

I Wish it Could be Christmas

Philip Boyes

Curtains drawn against the world beyond, threadbare fabric lit in a dozen shifting colours by tiny lights draped in rainbow train across a plastic tree. Good-quality, tasteful. Once. Now worn shabby by over-use; lustre dimmed by familiarity and exposure. Like the stockings hung without much hope above the three-bar electric fire; the jolly Christmas songs coming from the CD-player in the corner. In the galley kitchen at the back of the tiny flat, a bird roasts in the oven. The barely-touched leftovers of the last one are still on the breakfast bar.

A mean and paltry Christmas. No wonder the young man in the chair is weeping.

Last Christmas

A different place, a different time. A house, warm with the scents and colours of the season. A young woman's house. Small, modest and careful. There are Christmas cards from friends and family along the window-sills and pinned to the bannisters. Many cards. None from a husband; none from a lover. A bag of presents sits by the door to the porch, undelivered, though it is after noon on Christmas day. A bird roasts in the oven.

The same young man weeps. The woman – small and modest and careful – wraps him in her arms and listens.

'I tried,' the man says, and all his heart is in those words. 'I wanted it to be perfect. She said she'd never really done Christmas when she was little so I wanted it to be everything a Christmas should be. Presents, tree – I even got her a bloody goose. I don't know how to cook a goose but it's proper, isn't it? Turkey's American and I wanted her to have a lovely old-fashioned English Christmas.' He sobs and gestures limply towards the windows. 'It even snowed.'

The woman listens and he speaks and she listens more. She says nothing, though there are many things she might have said; would have said, if she hadn't been quite so small and modest and careful.

'I can't believe she left,' the man says, broken and forlorn as the last sentinel snowman when green and grey has reclaimed the world around it, the white and the magic banished. He buries his head in her shoulder.

'I'm all alone.'

She glances towards her sack of undelivered presents and thinks briefly about the nephews they were meant for. But she says nothing, and listens, and wonders if she should stroke his hair.

Coming to town

In the flat the doorbell rings. Tinny jungle bells startle the weeping man out of his tears. He looks up; calls a name. The wrong name. Before he can move, the door is opened and a girl bustles in. Not the girl he was thinking of. This one is short and young, with long, light-brown hair tied gathered in a ponytail and tied with a length of red tinsel. She's wearing a bulky black jacket and has to squeeze to get through the pokey hallway. Behind her, an older man, eyes sad but all a-twinkle; pale linen jacket over a ghastly Christmas jumper: all red with rows of knitted white snowmen. He doffs his panama, shakes the snow off it, and unwraps his red tartan scarf.

'All right,' the girl says brightly. London accent; not as streetwise as she pretends to be.

The young man dries his eyes but says nothing. He's still working out who these two are who've invaded his lonely little Christmas.

'Christmas lights, tinsel; brandy-butter and the savoury aroma of the well-cooked sprout,' the man in the jumper burrs appreciatively, rolling his Rs around his mouth like they're coated in brandy-butter themselves. 'A proper English Christmas, wouldn't you say, Ace?'

'Yeah, well festive! Just one problem, though.'

'Ah yes...'

'Problem?' The man who was weeping has finally found his voice.

The older stranger hesitates. 'Yes,' he murmurs gently. 'There's always one. Always a tarnished penny in the figgy-pudding.'

The young man stares at him with tear-smarted eyes. 'It's Christmas,' he sniffs. 'How can there be a problem at Christmas?'

'Because it's July,' says Ace.

The man knows this; of course he knows this. But hearing it out loud damn-near brings the tears back again. He reels silently. You couldn't just *say* it! Some open secrets must never be spoken!

'You have snow on your hat,' he says, and it is a plea.

'Ah. Yes,' the man says again, and gifts him an awkward little smile. 'But I'm a Doctor.'

Look to the future now.

A stretch of motorway in the Black Country. Treacle asphalt through gunmetal fields. A stream of cars grinds slowly through grey summer drizzle, speed not even troubling the birds which perch lazily on their wooden fence-posts. Somewhere, in amongst the fumes and the frustration and the boredom, someone has dug through his glove-box CD collection and bunged a Christmas collection on ironically. Stark and foolish so far from the season, jingle bells drift through the traffic.

From out of the blanket of cloud, something solid and blue plummets into the field beside the road, trailing snow in its wake. Alongside sparrows and crows, a red-breasted robin takes to the sky in fright.

A girl in bomber jacket and tinsel hair clammers from the blue box, wafting smoke away from her face.

