



# *Christmas Story Competition*

## *2023*

*Inkslingers*  
*Certificate of Award*  
*Best Christmas Story 2023*



*The In-Between Place at Solstice*

*Catriona Murphy*

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## **The In-Between Place at Solstice**

**Catriona Murphy**

All the mirrors had been covered in black.

The clocks had been stopped to mark her time of death.

Grandmother Aleksandra had passed away days before Christmas, to the sounds of carol singing, laughter and merriment.

None of which would reach the Kovalenko house this year.

A stout, hearty woman in her 80s, Aleksandra had lived through World War Two and the USSR reign, and had read to Hanna from the family's folklore tome she had managed to secrete through a humanitarian corridor in Kyiv, amidst the sounds of bombings and aeroplanes tearing overhead.

The funeral had been a rushed affair in Cavan's local cemetery, since her parents didn't have the means to send her home.

Hanna felt smaller without her, like things just weren't as fun anymore.

A light had disappeared.

The Christmas tree was the only beacon of cheer in the modular home now, and Hanna sat on the armchair alone, watching the lights dance.

Neighbours from Odesa, Lviv and Poltava had left bread and coins wrapped in handkerchiefs at the door, but Hanna ignored the gifts.

Her parents took them in and carefully placed them on the kitchen table, as if they were delicate China.

Their footsteps were light these days as if fearful they'd break something, and would laugh too hard at things, as if they too, were starved of joy.

They spent the evenings in quiet solitude, praying and talking lowly so Hanna couldn't hear.

Too polite and too nice, Hanna wondered if they were broken, like her race car last month when she crashed it into a pole.

None of it mattered anyway, cause tonight was December 21st - the solstice.

Which meant she could forget about death for a while.

Hanna tore her eyes away from the tree, to race into her back bedroom.

She had a free subscription to the Astronomy Ireland magazine, and December's edition mentioned the Geminid meteor shower.

She yanked on her telescope and pulled out her coordinates book, her finger running down the numeric tables.

Doctor Kennedy had said she had Aspergers, and that explained her daydreaming and her affinity with numbers, among other things.

She'd solved improper fractions, algebra and measurements faster than even Ciara at school, winning gold stars and making her parents smile before they slipped back into their automotive selves.

Numbers were an orchestra and numeric tables her hymn sheets. Her mind sang each tune perfectly and the world made sense again.

She pointed the telescope to the spot that would afford her the best view, and looked through the eyepiece, adjusting the course wheel.

Fireballs streaked through the night sky and Hanna squealed with what she thought was excitement, as she saw the cosmic dance.

After a while, when the full moon was low over Cassidy's fields on the distant hill, her mind began to drift.

A thought occurred to her.

People make wishes when they see shooting stars.

And one burning desire that had never left her since running from Kyiv, bothered her.

It was there when she had to leave her dog, Kola, barking in the kitchen, even when she pleaded with her mother to take him.

'There's no room,' she had scolded her, dragging her screaming down the apartment staircase.

One question she asked all the time since.

Why?

Her parents told her a 'bad man' had scared everyone in Ukraine away.

Why did the 'bad man' do this?

She pleaded again now, as tiredness took over.

To the night, to the spirits wandering the faerie path that apparently ran through her little modular street. To the leprechauns (who Ben in her class said granted wishes), to whoever slept beneath the earth, curled around the stars or dripped in the Doolin and Aillwee caves...

A terrible shuddering in the walls shook her awake.

For a moment, she was back in the homeland. Under the table with grandmother as the mugs fell from the rack.

She breathed slowly through her nose as Doctor Kennedy had told her to do when she felt dizzy and short of breath.

The little modular home continued to tremble for another few seconds, then ceased.

A stirring in the back garden made her look out the window.

The garden furniture was swirling in the air.

Hanna's jaw dropped.

She learnt in her social skills therapy group that this was an incident to tell her parents about, but a deeper voice, that no parent or teacher could touch, told her to go outside.

This was children's business only.

Emerging with caution, she stepped out onto the midnight grass as the stars continued to shoot overhead.

The deck chairs and table settled down, and a strong breeze blew.

On it, was a melodious, male voice.

'Hanna, you called.'

Her body froze, a coldness lanced down her back.

'Who are you?' she asked, her calculative mind clicking through various possibilities.

'I am the North Wind. Here to fulfil your wish, at the request of Bidy Early. She heard you all the way from Clare,' the North Wind hushed. His voice sounded like it was at the end of a long corridor, but it sang with such music.

'Where's Clare?' she asked.

'Doesn't matter.'

'Who's Bidy Early?'

'A healer, of sorts.'

'Could she fix me?' Hanna asked. Recalling how kids at school called her a robot and an 'A.I incarnate'. Whatever that meant.

'You don't need fixing Hanna. Jump on my back,' the North Wind said.

'Where are we going?' she asked, feeling her stomach tighten.

She didn't like it.

'To fulfil your wish.'

The holly bush bowed, letting a few berries fall to the ground and a robin cocked its head at her, as if waiting for her response.

She turned back to her parents.

Their bedroom light was on and she imagined them discussing things in that low tone of theirs.

'How-'

The North Wind swooped her up and sailed her across the sky like Aladdin on his carpet.

She smiled, and rarely did she do so. But elation filled her as she flew among the shooting stars, no longer just gazing at them.

The night chill didn't bite her either. She didn't feel cold despite wearing just her dressing gown, a robe and woolly Christmas socks (three euro in Penneys).

For a long time she flew, and the North Wind told her many secrets.

About the Tuatha de Dannan's rule in Ireland, their many courts and magical fountains. Vasilisa the Brave and the Baba Yaga. The caves in Northern Ireland that still remember the mermaid's touch.

When he touched her down, Hanna found herself in a flat, white expanse. From horizon to horizon, the snow stretched in all directions and she was enveloped in almost complete darkness.

A lonely desolate air permeated the forgotten place, as if it despaired on how to be remembered.

She felt like the last child on Earth.

The Northern Lights danced overhead in curtains of fuchsia pink, green and dashing reds. Faerie lights hung around her in the air, providing a few feet of visibility, but she could feel the oppressive weight of cold darkness that yawned on for miles around her.

She wondered if this was what outer space felt like.

The North Wind twirled snow next to her, forming a mini tornado, and she turned to him.

'Where are we?' she asked, wonder dancing in her eyes at the strange land.

'You are inside the Arctic Circle. As it is nearly polar night, the sun may not rise for some time, but hover on the horizon, as you see now.'

Hanna knew this from her astronomy book by Brian Cox.

The Antarctic was at the moment experiencing polar day, the opposite effect.

And she did see.

A tiny, orange globe floated on the horizon, stubborn to rise.

'And my wish?' she inquired. 'Where is the bad man? I need to ask him why.'

The North Wind ruffled snow off the ground but said nothing.

'I need to speak to him,' she said.

He was silent for so long that Hanna thought he'd vanished.

'Worldly concerns are heavy, child. While your sums follow rules and reach conclusions, some problems do not.'

‘Then how do they get resolved?’

‘Time.’

‘How much?’

‘Not for a young girl to worry about.’

‘Why did you bring me up here then? If I can’t see the bad man?’ she asked.

Anger was a new emotion she was just learning about, but knew she had it as she began to rock back and forth. She had done this many times in music class when she didn’t get her favourite instrument.

‘You wished for something else,’ the North Wind whispered.

‘What? No I didn’t,’ she replied.

