

The Night Afore Christmas

by
Jamie Cameron



The Christmas party had been sillier than usual, and I felt some satisfaction that it would be my last. In September Joe and I'd come to the parting of the ways, at least temporarily, as he strode off with all the confidence in the world to the school on the hill.

You could see Ancrum Road Primary School if you stood on the wall outside St Mary's Catholic Church where the High Street became the Lochee Road. I had no idea what Alcatraz was then, but if I had, I would certainly have named that institution of junior learning 'Alcatraz on the Hill'.

Party hats, home-made, crackers, home-made, and lumpy jelly, home-made, whistles, clackers, rattles, xylophones, tin drums, and abortive attempts at carol singing accompanied by the up-right, out-of-tune piano produced scenes of frenzied, frantic mayhem across the main hall of the nursery. Snowballs sneaked in under pinafores had reduced the wooden floor to a soggy, slippery mess, unimproved by the urine of several little girls taken short by the excitement of it all. The tree tipped over at an unlikely angle, bulbs exploding at the rate of one every five minutes, chocolate novelties long since ripped off, and the fairy looking as bedraggled as the nurses who fought half-heartedly for control of their pinafores charges.

All other doors were locked against us, including, outrageously, the door to the Quiet Room where I could have found solace in a Wizard or Hotspur, or even in these desperate circumstances a Dandy or Beano though my contempt for Dennis the Menace and Desperate Dan were legendary. Little surprise then that my participation in the Hokey Cokey ended after I'd three times put the boot, or at least the sandal into three toddlers who had the temerity to shake their limbs at me. Thrown across the room, I slid arse-first into the Christmas tree and was rewarded by the sound of three bulbs exploding simultaneously and the fairy falling into my lap. I would have left there and then, but the presents were still to come.

"Ho ho ho!"

If the voice hadn't given it away, the streaky moustache and the gin-tainted breath did. Santa was Matron. Santa was always Matron, I hadn't needed Joe to tell me that. But was I the only one who recognised her? The others, even my fellow five-year-olds screeched in delight and were only hindered from mauling Santa by the serried ranks of nurses who secured her path to the Christmas tree where Santa, as God is my witness, kicked me out of her way.

Santa's armchair was hauled into place. She dropped her Christmas sack with a thud and dropped herself into the chair which sagged beneath her not inconsiderable bulk, none of which was made up of pillows.

"Line up. Sparrows first. Then seagulls. Now you blackbirds, and then the tits." Nurses smiled, screamed and herded us into some semblance of order. I was four years old and therefore a tit. At the time I did not understand why mum laughed when I told her.

In the prescribed order infants, toddlers and juniors mounted Matron, were breathed upon, exchanged whispers, and given their Christmas present. They scrambled down and were led away by nurses who then man-handled the presents from them and piled them on a table near the door. As usual we were not to be allowed to open our presents until going-home time; previous experiments at letting the children open their presents had led to jealousy, bickering, arguments, fighting and worse. All of the infants, most of the toddlers and several of the juniors burst into inconsolable tears, not that anyone tried to console them, the piano just got louder.

My turn came. I looked up into Matron's eyes. Little black raisins embedded in a purple pudding. I wanted to put a match to her. Did gin burn like brandy? Never mind. That ratty beard would do.

"Get up here, Paul."

"My mother says you have to call me Jean-Paul."

"Get up here, Jean-Paul." I could feel the hostility, the gin must be wearing off.

"I don't answer to Jean-Paul."

"Get up here, you."

Immovable object met irresistible force.

"Here, take it." She thrust a small parcel into my chest.

"What about my Christmas wish?"

She snorted like the walrus in the nature film we'd watched the day before and stuck her ear into my face. I whispered my Christmas wish.

"No."

"What do you mean 'no'?"

"I mean 'no'. Now go and play."

