



THE ADVENT CALENDAR PETER TENNANT



with art by David Gentry



WHEN CHRISTMAS CHANGED

“Today,” said Mr Alfred Polly, Chairman of the Good chain of department stores, “we are going to make history.”

He gestured at the time machine and its inventor, Professor Wells. The audience, consisting of upper echelon Good executives sworn to absolute secrecy, applauded politely.

“Today,” he continued, “we are going to cure the seasonal slump which has dogged the retail industry for as long as our records go back. In the most audacious marketing campaign ever conceived we are going to identify our interests with those of the Christian Church, and by doing so give shoppers a reason to spend like never before.”

Dressed in costumes of the period to which they were to be sent and carrying their gifts, the three chrononauts stepped forward: Mr Melchior of Jewellery, Mr Gaspar and Mr Balthazar of Perfume and Toiletries.





THE HAUNTED GROTTO Part One

Billy was on the third floor of the mall when it happened. He'd just done the regulation half hourly check in to control, then looked up to see the figure.

The man stood outside the Disney Store. He was dressed in red and with a white beard, and seemed to shimmer in the light from his torch.

Some nutter dressed as Santa, thought Billy, and hiding out until after the mall has closed, just what I need.

"Stop where you are," he called.

The man turned towards him and began to advance. His eyes looked dead in the light of the torch, like twin black holes, and his fingers flexed as if he wished to seize something between them and twist it hard.

"Stop!" Billy yelled, and reached for his weapon. He desperately wanted to call for backup, but was too scared to take his eyes off the man and use his radio.

And then the man was running right at him, his arms stretched out in front of him, those fingers darting closer. Billy tried to bring up the stun gun he carried for protection, but it felt like a ton in his hand and he was moving so slowly his arm might as well have been encased in quick drying cement.

The man was almost on him, the red coat gleaming like blood in the torchlight, and Billy braced for impact, his breath catching in his throat, stomach churning.

And then nothing.

Nothing except the passage of time and intense cold and a feeling like his soul had been wrenched out of his body and was only now slowly sinking back into its sheathe of flesh, and of the man in the Santa suit no sign at all, and he was falling, falling...



“Are you okay, son?”

When Billy opened his eyes there was another security guard kneeling beside him, an older man with a name tag that glinted in the light cast by his torch and spelled out the word SHERIDAN. Billy didn't know the man, but the mall employed dozens of guards and they worked different shifts.

“I was attacked by Santa Claus,” said Billy, and started to laugh, aware of how ridiculous it sounded, but not knowing what else he could say.

“You've seen Freddy,” said the man, and there was no hint of mockery in his voice.

“Who the hell is Freddy?”

“Hell is exactly who,” said Sheridan. “Back in the nineties Santa's Grotto used to be on this floor, and Freddy was the Santa Claus. Only he was a little too fond of the children, if you know what I mean. One night a mob of angry parents burst into the mall and they burned down the Grotto with Freddy inside it, but they say that ever since his restless spirit roams these halls in search of children he can torment.”

“Jesus,” said Billy, and he felt a chill go right through him, but then the penny dropped. “Freddy? Freddy fucking Krueger! Oh you asshole!”

“Had you going for a moment there, didn't I?” said Sheridan.

“Not at all.” Billy rolled over on his side and pushed himself up onto his feet, reaching down for the torch he'd dropped when the Santa Claus, or whoever the hell it had been, had attacked him.

When he flicked it back on there was no sign of Sheridan. “Asshole,” repeated Billy, and made for the stairway.

It was past time for his break, and tonight he felt that he'd really earned it.





THE HAUNTED GROTTO Part Two

They'd watched the whole thing on the closed circuit television. When Billy got back to the control room they played it back to him.

"I don't understand."

He was standing there shouting as the torch beam swayed wildly from side to side. He pulled out his stun gun but couldn't bring it up, and then he was falling over. He lay on the ground for a few moments, and then he sat up and started to talk to somebody, but there was nobody there.

"I don't understand," he repeated, wishing there was something else to say, anything else.

"You on something?" asked Supervisor Crawley, his tone ripe with condemnation.

"I was talking to the other guard," said Billy.

"There's nobody else there," said Crawley and raised his eyebrow at the two other security personnel in the room.

"There was," said Billy. "It must be the camera angle, you don't see him. One of the guards. His name was Sheridan."

"Sheridan?" said Crawley. "Are you bullshitting me? There hasn't been anyone of that name here since the nineties. Mad bugger. Used to dress up in a Santa suit and jump out at people every Christmas. Nearly gave me a heart attack one time."

"Well that's who it was," said Billy, relief in his voice. For a moment there he'd thought he was going crazy.

"Sheridan is dead," said Crawley. "One time he pulled that stupid trick of his with a new guard, somebody who didn't know about it, and the kid shot him stone dead. Only death in the mall's history, and ever since then we haven't been allowed to carry



guns, just stunners and clubs.”

Billy shook his head. “That’s not possible, that’s just not possible.”

And although he’d been on the wagon for nearly nine months now, he wanted a drink very badly, even worse than usual, and he knew that just as soon as his shift was over he was going to have one too.

After all, it was Christmas.





DREAMING OF A RED CHRISTMAS

They were the kids who killed Santa Claus, or at least some old guy in a red suit who'd just happened to be standing in the middle of the road when the car came round the bend, Jason behind the wheel, drunk and doing twice the speed limit. They hid the body in a snow bank and then waited for the spring thaw, but nothing happened.

It had been over a year and they thought they'd got away with it, but then the Christmas cards started dropping on mats, each with a picture of a plump, oven ready turkey and the inscription *I know what you did last Christmas* in ink the colour of dried blood.

Jason was the first. A paperboy found him lying on his back in the middle of the road one morning. There were marks across his body like you'd get from the runners of a sleigh and steel shod hooves had transformed his face into a crimson mush.