‘You did. This wish was in the dark, in your unconscious. You wanted to see her again, one last time.’

‘Hanna?’

A voice from behind made her turn.

Grandmother stood as she had looked in Ukraine.

Her old wine headscarf wrapped round her head, her thickset glasses and sharp blue eyes regarded her in the faerie lights. Her long yellow petticoat stretched down to her clogs.

‘Бабуся?’

Hanna felt a warm surge in her chest.

‘Yes, little fox. We’re in the in-between lands, they open and close at different times. On solstice, they open, among other places.’

Hanna sprinted forward and threw her arms around her, breathing in the heavy scent of baked bread and wet dog.

The smell of Бабуся.

‘I miss you, Бабуся. Mother and father barely speak anymore, and I’m alone.’

‘You’re not, my little fox. I’m always there with you,’ her grandmother said.

‘Why are you here? How are you here?’ Hanna asked.



'This is a special place. Do you still remember your prayers for Holy Trinity Day?'

They spoke for a while.

About Christmas, when the kitchen would smell of varenyky, mushroom soup and cabbage rolls, and her grandfather would sing the ballad, What a Moonlit Night. A song about a boy inviting a beautiful girl to go out on a nighttime stroll.

Times when they shopped in the markets on Saturdays and went to the swimming pool on Sundays.

Places and scents and sounds Hanna will never get back.

'Take this back with you.'

Her grandmother placed in her hand a tree decoration.

A red and gold glass egg of intricate design. It reminded Hanna of a Fabergé egg.

'You can come visit during opening times,' her grandmother said.

The North Wind howled in agreement.

She took a token of comfort in that as she slipped the delicate piece into her robe pocket.

They embraced one last time and Hanna glanced at many people now, standing in thousands on the outskirts of the lights, watching them.

All those who had fallen in the war regarded her in silence, and she suddenly felt very grown up.

When she pulled away from her grandmother Aleksandra, they were gone.

'You must go now,' her grandmother's eyes flicked at the sun behind her, as it began to sink back into the horizon. 'The opening is closing.'

Hanna nodded, but felt a twinge of something she didn't like.

Doctor Kennedy may have called it sadness.

'Remember little fox, always here.'

She nodded.

Always here.

In the egg.

In the in-between land.

The North Wind swept her back up and her grandmother waved her goodbye, the faerie lights illuminated her wrinkled, hearty and wholesome face.

When Hanna was deposited into her back garden, she turned to where she sensed the North Wind, coalescing in one corner next to the gnomes.

'I think I'm supposed to say, 'thank you',' she said.

'You are welcome, little girl. Until our next date.'

The North Wind did a final flourish as he departed, knocking over her mother's sunflower pot.

Inside, the house was dark and silent.

None had noticed her absence, but Hanna knew from her social therapy group that she was supposed to feel nervous, like she was in trouble.

She didn't as she stepped over the threshold, feeling herself being absorbed back into reality.

She placed the egg on the tree. She believed it to be a transmitter of sorts between herself and her grandmother. It glinted at her, as if communicating their little secret.

Her body tingled with excitement, as she marked the next spring equinox in her astronomy calendar.

She knew Christmas would come with a little bit of magic (and a short trip), every year thereafter.

## Brussels Sprouts

Harry Browne

Christmas Day and the house was as busy as any beehive, the Christmas tree stood tall and splendid in the corner, the house was festooned with lights and decorations, the floor was ankle deep in discarded present wrapping and torn crackers and the smell of roasting turkey filled the air with its enticing odours.

Also littering the floor was a large number of small children and babies, who seemed to be multiplying as the day progressed. The house was loud with shouts of “that’s mine” and “no it’s not, it’s mine” and the inevitable “Daddy the batteries are dead in this, can we get some more”

The Head Cook and Bottle Washer (hereinafter to be called the HCBW) was in the kitchen amidst clouds of steam and fragrant emissions. One of the younger ankle biters came into the kitchen and stood gazing open eyed at the ongoing preparations.

“What are those things?”, he asked, pointing at a small heap of Brussels Sprouts occupying space on the work top. THCBW (not a great fan of these odiferous vegetables replied “They’re Brussels Sprouts, a type of small cabbage. You’ll have a chance to try them at dinner”

“Why not have real cabbage” asked the youngster, obviously wise before his time.

“Well, She Who Must Be Obeyed (SWMBO for future reference), your sainted grandmother, has decreed that Christmas dinner is not appropriate to the holy season if not accompanied by Brussels Sprouts”

Finally, it was dinner time and he proud HCBW presented the result of his labours to the assembled multitude. Turkey and Ham held pride of place, of course, and the accompaniments included roast and mashed potatoes, creamy mushroom sauce, mushy peas (an essential part of the Christmas feast) and, of course, the odious and odiferous Brussels sprouts.

Nobody in the family with the exception of SWMBO and an errant son-in-law actually, eat these unnatural vegetables but, in accordance with time honoured tradition they along with everything else were passed around the table. As suggested earlier the only takers were SWMBO and the son-in-law.

All the more discriminating members of the family hastily passed them on to their neighbour on their right, dishes in this family always proceed clockwise, otherwise bad luck will blight the entire clan for a full twelve month period. A competition invariably arises amongst everybody to push the offending bowl of horribleness as far away as possible without it finally finishing up on the floor. If that happens the last person to push the dish is adjudged the loser in this harmless piece of family fun.

St Stephen's Day (Boxing Day is an abomination) dawned bright and clear and the HCBW was up and about early. The detritus from the celebrations of yesterday had been cleaned up and various scraps had been thrown out in the garden for the birds to eat. To his horror he saw that someone had included the leftover Brussels Sprouts with the other vegetables. What the unfortunate birds might have done to deserve this treatment was beyond his imagination. Could they have possibly shit on the clothesline, or the brand new car?

Whatever the crime committed, the punishment was well over the top. They could have brought out a shotgun and shot the poor bird, it would be fit for the pot then and it would not have had to suffer the horrible fate of accidentally eating those abominable brassicas.

All things considered he was forced to the conclusion that the cultivation of Brussels sprouts should be made a crime punishable by fifteen years in jail and a twenty thousand Euro fine or both. Who grows these things anyway and what prompts them to offer them for sale?

He had also developed serious reservations about those few people who profess to like eating sprouts. In his experience they are all left handed people and we all know where that kind of thing leads to.

**BAN THE SPROUT!**

## **An Elf apart**

**Miguel A. Rivera, Jr.**

It was the wettest of wet dreams come true. Eddie-Elf awoke to a soft ocean breeze in his well-appointed penthouse suite at a hotel in Rio De Janeiro. Two Brazilian bikini models on either side in his majestic bed with him, their lengthy, tan, human legs extending far past his. At long last, his life had changed. It had in fact improved by several thousand orders of magnitude since his escape. Free from the icy, hellish tundra's of the far North, set free from inexplicably brutal fifteen-hour workdays. Far from the punishing whip of Anis Overlooks.

“Overseer” Anis, Head Elf, a.k.a. Anal-Anis, and his relentless driving of subordinates, seven days per week at the bidding of “The fat one”. Eddie was now liberated from all the mistreatment of the Elven race perpetrated at one man's whim. A life of bondage into which he was born but never asked for. An existence whose dark truth never appeared in all the cheery Christmas cards, toy advertisements, commercials, and other internet media, borne upon the pillars of their never-ending, forced servitude.

