

BROCK'S BANTER: Every Ugly Christmas Sweater has a silver lining

By Brock Weir

At the risk of being vulgar for a moment, particularly in our last paper of the holiday season, I'm afraid I just can't help myself. Here goes: vomit and crap.

They are each vivid enough on their own, but together? Well, it's damn near unprintable. In fact, several synonyms for each were weighted before the publication of this week's column, and that was, believe it or not, the most palatable combination.

I bring this up in the context of a particularly ugly piece of clothing currently hanging in my closet, just a wash or two away from being a complete pile of rags.

Four years ago, when I first set eyes upon this item of clothing, I felt my eyes bulge just a little bit beyond their sockets. If you've ever had the pleasure of receiving a gift, you know the risk you run of opening something that's just plain awful and the inevitable dance ensues ? finding that perfect balance in your reaction. You want to seem genuine in your enthusiasm for whatever monstrosity is before you, but not too enthusiastic as to arouse suspicion.

In this case, I'm not quite sure of my success.

It was Christmas 2014.

I was handed a box bearing the name of a rather nice department store still in business in this pesky Canadian market. My hopes lifted (as did my suspicion, but more on that later). Giving it a light shake, as Christmas tradition dictates, all doubt was removed: it was some piece of clothing.

This, in itself, is a perilous move. All too often when you buy clothes for someone at this time of year, there is a distinct chance that your purchase might align better with your own tastes rather than the tastes of the intended recipient.

What might look like the epitome of cool ? say, the nifty green drape dress that Mammy expertly sewed up for Scarlett O'Hara in ?Gone with the Wind? ? might, in the eyes of others, be a complete monstrosity ? say, Bob Mackie's interpretation of the same ?Gone with the Wind? getup on ?The Carol Burnett Show?, complete with curtain rod.

In this case, it was very much the latter.

As I opened the box and unfolded the tissue paper to reveal what lay beneath, the eye-pop happened.

Before me lay what someone at a healthy distance could be forgiven for mistaking for a pile of the aforementioned vomit and crap, but those who had the misfortune of being just a little bit closer could see quite clearly, perhaps thanks to the glimmering zipper pull, that it was vividly coloured shirt of some variety.

?I just saw the colour and immediately thought of you!? said my now-former stepmother with a smile, looking down on me as I sat on the ottoman, my mouth slightly agape at the box in my lap.

?Ah ha!? I thought, my inner monologue shuffling through a series of expletives before deciding to leave them on the table.

?Symbolism!?

Had you been on the outside looking in, you might have thought this gift was a sweet, if misplaced, gesture. This, however, was a familiar routine, and I could only think, ?Well done!? as the colours of the sweater were a direct reflection of our opinions of one another.

Out of respect for the assembled family, and out of respect for myself because I sure wasn't going to let on I was in any way ruffled, I gave a tour-de-force performance, cooing over the shirt as if it was a newborn (something I also don't do as a rule), and then set the shirt aside with a raised eyebrow directed at the gift-giver.

It seems, however, the joke was squarely on me. Or was the joke on her? Four years on, I'm still not sure, but back to the yarn?

Later that December night, the house suddenly became chilly ? and it had nothing to do with the routine froideur within. Having only packed a couple of shirts to tide me over during this brief stay, I looked towards that department store box, and the shirt bearing the label of a store far removed from that printed on the cardboard.

I swallowed my pride, closed my eyes for a moment, avoiding the monstrous colours, and let my fingers flit over the fabric.

I was seduced.

Few items of clothing in my wardrobe have ever been as cozy. It wasn't quite a sweater, it wasn't quite a sweat shirt, but it was just right for that freezing winter night ? and it has been just right through many seasons since.

In fact, garment's reign in my wardrobe has now outlasted the gift-giver's brief reign as my stepmother, but its rein is soon to come to a close as well, not yet entirely threadbare but certainly hanging by a thread.

The hunt for a replacement that was just as comfortable ? heinous-looking or otherwise ? has proved fruitless and, in the end, that

there is always a silver lining, whether it is in a regular, every-day terrible gift, or the lining in a textile disaster. As I look back over Christmases past, I can't help but think of the joy that small, inexpensive items bring. Admittedly, this gift didn't bring much joy upon first sight, but it kept me warm and cozy, and I will mourn its loss when my elbow eventually bursts through its increasingly thin arms ? and that should be by the New Year.

This gift is not alone.

There was the gift of an old, beat-up glass bottle, the backstory to which set me on a path of building my own family tree; a well-worn discarded library book held together with clear packing tape that helped stoke my interest in film and television, a small piece of art, barely bigger than a playing card that is a lasting memory of the artistic talents of a person close to me who was robbed of her talents all too soon by forces beyond her control.

And this disgusting-looking shirt ? a reminder not of a sour relationship, but rather how privileged I have been in life to have the gall to stick my nose up, albeit temporarily, at a gift such as this, now realizing full well how many people would have been grateful to have just a moment of its warmth and comfort.

I hope you and yours get everything you want this holiday season.

See you in 2019!