Red Steve turned up perched on top of the big Christmas tree in the market place, a macabre fairy wrapped in tinsel, with glass baubles in place of eyes, a sprig of mistletoe dangling from his open mouth and a gold star shoved up his jacksie.

Amanda's head was discovered in the crib with baby Jesus at the school nativity play. Mary had thrown up and it was whispered that one of the wise men would need counselling for the rest of his life. The police had taken away the family's Christmas presents in their search for the remainder of her body.

It's Christmas Eve and Susan is the only one left. She sits alone in her house with the lights off, determined not to go without a fight. The sherry is laced with cyanide and



there's arsenic in the mince pies. The roof guttering is wired up to the mains and the fireplace is piled high with oak logs doused in paraffin. Her breath smells of Dutch courage and there's a cigarette lighter clutched in her hand which she obsessively flicks on and off as she waits. At the first sound of someone coming down the chimney that red suited sucker is gonna burn, baby, burn.





SECRET SANTA

Mr Sumter handed out the parcels as usual.

Bessie Cuthbertson's was the size and shape of a hat box, which boded well, but all the same she hesitated, not wanting to begin tearing at the gore encrusted paper in which it was wrapped, instead holding the present at arms' length and shaking it gently.

Something inside rattled.

"I've got a hand," called James, and Bessie looked back over her shoulder to see him waving it from side to side.

"I have the genitals," said Katy, and held the shrivelled penis and testicles up to the light so that the rest of them could examine her prize, the disappointment obvious on her face.

Bessie sighed with relief. Last year she'd received the genitals, which meant that she'd had to do the accounts for the first quarter, and it was not a forfeit she was eager to repeat.

"Who's got the head?" asked Mr Sumter, brandishing a left foot in his right hand by way of emphasis.

The left foot was a choice body part. Whoever had the left foot got an extra afternoon off every other week.

Bessie looked at her present again, the hat box shaped parcel, and wondered if it could possibly be...

She began to tear at the paper with some trepidation.

The head was a mixed blessing. Whoever had the head got to run the office for a whole year, their every whim a matter of law, but they also had to provide the next



year's Secret Santa and, while staff at the company's branch offices in Jacksonville accepted the necessity of such a sacrifice, it wasn't a task anyone welcomed, particularly since word had got round on the hobo grapevine and itinerants had taken to avoiding the town.

One year there might be no tramps at all. What would they do for a Secret Santa then?





THE TRUE SPIRIT OF CHRISTMAS

“It’s all too commercialised,” said Henry. “We’ve lost sight of the true spirit of Christmas.”

“Yes, dear,” said Mabel, the default response she used whenever her husband of thirty years went off on one of his rants, which nowadays he seemed to do with an ever increasing frequency. Old age had made Henry cranky. She had no idea why he insisted on accompanying her for late night Christmas shopping when it was an activity that was obviously anathema to him.

“Look at these shop windows, crammed with all this useless stuff, most of which will get thrown out as soon as the holiday is over. It’s got absolutely nothing to do with the birth of our Lord. All these people are concerned with one thing, and one thing only. Making a profit out of poor saps who should know better. I bet most of them don’t even believe in God.”

“Yes dear,” said Mabel, who would have been more impressed with this sudden outburst of piety if Henry had ever accompanied her to Midnight Mass, but unfortunately churchgoing wasn’t his thing either.

“Even the ruddy churches are only in it for the money,” said Henry, almost as if he’d been reading her thoughts. “Like everyone else they’ve lost sight of the true spirit of Christmas, instead embracing all this crass commercialism. It’s not about giving stuff. It’s about being kind, acting better.”

“Yes dear,” said Mabel.

“Happy Christmas,” called a dour looking man sitting on the cold pavement by the side of the road, dressed in rags. “Spare some change. My wife is pregnant and we’ve nowhere to spend the night.”



“Then get a job you lazy sod,” said Henry.

Mabel had been about to dip into her purse and approach the man, but Henry caught her by the arm and propelled her in the opposite direction. She looked back over her shoulder and smiled an apology, and the man smiled back, his face lighting up with such a beatific expression that it warmed her inside to see such joy, and she just knew that everything was going to be all right with the world despite all the terrible things they heard on the telly.

“Even the beggars want to cash in,” said Henry, but Mabel didn’t reply.





A DREAM FOR CHRISTMAS

Daniel woke his son just after six and told him to hurry up and get dressed. As soon as the boy was ready he led him outside. It had snowed heavily during the night, and the ground all about their wood cottage was an unbroken blanket of white.

“See those,” said Daniel, pointing down at the hoof prints that led right up to the side of the cottage.

“Rudolph?” said the boy, and after a moment his cherubic face seemed to glow with some inner light.

“Rudolph and Donner and Blitzen,” said Daniel, a note of solemnity in his voice. “They were all here last night, pulling Santa’s sleigh to bring your present.”

The boy’s mouth just hung open, his eyes wide with wonder. It warmed the cockles of Daniel’s heart to see him so rapt.

“Now you go in and get some breakfast down you. Mother has porridge on the stove as a special Christmas treat. And after you’ve helped her wash you can open your present.”

“Will you come, Dad?”

“In a while. There’s something I have to take care of first.”

Daniel watched the boy go inside with a big grin on his face. Let him have his childhood and belief in all the fairy stories that made days like this so special. There would be plenty of time when he was grown some to deal with the reality, to take on board things like poverty and sickness. For now, his son’s innocence was a thing to be protected and cherished.



When he heard the door slam, Daniel went to his tool shed and took the gun down from its hanger.

The spoor was still fresh, and if they were lucky there would be fresh venison for Christmas dinner.





JOYOUS NOELLE

The man grinned, and then he typed *Ur looking v seasonal. Wotz ur name?*

The webcam girl was dressed in bright red panties with a white fur trim, strands of silver tinsel wound round her neck and falling down over her breasts, and she had a red hat with a bell on the end that looked as if it jingled every time she moved her head, though the man couldn't be sure, as the connection was poor where he was and the sound was off.