Edward Dreyfus Snowflake awoke this morning, a free man, or Elf, as the case was. It was amazing to him how energetic he felt with just a few nights of warm, tropical air and extensive sleep. The two models he'd met at the hotel bar were initially amused by him. Thinking he was some sort of human dwarf or runaway circus performer with pointed ears, wearing children's shorts and a Hawaiian shirt.

They had been mesmerized by his acrobatics, his magic tricks, singing, and command of the Portuguese language. Humans were so very easy to impress. But the real magic show came later when they agreed to accompany him to his penthouse. Elves lived over a thousand years and at only two hundred years of age, Eddie easily commanded the strength, vitality, and vigour of twenty human males. Thus, their night had been quite an adventure.

His lady-friends continued in their deep, exhausted slumber, with one of them snoring a bit. Eddie meanwhile somersaulted out of bed like a tiger and landed upon his feet. He grabbed the children's robe that he was forced to wear due to his stature and stood on the balcony. His view overlooked the beach, bay, and palm trees as the rays of a warm rising sunbathed the earth.

The cappuccino machine had provided a steaming and wonderful treat to start this day in his new, “tropical” life.

As that very thought wound its way through his head, a black, floating object became visible on the horizon. Eddie instantly recognized it and more importantly, what it meant. “Fuck, they’ve found me!”, were the words that escaped his mouth as he raced inside to grab the bag of gold and mystic frost globe that he’d “borrowed”, from his former employer. He also grabbed the 9-millimeter Glock he’d purchased at a nearby favela in anticipation of his confrontation with “The Hunter Squad”. He raced out toward the stairs that led to the roof where his “borrowed” sleigh was parked. He knew if he could reach it and use it in concert with the snow-globe to open a portal, he’d be safe.

However, black-clad elves dressed in combat gear, repelled upside-down from a hovering, giant black sleigh above the hotel. They landed on the roof before Eddie could reach his escape vehicle and encircled Eddie with rifles pointed. Their leader began making pronouncements.

“Elf-Edward Dreyfus Snowflake, by order of Saint Nicholas, Monarch of The North Pole, and under Warrant #23-456, issued by The Board of High Elves, you are under arrest for numerous violations of North Pole laws and gross deviation from long-standing Elven codes. Now, drop the gun, the snow globe, and kneel with your fingers interlocked behind your head!”, He barked.

Eddie’s eyes darted back and forth. He’d heard plenty of horror stories about this group. “Hell’s Elves”, were slave catchers. Militant bastards whose main assignment was the location and retrieval of runaways. Eddie’s options were limited and being dragged back to The North Pole in chains was a thought too morbid to even consider. He knew he could leap over their heads but was not sure that even his elven body could withstand a fall from ten stories. He resolved that he was willing to chance it or die trying!

He indeed leapt over their capture-circle formation and cleared the edge of the hotel’s roof.

Plummeting downward towards his very probable death, he felt an odd sense of gratitude for having lived, even a little, as a liberated-Elf. The next moment his right leg was treated to a shocking, painful feeling as a harpoon with an attached cable pierced it.

He reached for the Glock in his waistband and it too, was harpooned away from his grasp as he was hoisted upwards like a white whale finally captured by Captain Ahab. A dark bag was slipped over his head, and he felt himself lose consciousness.

Eddie next found himself chained to a chair in the middle of a very large chamber, surrounded by thousands of Elves with two throne-like chairs high at the front on an elevated platform. Once again, he was in the dreaded uniform that he'd grown to hate. The green tights, the elf hat, the pointy shoes. He knew exactly what this was. A trial to be followed by extreme punishment and possibly a horrible death. Satris "The wild" had been the last Elf to sit in this punishment arena and Eddie could still hear his screams, still smell his ashes in his nightmares.

Those bells that every human knew heralded the arrival of "The fat one" with oodles of forced-labour gifts in his sack, sounded. Only it had a different meaning in this place. All the elves in the room bowed on one knee with their heads downward as Chris Kringle and Mrs. Kringle, dressed in long, dark, red robes, entered the room and sat upon their thrones.

"Rise my elves.", That cannon-like deep voice unleashed, and all rose. A second later a very familiar Elf stepped forward. It was Anis Overlooks, Head Elf, and Chief Minister of Elven discipline. His face was solemn. He wore a dark robe and in his hand was a large, brown scroll.

Kringle gave him a nod and he began. "Elf Edward Dreyfus Snowflake, born October 31st, 1823, in Little Ice, North Pole, and most recently assigned to production pod number 6,521B. This hearing is convened to hear charges against you for the following offenses:

1. Absconding from North Pole borders without express written permission from its royal Monarchs, Kris Kringle and/or Mrs. Kringle.
2. Theft of North Pole Christmas property, i.e. one Christmas sleigh and space altering snow globe, in addition to two-million pounds in North-Pole gold.
3. Delay and/or disruption of toy productivity, compounded during Holiday season.

4. Coupling with human females and in one case impregnation of same.
5. Impugning the reputation of The Kringle Family and The North Pole as a whole.
6. Possession of human firearms.
7. Attempted escape from custody.
8. Use of prohibited language, i.e. the word “Fuck”, during the commission of the aforementioned crimes.

“How do you plead to the charges levelled against you?”, Anis asked.

Eddie knew this was all a game. A farce disguised as some sort of impartial legal proceeding with actual due process. Still feeling the throbbing pain in his right leg where the harpoon had pierced his flesh, he decided that his sense of desperation to be free was unabated and in fact stronger than ever. He calmed his soul and began speaking.

“I plead guilty as hell to all of the charges but make one small request that I might address Mr. Kringle directly before my punishment, so as to make clear my reasons for choosing my path.”

Anis said nothing and instead motioned to one of his assisting elves who yanked a lever which drew Eddie’s chained hands upward while a second assistant cut the hotel robe which he was still wearing away from his body and began cutting away the Elf uniform as well. A tear escaped one of Eddie’s eyes in anticipation of Elf justice, which was swifter than Santa’s sleigh. A brown, wooden box was brought to Anis with a whip inside. Another scroll was handed directly from Kringle to an assistant and then to Anis, who read it and without expression began speaking.

“Elf Edward Dreyfus Snowflake you are hereby sentenced to a flogging of two hundred lashes and amputation of Elven ears, followed by full-body roasting. Do you have any words for this court before sentencing is carried out?”, He asked.

Eddie looked at Mrs. Kringle, spotting what appeared to be a hint of mercy and discomfort with this entire process, dancing in her eyes.



Eddie spoke. "I am a simple creature, as are most of you. Born in this place and apparently sentenced at birth to a servile life. Using our talents and creativity to make human children's dreams come true all over the world while ours are given neither consideration nor thought. I simply wanted more. Too many an Elf have come and gone knowing no life but the production line. Nameless and faceless while "Saint Nick" bathes in the warm glow of human worship. Although I have no illusions about how painful it will be to be flogged, mutilated, and burned to death, I embrace it. I welcome it because it is less painful than the alternative. A thousand years of exploitation and abuse for the benefit of people I have never and will most likely never meet, is repugnant at best."

"As for my escape, it was facilitated by none other than Mrs. Kringle, my lover and benefactor for the last fifty-three years!", He spewed out. A collective gasp was heard across the audience and the wrinkles on Mr. Kringle's face became pronounced, red snakes, as blood flooded his face.

