okay if you don't want to,' said Ryan, a red flush creeping over his cheeks. 'I mean, we only just met ...'

'Are you kidding me? I would LOVE to join you!' blurted Olive before she could stop herself. 'But how much does it cost? I'm on a bit of a tight budget.'

'Oh no, Olive!' said Ryan. 'The tickets are free! A gift from a client— well, when I say client, Jack's more of a co-worker of sorts. Anyways, Jane and Betty thought, seeing as we're both geeks together— well, not *together*, together ...'

Olive burst out laughing. 'That pair of schemers!'

'Pair of schemers, indeed ...' said Ryan, bemused.

'You know what, Ryan? Why not! Let's just enjoy this. What do you say?'

'I say let's go meet Number One!'

*

Olive and Ryan arrived at the crowded entrance to the pavilion to see a roped-off red carpet walkway with a VIP's Only sign next to it.

'This is what movie stars must feel like!' said Olive as they walked past the long line-up in the general admission line.

They waited at the door for the attendant to check their guest passes. Olive overheard a conversation from a couple

behind them.

'Great cosplay couple! Remember that scene when Number One chatted up Guinan?' said one friend to the other.

'I remember! She told Wesley to "Shut up, kid!". What a hoot! We know how *that* scene ended!' replied the other, chuckling.

Olive blushed. Ryan, busy with the attendant, didn't hear the comment. To Olive's relief, the VIP area in front of the stage had spacious seating. Settled in their seats, Ryan and Olive chatted easily about their favourite snippets from the show, eyes shining in anticipation and the buzz of the crowd humming in the vast auditorium adding to their excitement.

The stage lights dimmed, the crowd hushed, and two crew members carried a park bench to the side of the stage. A spotlight shone, focused on the bench. Olive burst out laughing when the two old guys from the muppets tottered onto the stage and sat down. After bantering with the audience, they finally introduced Frakes. A massive roar resonated through the auditorium.

'OMG, it's the old man from the foyer!' cried Olive.

'Can't hear you!' said Ryan, shaking his head.

'Tell you later,' she mouthed, turning her full attention to the stage.

Frakes held the audience captive, sharing stories from his time as Number One on Star Trek and his current role as a director. Then, both to Olive's delight and horror, he spotted her.

'Hello again!' he cried, moving across the stage and pointing Olive out to the audience. 'Now, this young lady knows how to do cosplay! Guinan as a Timelord! Inspired!' With a wink at Olive, Number One led a round of applause.

Olive flushed with pleasure, the hat suddenly as light as a feather.

Frakes spoke for ages, way past his time, his audience enthralled as he answered questions. After three encores, the well-happy crowd dissipated. While Olive and Ryan waited for Meet and Greet, she told him about the kind old man in the foyer.

'But didn't you recognise him?' asked Ryan.

'Well, no,' said Olive, feeling a little stupid. 'Just didn't realise that Number One's now a grey old man in the real world, you know?'

'Next Gen was filmed a long time ago,' said Ryan, kindly. 'Plus, who would have expected him to be sitting in a foyer like a normal person?'

When Number One greeted Olive like an old friend, Ryan was beside himself, starstruck at first but soon settled into easy conversation, chatting merrily about their favourite episodes of Star Trek.

After the excitement of meeting their idol, Olive and Ryan spent some time amicably wandering around the merchandise stands. After much deliberation, Olive bought the Unicorn slippers and a communicator badge. Reluctantly, Olive accepted a gift from Ryan of the Tenth Doctor bobblehead doll as a keepsake to remember the day.

'You should make him a miniature Tardis blue flying saucer hat!' laughed Ryan.

Nearing closing time, Olive did not want the day to end.

'It's like this is the real world, isn't it, Ryan?' said Olive.

Both of their phones beeped simultaneously.

Betty to Olive: Ask him out. He's nice. And Jane said Santa approves.

Jane to Ryan: See? I told you she was lovely! PS: she doesn't know about our real world yet. Santa's going to tell her at the party, so don't blow it.

'Speaking of the real world,' mumbled Ryan in an undertone, then turning to Olive, he asked, 'Do you know about Jane's Christmas Party? It's for our clients—the SugarSpun crew all come along ...'

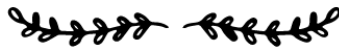
'My boss hasn't mentioned it yet, but I only started a few weeks ago.'

'I know we only just met, but would you like to go with me?' asked Ryan.

Olive smiled. 'I would love to, Ryan. And anyway, we're old friends now, aren't we?'

Ryan also smiled.

'How about we go out for a beer, friend? But maybe we should both change first? Not sure if the other world will cope with your hat!'



Thanks for reading

Dear Reader,

Thanks for reading The Christmas Hat! I hope you enjoyed this geeky little short story!

I remember sitting in a foyer at a geek convention, feeling very fragile as my old Mum would put it, and a nice old man spoke kind words to me. If only I had realised it was my idol, I could have at least asked him for a photo! Nevermind. I probably wouldn't have been able to speak like a human if I had realised anyways!!!

Onward, to the world of the Mullet! Stay tuned!

With love & kindness,

Maddy x

Author Bio

Maddy's quirky uplit stories are about the ordinary heroes of the world, set in Australian suburbia, where marvellous misfits find their inner magic.

A practical dreamer, Maddy is currently working through years of chicken scratchings in her very untidy scrawl, creating her fantabulous story world, with kindness at the core. Her memorable characters stay with you long after the book is closed.

She also enjoys cooking up a feast, crocheting miniature creations for whimsical tea parties while binge-watching her favourite geek shows, and hanging out at home in the garden with her husband, daughter and the dogs, the best people ever.

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