It's Christmas Eve the girl typed *and I'm Joyous Noelle*

U certainly r

Wot can I do 4u honey

Culd u touch urself

I sure can she typed, and was as good as her word, hands caressing her breasts, squeezing them and thrusting her pointy nipples at the camera, so that momentarily they filled the screen, a pout on her lips, and then her hands moving down over her belly, down further still, fingers sliding inside her panties, eyes closed and tongue wetting her lips, a look of bliss on her face.

The man knew that the look was false, but he didn't care. Eyes never leaving the screen, he slipped a hand inside his pants and brought himself to a shuddering climax.

Woz that good 4u honey the girl typed when he let her know he'd done.

Sure woz

Spare a thought 4 poor Santa typed the girl. *He only cums 1 night a year*

On the screen, she laughed at her own wit.

U don't know the half of it typed the man, and then cut the connection. At \$2.50



a minute he didn't have time to be sociable, especially not when there was work waiting to be done.

The man pulled up his pants, ran his fingers through his long white beard and then went outside to hitch up the reindeers and load the sleigh.





THE MURDER MYSTERY

“This way Mr Holmes,” said Inspector Lestrade.

The great detective followed the policeman down a path lined with sparkling Christmas trees and overhung by garlands of mistletoe, the faithful Watson trudging in their wake. At the rear of the house they found a corral cloaked in snow, with a pack of reindeers huddled together in a far corner, while a crowd of onlookers watched and nervously shuffled their feet.

One reindeer lay in the centre of the corral, its body unmoving.

“It’s Rudolph,” said Lestrade, unable to keep the indignation from his voice. “Bugger killed Rudolph.”

“Inspector, please tell me that nobody has disturbed the crime scene?”

The policeman frowned. “We may only be humble rozzers, but we’re not stupid.”

Holmes nodded. “Watson, you will observe that although this snow is not fresh there are no human footprints to be seen.”

“Good Lord Holmes, are you saying that one of the other reindeers did this?”

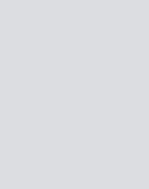
“Perhaps. But let us examine the body and see what we can learn.”

The great detective removed his deerstalker as a mark of respect and then led the way over to the corpse of the dead ruminant.

“Poor Rudolph,” said Lestrade, brushing a tear from his cheek. “The children won’t be getting their presents on time this year.”

“Watson, what can you tell me as to cause of death?”

The doctor knelt down and examined the dead reindeer. “There are puncture marks on the neck, a wound of some kind. Rudolph is celebrated for his ruddy nose and yet it appears to be pale white. Holmes, he’s been exsanguinated.”



“And what do you deduce from this, Watson?”

“Why then, that that fat man standing over there with his clothes covered in blood is our culprit.”

Holmes looked behind him and sighed. “That’s Father Christmas Watson. He always dresses in red.”

“Ah!”

“No Watson, this is far more heinous.”

“You mean...”

“Yes Watson, a dead reindeer, its body drained of blood, can only mean one thing. Our old enemy Vlad the Impala is back.”





CHRISTMAS ON THE ORIENT EXPRESS

Ratchett had not expected to enjoy himself with these people, most of whom he suspected hated him, but as it turned out he was having a fine old time and did not regret accepting Mrs Arbuthnot's invitation to take the festive train journey at all.

The bubbly was flowing freely in their private compartment and everybody was laughing as the party poppers exploded, and then somebody said that it was time to pull the crackers, and so they did, the sound like a salvo of gunfire, all of them cramming paper hats onto their heads and rooting around in the crumpled tissue paper for their presents.

Sarah had what appeared to be a chocolate liqueur, wrapped in silver foil, and so did James and Mr Morecambe.

Ratchett could only find a strip of folded paper. He undid it carefully, expecting to discover the sort of silly joke that would be greeted with disdain on 364 days of the year but was always accorded howls of raucous laughter on Christmas Day.

You are an evil man and you will pay for your sins.

Ratchett blanched as he read the words. "Is this somebody's idea of a joke?"

He looked up at Mrs Arbuthnot, but she wasn't laughing. In one hand she held a revolver and in the other – not a chocolate liqueur wrapped in silver foil, as he had first thought, but a bullet. As Ratchett watched she placed the bullet inside the gun and snapped it shut.

Ratchett started to his feet, and the bullet took him in the stomach, the sound of the blast obscured by yet another fusillade of party poppers and the laughter of the celebrants. He collapsed back down into his seat, clutching at the wound and surprised to see the blood leaking out between his fingers.



“What are you doing?” Ratchett tried to ask, but the words simply wouldn’t come.

Mrs Arbuthnot looked at him dispassionately, as if he was something unpleasant she had trod in and nothing more than that. She handed the gun to the man seated next to her – Ratchett couldn’t for the life of him remember the man’s name, even though they’d been talking like old friends earlier on.

The man cracked open the barrel of the gun and shook the spent cartridge out onto the table top, replacing it with his own bullet, and then slowly rose to his feet.

“Happy Christmas,” he said, and calmly took aim.





CHRISTMAS IN VENICE

It clouded over in the afternoon and St Mark's was virtually deserted when the child appeared, all done up in a red plastic raincoat with the hood pulled tight over her head.

"You're dressed just like me," called Santa, and laughed hugging his big belly. "Come over here and let me see that smiling face."

"Oh no, not another one." The medical examiner sighed as the Carabinieri tugged the body out of the water. It was the third Santa Claus they'd pulled from the canal in less than a week.

Somebody most definitely had a downer on Christmas.





WRIGGLE ROOM

“You have to grant my wish,” said the paedophile. “You have to grant my wish, whatever I ask for. Right?”

The Fairy Godmother sighed and then nodded. It had been her own wish that the man would ask to have his sick desires taken away, but now she knew that wasn't going to happen. Instead, like all the other perverted fucks who had summoned her over the years, he would wish for a way to gratify his carnal appetite without any comeback. She would dearly have liked to refuse him, but rules were rules and Christmas Eve was the one night of the year when she couldn't refuse any wish.

