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SOLDWAY'S SECRET SANTA

LAURIE DARLEY

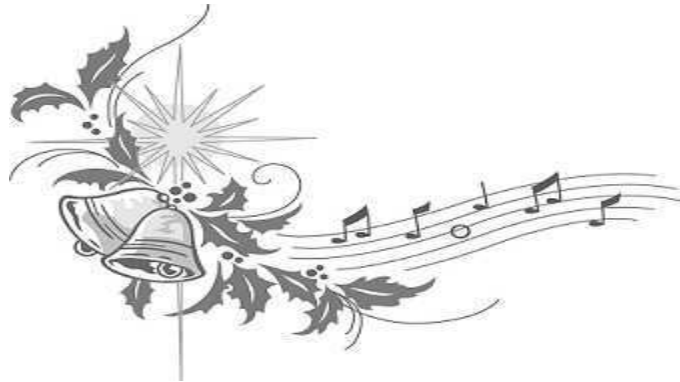
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Have yourself a merry little Christmas
Let your heart be light
From now on, our troubles will be out of sight
Have yourself a merry little Christmas
Make the yule-tide gay
From now on, our troubles will be miles away
Here we are as in olden days
Happy golden days of yore
Faithful friends who are dear to us
Gather near to us once more
Through the years we all will be together
If the fates allow
Hang a shining star upon the highest bough
And have yourself a merry little Christmas now

...

Hugh Martin and Ralph Blain



Peter Brook

THE NIGHT BEFORE CHRISTMAS

1

Christmas Eve! When I was a child it was the best day in all the year, a magical day. And it has never quite lost its lustre, even though, over recent years, it has been a day of disappointments and loss, it has never become just another day. It's still a day when things might happen, when the world might turn out to be a very different place, when adventures might begin, when the planet might refuse to turn its face back towards spring, might brave instead the midnight blizzards, might go on into infinite winter.

I was in Scotland. I could have been back home in England by nightfall, but to what end, to return to a cold house full of the ghosts of Christmases past? I decided to stay in Scotland and travel back on Christmas Day, the

roads would be quieter and it was one way of getting through that day.

I had landed in a small, long town in the Galloway hills, booked in at a bed and breakfast. Like many Scottish long towns there was a main street with its civic buildings in the middle, shops of diminishing importance on either side, and a hinterland of grey concrete housing schemes.

It's soon dark in December in Scotland. There was a keen north wind, driving the last minute shoppers off the street. There was traffic returning from Dumfries. Nothing much going the other way, and nothing at all heading out to the cold, still solitudes of Loch Ronald.

There was one hotel. Nobody at the reception desk. Nobody in the bar. Nobody behind the bar. Distant sounds from the kitchen suggested the staff were preoccupied with getting dinner ready, so I left them to it.

There was a bar further down the street, a long, low, mean-looking bar with low, mean-looking folk at the door braving the cold to have a smoke. On impulse I went in, excusing myself. The smokers gave way civilly.

"It's cold out," I remarked.

"Colder still in there," someone joked and there was a deal of wheezing laughter and coughing.

And cold enough it was. A low fire burned, nothing at all on such a bitter night. Few lights were lit. The darkneses in the great, bare room were allowed to brood quite undisturbed. Only the lights behind the bar were on. The barman was reading his newspaper. The only customers were Santa and Rudolph - a short, stout Santa, and a tall, morose Rudolph.

I minded my manners and didn't stare. After all who would you expect to find in a bar on Christmas Eve? I guessed they must have finished their stint at the grotto of a nearby store, but by dint of discreet observation I noticed that Santa's outfit was grubby and soiled, as though he'd slept in it for many a night.

The young barman had sandy hair, sandy eyebrows, sandy eyelashes and was called Sandy. I ordered a pint of Guinness with a vodka chaser. The tinsel round the optics looked like it had always been there, ever since the original Christmas, the first Noel.

"A cold night," I remarked.

"The fire does nae draw so well," Sandy replied.

"It'd draw fine if you put some coal on it," Santa said, his faded blue eyes fixed on some distant recollection. His whiskers were genuine

enough, albeit stained and flecked with tobacco. His snub nose and cheeks were rosy with broken veins. His head was bare and pink.

“It’s like an igloo in here,” Rudolph said mournfully. It was a proper Nordic mournfulness. What an oddity he was. He emerged from the bottom half of a reindeer suit, the forelegs of which were tied round his waist. Head and antlers dangled down behind. His face was long and rubbery. His bulbous nose glowed as though from years of intemperance. His fat, spiteful lips were pushed out petulantly.

