

~ The Best Christmas Ever ~

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Disclaimer: None; just a tiny bit of Christmas mush. Hope you enjoy it.

This is the thoroughly revised version of a Christmas story I wrote for the Christmas Challenge 2004 at the Academy of Bards. I hope you like it. Besides, the original version is still available there and waiting to be compared.

MERRY CHRISTMAS TO ALL OF YOU
AND
A HEALTHY AND HAPPY AND SUCCESSFUL NEW YEAR!

"Mom, tell us the story about your first Christmas with Mommy."

"Pauly, you must have heard this story at least a dozen of times already, even more than that. And besides, it's almost time to go."

"But it's my favourite, Mom, please."

Paul looked up and as usual I was not able to refuse anything to those blue eyes. But it was the voice coming from the door that sealed the deal, "Yes, please, it's also my favourite."

My wife of fifteen years was still as incredibly beautiful as the first time I had laid eyes on her, when I moved into my dorm room. Paul didn't yet know about the power his deep blue eyes had on me, but his mother did.

"Alright, you win. Sit down and I will tell you the story."

Mary sat down on the couch and Paul climbed into her lap. Meghan and Sam sat on the floor with their backs to the love seat, and I had made myself comfortable in the Grandfather armchair I cherished since my grandmother willed it to me.

And so I began my tale.

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Like every child your age I loved Christmas, Pauly, but then I found out that Santa Claus does not really exist, and that the stories about the Christ Child my grandmother used to tell were also not true. I learned that the presents all came from my parents, my aunts, my cousins, my uncles, the friends of my parents. And suddenly Christmas had lost its magic

I turned into a real Grinch. I complained about everything and drove the whole family crazy with whining or ranting. Believe me, during the Holidays I was anything but pleasant company.

But all of that changed in the year I had turned twenty-one. My parents had had finally enough of my attitude and had decided to spend the Holidays on a cruise ship in the Caribbean.

I was happy to stay home, for once being absolved of participating in what I saw as stupid rituals like carolling and midnight mass, putting up a tree and decorating it. That year I would not have to do any of it. I had planned on going skiing with a couple of friends but one after the other backed out, citing the need to honour "family obligations". So, when Christmas Eve drew closer I found myself stranded on campus. My favourite book, 'Tropical Storm' by Melissa Good, was waiting on my bedside table to be reread but Mary, my roommate, your Mommy, clearly had other ideas.

I don't know how she did it but she managed to drag me away from my book before I even had the chance to finish the first page - but, by the Gods, when your Mommy looks at me a certain way I still can't resist her.

We went to the local orphanage, of all places. There were quite a few other students I had seen on campus without really seeing them. I knew only two of them; the star pitcher from the women's softball team and a boy on academic scholarship everyone was calling Sleepy because he was all of five foot one and worked the night shifts at the local hospital to pay for his room. All were busy preparing one thing or the other. I once had told your Mommy that I was good at building things, so, I was assigned to assemble as many bikes as possible from the pile of parts donated by the local scrap yard.

Building bikes from scratch really was not my idea of fun. So, I grumbled and whined at first but then I began to work. It was a challenge, and I love a challenge.

Hour after hour passed and somehow I must have fallen asleep - well, at least I suppose it was a dream though I remember it as if it were one of the Christmas stories my grandmother had told me.

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Mary smiled at me, the way only she knows how. Sam had put down her book in favour of listening and gave me a sheepish smile. She is our eldest and lately often tells us that with eleven

and a half years old she is too big to still listen to children's tales.

"I even heard my grandmother's voice in my dream..."

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One day, - and it's been a really long time ago, my beloved, - Santa was sitting in his workshop, like he did every day. It was his job to see that all the presents for all the children of the world, great or small, were ready on Christmas Eve. It was his job to build and paint them, all the teddy bears and dolls, baby-strollers, bongos, snare drums and books. He saw to it that the train sets were working; the doll's houses had everything they needed, including a room with a piano and a violin for the music lessons, as well as a fully stocked kitchen. He rechecked the nutcrackers and made sure that the green wings of the wooden angels were solidly attached. Especially the one holding the triangle, as this angel seemed to have had some problems the year before. There were a lot of other things in his workshop: cards, baseball bats, candy canes, footballs, tin soldiers, stuffed animals of all size and shape - everything a child would dream about. He even made clothing and shoes - for all the big children who had forgotten to send their wish list.