Eddie continued. "It was she who showed me the wonders of the world, its beauty, mysteries, languages, art, and people. In the few hours we spent together I felt the first drops of freedom in my tortured life. It caused a hunger in me that could not and can never be satiated save by death. I thank her for it and request that she be spared any wrath as she too is a lonely, neglected soul, trapped in this frozen wasteland."

Anis signalled for younger elves to place logs around anis and then withdrew the whip from the box to prepare the court's punishment, when Santa Clause himself rose and signalled for him to halt.

Kringle began addressing the masses. "This elf will be spared both the whip, and the death penalty. Not because either he nor my now unfaithful wife deserve any measure of mercy for their collusion and debauchery, but because the billions of innocent children who view our very existence as a fountain of hope would be punished along with them."

"Neither is it lost on me that this errant Elf's legacy would continue, his martyrdom infecting the minds of countless others, who might in turn follow a similar, if not more wicked path."

"Therefore, I hereby sentence both he and Mrs. Kringle to banishment for all time from The North Pole and its lands, as well as eternal placement on the

‘naughty list’. Take what gold you initially stole along with one of my sleighs and begone from my sight, forever!”

Several months later tourists would see an umbrella rental on one of the beaches of Brazil. The name of the establishment was “Elf and Milf Beach Rentals”.

A large, white, woman and her odd pointy-eared son were in charge. Their happiness was palpable and all who rented from them received a free snow globe.

## **And a candle shone**

**Deirdre Powell.**

And a candle shone  
Like a light between the hills,  
With iridescent fervour  
And flame in the heart,  
And they were searching.

A lonely, tiring journey,  
A stable bare,  
A simplicity of state and heart  
Unseen and unknown  
And He was welcome.

And so it is that  
In the present day,  
We light a candle  
Beside stable and manger, as evening falls,  
And we are welcome.

The bells peal, like a schola cantorum,  
The voices chatter,  
Someone calls  
At midnight Mass  
And you are welcome.

And a candle shines  
Like a light between the hills;  
Sunshine spills at daybreak  
And the promise of peace descends –  
And I am welcome.

## **A Mechanical Yule**

**Paul Browne**

Arriving into the city on the 23rd, we settled into our accommodation. We urgently needed a motorcycle shop. We'd met a few other motorcyclists en route to here, and they had all raved about a small workshop with no name. The following morning a phone call was made. Directions were given, and we arrived outside the shop early on Christmas Eve.

There's a throttle problem with one of the bikes, both are also very much in need of new tyres, and we're hoping that we can get them here. Given the time of year and our traditional Irish approach to things, we don't hold up much hope of anything being achieved today! A quick knock on the door and we're told, "Xavier will be here soon". Twenty minutes later and Xavier does indeed arrive.

Tyres, not a problem – but what about the throttle problem? A quick test ride established that there is indeed an issue. Then Xavier's wife and business partner, Sandra, arrives and puts the kettle on, an important ritual in motorcycle shops across the world! She and Maeve retreat to the garden sunshine with coffees and pastries while work continues inside.

Two new sets of tyres, front and back for both the bikes are fitted.

Once that's completed, we stop for some more coffee. It's important not to rush things. It is, after all Christmas! Xavier takes the air filter out, but all looks well. I begin to get worried. If that's not the problem, what is? "Look, it's Christmas Eve; surely you guys have better things to be doing. Are your families not expecting you?" I ask. He grins, looks at me and says "We're Jewish! And no, I'm quite happy to be here. The problem may be with the cylinder head."

He removes the spark plug from the left hand cylinder head to find that the rubber seal around it, holding it in place and preventing oil from leaking out, is perished. Borrowing one from the second bike he fits it to the first before thumbing the starter. Immediately the engine sounds different. Another quick test ride around the block confirms that the problem is the seal. There are none in stock. A quick phone call to the local BMW dealership confirms that they don't have one either! Annoyed and deflated, I hunker down and

sit against the injured BMW. It could take a couple of weeks to get the seal shipped from Europe. We don't really have that time. At this stage, we have already booked our motorcycles for shipping to Germany.

Happy Christmas indeed!

## Christmas

Laura Alves

What is Christmas all about? He was alone that December and could not understand what all the fuss was about Christmas. He said: OK. Let's see if there is any truth in all that story of Christmas being a magic time of the year when miracles happen. I am going to call all my friends and in the end one of them will be willing to invite me to their family party and the magic will be there. He started by thinking of his brothers. They had a brothers' Christmas tradition, but he noticed he was being left out of this occasion over the past couple of years. At first, he thought it was just an impression, they each had different commitments and could not agree to a date, so it wasn't happening. But then it was brought to his attention that they still had it, only he had been excluded from the event. It was sad.

He started putting his plan into action. He thought of his best friend from school, the one that would never leave him alone at break time and from whom he could never hide it if there was any kind of issue in his life. He was that kind of friend that, no matter how long it had been since they had last met, would greet him with that same lovely smile and make it seem like they had just met last night. "Hey, mate! How are things? It is so amazing that we should meet now", he said. "There is something I've been meaning to talk to you about. Are you free for a coffee right now"? "I have all the time in the World", he eagerly replied. It so happened that Jimmy was thinking of proposing to his girlfriend, whom he had met only a few months ago, so wasn't sure he was doing the right thing and wanted a second opinion. Having been lifelong friends, he thought Tony was the perfect person for that opinion. That at least lifted up a little bit his self esteem, even though he was sure there would be no Christmas invite from someone thinking of a proposal. He was frank and gave his mate a few examples of the pros and cons of being spontaneous and of not being so.

As he expected, his mate Jimmy went off and didn't call him back after that. He went on to look for some other friends. Some of them were busy, some very welcoming and he had a good time talking to them but in the end, there was no change to his view on the Christmas legend. It is all just a legend, he thought. There is nothing more to it. Christmas eve came and as before he was all alone. His wife had left him and the children, all grown up, had each

their commitments and places to go. He had just retired and there was no farewell from the workmates, as most of them didn't know him that well anyway. They were only newbies where he had been for most of his life.

He decided to go for a stroll and see if he could find a nice restaurant so he could at least have a decent meal on Christmas night. He thought of a place he had passed by many times and was curious about. Some restaurants choose to give their employees time off so they can enjoy it with their families, but thankfully there are those places that are willing to open and reward their employees well enough so they can be happy about it. Tony had been curious because this was a Brazilian restaurant, the first one to open in Dublin. He once had met a Brazilian and she had mentioned this restaurant, past which he would frequently go on his way to or from work or to meet some of his relatives or friends. He was always busy enough not to let his thoughts tell him the actual reason he was curious about the place. Of course, he had never tried Brazilian food and was eager to try some.

As you walk in the streets on Christmas night, you go past residences and see big families gathering and celebrating. Most restaurants you walk past are quiet, some with couples or small groups, as most work Christmas gatherings are deliberately a week or so earlier. So, he wasn't expecting much as he reached the place. To his surprise, it was full of people and there didn't seem to be a free table inside. It turned out all Brazilians had chosen to celebrate in that one place. Word spread around that business was not going well for them and they were going to have to close down. So, they chose to give all their customers a day to remember and cut down their prices by half for Christmas. All their Brazilian customers not only came, but also brought their Irish friends, their Polish, English, Italian and all other workmates, neighbours and everybody was having a great time.