“Okay,” said the man. “I want to be irresistible to young boys. Boys between the ages of six and eleven. Athletic types, no chubbers. I want them to play with me all the time and I don't want the authorities getting involved.”

“You've obviously given this a lot of thought,” said the Fairy Godmother, and then thought about it some herself.

Finally she waved her wand and put the man's soul into the body of a football in the locker room at the local junior school. She added a few refinements of her own: made it so that the leather would never wear out and need replacing; made it so that the man would feel each and every kick.

Rules were rules, oh yes, but there was always wriggle room.





A SANTANIC PACT

It all began with an argument about the Christmas Number One.

“Shit,” said Donner, “even Cliff Richard gets to number one at Christmas. Even Rolf ruddy Harris. We’re Santa Claws and The Reindeers. We should be topping the charts at this time of the year.”

Donner (real name Kevin, and he played lead guitar like it was going out of fashion) had ideas above his station. The reality was they were a tribute band, doing cover versions of ‘White Christmas’, ‘I Saw Mummy Kissing Santa Claus’, ‘Santa Claus is Coming to Town’ and the like. They did well in pubs and clubs most of the year, and at Christmas they did even better, but the Christmas Number One slot was just a pipe dream.

Except Santa (real name Dave, and in his previous life he’d been an Elvis impersonator) was a devil worshipper, and thought a Satanic pact might just do the trick. The other members of the band considered the suggestion ridiculous, but they couldn’t risk alienating the lead singer and so, after talking it over among themselves, agreed to give it a shot.

What harm could it do?

Rudolph (a vegan whose real name was Nigel) drew the line at sacrificing a goat, but otherwise he was fine.

There were black candles and chalk circles. There was chanting in Latin. Santa threw something on a brazier glowing in the centre of the room, and after that there was a thick aromatic smoke that made them all feel drowsy when they breathed it in. There was a sinister, shadowy figure. There was a pricking of thumbs and a contract signed in blood.



Blitzen (real name Clint – his parents had met at a screening of *Dirty Harry*) thought the whole thing was absurd. He particularly couldn't get his head round the idea that the Devil looked like a failed rugby player and wore his trousers almost up around his chest. You'd think Old Nick would at least have some fashion sense.

"What the hell just happened?" asked Rudolph when the smoke cleared, and he was asking for all of them, except Santa.

"We just sold our souls to the Devil for the Christmas Number One spot," he said.

"What a load of bollocks," said Donner, whose ambition had waned for the moment, and the others nodded their heads in agreement.

The phone rang and Santa answered. He spoke quietly to the person on the other end of the line and when he hung up the lead singer was smiling.

"That was our agent. He's just signed us up for some new TV show called *The X Factor*."





THE WICKER SNOWMAN

The policeman had come over from the mainland to investigate reports of a missing girl.

The islanders had welcomed the officer into their community and shown him nothing but kindness, grateful for his presence and willing to do anything to help forward his inquiry. Eventually he had come to the conclusion that there was nothing to the report, just some busybody seeking to stir trouble for people who, while they might seem a little eccentric and old fashioned in their ways to outsiders, had done nothing wrong, and the policeman had made plans to return to the mainland as soon as weather conditions permitted.

For his last night, the locals had thrown a party at the island's only public house, and he'd been happy to join in and agree to all that they asked of him, dressing as Santa Claus and blessing the small children who came to dandle on his knees, throwing back every drink that they set in front of him.

In the hour before midnight they bundled him outside and stripped the unresisting officer of his white beard and red costume, forced him into a giant frame in the shape of a snowman built from wicker.

He stood there, naked and shivering in the bitter cold, wondering what he could possibly have done to offend his hosts.

"It's the Solstice," said Lord Winter Isle, "the longest night of the year. If you freeze to death during these hours of darkness then it's a sign that our sacrifice is acceptable and the harvest in the coming year will be bountiful."

The policeman begged them to set him free; he tried reason and the threat of punishment from a higher authority, but all to no avail. And when his lungs were



filled with ice shivers and his throat was so raw with cold that he could no longer speak, the man curled up into a foetal ball and tried to hug warmth back into the freezing meat of his body as the pagan celebrants formed a conga line and capered about the giant snowman, chanting the words of a popular song whose true meaning had been lost to the ages.

“In out, in out
Shake it all about.”





TELL US A STORY

“Tell us a story,” demanded the youngest one in the hour before midnight.

“Tell us a story,” echoed the eldest. “A tale of ghosts and things that go bump in the night to scare us all to sleep.”

And then the whole family would assemble in the dining hall, as they did every Christmas Eve, and great grandfather would perch on the padded seat of his big, leather backed armchair in front of a roaring fire, and all the lights would be extinguished except for a single candle. The family would sit in a semi-circle around him, the adults and the teenagers in chairs and the younger children on the floor, their eyes big and round as tea saucers with anticipation, and great grandfather would tell them a ghost story, his voice carrying to the farthest corner of the room and sending a shiver down everyone’s spine.

It was a family tradition, and had been ever since great grandfather had been only father, a man far younger than most of those who listened to him now.

When it was done, each of them would approach him and say thank you, or whatever words of gratitude came to mind and found a way past their lips. And then they would file out, one after another, and go up to their rooms to sleep the sleep of the just, and dream of ghosts or whatever else went bump in the night, but those dreams were always safe, harmless, anodyne, and none would cry out or wake up in a cold sweat.

And in the morning, it was also a tradition of theirs that, while the others went to church to thank God for their many blessings, the oldest and youngest members of the family would go out to the cemetery and place a wreath on his grave.

“I don’t understand,” said Simon, five and a half, and a bit backward for his age.



“How can great grandfather be buried here, when we saw him only last night?”