At the time there were no tapes or CDs or DVDs, no computers and no computer games, no stereo systems with powerful bass boosters, or 16:9 flat screen TVs with HD resolution. Remember, my beloved, all this was a long, long time ago and all these things had not yet been invented.

There was so much to do that he didn't have a choice but to work on more than one thing at a time - to be frank, he put multitasking to an entirely new level: He was putting together a Confederate style rocking chair and painted the mouth of a curly haired blonde doll bright red. He made a new binding for an anthology of love stories, with a cute little Cupid as the book cover and gave a swing a twist to test it out. He put the left eye of a teddy bear straight to keep him from being cross-eyed and saw that the reindeers had enough to eat and were diligently training for the great day. They practiced landing and taking off; some roofs were rather small and others had snow and ice making it more difficult. Santa's reindeer team had to be prepared for all eventualities.

It took a real master not to lose track of things. We certainly would have ended up with our fingers all knotted together but Santa had a lot of practice, and so everything always was ready in time.

But one day there was an accident. Santa was checking out a pair of roller-skates, some sleigh bells and a rocking horse when he suddenly lost his balance. It might not have happened if he hadn't been thoroughly taste-testing the eggnog. The back of his head hit a small brass table he had just put a last coat of blue paint on with a loud 'klang', resembling the sound of a big gong. He saw stars and lost consciousness.

When he finally awoke, he didn't know where he was. He slowly sat up and rubbed the bump on his head. Santa gazed around the workshop at the unfinished toys. He saw the stack of presents waiting to be wrapped. This room where he had spent hundreds of years now was strange and unfamiliar to him. He didn't recognise Blitzen, his favourite reindeer. He also didn't remember the story he had been about to write about Thor, the Nordic God of thunder. Only when he saw his friends, the small white dog with the black circle around his left eye and the black cat with the white shoes, did he begin to remember. Though even his reflection in the mirror even gave him a start; he remembered a young man, but what he saw was someone with wrinkles around his eyes, a white beard, and long curly white hair.

All of those things finally triggered his memory and he returned to work but it didn't go as he was used to: The teddy bear ended up with the face of a smiling doll and the doll suddenly was cross-eyed. The rocking chair refused to rock back and forth because the balance was off. He unintentionally had used the supporting beam of the doll's house to stabilise the seat. The lower jaw of the nutcracker was upside down and now was looking like the front teeth of a rodent. Whatever he tried, it didn't work out; in fact he destroyed more than he completed - and when he went to bed late in the night, he was sad and frustrated.

As you know the Christ Child sleeps in a secluded room to the west of the workshop far enough away from the banging and sawing to not disturb its sleep. Usually Santa would have gone to speak with the Christ Child, for the Child always had the answers. Unfortunately Santa would have to wait. The Child never woke before the end of November when the nights were longer than the days to help with a few last minute details and do most of the gift-wrapping - and summer had just begun on earth.

He even thought about asking the little angels but they were busy with guarding the children all over the world. It was their job to see that the children were good and didn't play any stupid pranks. Only if the children really had been good throughout the year on Christmas Eve would the Christ Child leave them presents. Sometimes it was hard to get some of the young-ones to obey and so the guardian angels had to be ever vigilant.

When he went back to his work the next morning, it didn't go any better and he started cursing under his breath, but as you all know using bad language does not really change things, and so Santa took a deep breath and then decided to do one thing after the other. He knew that it would take him more time to get ready this way, but it also was his only choice. And really, it took him the whole day to repair the things he had botched up the afternoon before. The teddy bear for instance not only needed a new face but a whole new head because the paint of the doll's face couldn't be removed, and the rocking chair worked only after the third try. When he went to bed this night, he still knew that everything was not as it should be but he also was proud that he hadn't given up. And thinking about the rainbow coloured coat of paint he had put on the body of a big xylophone, even brought a smile on his face.