Tony hesitated before asking if there was any chance of a table within the next two hours, but soon realised his friend Carmen was not just a customer, but the founder and manageress of this restaurant and made sure of a spot for him in one of her friends' tables. He then started to think about the fact that this was happening on Christmas night (at least following the Brazilian tradition, in which the main Christmas celebration is on the night of Christmas eve, and therefore we call it Christmas night). Miracle or not, Tony believes that was the best Christmas celebration of his life. He made quite a few new

friends, met someone special who was just waiting for the right time to get into his life and even three of his own children had been invited there by their workmates... they could not believe their eyes. From then on, they never got away from their father's life again.



## **Dare to Dream**

**Shea Walsh**

What matters?

Technical ineptitude

Not quite in key

When joy is the word

Children's fantasies

That flicker of sunlight

Of the winter solstice

Hanukkah light of the menorah

Christian Christ

Unbeliever's Xmas

That glimmer of sun

Rising from the gloom

Has made us all

Try to forget the horrors

And dare to dream

Of a happier New Year.

## **Last Christmas**

**Clodhna Joyce-Daly**

Gloomy was the feeling that encompassed your body walking throughout the foggy night. The desolate streets further projected the atmosphere into a darkness and depths of isolation. Despite the solitude, the aromas of stench consumed the air and overpowered nostrils from weeks of poor cleaning. The footpaths were thick from the mist of the light rain and the dimly lit lamps illuminated the slick ground. Against the tarmac paced a thin lined shoes with soles pulling apart with every step.

The shoes were attached to hunched man with a woollen oversized coat protecting him from the mother nature's wrath, his hands as shields from the pelting rain. Despite his determined stature, he carried a sadness that loomed over his haggard expression.

It was a few days until Christmas, and the lights twinkled along the trees that were dispersed on the footpath. Despite the festive ambiance, something tragic was held within the eyes of this passer-by as he trudged forward.

Tucked underneath his tattered coat laid a Christmas turkey. The only turkey left that was available for half price.

Times were tough, but living in the current economy was even more challenging. Despite the increases in rent, necessities and groceries, salaries remained stagnate. The dilemma was projecting more citizens into insecurity.

As town became more vibrant and posher with the pace of John's speed. He could not help but notice the eliteness of the surroundings. He felt in an unnatural state. There were countless rows and pillars of shops illuminating the most chic, off the runway fashion, with its admirers so oblivious to the very city around them that garnered one the worst housing crises' in the world. Their eyes glistening at the lights of capitalism highlighted in the walls of oblivion. Must be nice he thought.

Despite the world they conjured in their minds beneath their feet laid thousands of its inhabitants without homes, food or the basic comforts in life. Others just barely surviving. The divide in society between those who had everything and those that had nothing, it made John shiver.

Last Christmas, John had been a dreamer – longing for a life of security and slight embellishments. Buy a home, they said. Don't rent, they said. Yet when the money is dried up and the warden comes knocking if the bills are not paid you are out. It had been several months for scrambling for normalcy.

In a desperate search for accommodation, John landed on a flat that stood above a chipper. The family made do. They painted the walls, found bits of spare furniture and attempted to create a home in an atmosphere that stank of salt and vinegar. The flat was large enough for them, but not spacious enough to get a bit of peace.

Last Christmas, John had been healthy, taking on extra jobs in the working sphere. Health scares riddled his mind now, with the fear of collapsing in the cold winter's night again. The medical bills were unopened, and the angst of the realisation further projected his heart into spasm. He walked on, tempted to grip his heart, but terrified to drop the turkey.

The lights of the town were beginning to fade into the distance - leaving strains of colour dancing throughout the night. Within the sphere of John's surroundings were uninviting, overpowering brick homes. Its bay window highlighted glorious works of artwork and blank walls along with the blank faces that held them. Further within the depths of the house, John could make out a grand piano with an array of photos and what appeared to be trophies on its throne. Men and women sat clasping onto stems of champagne, wine and other inhabitants that made them oblivious to the outside world. Despite appearing to have copious amount of wealth, there was an emptiness about the company they kept.

Last Christmas, John had idolised the idea of living in one of these brick houses tucked away from reality. He fantasied about the parties they would throw and the conversations they would have about stocks, making money and other finances John did not quite understand.

As he progressed streets got brighter, highlighting a slightly unpaved footpath and smaller homes. The grandiose ideals of the previous neighbours had evaporated and the windows were now closed with tiny lights flickering to illuminate a modest inside. Hand-drawn photos from children's hand and laughter filled John's soul.

Despite the lack of luxuries, John did notice his family seemed predominantly happy with their life. His partner laughed and told stories. His children relished creating make-shift furniture. He sizzled the little dinners they favoured and savoured. It was not much, but an honest life. He did not lie or cheat to manipulate society to get ahead. His children did well despite the limited income.

The fog was starting to subside and the heavy droplets that once pierced John's oversized coat were slowly halted calming the night's sky. The sadness that once loomed over his raddled expression began to fade as he grew closer to home. Painful memories erupted.

Last Christmas, John was so caught up in work, he missed Christmas dinner in a hast to get a deadline completed. Last Christmas, his daughter begged him to take her to the lights in town, but he never got round to it. Last Christmas, he did not participate in the full sugar spread left to satisfy Santa's hunger. Last Christmas, had been a depressing one – filled with unforgiving bosses and demanding time constraints.

This Christmas was determined to be different.

Taking a final breathe in the blistering breeze, the aroma of the chipper encapsulated the air.

This Christmas, John figured out the true meaning of family. For love within a family goes beyond any deadline, wealth, or grand architecture. In the true meaning of Christmas and holiday spirit, love is priceless and John was determined to hold onto to that this Christmas.

## **Making it home for Christmas**

**Alexander Dunne**

It had been a great day! Ross and James had managed to see everything today and nearly everything was finished in time for Christmas Eve. They had helped their Mom (Janet) finish with the shopping and Ross had also been allowed to help his mother buy James's Christmas presents this year. While Ross had started secondary school recently and stopped believing in Santa Claus this Christmas – James was still eight. Therefore, he still had a few more Christmases to remain blissfully ignorant about the big man in the red suit. However, the main reason that Ross was helping Janet so much this Christmas despite his age, was because she really needed his help.

This Christmas would be a very difficult one for the family. Ross's Dad (Arthur) had left to go abroad for work, and wouldn't be able to get back until late Christmas Day. Arthur was a prominent businessman who partially owned a company that both continued to be successful and grow internationally. Unfortunately, a massive deal and growth opportunity for the business had come up, meaning Arthur had to effectively cancel his Christmas Plans and go abroad for last minute talks to successfully close it. All of his partners (and employees) were on holidays for Christmas, and instead of ruining their Christmas he decided, that as the boss – he could sacrifice his for the long-term benefit of his family. At least that was how he saw it; Ross could still remember the horrific argument between both Arthur and Janet after he told her about this. Ross had overheard the commotion, and decided to eavesdrop on the conversation, mainly to ensure that it wasn't about him; and that he wasn't going to be in trouble for something. "I CAN'T BELIEVE YOU'D ACTUALLY CHOOSE TO MISS CHRISTMAS FOR WORK!", Janet screamed. "Someone has to...it's what pays for everything here – including our big Christmas. How else do you expect to pay for presents you've gotten for the boys and everyone else coming over the holidays." Arthur replied. "Don't put that on me" she countered. "How am I supposed to explain to the boys about this, especially James. Arthur, they'll both be teenagers soon, and Christmas will be different – you can't miss this. Just ask for the meeting to be postponed until after Christmas, surely that's a reasonable request?" She pleaded. "I can't...I've already booked the flights. This is important and I'll still be back on Christmas Day...just later." Arthur responded. "Fine then, just

forget it” Janet finished, and she left the room – Ross had tried to make a run for it, but she was too fast and saw him as she left the room. Ross had expected to get yelled at, but instead, his mother had hugged him, and she just went downstairs. Ross decided then and there that he would do whatever he could to help and ensure that this was still a good Christmas for his family.