Ellen, who was eighty three and rather spry for her age, and one of the few who had actually known great grandfather when he had been alive, ran a finger through the boy’s hair and smiled.

“Great grandfather got so fond of telling his ghost stories that he became one,” she said.

She paused for a moment and looked up at the sky, which was filling with dark clouds, while a chill wind whipped around the gravestones, and then she took the boy by the hand and led him from the cemetery.

The flowers in the wreath were dead and faded before ever they reached the gate, and deep in the earth great grandfather’s soul moaned in anguish, and he cursed the expectations of the family and their unwillingness to let go of a tradition that should have been buried with him, but now kept his spirit trapped inside decaying flesh, a spectre more sorely stricken than any in the tales he was compelled to spin every Christmas Eve for their edification and delight.





CHRISTMAS NIGHT OF THE LIVING DEAD

It was the one night of the year when the whole family got together, fifteen of them all seated at the same table.

They cheered as grandma brought in the turkey, a huge bird on an immense platter, cooked to perfection. Beaming she set it down in the centre of the table and grandpa rose to his feet with a carving knife in one hand and fork in the other. He made a great show of gesticulating with the cutlery, waving the blade from side to side like a musketeer in the service of the French King and then scraping it against the fork, the sound setting teeth on edge.

Finally he prepared to make the first cut, to slice into the flesh of the bird and reveal the tender, succulent white meat beneath the browned exterior.

“It moved,” he said, knife waving in mid-air.

“Beg pardon,” said grandma, who was a bit hard of hearing, while the others looked at grandpa in expectation of the punch line his reputation as a practical joker required.

“The bird moved,” he said. “I saw it with my own eyes.”

“Oh Hubert,” said grandma, and shook her head in amused disbelief.

At that point the bird seemed to pulse, its whole body shivering as if there was something inside it, cooked wings unfolding. They watched in horror as it threw off the pinions that held its legs to its side and stumbled to its feet. There was movement inside the stump of the neck, and a bald head pushed out from inside, while the brown colour drained from the bird, like dirt washed off in a shower, to reveal pinker flesh.

Someone was screaming at the far end of the table, one of the grandchildren,



though grandpa wasn't sure which. He stabbed at the turkey with the knife, but it dodged easily.

And then the bird pecked him.

Grandpa dropped the knife and clutched at his hand. "Cluck," he said.

"Hubert Mortimer," said grandma, who was a little hard of hearing. "I will not have that sort of language in my house, and most especially not at Christmas."

The turkey flew at their astonished son-in-law and batted on to his neck, newly sprouted cockscomb waving, beak pecking in wild abandon, the blood flowing from torn flesh.

"Cluck," said grandpa, and turned to grandma with the light of madness sparkling in his eyes and his stomach rumbling like a kettle drum being played.

They'd gone without food all day to better enjoy the evening feast, and now he was absolutely ravenous.





THE CEASEFIRE

It was getting on for dark when Susie turned on the sound system, the Choir of King's College Cambridge belting out carols from two industrial size speakers, one set at either side of the barricade behind which they huddled.

The zombies came, summoned by the noise like pigs drawn to the dinner bell, a trickle at first and then hundreds of them, perhaps the entire population of the small village that lay on the far side of the field.

"They're not attacking," said Eric.

It was true: the zombies had stalled, all their number frozen in the glare of the floodlights and swaying in place like the fronds of sea anemones tugged by the current. Eric studied them through his field binoculars, frowning at their bloated bellies and snarling features, the blood that matted their hair, the torn clothes and faces stripped completely of humanity, expressions that registered nothing except an insatiable hunger. There was even a Father Christmas among them, with shreds of intestine tangled in his white beard and his scarlet costume in places speckled a deeper hue of red.

"I don't believe this," said someone. "They're singing."

Eric listened hard, and yes, he could make out the words, stilted and mumbled as they were. The zombies were singing 'O Come All Ye Faithful'. It was a miracle of kinds, that even those dead hearts could be moved by the spirit of Christmas.

"It's like what happened in the First World War," said Susie. "When the German troops and the English troops came out of their trenches and played a game of football in no man's land."

Eric laughed. "You want to go and play footie with them be my guest, but don't



be surprised if they use your head as a ball.”

The carol ended, and for a moment all was still, with only the lonely sougning of the wind to disturb the feeling of peace on which the distant stars looked down.

And then the zombies began to shuffle forward into the minefield that Eric and the others had spent all afternoon laying down, moaning as they came, and with the first explosion and the first burst of automatic weapon’s fire, the war between living and dead was on again with a vengeance, and nothing would stop it until one side or the other was completely vanquished.





A WELL HUNG TREE

“You’re beastly,” said Madigan, and glared at her twin brother to show that she did not approve of what he was doing.

Marley broke the white rat’s neck, a quick twist of his wrist that resulted in an audible snap and sent a shiver through Madigan’s body. He added its corpse to the pile on the tray.

“Mr Reagan is going to be really pissed off,” said Madigan.

Not for the first time she wished that she hadn’t told Marley she was baby sitting at their neighbour’s house. He’d insisted on keeping her company, and Madigan just knew that whatever mischief he got up to would end up laid at her door. It was so unfair.

“They’re vermin,” said Marley, as he reached inside the cage for the last of the rodents. “Mr Reagan should thank us for getting rid of them.”

“They’re his pets.”

“Well he can always buy new ones,” he said, and administered yet another coup de grace.

With the tray carefully balanced on the palms of his hands, Marley walked through to the living room, where the big Christmas tree stood in the corner, its branches festooned with streamers of tinsel and glass baubles that reflected the moonlight coming in through the window, with hanging chocolate figurines and fake icicles that shone with all the sparkle of the real thing.

Taking care to position them where they could be seen, Marley hung the white rats on the tree, knotting their tails round some of the higher boughs and allowing their bodies to dangle down, dripping blood on the floor where it mixed with the



pine needles and splattered the neatly wrapped presents around the tree's foot.