I stood my ground until I was hauled away by a nurse. I hardly felt my present slip out of my arms. I was in a state of shock and did not come to until I found myself in a conga that twisted, turned and staggered its way around the hall, children slipping, sliding and falling on the treacherous linoleum. I disengaged myself from this travesty and returned to the tree. Santa had gone. I scrambled onto the armchair, slung my legs over the side and looked up into the tattered branches. I had some thinking to do. Above my head another bulb exploded.

At five o'clock I stood at the entrance to the nursery waiting for my grandmother to take my home. Light snow was falling. It spun and swirled through the lamplight. Although I was not cold, I shivered and pulled the canvas bag that held the history of my three nursery years closer to me.

Gran came zigzagging down Flight's Lane in that curiously distracted way that suggested her mind was not entirely at one with her body. She began several possible conversations before hitting upon one that continued long enough to make some sense. I thrust one rope handle of the bag towards her, kept a tight grip on the other and dragged her up the lane.

"Dae you no want tae say cheerio tae the nurses?"

"No, come on."

"Did you ha'e a guid perty?"

"No."

Disappointment flitted across her ruddy cheeks, but Gran could never be unhappy for more than a moment. A lady of the old school, she was born to serve and please others, especially menfolk. Her misery melted like an ice cream cone at the Ferry in August.

"We'd better get hame quick. It's Christmas eve, ye ken, an' yer ma's probably goin' oot fur some last minute shoppin'. We'd better no be late." My mother was not of the old school, and my grandmother was terrified of her. She pulled on the canvas bag and almost dragged me under a tramcar. I doubt she even saw it. We passed one of my grandfather's public houses. The stink was intoxicating. Gran shuddered and pulled me past its seductive double swing doors.

Joe'd been home for an hour. The room was snug and cosy. Gran attempted fitful conversation. She'd no takers and left with a promise to visit on Christmas Day. We made no move and she did not kiss us good-bye. There were conventions in the family we did not understand, but which we respected. I got on with my reading and Joe continued to build his version of a better mousetrap. We'd already got mum's present, wrapped it and hidden it in the bedpan. Our Christmas preparations were done.

Just after six mum came home and collapsed into the armchair hacking like a tubercular cat. My mother suffered from pleurisy. Neither Joe nor I had any idea what pleurisy was, but we recognised its painful symphony and hated it. Mum sat in the chair, bent double, fighting for breath. Joe sat on an arm of the chair, leaning over, her massaging her back, digging deep with his thumbs. When his thumbs were aching, I took over, not nearly so effectively, but I was learning.

Sometimes I would hold her shoulders and rub my face into her back. It probably didn't help her, but it helped me. Later mother would make a kaolin poultice of hot china clay smeared on a thick bandage. We would tenderly apply the hot sludge to her bare back and freckled shoulders, swapping stories about our day.

Many of my stories were embroidered, exaggerated or wholly invented. I loved to make mum laugh though laughter had its price in further fits of coughing and pain. A dig in the ribs from my puritanical brother told me when I was going too far. That night the laugh was on me.

A sharp series of knocks rattled the door in its frame. Joe answered the call, his high but even voice counter-pointing a deep rumble like thunder over Balgay Hill. He came back and spoke to mum, a quizzical look running across his thin frenchified features.

"The polis is at the door. I think he's looking for Paul."

I started like a guilty thing. My mother pinned me to the wall with a look. Was my hair standing on end? I resisted the urge to turn and look in the wardrobe mirror. Lucky arched

her back and hissed in sympathy.

"You, wait there," she said, adding superfluously, "don't move."

Thunder rumbled behind the door again. The words made no sense. My mother had pronounced a sentence of immobility upon my brain as well as my body. Her words came to me in fragments.

"Good idea not to come in... terrified of men... scream his head off... always been like that... the doctor says..."

I risked a glance at Joe. He was still working on his mousetrap. He was smiling, but it was a smile I did not like, it was the smile he wore when he caught a mouse in one his traps. I'd seen one before, its wee heid snapped clean from its body, its incisors embedded in the cheddar that had lured it to its doom. I'd like to see his head... No, mustn't think like that. God's listening, God's watching, God sees all. Doesn't He ever take time off or is He too busy keeping an eye on the mousetraps He has built for all of us?