'Christmas in Lapland, you said, Professor,' she calls. The Doctor emerges after her. The edges of his jacket are smouldering, but there is snow on his hat and his shoulders and it doesn't melt. He says nothing. 'Only this looks more like the M6.'

Deep inside their impossibly small box, a resonant bell begins to toll.

I don't want a lot for Christmas

Awkward questions. The small, careful woman has called round. She does this every day; they're all the same. But every day there aren't strangers in her sad friend's front room. She doesn't know what to do. The Christmas decorations look somehow illicit now. She hesitates uncertainly by the kitchen door, half-draped in a summer jacket. She feels like she's been caught with her hand in the cookie jar.

The unknown girl is accusing her. 'Every day?' she demands, incredulous. Voice raised; a torrent of west London vowels. 'He sits here sobbing into his mince pies every day and you just let him?'

'Ace,' the older stranger warns.

They were drawn off course, he explains. She doesn't understand what he means. More than just the sat-nav not working. Looking for Christmas and this was what they found. A place where it's Christmas every day. Where no worldly concerns can steal away the season. No job or current events or friendships. She used to love Christmas. A year ago she did. Now she has heard Cliff Richard, smelt sprouts every day for months and she knows that it is hell. She comes here and she wants to cry as well.

And still she comes.

The goose is cooked. The Doctor asks her to help him carve while his friend comforts hers. She'll get no sense out of him. He doesn't understand what's happening to him. He can't take in this new development. How could he? His mind is trapped. Trapped on that day in December when his gingerbread world came tumbling down.

In hushed whispers, she tells the Doctor. Together they serve up plates of bird-meat. It smells rank to her, like rendered fat and burning feathers. Goose is an expensive bird. She knows what this hated daily diet has cost the young man.

When they re-enter the sitting-room, the music is playing again. Her friend is opening presents. Bits of junk and litter he's gathered from skips and park benches. The detritus of life all he can manage now. How absurd the taped-together scraps of bright paper look. He unwraps them carefully now – he will use them to wrap tomorrow's presents later.

'This isn't natural,' the Doctor announces as he lays the plates on the coffee-table.

His young friend cocks an eyebrow. 'You think?'

‘It was an awful day for him,’ the woman finds herself saying, unable to meet her friend’s eye. ‘Christmas, of all days. It broke him. He can’t move on. I don’t think he wants to.’ She feels herself going. Tears prick. ‘I didn’t mean to reinforce it for him... But I didn’t know what to do. He’s... I mean, I couldn’t just leave him to it, could I? I had to come by, keep him as calm as I can. But I know... I know this isn’t normal.’

‘Not normal,’ the Doctor said. ‘Natural. A young man’s heart is broken on Christmas day. Unable to let go, he relives that day in his mind over and over. I’ve seen that, many times. All too human. Sad; desperately sad. Unusual. But abnormal? No. It wouldn’t be. There’s something more here. Something that’s not...’

‘Natural,’ his friend finishes. ‘That was why the cloister bell was ringing!’

On the telly, the national anthem begins to play for the Queen’s speech.

‘He doesn’t just think it’s Christmas,’ the Doctor says. ‘In this room, for him, it is. Always Christmas, never winter.’

Across the fields behind the house, from a blue box parked lopsidedly on the motorway verge, the bell peals out ever more insistent.

You better watch out...

Four people stand in a room decked out for Christmas in the middle of July. They say nothing. On the TV a tiny old lady speaks to them about the joys and sorrows of a year that never happened. They are joys and sorrows they have not shared. Her words mean nothing; only the sob-tired young man watches, transfixed.

In time, the Queen cedes the screen to Morecombe and Wise; they to Del Boy and on, a cavalcade of specials. Ricky Gervais does a dance. There is a horror about the room.

It is the girl Ace who gives it voice, looking away with a visible shudder. ‘I hate Christmas TV,’ she complains. ‘And the music. Why does it have to be so naff? Always trying to make you feel happy and cheerful. It’s like clowns. Clowns in your living room.’

‘Depends on the kind of programme,’ the Doctor murmurs. His voice is like clear Highland waters over sun-warmed pebbles. ‘I always rather liked the ghost stories.’

‘What are we *doing*, Professor? *Why* do we have to watch this?’

‘Wrong question.’

‘Well, what’s the right one then?’

She’s so young; so teenage. In her noisy truculence she can’t see. The older woman, small and modest and careful, saw it at once. It’s the question which has been buzzing round her head for hours now.