"I think they look rather good," said Marley, standing back to admire his handiwork. "They add a certain something."

Madigan sighed and thought, *poor Mr Reagan*. All he and his wife had wanted was a night out in the week before Christmas, and now they would come home to this. And it was all her fault for allowing Marley to tag along, but really she could deny him nothing, and besides, beastly as he was Madigan could understand the resentment that drove Marley to act as he did. All the adults treated him abominably, never speaking to him, acting as if he wasn't there, ignoring Marley completely. Who could blame him for lashing out in the face of such indifference? It was not fair.

"What it needs," said Marley "is a proper angel on top. That paper thing looks ridiculous perched up there."

At that moment the baby started to cry, the sound echoing out of the intercom on the sideboard.

"Oh Marley, no," said Madigan, but *her* feet were already turning in the direction of the nursery.





THE CRACKER OF DOOM

“I think I’ve found Gran’s Christmas decorations,” said Simon, and passed the large leather suitcase down to his sister.

Samantha placed it on the floor, knelt down and snapped open the catches.

“God, this stuff brings back some memories.”

Simon descended the ladder from the loft and crouched beside her, watching as Samantha unpacked the contents of the case, a miscellany of glass baubles and faded paper streamers, strips of tinsel and neatly printed place settings.

Christmas had always been such a big deal to Gran, but she had stopped celebrating when their grandfather had died, banishing all tokens of the festival to her loft.

And now Gran herself had been forced to move to a nursing home, and the old house was to be sold to pay for her care. Simon and Samantha had volunteered to clear it out before the estate agents put up their signs.

“There must be every card Gran and Grandfather ever sent to each other,” said Samantha, leafing through a wad of folded cardboard held together by a perished elastic band.

“Oh my God,” screamed Simon, his eyes alighting on something in the far corner of the case. “The cracker of doom!”

Laughing Samantha picked up the ancient cracker, its paper worn as thin as moth wings and the colour of the silver band round its middle faded to a dull grey.

“She used to tell us such stories about this.”

For a moment the two of them were motionless, lost in fond memories of the past. Gran had always been a great storyteller, and the Cracker of Doom had been



one of her favourites, a tale that she would trot out every Christmas without fail, and each time with some new embellishment. According to Gran it had originally belonged to God, but had been stolen by the Devil and placed in an ordinary box of Christmas crackers, but if it was ever pulled then the world would end.

She and Grandfather had kept the cracker safe.

The two grandchildren would listen with eyes open wide, and when the tale was over Gran would threaten to pull the cracker and they would both beg her not to, a request to which she would eventually accede, placing the hallowed cracker back in its box for another year, and another story.

“We should pull it,” said Simon, and there was something cruel in his voice, a desire to be rid of the fears that had haunted him as a child, no matter the cost.

Samantha looked at him as if he was mad, and then a smile lit up her face and she offered one end of the cracker to her brother. He clasped it firmly in his hand and tugged hard.

With a faint plop the cracker tore apart, a paper hat and plastic trinkets spewing out of its innards. They both stared down at the sad detritus of a family legend.

“The world is still here,” said Simon, and laughed, but it was a harsh, brittle sound, empty of warmth.

“Idiot,” said Samantha, and went back to unpacking the case, anxious to see what other treasures she might unearth.

In a nursing home five miles away an old lady sighed and closed her eyes for the last time.





PITY THE CHILD

There was noise in the house, father and mother shouting, and then silence. Jimmy hunkered down in a corner of the cupboard, eyes closed to shut out the dark, head bowed in anticipation of the blow he knew would fall sooner or later; always they found a way to blame whatever went wrong on him, always.

He heard the noise of somebody approaching, a hand at the lock on the cupboard door, and his bladder let go, releasing a ripe aroma of urine into the enclosed space. He couldn't stop himself, even though he knew that it would only make things worse.

The door shuddered open and light flooded into the cupboard. Jimmy blinked, allowing his eyes to adjust, wanting to keep them closed but knowing that wasn't an option, only it wasn't his father or mother who stood in the opening.

It was a man with a kindly, beaming face and a white beard, his head and body cloaked in red cloth with white trim.

Jimmy started to say the man's name, but remembered in time that he wasn't supposed to speak until spoken to. It was one of his father's rules.

But could the man dressed as Father Christmas really be his father? Would his father ever do such a thing, and not have it turn out to be some terrible trick?

"You can come out Jimmy," said the man, and there was none of the meanness in the voice that Jimmy associated with his father.

Still, he didn't dare to move, ignoring the hand that was thrust out in front of him, sure that it was all some cruel prank.

"I got your letter," said the man. "The one you sent to me."

Jimmy blinked and a vision came into his head all of a sudden: the words *Please make it stop* scrawled on a sheet of paper and thrown into the fire when nobody was



looking, caught on an updraft and carried up the chimney.

Off to Lapland and the North Pole.

Daring to believe, he took the man's proffered hand and stepped out of the cupboard that had been his prison for the last two years, and though the man's palm felt chill with cold, strength and warmth flowed out of him and into the boy.

"Father Christmas," whispered Jimmy.

"They can't hurt you any more," said the man, and for a moment his face was transfigured, became something terrible, and Jimmy thought that he wasn't a man at all, but something else, something coated in blood and reeking of death.

And then the man was gone, and there was only Jimmy, and no noise except for the soft sound of water dripping, or some other fluid, but it came from far away, another part of the house entirely.

Jimmy moved towards the steps that led up out of the cellar, and for the first time in years he wasn't afraid.

He knew that it was going to be all right.





ANNUS HORRIBILIS

“You’re not paying attention,” she said.

It was true. Father lay stretched out in his chair with his trousers undone and his belly bulging, his chest rising and falling regular as a metronome and in perfect harmony with his snoring. Mother wasn’t sprawled quite so inelegantly and she didn’t snore, but she was equally dead to the world, exhausted by the demands of the day. The children had been up half the night hoping to catch Father Christmas and spent the morning in a whirl of activity, playing with new toys and stealing chocolates from the tree when nobody was looking, racing from one room to another and shouting at the tops of their voices; now they lay on the couch, arms and legs curled round each other, thumbs in place between lips and young minds adrift in that fabled Land of Nod.