"Jean-Paul Bosquet."

I was startled to hear my name pronounced in full. My mother might as well have worn a piece of black cloth on the top of her Christmas perm.

"Jean-Paul Bosquet. Hand them over."

For an instant I was tempted to play dumb, tempted to commit instant suicide. I resisted the temptation and lived.

Scrambling under the bed, I hauled out the bulging canvas bag and dragged it to my mother's feet. I knelt down and pulled out one wrapped gift at a time handing them up to my mother who placed each one ceremoniously on the table. "four... five... six..." Would these poisonous parcels never end? "eight... nine... ten..." The final parcel tugged at my heartstrings. I gave my mother a look that would melt an iceberg. She must have known it was mine. She was implacable, taking my parcel between finger and thumb - green holly paper, red berries, laughing snowmen - she dropped it like a dog turd onto the pile.

A policeman stepped into the room. My heart or some other organ leapt into my mouth. I could not make a sound. I froze. I could feel my tiny scrotum tighten. I tried to fix my gaze on the floor. My eyes betrayed me. I looked up. It was a man, a very big man, with big yellow teeth, a moustache thicker even than matron's, and a flat policeman's cap supported by big ears on either side of his big head. My eyes widened. My chest began to heave. A strangled sob forced its way past my constricted throat muscles. A cold chill blew in through the open door annihilating Christmas.

The man swept all the parcels up into his big arms, nodded a cheery "Merry Christmas" to my mother and disappeared into the night. I could see him striding across the wasteland to the Lochee Road towards the railway bridge at Muirton Road. My imagination pulled down the shutters. I knew the Lochee Road led to Dundee, the big city. As far as I knew, I'd never been there. But it was obvious. The big city was where the big men lived, and I wanted nothing to do with that or them.

"Take three big breaths. Remember how Dr Heinrich showed you."

I took the breaths, the biggest and deepest I could manage. They almost blew my head off.

"Come here."

I came there. Mum sitting in the armchair. Me standing in front of her. Joe sitting on the rug in front of the fire. Lucky stretched out on the bed.

"Why did you take the presents?"

Another deep breath.

"It was Matron's fault."

"Why did you take the presents?"

"She widnae give me one for Joe."

"Go on."

"You said me and Joe had to be the same."

"Go on."

I was annoyed now. I could feel my neck redden. It was not my fault.

"I asked her... for a present... for Joe. I asked nicely, honest, mum. She said no, not nicely. So I put them in the bag when everybody was changing. And Gran helped me carry

them up the road. They were really heavy, and a tram nearly..."

"That was wrong. The presents didn't belong to you, so you had no right to take them. What you did was wrong."

The room went silent. Joe sat still. The fire ceased to spit shale. Lucky stopped purring. I was drowning in the silence, thick heavy fluid clogging my nose and my brain, running down my back, pouring down my legs into my grey nursery socks. Mum had said the word we never wanted to hear: wrong. It rang like a huge gong banging relentlessly into the silence. Anything but that word. That word put distance between us and this woman, that word sliced into the umbilical cord that nourished us, that word made her turn her face away from us, that word cost us her love, and without that love we could not survive.

"You did the wrong thing for the right reason. Now what are you going to do about it?"

Never ask a four year old that question. It isn't fair. It's too harsh. Because a four year old will always come up with the right answer, and the answer will hurt.

I racked my brains for a way out. I looked at Joe. He shrugged at me with his lips. He knew the answer, too. And he knew there was no way out.

"Bed."

"When?"

"Now."

"How long?"

"Morning."

"Comics?"

"No comics."

"Good night, son."

My mind chased a little tail in circles. There had to be something. There was. But play it carefully. I looked mum full in the face.

"Eh hivnae had meh tea."

"What?"

"Eh hivnae had meh tea. Eh'm sterving."

Even Lucky held her breath. Fire danced in my mother's eyes.

"It's Christmas Eve, and eh hivnae had eny tea."