After Arthur left for the airport on the 23rd of December, Ross had to check his phone constantly because Arthur kept texting him things to do to help with the Christmas preparations (even though his Mom was already telling him what to do in this regard anyway). He was also sending regular progress updates about his trip to let the family know what was going on. In part because he also wanted to know how everyone was doing, and also to try and abate his own guilt for not being there. Janet was incredibly appreciative of how Ross had stepped up during his Dad’s absence. Ross’s grandparents also came early to “visit”, but Ross knew they were also here to help out too. His Mom would never really show it, but she was upset about how things were now. Ross was also worried about his little brother, James. He continued to play videogames and watch Christmas movies playing on TV, but deep-down Ross knew he was upset that Dad wasn’t here too. Ross decided to try and distract him by joining him in the fun, every chance he got. For a while it worked, but eventually he caught him looking gloomy in front of the TV and tried to talk to him. “I wish I could change my letter to Santa”, he told Ross. “What else do you want?” Ross replied. “I just wish that Dad could be here” he finished, then went into the kitchen to get a drink. Ross was glad that no one else had heard that – he doubted his Mom could bear to hear that. Ross took out his phone and started to text his Dad, “Can you come home, please?” then pressed send. On some level, he hoped that it would work he still wanted to believe in Christmas miracles.

Just then, as if by magic, he heard the front door open out in the hall. He got up, to see who it was, and was shocked to see his Dad standing there, carrying some presents with his suitcase, and a big smile on his face. Ross didn’t even say anything, he just ran towards his Dad and gave him a big hug – he was just so happy. He didn’t get to say anything before his Mom and James discovered what was happening, and ran towards them yelling in joy, they all ended up in a group hug; with his grandparents looking on happily from the kitchen. After it was over, Arthur explained to everyone that he had

thought it over, and after having a change of heart, he managed to persuade both his potential clients and his company to push the meeting back until after New Year's but wanted to surprise everyone in true Christmas fashion. "I just didn't want to miss spending Christmas with you all – I also had clear instructions that I was needed here", he said, after taking out his phone and smiling. He looked at Ross and winked, Ross couldn't help but respond in kind. Ross also noticed that both his Mom and Dad were also smiling at each other, hopefully all was forgiven. Finally, after bringing everything in, and handing the extra presents to both Ross and James – Janet exclaimed "alright everyone, let's enjoy Christmas!", which of course, they all did. In fact, it was one of the best Christmas's that the family ever had.

## **A Christmas life**

**Davey**

Oh Christmas my heart is sweetly broke,  
And tenderly blown by sway of all that gathers memory,  
All that is agony and joy loss and gain whisked together and live the pain and  
struggling hope,  
Oh what state we bring out of Christmas are we changed, are we the same,  
we fall to January's fast to forget Christmas quickly ,  
For some it's too hard to endure and often unfair and the same same same ,  
But what are these words you read as you read ,  
For many this season is always strange, and wonderful, difficult and  
prolonged a prisoner to hope is Christmas to life ,  
Life to the Christ who knows our every Christmas,  
It's the next one i will long for ,  
It's the next one Im holding my breath for as the change comes to throw my  
being into the arms of the Christ who began the Christmas.



## Christmas Wish

Shea Walsh

I want to be  
A child oblivious  
Of Ukraine of Israel  
Palestinian pain  
I want to write to  
Santa Claus to bring me  
The latest game  
I want to block out  
Hunger floods drought  
Endless rain  
Humanities inhumanity  
I won't get that wish  
I might as well write to  
Santa Claus  
As the world descends into insanity  
Groucho Marx had it right  
There is no sanity clause!

Be cheerful be happy  
Survive this year  
Light the darkness  
With blinking lights  
All merry and bright

Is there any way?  
We could unite to  
Build a world for our children  
That will embrace  
The simple fact that  
We are all from  
The same human race.

## The Star

### Declan Cosson

It was Christmas Eve and Cillian Archer was at the controls of the Aer Lingus flight from Paris to Dublin. A young man not long married, Cillian was unprepared for how much the job of being an airline pilot would strip him of his normal life, forcing him to be away from his family for long periods at a time. He only applied for the job as he thought it was a way to put his flying skills that he learned in the Irish Air Corps to good use and that it would be the perfect job to buy him and his new family a proper home of their own. Now, as the pale, black haired and blue-eyed youth struggled with exhaustion, such a job offer from Aer Lingus felt like a Faustian bargain and the high wages earned on the job did little to comfort him. He peered out into the pitch-black sky, although there was barely anything outside to look at. For now, Cillian was totally dependent on the control tower's coordinates when it came to plotting his course. Although his co-pilot, Jake Flaherty felt that Cillian should take a rest, the loud roar of the engines and the occasional rattling of the plane meant that even if Cillian wanted to take a nap, he couldn't. Flaherty's reassurance that the plane was mostly on autopilot was of little comfort to Cillian who couldn't trust a machine to baby-sit for him when he slept.

Flaherty was clearly concerned.

"Captain Archer, when are you going to get some rest?"

"When I get down on the ground."

"That's dangerous, Cillian, that coffee can only keep you awake for so long, you know?"

"It's not just the coffee keeping me awake, Flaherty, the plane won't let me sleep, she has too many passengers to let me slack, it's as if she knows what I did in the Congo."

"The Congo? What was that?"

"Something I didn't tell my employers..."

As it was late at night, most of the passengers were asleep, especially the children, many of whom had fluffy toys that were bought at the airport

terminal back in Paris. Nevertheless, the airhostesses went about their duty, giving drinks of coffee and hot chocolate as requested by passengers who were still awake. Back in the cockpit, Cillian and Jake went about the usual chores of checking the controls and following the instructions of the air traffic control. From their charts, they could tell their plane was heading towards the Irish coast. Already, Cillian was having to stop himself from titling forward. Perhaps Flaherty was right after all, Cillian should get some sleep, but then any concern about that was quickly killed by the sound of thunder up ahead, followed by alarms going off and lights on the control panel flashing red. This jolted both Jake and Cillian out of their comfort for up ahead of them was what looked like a gathering storm of black clouds and there was even a brief flash of lightning. Seeing this, Flaherty groaned.

“Oh, come on, just as we approach Ireland!! A storm, really? Thought the weather forecast said there were no storms!!”

But as Flaherty turned to Cillian, he noticed that Cillian looked to be in a state of shock, his bright blue eyes widening ever more and starring dumbly at the storm up ahead. For little did Flaherty know, but Cillian was having flash backs to that time in the Congo, when he had been stubbornly determined to fly to the outpost as quickly as possible to reinforce it which led him to fly the cargo plane straight into a storm. He was haunted by the memory of helplessly dangling from a parachute as he watched the plane with all of the men inside burning on the ground. He seemed to be almost convulsing as he thought about those boys whose blood was on his hands and how cowardly he felt he had been to bail out and save his own skin. These flashbacks were disrupted by a stinging slap across his face, followed by the sound of Flaherty shouting.

“Cillian? Cillian?? Captain Archer!!!”

Cillian shook the dark thoughts from his head.

“Yes...”

“Captain, we’re about to run into the storm, what do we do??”