“If you’re not going to listen to me why do you bother turning the television on?” asked the Queen, sounding uncharacteristically shrill and petulant. She frowned and leaned forward, tapped the screen with jewelled knuckles.

“Wake up!”

But nobody stirred.

“Wake up, or you’ll be sorry.”

Father coughed in his sleep. One of the twins shifted position. Mother sighed loudly, but did not wake.

Her Majesty snarled, which wasn’t at all regal of her, but the Queen was past the point of caring. Every year she put herself out for the sake of people like these, and this was the reward she got: to be ignored, slighted, dismissed as if of no more account than her gurning idiot of a Prime Minister or that fool at Canterbury. Well



this year it would be different.

She flattened her hand and pushed against the television screen. It bulged outward, and then parted with a soft pop of escaping air, like a piece of cling film tearing or a bubble pricked by a pin.

With a hiss, the Queen hauled herself over the lip of the television screen and slid forward into the room, the madness in her eyes glowing brighter than the lights on the Christmas tree.





ON EARTH X

The man in red and white whipped the reindeers harder and as the sleigh careened round the hairpin bend in the road a panel in the rear opened spraying tin tacks in its wake. The first of the black cars in pursuit burst its tyres and flipped completely over coming down to land in a snow bank, undercarriage skyward, wheels still spinning madly.

The second car slowed momentarily and then speeded up again. A man leaned out of the passenger side window and trained a machine gun on the sleigh and its driver. Bullets ricocheted off a metal shield that rose up at the back of the sleigh, each striking sparks.

Ahead the sleigh was rapidly running out of road, crashing through several signs that said ROAD OUT and then with a huge chasm looming before it. The reindeers didn't hesitate, but flung themselves into the gap, dragging the sleigh in their wake. For a moment it hung in mid-air, a red and white blotch on the star spangled curtain of the night sky, and then tongues of red flame erupted from the rockets strapped to the reindeers and the sleigh's undercarriage. As it rose in the sky a red and white parachute blossomed from the sleigh's canopy, and the vehicle, reindeers and all, sailed across the gap to gently alight on the far side.

Behind the black car in pursuit plunged into the abyss, the screams of the men inside echoing out as they fell to their doom.

The man in red and white drove the sleigh round a few more bends and then swerved to a halt in front of a luxury hotel built in the shape of a giant igloo. As he dismounted a beautiful young woman dressed in nothing but a white fur bikini stepped out of the hotel's entrance. The man tossed the reins to her and then followed



up with a kiss on the mouth, before marching into the hotel as the woman gazed after him with a rapt look on her face.

The man walked through the reception, light glinting off his polished black boots, and into the hotel's bar.

"Eggnog," he said, running fingers through his thick white beard, "shaken, not stirred. Charge it to my room."

"Certainly sir," said the barmaid, her eyes twinkling with desire. "What name?"

"Claus, Santa Claus."

Rick turned the television off and sighed. Every Bondmas ITV showed a Santa Claus movie. Just once, you'd think the programme planners would exercise a little imagination.





CHRISTMAS WITH THE MOTHER-IN-LAW

Every year, it was the same, a tradition, like the Queen's ruddy speech or watching the seasonal *Top of the Pops* with the sound up all the way and tapping your feet and singing along to drivel you wouldn't give a second thought to for the rest of the lifelong year.

Every year, his mother-in-law would sit down at the table and give them all a reproving look, and then she'd say, "Well, I expect this will be my last Christmas dinner."

It was the start of a litany of complaints that would last right through the day and into the early evening, when Greg would finally help her into the car and drive Mrs Collins back to her sheltered housing.

Twenty bloody years the old biddy had been saying it. For twenty bloody years the phrase had haunted him, casting a pall over every family celebration. And now, this year, she'd finally decided to give it a rest.

Well, that was not going to be allowed.

Greg was a great one for tradition, and at Christmas everything had to be just right, with no deviation from routine. He leaned in close, doing his best to ignore the smell, and placed a hand on the paper dry skin of his mother-in-law's withered forearm.

"Come on now, Mrs Collins," he said. "What do you say?"

June was glaring at him. Greg suspected he'd be in for a right tongue lashing once he pulled the tape off her mouth, but it didn't matter.

This was Christmas, and things would be done his way or not at all.

Greg gripped his mother-in-law harder, and his fingers seemed to press into her



flesh, like sinking into mouldy dough. He shook her, as if doing so could force the words out of her, but the old lady didn't respond, except to slide sideways off of her chair when he let go, so that Greg had to jump up out of his seat to grab her before she hit the floor.

Exasperated, Greg looked round the table at the others, June with her eyes full of anger, Martin and the twins, each of them gagged and tied to their seats, all three of them looking close to tears. Greg sympathised. The turkey and the rest of the food was going cold while they waited on Mrs Collins. He almost wished that he hadn't gone out to Pleasant Pines to bring her back for the day, but Christmas wouldn't be Christmas without his mother-in-law there to make the day a misery for them all with her constant carping and complaining, and with all the layoffs at work and everything else, Greg needed something that he could rely on, something he could trust, even if it was only an arthritic old harridan who never opened her mouth except to find fault.

Greg folded his arms and sat bolt upright on his chair.

"Nobody gets to eat until you say the words," he said.

And waited.





THE CHRISTMAS DAY SWIM

It had barely gone six o'clock in the morning when Jonas arrived for the Christmas Day swim, but already the beach was crowded.

Jonas would much rather have spent an extra hour or two in bed, and been there when the children got up to open their presents, but as the event was for charity and he was one of Kingsport's most prominent citizens, he felt obliged to make a showing and take part in the annual tradition.