Something like contempt flickered in my mother's smile.

"Right, boys, what'll we have for tea tonight?"

"Macaroni on toast."

"No, we had that last night."

"Scrambled eggs on toast."

"No, that's for breakfast."

"What day is it, mum?"

"It's Thursday."

"Bread and chips. Right?"

"Right."

Paul recognises the note of despondency in Joe's voice. He cannot understand why his brother fails to appreciate the joys of bread and chips, teeth sinking into the fleshy fried potato, greasy margarine sliding down the throat, lips worth licking again and again, and hot sweet tea washing down the whole sloppy mess.

On good nights you can have as much bread as you want, including the ends of the sliced white loaf, the 'heelies', which are always reserved for Paul since nobody else wants them. You can curl up on the big double bed that dominates the single room, chew on the crusts and get lost in the Rover, the Hotspur, the Wizard for hour after hour.

How can Joe sound so despondent every Thursday night about such prospects as these? Even Kathleen, the new baby, lies gurgling happily, but then Kathleen lies gurgling happily most of the time, kicking her feet against the sides of the tin bath that serves as her crib.

"Who wants to put the kettle on?"

"Eh'll dae it."

"Joseph, speak properly when you're in this house. Put the kettle on. Jean-Paul will go for the chips. Get your coat on and your wellies. You're not going out in sandals on a night like this. And come straight back. No wandering."

Paul clammers into a heavy bottle-green overcoat and ties the belt around his middle, the buckle is long gone. Reluctantly he pulls on the heavy Wellington boots. He stands beside mum's armchair. She is absorbed in the Evening Telegraph, smoke curls up from her cigarette. Paul stands and waits. She turns her head to him, blue-grey eyes meet. She has

that far away look. Paul knows she hasn't been reading the newspaper, only looking at the words.

"Money, mum. For the chippie. I'm ready."

She reaches for her purse. She takes out a sixpenny piece and presses it into his warm little palm closing her fingers over the money, her fingers over his. He swells with pride. He is a knight-errant setting out on a perilous mission. He knows he may meet dragons, monsters, wizards and bogeymen out there, but he will overcome them all, he will wade knee-deep through blood, guts and slaughter, but he will get there, and he will return with the holy grail, the sixpence worth of hot steaming chips to lay at her feet or at least on the stove until the bread is margarined.

Outside it is dark, cold and bitter, and the boy is not so sure. There is neither wind nor cloud. Winter stars sparkle overhead. Frost and rime sparkle below his feet. The gas lamps hiss and sputter. Shadows are blackly frozen. Paul remembers he is only four, nearly five, but by the calendar still only four.

He will gallop and sing his way to Delanzo's. It is not far, only half a mile. The boy hasn't the faintest idea what half a mile is, but it doesn't sound too far. Across the 'Greenie', singing and galloping he will go. What to sing? That new one they learned in school at Christmas. He has only the vaguest idea what the words might mean. Something about the last time good King Wences looked out, looking for Stephen or someone like that, and Stephen arrived but he was only a kid, but the king decided to take him anyway. Get on with it.

His high treble rises into the frozen night air. "Good King Wences last looked out, he was looking for Stephen, when the snow lay round about, deep and crisp and even." He likes the sound of that, deep and crisp and even, as he slides and slithers across the freezing mush, slush and mud of the 'green'. He's got quite a good gallop going now. He can make out the Cally fence. Can't be too far now.

The boy is gripped by the windpipe. His voice cut off in mid note. There is a searing pain across his throat. He is thrown backwards, his arms fly up, hands extended like a child crucified. He lands on his back with a thud even the slush cannot muffle. He lies there, arms and legs akimbo, too stunned to move, to think, to cry. He waits for another blow. It does not come. He feels the pain now, the hot searing pain across his windpipe.

He feels the pain and he is glad he can feel the pain. It allows him to move, to think, to cry. But he won't cry yet. He rolls onto his front. If another blow is to come, he does not want it in the face or in the stomach. He knows that would really hurt. He can take it across the back or across the backside, but not across his front. So get on with it. If there's to be more pain, get on with it.