“As a matter of fact igloos are very cosy,” Sandy said.

“You two just finished for Christmas?” I remarked.

“He finished for Christmas years ago,” Rudolph said, Santa said nothing but fondled his empty glass. Prompted by the spirit of the season, I offered to buy a round. Santa had a large whisky. Rudolph had a pint of Carlsberg.

“You too?” I said to Sandy.

“Thanks, I’ll have it later.” He dropped a couple of pound coins in a glass behind the bar. There wasn’t much change from a £20 note.

“Never mind it’s Christmas,” I said to nobody in particular.

“Christmas!” Santa muttered with unmistakable bitterness.

“Busy time for you,” I remarked.

He sighed and drank whisky.

“Rudolph’s right. I gave up Christmas years ago.”

“Was busy then.”

The whisky put some fire in him and he turned to look at me for the first time. I saw a failed and faded old man. What did he see? I would have given much to know what he saw.

“Pleased to see you Mr”

“Bailey, George Bailey.”

We shook. His hand was small.

“I’ll say it was a busy time, eh Rudolph?”

“If you say so.”

“Of course Rudolph never knew the old days.”

“I hear plenty about them.”

Santa sipped his whisky and recalled those better days.

“Busy? I’ll say we were busy. We’d pile up the sleigh, secure the load, whip up the team and off we’d go. Donna, in the lead. My how she

pulled. She'd put her back into it and we'd be off, up, up and away." He swept his arm and staggered. "Away, away up to the Northern lights, as high as the Moon, all the way to the Pole Star and beyond. Back we'd come with an empty sleigh, load up again and be off, and so it was all through the long night before Christmas."

I let him savour the recollection for a moment and then asked.

"What went wrong?"

He sighed and flipped his glass with a nicotine stained, well-bitten finger nail.

"Got too fond of this stuff. Oh it's fine when you're young. At every house there's a glass of sherry, maybe a whisky. You toss it back and think nothing of it. Keeps the cold out you say. John Barleycorn's a good fellow, a fine servant, but a bad master. As the years went by he got the better of me. At every house, the first thing I'd look for was the welcoming glass, and I wasn't above helping myself, if nothing had been put out."

"And what about us? What did we get?" Rudolph complained. "A slice of bread and usually stale at that."

"It got so that by the end of the evening I could barely stand."

"Good job we knew what we were doing," Rudolph said, "or there'd have been even more chimney pots lying in the gardens on Christmas morning."

"And then one Christmas Eve we came to the big house near the head of the Loch. There was heavy snow, a bitter night like this. There's a lawn. It lay there below us sparkling, unmarked. It was a perfect landing. I put the sleigh down right outside the french windows. They were open. It was a silent night alright. The snow muffled everything, even the tinkle of sleigh bells.

"I went inside. There was a bottle of whisky and a crystal tumbler by the chair next to the fire. And my what a fire. It fair made your eyes twinkle, even from the other side of the room. There was a basket of logs. You couldn't have wished for a more welcoming sight on a bitter night."

"And we were stood out in it remember," Rudolph said.

"There was a fine Christmas tree. They'd left the lights on for me. The whisky was a malt, a Bladnoch. Old Nick himself could not have tempted me better. 'No harm in pouring myself a glass and having five minutes by

the fire,' I said to myself. I eased my boots off and toasted my toes. I poured myself a good measure and admired the colour against the flames."

"And all the time we're standing out in the snow," Rudolph pointed out again.

"There's nothing like that first drink. It throws a genial light on any situation. It enlivens the dreariest prospect. It brings a touch of magic to a snowy night. The only thing you need to make it just perfect is another one."

"And we were still standing in the snow," Rudolph moaned, harmonising with the wind.

"Well the next thing I knew it was daylight. The fire was out and the bottle was empty."

"And we were still standing outside."

"A lot of children didn't get their presents that Christmas morning." Santa stared forlornly at his empty glass. "I knew I was finished, knew I had to give it up."

I had an irresistible urge to get rid of another £20 note and put Sandy to work.

I wandered over to the jukebox to look for something seasonal. The door opened and one of the smokers appeared, as picturesque an old tramp as you could wish for – stubble-chinned, jacket out-at-the-elbows, the uppers of his shoes gaping from the soles. His legs and arms worked in agitation, as though a cruel puppet master was tugging his strings. Easy to see how he came by his name.

"What's the matter Dancer?" Sandy asked, though seemed not too concerned to know.

"It's started snowing. There's a proper blizzard out."

"Aye well it was forecast."

"Aye but it's awful bad. The road by the Loch is closed."

"Is that right?"

"Tam says he'll no be able to take the van out."