There were many people he recognised, friends and neighbours, men and women he worked with in the council offices. Bottles of drink were being passed round, despite the earliness of the hour, and somebody had got a bonfire going over which a pig was roasting, its flesh sizzling in the flames.

As the first rays of the sun broke over the horizon there was a stirring out at sea, and everybody fell silent.

The first creature emerged from the waves soon after, a batrachian monstrosity that crawled on its belly, twin rows of spines running the length of its back, the rudiments of a spiked tail dangling between its legs, clawed feet that gouged huge chunks out of the sand as they propelled the thing forward.

Oblivious to the human onlookers the creature lurched its way up the beach, summoned by some call only it could hear, and others followed, a miscellany of monstrous beings.

There were lizards that stood erect on their hind legs like men, and toad like things that squatted and leaped, and creatures that were hairy as apes, but with the bulbous eyes and pouting lips of fish, and gills in the side of their necks. There were horned creatures and an albino with a featureless head but a raw slit of a mouth filled



with shark teeth in the middle of its belly.

Jonas never ceased to marvel at the diversity of the ocean's inhabitants. In thirty years now he had never seen any two creatures that looked similar.

At a signal from the town Dreadful, the slaughter began.

Some of the men had guns, but they were there only as a precautionary measure. Despite their hideous appearance, the creatures of the deep were feeble things and a blow or two from a stout cudgel was sufficient to incapacitate them.

Jonas wielded his weapon with as much vigour as the rest, beating unconscious a scaled monstrosity whose face consisted of two fleshy lumps that resembled misshapen female breasts and with a nose like a suppurating penis protruding from between them. As the men worked, the boys who were not yet old enough to participate in the violence, moved among them dragging the bodies off to a place by the seawall where they were stacked like logs of wood under the watchful eye of the Dreadful.

When the bell in St Jude's rang out the hour the townsfolk began to leave for their houses, where they would spend the rest of the morning behind locked doors and barred windows, playing with their children and doing their best to pretend that it was a day of blessed celebration, one on which all was right with their world.

As he made his way up the steps to the promenade, Jonas took one last look back at the pile of bodies, some of which seemed to still be moving in the early morning light.

Soon the town's poor would emerge, scurrying out of their warrens on the west side and making their way to the beach, to drag the sea's bounty back to their hovels, and though he didn't care to think what might happen after that Jonas could see the wisdom in what had been done.

It was a tradition that on Christmas Day all the town's inhabitants, even the lowliest among them, would eat well, and in Kingsport only a fool paid no heed to tradition.





THE CLAUS AT MIDNIGHT

When Burt got home from work, he just slumped down in the big armchair in front of the fire, without turning the television on or heating up the leftover curry from two nights ago. He didn't even bother to take off the Santa suit, he was that tired.

All day the children had been making his life hell, trying to pull off his beard, telling him he was fat, punching him in the stomach as they sat on his lap, and all the while their parents stood by smiling inanely and nodding in approval at the antics of their little brats, stopping only to whine about how much it cost to visit the Magic Grotto and how crappy the presents were, as if they expected the very finest toys from Disney and Hasbro for their three pound.

There'd been a time when he'd enjoyed being Santa Claus, when the wonder in children's eyes had been the only payment he'd needed, but that time was long gone and all the wonder with it. Nowadays the children had seen and done it all, and were every bit as cynical as their elders, and pandering to their snotty attitude just left him drained. He really was getting too old for this job.

Burt scratched at the red spot on the back of his hand. Last week he'd visited the circus with his daughter and her husband, and one of the clowns had got free from its cage. The beast had bitten him before its keepers had brought it to heel and, although he'd dismissed it at the time, now the mark was causing him irritation. Sighing, Burt shifted so that his hand was close to the fire: heat seemed to soothe the wound. His eyes gazed deep into the dancing flames, following the pattern, trying to make sense of the ways in which they glowed, to read the message written in tongues of fire and before he knew it they'd lulled him completely and he'd drifted off.

It was the stroke of midnight when Burt opened his eyes. He looked down at the



mess of white in his lap, the discarded beard of his calling sitting there like a fresh fall of snow gleaming in the wan light of the full moon on a winter's night. His eyes took in the ways in which his costume had changed: thirty inch long shoes with peeling uppers in lieu of shiny black boots, patchwork pantaloons several sizes too large and held up by braces in place of the snug fitting red trousers, a striped T-shirt instead of his customary red tunic, and perched on top of his head where the red hood trimmed with white should have been was a pork pie hat with its lid curled upwards and a dilapidated daisy peeking through the crack.

Burt rose to his feet and edged over to stand in front of the mirror on the wall, taking care not to trip over his outsize feet. Gone was his usual ruddy countenance, replaced with a white, pasty complexion and a bulbous red nose that looked like nothing so much as an inflamed zit ready for bursting. As he looked at himself his outrageously rouged lips turned up in a smile that was more sneer, or rictus grin.

He felt in his pocket for the buzzer, which would administer a healthy jolt of electricity to any hand unwise enough to shake his own. He admired the flower in his lapel, which would squirt something decidedly less pleasant than water into the face of anyone foolish enough to attempt to smell its scent. He pinched the unsightly bulge at his crotch, where chattering teeth on a spring mechanism lurked ready to snap at any tender bottom that had the temerity to plonk itself in his lap. There were sachets of itching powder hidden up his sleeves and twin razor blades concealed in the rotating bow tie that clung about his neck.

He was armed and dangerous.

And as Burt considered all these things his grin grew ever wider, until his mouth was nothing but a red slash filled with carnivore teeth.

Tomorrow the spoilt children of this burg would discover that there was a new Father Christmas in town, and if they tried to pull any of their shit with him the little fuckers would find they were messing with the wrong Claus.

Burt started to laugh, the sound escalating and spiralling off into the depths of the night, where it caused many a sleeping child to shift uneasily in their slumber and dream of things that were better left unspoken.



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