At the sound of the word, “storm”, Cillian jolted out of his stupor, looking up in horror to see the storm clouds gather closer and closer ahead of them. His first reaction was to think “Lord God!” Then, as if determined not to repeat the same error he had made in the Congo, he snapped into action.

“Right, I’m changing to manual!!”

Before Jake could say anything, Cillian disabled the autopilot and took direct control of the plane. Jake had no choice but to handle the controls himself as they circled their plane around the storm. Sure, it would take longer than expected to get to Dublin airport, but for Cillian, it was a price worth paying if it meant saving the lives of his passengers. He blessed himself, silently praying to God to get the plane through this ordeal. Despite his best efforts to escape the storm, the plane still rattled and received such seismic bumps that it awoke most of the passengers who began to panic. Noticing this, one of the air hostesses came into the cockpit.

“Excuse me gentlemen, but can I speak to the Captain?”

“Go ahead, Ma’am, but make it quick.”

“Captain, we’ve got an increasing number of terrified passengers who want to know what is going on, what do I tell them?”

“Our trip to Dublin airport will take longer than expected because of a storm, I’m trying to get us away from it as quickly as possible, but honestly, I feel we will need God’s grace to get us out of this.”

“God’s grace? Captain, with all due respect, I need a more certain answer to reassure the passengers.”

“I understand Aoife, so please tell them that the flight will arrive later than usual because we are bypassing a storm. Instruct them on the usual safety procedures and assure them that Flaherty and I have everything under control.”

Aoife did as she was instructed but despite these words, a tense atmosphere remained throughout the plane. But of all those on board the plane, none were more tense than Cillian Archer himself. As long as the clouds were in sight, the memory of the Congo and the plane crash haunted his memory. Suddenly, amidst all of the darkness, when Cillian looked up, he could see what looked to be a glowing bright star in the sky. At first, he was briefly dazzled by it but increasingly, he couldn’t take his eyes off it. He didn’t know what it was but when he looked up at it, it was as if his convulsions stopped because he found that he was thinking less about the Congo and more about what happened between then and now. He thought about the nature reserve

and its gorillas. He thought of Alicia, that beautiful Australian woman he fell in love with. Of his return to Ireland and his marriage. Of his newborn child and ultimately, he thought of his home, the Emerald Isle itself. Flashing back to the present, Cillian seemed to have gained a newfound sense of confidence as he prepared to fly around the storm. Looking over at him, Flaherty spoke anxiously. "Captain Archer, what are you doing?"

"Look up there, a star, and I'm going to follow it."

"Really, with all of our equipment and the instructions of the air traffic control, you're going to follow something as childish as a star?"

"Nothing childish about it, Flaherty, for men have always followed the stars. The wise men followed one to Bethlehem, Columbus followed the stars to the Americas! So, mark me, Flaherty, if God has given us a star to follow to Dublin, then I will follow it."

Thus, the plane followed the star out of the storm. Having escaped the storm, it wasn't long before people looking below could now see the illuminated lights of the runway below.

As the plane touched down on the runway with a thump, Cillian could now rest easy knowing that his passengers had safely arrived, even if it was later than had been planned.

Later that evening, the Archer family's household was brightly lit and decorated with all sorts of Christmas decorations. And yet, all of this glamour did not match the mood of the Archer family inside, who were still waiting for Cillian to come home. Cillian and Alicia, along with their newborn child, Cody were staying with Cillian's parents over the Christmas break. For now, Seamus Archer was watching the news anxiously as it went on about the storm that was covering the region and the threat that such a storm had for airlines. This was not easy for a father whose son flew commercial flights for a living but he kept his phone close to hand in case Cillian should call. Cillian's mother was pretending focus on her book.

"Well, Seamus, is there any news?"

"Not yet, Nuala, I'm afraid we're going to have to go to mass, it's getting late. Even if he doesn't come home soon, I'll let Cillian know that we're heading off. Hopefully, he'll be able to catch up with us later."

Nuala nodded, but there was a clear sense of worry on her face, the only comfort being that her son was very resourceful and a skilled pilot. She went off to tell Alicia who was in the dining room, looking up through the windows at the night sky, letting her son sit on her lap. She whispered to him in a reassuring tone.

“Don’t worry, Cody, I’m sure your Daddy will make it home soon.”

Alicia was dressed for going out, wrapped in a furry coat which she wore over dark blue dress. Her hands were shielded by soft gloves and her long thick reddish-brown hair fell in curly locks down her shoulders. She looked up with a sense of worry, knowing all too well that Cillian had been due home over an hour ago. Nuala spoke with deliberate cheerfulness.

‘Come on, Alicia, it’s time to go.’

Standing up, Alicia looked at her nervously.

“But what about Cillian?”

“He’ll make his own way, don’t worry. He’s a capable lad who learnt to stand on his own two feet the hard way in school.”

“But...”

Trying to comfort her daughter in law, Nuala continued.

“Don’t worry about Cillian, that boy survived the Dark Continent in one piece, a bit of bad Irish weather is not going to stand in his way.”

Alicia was starting to smile when the doorbell rang. Passing to Cody to Nuala, Alicia rushed to open the door only to stop in delighted surprise. Cillian was standing on the doorstep, still dressed in his pilot’s uniform, the moon gleaming off the visor of his cap, exhausted but smiling.

“Well, honey, I’m home...”

Overjoyed, Alicia wrapped her arms around him.

“Oh Cillian, what took you so long? We were all so worried about you!”

“I’m terribly sorry but a storm delayed our arrival and if that wasn’t enough, the taxi broke down on the way here so to say that I was delayed was an understatement.”

Cillian's parents stood in the hall, both pleasantly surprised and relieved, waiting to embrace their son.

"So, Cillian, my boy, the storm didn't cause ye too much trouble, did it?"

"At first, I feared I'd be responsible for another crash but then I saw a lone star, at least, what I thought was a star and I followed it..."

"You mean to say that the Good Lord guided you home? All the more reason for us to go to mass!"

Later that evening, Cillian, dressed in a long black coat, was standing outside the church, clasping Cody in his arms. He gazed upwards, trying to see if the wonderfully bright star that had guided him was still up there. But for now, he saw nothing. Alicia came up beside him and took Cody in her arms.

"I can't have imagined it. I swear I saw an amazing star tonight. An illusion can't have guided me home safely."

Before Alicia could say anything, Cody wriggled in her arms, waving his arms. From the noises he made, he seemed to be trying to attract his parent's attention to something high above them. Curious, Alicia looked in the direction that her son was pointing in.

"Look, Cillian, is that it?"

"My God, that is the star!"

He wrapped his arms around his wife and son as they continued to gaze at the star that was gleaming in the pitch-black sky.

## **Yes, Your Honour, There Is A Santa Claus**

**Stephen Brady**

It was Christmas Eve. And Breffni was lying in his bed and he was wide awake.

Because he had heard a noise, downstairs.

Dad was on the night shift at the hospital and Mom always slept the nights through. Breffni was an only child, so there was only one possible explanation for the noise: it must be Santa Claus.

Breffni got up and padded down the hallway, a slender figure in Buzz Lightyear pyjamas. At the top of the stairs, he stopped and listened.

The sounds were coming from the living room. He heard shuffling, and a rustle of paper.

Santa was leaving the presents!

Breffni crammed his hands in his mouth to keep from screaming with delight.