Nothing. Only the hot slash across his windpipe. He staggers to his feet, slipping and sliding in the slush, he is breathing heavily, fighting for breath at times. The six times table helps a lot. He might even try the seven but he has trouble with seven times six. He turns to face his assailant.

Nothing. There is nothing there. Except a washing line. Hanging low. Swinging gently. If the seven times table presents problems, the answer to two and two is immediate. He has galloped into the washing line. It has caught him round the neck and thrown him into the sludge. Paul's cheeks blaze and burn, and not only from the bitter chill. He is embarrassed, and the embarrassment sears him worse than the rope burn across his neck. Tears spring to his eyes at last. Never mind. Get on with it. He's late enough.

He brushes the muddy slush from his hands. They have been grazed by the gravel beneath the snow. His overcoat has saved his knees. His fingers tingle but he cannot tell if they are burning or freezing. He opens his left palm, then his right. He jams his right hand into his coat pocket, then his left into the left. He fumbles in the pockets of his corduroy shorts. He is fighting for breath again, his chest heaving in great gulps. He drops to his knees, the slush splashes around him. He scrabbles wildly in the snow, in the mud, careless of his corduroys. His fingers are frozen, he cannot feel his knees, slush turns to icy water in his wellies.

"Our Father which art in heaven where's mum's money?" What can he promise this God who remains so stubbornly silent? I'll never steal presents again, just let me find the money.

It's Christmas tomorrow, you'd think He'd be listening.

The tears are running down his face, the snot down his nose, water into his wellies. His scrabbling has grown more frantic. He has covered a wide circle. How far can a silver sixpence roll in snow? Should he scrabble backwards towards the house? What did the wise men bring to the baby Jesus - gold, frankincense and mirth? What is mirth anyway? Must remember to ask mum. Please God, I'll do anything, anything.

"What are you doin' doon there, you wee shite?"

Paul looks up. Tears and snot run into his mouth. He gathers them in with his tongue. He blinks to clear his eyes. It's Joe. God couldn't make it, so He sent His representative on earth. Lochee's answer to Herod.

"Ah drapped the sixpence, Joe. Ah didnae mean it. Honest. Ah ran intae the washing line. Sumbodys left it hinging afae low. Help is, Joe, go on, help is find it."

"Stop bubblin'. Gie's yer hand. We're no gonna find it the nicht."

Joe reaches for Paul's hand and pulls him to his feet. Using the back of his hand, he wipes the teary snot away from his little brother's face as best he can, then wipes his hand in the snow. He pulls the overcoat tight around the smaller boy and still holding his hand leads him back to the house. On the stairs leading to the attic, he gently eases off the overcoat and hangs it up on a wooden peg. Then he helps Paul off with his Wellington boots and wet socks. He dumps them on the stairs.

"Wait there."

Joe slips into the attic room. Paul stand and waits, cheeks ablaze, teeth chattering, wet corduroys clinging, the dirty tears stain his face. The door opens.

"Come in."

Paul steps into the room. His mother is standing by the open fire. He can hardly raise his head to look at her. When he does, the familiar blue-grey eyes meet. His mother is smiling. Then she is laughing. "C'mere, son."

He runs to her and throws himself into those strong familiar arms. He is crying again, sobbing and heaving against her stomach, drowning himself in that familiar warmth, that familiar smell.

"You know what this means," he hears her say. "It's toast and dripping tonight. We haven't had that for ages. Now come on, get these things off, you're soaked through. It looks like the Steamie on Saturday."

"Tea's nearly ready, mum. Will I start on the toast?"

"Let me get this boy's backside warmed up first. Then we'll all make the toast together. Save the heelies for Jean-Paul."

In the grate the fire hisses and spits out tiny pieces of shale. The kettle whistles, the gas lamp flickers, the woman hums and towels the boy vigorously.

In her tin basin the baby lies gurgling happily as she watches the shadows dance on the ceiling.