As he said the words he did a perfect fandango of dismay.

It was dismay that communicated itself to everybody in the room. Sandy, Santa and Rudolph were all frozen in attitudes of concern.

The door opened again and a stocky chap with a long upper lip and a flattened nose marched in.

“A pint and a dram, Sandy.”

“Are you not out with the van tonight, Tam?” Santa asked.

“The van’s going nowhere tonight Santa.”

“But it’s Christmas Eve,” Santa said. “You always drive up to St Clements with the toys.”

“The van’s going nowhere tonight.”

“But what about the bairns.”

“Have you no seen the weather.”

“But the bairns. . . “

His consternation was shared by the others and when the smokers came in, bringing a flurry of snowflakes with them, Santa said:

“Tam’s no taking the van up to St Clements the night.”

“But the bairns!” they chimed in unified dismay.

“I canna do a thing about it. They’ve closed the snow gates and I canna carry the presents up on my back.”

He drained his pint, tossed back the whisky and pushed both glasses back for refills.

I broke the awkward silence:

“What’s St Clements?”

“The orphans’ hospice,” the chorus replied.

“How many of them will see another Christmas?” Rudolph wondered dolefully. “Still can't be helped.”

“What can I do?” Tam demanded, standing back from the bar and holding out his hands. “I can’t fly there.”

“No, but I can,” Santa said. “I’ll take them.”

“You!” the chorus exclaimed.

“Who better, man?” Santa demanded.

“You’ve no driven a sleigh for many a year,” Sandy pointed out.

“Och there’s nothing to it. Mr Bailey here could do it.”

“And who’s going to pull the damned thing?” Rudolph demanded in a tone that suggested he knew full well what the answer would be.

“You are, and Dancer here and Donna, and all the boys and girls.”

“Boys and girls!” Rudolph snorted. “Grandads and Grannies! Everybody’s too old.”

“You’re still a lad.”

“I can’t pull the damned thing on my own.”

“Dancer, you’re game?” Santa said. “You’ve still got your suit.”

In his agitation Dancer executed some complicated footwork .

“Aye Santa I have that, but it’s many a long year sin I had it on my back.”

“You’ll be fine man. Away with you and find Prancer.”

“It’s a terrible blizzard they’re forecasting,” Tam warned.

“Och man we’re no afraid of a bit of snow.”

“And when did that sleigh last have an MOT?” Sandy asked.

“Och it’s snug and dry in my lock-up.”

“Just so long as the mice haven’t gnawed the reins,” Rudolph said.

Santa wafted the notion away.

“Come on, let’s get the others, Donna first. I know just where she’ll be.”

In the grip of the same impulse that had prompted me to buy drinks, I asked if I could come.

“Come and be welcome man.” He gripped my arm. Already he seemed grown in dignity and stature – the very spirit of Christmas Present. We turned out into the snowy night.

2

The street was muffled, transformed. Under the lamps the snow lay orange, beyond, in the shadow, it had a blue cast. Tam's van was already blanketed. We put our heads down against the snow that flew and flocked. Our presence did not disturb the stillness, nor did the squeak of our boots biting into fresh snow much disturb the silence.

We floundered down High Street and turned by the town hall. Its many architectural flourishes were muted by snow. The clock that shivered up there beyond the flickering flakes struck the hour with tremulous vibrations - seven o'clock.

The library was a lowering pile, a doleful mausoleum. The solitary gas lamp outside turned the snow all around it to silver and to silver sparks all the flakes that flew through its aura. The big double doors were locked, but there was a glow from within. Santa knocked. He shook his head.

“Still here on Christmas Eve.”

A bolt was withdrawn. One door yielded and a sour-faced gargoyle was thrust out, eyes narrowed against the flying snow.

“You!”

She stood back to admit us.

“What are you thinking of still working at this hour?” Santa asked, shaking the snow off his cap. “Who works on Christmas Eve? Who sits and works alone on such a night as this?”

“What else would I do - sit at home with my memories? Besides there are books to be dusted; books to be shelved; books to be catalogued; books to be repaired. Why am I talking to you about books? What do you care? come in.”

Her words echoed in the dismal vault of the entrance hall. She flip-flopped back to the counter in her fluffy slippers, to where a gas lamp glowed, the only light in the vast darkness, at the edges of which tall shelves full of volumes loomed. It wouldn't have taken much imagination to fancy you heard the clank of heavy chains being dragged up from the vaults below, or to see a ghost peer from the far end of one of the stacks. Indeed I had the curious fancy that I saw down there a distant street lamp amid a clearing of snowy pines.