‘Who turned on the telly?’

Did your granny always tell ya...

Signals are wonderful things, aren’t they? (the Doctor asks.) All those waves and bytes and pixels swarming into our homes to tell us something, make us think, make us feel. Who doesn’t love a Christmas special? (He ignores his friend’s raised hand.) Nothing like music to set the mood.

...that the old songs are the best?

But suppose there were things that could inhabit those signals. Imagine there were things that could ferret themselves away in all that data; down the pipes, across the airwaves, swaddling us and smothering us in a season’s strange allure. What if they fed on the psychic feedback of the way those broadcasts make us feel, growing stronger, closer to full manifestation? What would Christmas be to them?

Then she's up and rock 'n' rollin' with the rest

‘Professor,’ Ace asks, her voice catching with fear. ‘Are you saying Noddy Holder’s an alien monster?’

‘I’m saying he’s a puppet. Like Bing and George and Eric and Ernie and all the rest. A conduit.’

So here it is

‘A conduit for what?’ the woman hears herself asking, and looks at her friend.

‘I’m so alone,’ the young man whimpers. ‘So empty.’

Merry Christmas!

'For what?'

Everybody's having fun.

'For banished and forgotten things. Things that haunt the wavelengths. Things waiting to be born. Good time for things to be born, Christmas.'

Look to the future now!

It's only just begun.

Nothing has changed. Not a note. But the music has taken on a strange, unsettling quality. The music from the battered old CD player and the music of the TV special have come into synch. Almost. Just-out-of-phase voices ripple around the room.

The young man screams the name of his lost love and begins to cry once more. This time the woman can't help herself. His anguish breaks her heart. She crumples to her knees as an insane, off-kilter war-cry shrieks out around them.

IT'S CHRISTMAAAAASSSS!!!!

'No,' says the Doctor. 'It's not.'

He hurls his umbrella through the TV screen.

This year

The young woman has been waiting for this day with trepidation. Throughout the slow build-up in the high-streets and on the telly (earlier every year) she has been preparing; buying. Not the gifts and baubles of her friends but provisions and arms; just in case. Just in case when those tunes and shows return and are everywhere, they bring something else with them. Throughout December and much of November, she doesn't go out; doesn't turn on the TV, start up her computer. Outside it is Christmas, but for her, inside, she will brook no acknowledgement.

On the morning itself she wakes in fear and wonders what the day will bring. It's raining: no snow – this is England. Out of her window there is only stillness. She longs to turn on the news, to check the world's still there.

She wishes the Doctor and Ace had stayed longer, had lingered to explain. Needed elsewhere, he'd said. A doff of the hat and gone. The snow on its brim still hadn't melted. They seemed to think this was all over, that smashed machinery was all it took. She is less easily convinced. A seed of fear has been planted in her, and the holiday has been tainted.

She looks out of her window across the fields towards the motorway and sees nothing move.

She's alone. So very alone.

Her doorbell rings, startling her, making her spill tea on her dress. It hasn't rung for a long while. Everyone she knows has given up on her, since she became this strange and housebound Scrooge. For a moment her anxiety bids her hide; not answer. It's not tenable. The bell rings again. She hesitates. If it rings a third time she will go.

A long wait. Let it ring! she finds herself pleading. Don't let the bells end!

A third ring.

She flies down the stairs and answers it. He is there. Her young friend. A green scarf round his neck and a bashful smile on his lips.

'I thought you weren't in,' he said.

He's better now. Christmas lost its grip on him that day and he's been better for months. He's had no need of looking-after. Lacking excuses for her to visit, they'd drifted apart. She'd doubted he'd even noticed.

He has a carrier bag of presents. Real ones, carefully wrapped. Each a bomb, ready to detonate Christmas in her sanctuary.

He takes in her anxious glances and takes her hand.

‘Don’t worry,’ he says. ‘It’s fine. They haven’t come back. It’s fine out there. Christmas, like any other.’

She has no words. It’s fine. Of course it’s fine. She feels a fool. In gasping breaths she tells him, but can’t finish the words before it’s too much. She runs inside, leaves him standing in the doorway in the rain.

He finds her by the upstairs window, looking out across the fields.

‘These last few months I came to realise,’ he says. ‘All that time. All that time I was trapped in Christmas. All that time I thought I’d been abandoned. I wasn’t alone, was I? I was never alone.’

She looks at him and realises what he is saying.

‘And neither are you.’

Falteringly, gently, he takes her hand.

And it’s Christmas.