Right downstairs, Santa Claus was leaving all the things that Breffni had asked him for. He had written a note, two months before, carefully addressed to the North Pole. And he'd been so good. Santa must have brought everything he'd wanted.

Then he heard a clink of glasses. Santa must have been drinking the wine that Breffni's Mom had laid out for him. Breffni hoped he had eaten the mince pies, too. After all, he had a long night ahead.

Then came a crash!, the swishing of branches, and baubles tinkling. It sounded like something had knocked over the Christmas tree.

"I hope Santa's okay," Breffni whispered.

The living room door crashed open and heavy, booted feet thundered up the stairs.

Breffni ran back to his bedroom and hid behind the door. He was not supposed to see Santa, he knew that.

But wait, he thought. Santa's not supposed to come upstairs.



The heavy feet reached the top of the stairs, then tramped down the hall. Breffni heard wheezing breath and caught a strange, unpleasant smell. Then the door to the bathroom slammed shut.

Breffni crept out and looked down the hall in the midnight gloom.

Big, muddy footprints on the carpet. Also pine needles, bits of tinsel, and pieces of mince pie. Santa had made a bit of a mess.

Noises came from the bathroom, crashing and mumbling. Then the toilet flushed.

That seemed strange to Breffni. But then, he supposed, Santa must need to go to the toilet too. He drank a lot of wine over the course of the night, and he was pretty old. Breffni's granddad was sometimes on the toilet for a weekend.

Breffni moved quietly down the hall. He reached the bathroom door, leaned close and listened.

Nothing.

After a moment's hesitation, Breffni opened the door.

Santa Claus was climbing out the bathroom window.

Oh my God.

It was really him!

He had the red coat, the tumbling beard, the fur-lined hat. Breffni stared in wonder. So stunned was he it took him a minute to realize what Old Nick was doing.

Santa had one leg out the window and the other on the edge of the toilet. His sack of presents rested on the cistern, and it was bulging. Santa seemed to be trying to figure out how to get out the window without letting go of the sack.

Breffni was transported with joy.

He shouted: "Happy Christmas Santa!"

“What the fuck-“ Santa mumbled, and looked back. His eyes, nestled above the curly white beard, were red and wayward. He gave off a powerful smell, like rotting fruit. And when he saw Breffni in the doorway he froze.

There was a moment's pause. Then Santa said, “You should be in bed.”

Breffni said, “Are you the real Santa Claus?”

“I am, yeah.” Santa coughed. “Em... ho ho ho.”

“What are you doing, Santa?”

“I’m goin to the next place. Got a lotta houses to do tonight.”

Santa's voice did not sound like Breffni had expected. In fact, he sounded a lot like the old man who shouted at people outside the chip shop.

“Why don’t you go up the chimney?” asked Breffni.

“Em... I don’t do that anymore.”

“Is Rudolph not up on the roof?”

“I gave ‘im the night off.”

“Wow...”

“Here kid, I’ve to shoot. Don’t tell anyone you seen me, right?”

Breffni was staring now at Santa’s sack. It was crammed with gifts, and some of them looked awfully familiar. They looked exactly like the presents from under the tree downstairs. Also protruding from the sack were two candlesticks, and they looked exactly like Mom’s ones, the old expensive ones that she kept in the cupboard.

Breffni said, “Are they my presents Santa?”

“Yeah.”

Now Breffni was beginning to suspect that something was wrong. “How come you’re going out the window with my presents? And my Mom’s stuff?”

Santa muttered something under his breath that sounded like a bad word.

“Because, I’m takin this gear.”

“You’re... taking...?”

“Yeah.”

“But... Santa’s supposed to give stuff.” Breffni was breathing fast, and was worried he might burst into tears like a girl. “It’s... it’s Christmas.”

Santa leaned back in through the window. Breffni now saw that his red coat and hat were very dirty, and he smelled like he had drunk an awful lot of wine.

“New deal this year,” he snarled. “I’m takin yer shite.”

“But why, Santa?”

“ ‘Cos you been a bold boy.”

“I haven’t I haven’t! I’ve been good! Ask Mom!”

“...So I’m takin all yer presents. And here... if you tell anyone you seen me, if you don’t keep shtum, you’ll never get another present as long as ye live. Ye little prick. I’m outta here.”

Santa turned and squeezed his bulk out the bathroom window, dragging his sack behind. He was chuckling to himself, not so much “ho ho ho” as “heh heh heh.”

And that was when Breffni lost his temper.

“I hate you Santa Claus!”

He ran at Santa and shoved him hard. Old Nick swore violently teetered on the ledge. Breffni grabbed the sack and held onto it for dear life. For a moment they tussled with it. Then the festive intruder lost his footing on the windowsill and fell, two storeys, landing hard on the deck below. Breffni heard the snap as Santa’s leg broke.

Vile, unseasonal language arose from the prostrate figure below.

Breffni didn’t care. He had the presents!

He didn’t think the noise would wake his Mom (she took tablets to help her sleep). But he couldn’t really leave Santa Claus down there. Lights were coming on in the neighbours’ houses and Santa’s colourful language was carrying on the frigid Yuletide air.

Breffni went downstairs to the house phone, dragging Santa's sack behind him. He picked up the phone and hit a few buttons and waited, like he'd seen on telly. He could still hear Santa swearing and vowing bloody revenge from the back garden.

There was a click, and a voice came on the line.

"999, what service please?"

"I need a ambulance!"

"One moment please."

A few seconds later a different woman, who sounded very tired, came on the line.

"Please state the nature of your emergency."

"Hello? Hello! Yeah. This is Breffni." He thought for a second. "Happy Christmas!"

"Please state the nature of your emergency."

"Santa's outside he tried to rob the presents and I caught him going out the window and I pushed him and he fell and he can't get up and he's in the garden and he's using a lot of bad words!"

There was a moment's silence on the line.

Then the voice returned, sounding even more tired than before.

"Young man, you're the fourth one tonight. I do adore Christmas.

## Rockin

Paula Sweeney

ROCKIN AROUND THE CHRISTMAS TREE ARE YOU ROCKIN LIKE Santa baby busy down the chimney with me as long as the Grinch doesn't know about it he tried to ruin the little girls Christmas she was Danish he didn't like little fancy girls he'd put soot in their stocking; Please Santa don't let the Grinch ruin Xmas for boys and girls. Santa baby crazy down the chimney for you and

It's been 7 hours and 16 days since you gave your LOVE away I go out every night and sleep all day I went to the doctor and guess what he told me, last Christmas I gave you my heart and the very next day you gave it away this year I gave it to someone special

Nights in white Satin what you want me to be cause I love you on a first day of Christmas when my true love gave to me 4 humming birds and a pear tree

Talking about the Grinch stealing Christmas so could Maria Carey she stole a song about Christmas like stolen slices there gorgeous I gave one as a gift someone doesn't do something soon there will be no gifts off Santa as all these people are giving up on Santa as all the other people are stealing away LET Dec the hols light up Christmas instead like every house in Red Island and I believe the

Grinch comes from there he describes himself as an ugly Santa sure he could frighten all the boys and girls in Iceland and then the Iceman might turn up instead he doesn't like his job as he's a hit man what can he do try to find Cris Kindle to save Christmas he's to far away and he might not be available on Christmas'.

Feed the world do they know that Christmas time is here. who said that Bob Geldof arranged that people all over the world mattered and all those song writers took part in raising funds for feed the world campaign it was a great success I make lovely things like crafts and would love to give them something. Perhaps another time I will get a chance.