In the gas light I got a better look at her. She couldn't have been much under 70, but she stood tall and straight. She had steel-grey hair, steel-rimmed glasses and a steely gaze. She was handsome still, but must have been a beauty when her skin was smooth and her flesh full and soft enough to offset her strong features – nose, chin, cheekbones. They stood out now like weathered grit-stone. I realised she was appraising me too.

Santa introduced us. She gave me a sugared smile and a strong handshake.

“Don't be fluttering your eyelashes at Mr Bailey we've work to do. We've presents to deliver.”

Donna sniffed the air.

“You've been drinking, but when have you ever not been drinking?”

“Och Mr Bailey here was good enough to buy me a dram to keep out the cold and I'll need it with a night on the sleigh ahead of us. Come let's round up the gang.”

“You're mad. What are you talking about? We gave that game up years ago. You're too old. We're all too old, too old and too far gone.

“Never mind that. We have to go. Tam can't get the van up to St Clement's. The snow gate's closed. The children must have their toys.”

Donna maintained her cold blue stare for a moment, then:

“Of course we must go. I'll just get my shoes. We must act quickly. By

nine o'clock most of the old gang won't be able to pull a cracker, let alone a sleigh."

Not even a veil of white could disguise the angular ugliness of Marley Court. Donna pressed one of the buttons on the intercom.

"It's me. We're freezing out here." The door was unlocked.

Vicky was waiting for them, plump and pink with snowy curls.

"What's all this about?"

"We need to get the boys and girls together," Donna said.

"Get your costume," said Santa. "We're on the sleigh this night."

"If you think I'm turning out on a night like this!"

"We've no choice," Donna explained. "The snow gates are closed and it's the only way we can get the presents to the kinder at St Clements."

As Donna had done before her, Vicky maintained a hostile stare for a moment, then relented.

"Just give me a minute."

We picked up some of the others in the common room, disturbing a noisy game of dominoes. Only Blitzed was missing. Blitzed had lost his home long ago and was grateful for a bed at the night shelter.

The warden took us to where he lay, in the ward of old men. Some slept. Some lay awake reading newspapers. Some stared at the ceiling. Some coughed. Some were restless. Some were still.

Blitzed has his arms folded behind his head. Rough living had left its mark on him; many marks. His features were pitted. His beard was a greasy, filthy mat, as was his long hair. He didn't seem surprised to see us. Santa explained.

"You'll join us man?"

Blitzed turned away.

"For the kinders' sake." Donna said.

The old man's eyes filled with tears.

"I have nae got it," he whispered.

"Course you have. We've all still got it," Santa insisted.

"No, I mean the suit. I've no got it."

Donna was aghast.

"Where is it man? What have you done with it?" Santa demanded.

"Pawned."

"Pawned?"

“Pawned.”

“Give me the ticket.”

“I’ve never had the cash to redeem it. It’ll no be there now. Somebody’ll have bought it.”

“What can you have been thinking of to let such a thing out of your hands?” Donna said.

Santa shushed her.

“The ticket, man.”

Blitzed produced the ticket from the recesses of his grey, greasy clothes. Grey and greasy was the ticket and, folded so long, it fell apart.

Santa offered his spirit flask and Blitzed took a long gulp.

"Hot soup would do him more good," Donna said.

Potter's pawnshop was up a yard where it had no business to be. Its meagre lights illuminated the dark entry.

It was cold within. The breath of the prematurely aged clerk who tended the counter plumed in the air. He examined the two halves of the ticket.

“The deer suit!” he exclaimed. “Well we’ll not be sorry to see the back of that. The trouble we’ve had . . .”

“Just a minute,” rasped a harsh voice from the office. An old goblin with a face like frost-bitten flint pushed himself out in a wheelchair - Mr Potter himself. No plume of steam from his breath. There was no warmth in the man. A thermal imaging camera could not have detected him. He held the ticket close to his eyes.

“That one! I note he hasn’t the nerve to come in the shop himself. We’ve had damages threatened on account of this, proceedings threatened. Trading standards, health and safety, they’ve all been on to us. We’ve had solicitors' letters. It’ll cost a pretty penny to redeem this.”

“How much?” Santa asked.

“The last one to wear it ran amok at a school Christmas play. You can imagine I had to make a handsome donation to school funds . . .”

“How much?”

“After all the trouble I’ve been put to, I’d be out of pocket at £200.”

“Out of the question, man. Look Tam can’t get the van up to St Clements. The snow gates closed. We’re going on the sleigh.”

“Well, what’s that to me?” Potter growled.

“We’ve got to get the presents to the bairns. Some of ’em won’t see