This year, when the nights finally became longer than the days, the Christ Child didn't wake to a well-ordered workshop where everything was just waiting to be neatly labelled and wrapped. Instead it found Santa still in a working frenzy. He didn't even get up to greet the Christ Child, so

intend was he on painting the names of the seven dwarfs on the little pedestals they were standing on. The figurines were only a couple of inches tall and he had to use very tiny letters. Every once in a while he paused to get the names right: Doc with the big beard and the spectacles, Sneezy with the red nose. Happy was also ready, sitting in the centre of the table and waiting to be put on the shelf. The paint on Dopey's pedestal was still drying and he just had started with the last two of them when the Christ Child called his name.

To say that the Christ Child was shocked at the state of things would have been an understatement, especially when it learned that the accident happened because of too much eggnog. Of course Santa didn't even think of lying to the Christ Child. So, it read him the riot act, unnecessarily as it turned out because the whole thing already was weighing heavily on his conscience and he was convinced that it was his fault that this year's Christmas would be totally ruined. Short of accusing him of theft or murder, there was nothing the Christ Child could say that he hadn't already told him himself.

So, the Christ Child took pity on him and decided to resort to extraordinary measures. The next night, the child went down to Earth. It was very late when the child arrived and all the small and bigger children were asleep - you know, my beloved, the children who call themselves adults.

The Christ Child whispered in their ears and gave them ideas of what to give their family, their friends, their neighbours for Christmas. The adults would remember the Christ Child's suggestions when they heard the tinkling of Christmas chimes. The Christ Child returned every night until it had reached everyone in the world - and even the rather grumpy adults who usually didn't want anything to do with the whole Holiday spirit found themselves building little toys, sewing or knitting or simply buying something.

They were surprised and astonished by what they couldn't help but doing. In the beginning some of them even were afraid, they thought themselves obsessed because they were acting totally out of character, yes, there was more than one Grinch among them. But they really did have any choice: even the most grown-up of children are powerless faced with a request made by the Christ Child.

And while they were thinking about what to give to others, they became as carefree and friendly as never before. Total strangers greeted each other on the streets, they joked and exchanged ideas. Their laughter ascended to the sky and Santa's workshop where he still was working side by side with the Christ Child. From time to time Santa found himself humming with the Christmas carols that drifted up from earth.

Groups of people just met and sang together, creating an impromptu choir, and whenever one had forgotten the words, someone else knew them or they just made something up. On rare occasion they even danced on the streets, without caring if one was a good dancer or had two left feet.

It was a season of Advent to remember, unusual, strange, and at the same time like a well-choreographed ballet. Santa kept on making one present after the other - and he no longer felt guilty of his accident. You see, my beloved, the Christ Child had whispered forgiveness in his

ear during his sleep - and just to stay on the safe side, he hadn't touched a single drop of eggnog since then.

The small army of guardian angels still was watching over the children on Earth but they soon found that at the moment there was nothing to do for them. So, one evening, they decided to go and help Santa and the Christ Child. Boisterous, high-spirited, blethering, chattering, giggling, they were about to turn everything upside down with their enthusiasm. The Christ Child let them help with the gift-wrapping. They put all their skills and ambition in the task and were especially proud of their work when they created a package one couldn't tell what was hidden under the colourful wraps at first glance. Their masterpiece was a pair of timpani, the big bulbous drums looking like a doll's house, complete with a fake gable.

And so with the combined efforts of angels, and Santa, and humans, and the Christ Child despite the black cloud it had started under that year's celebration became the best Christmas ever.

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Paul was snuggled in Mary's arms. His blond head was resting on her shoulder and his hair was entwined with Mary's long blond tresses. Paul looked so much like his Mommy; I could have spent hours just looking at them. Sam and Meghan were now sitting closer together. Sam had her arm around her younger sister, and for this moment had obviously given up on being all grown up.

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My grandmother's voice faded when your Mommy's hand touched my shoulder and I woke up. And she told me that it was time to go back to the dorm and catch a few hours of sleep before returning to the orphanage in the morning to watch the children unwrap their gifts. She also told me that I had done a great job at assembling the bikes and that all of them were shining and ready to be put under the tree.

I gave her a slightly disorientated, bashful smile, not quite believing her praise but when I looked around I saw that she was right - though I distinctly remembered that there still had been enough parts left to make another three bikes when I fell asleep. I knew there had been a roll of yellow tape in my hand I had intended to put on the handle of one of the bikes.

The next morning, I didn't have to be dragged to the orphanage. I was looking forward to it and when I saw the smiling faces of children and adults alike, eyes shining with excitement I

remembered why I had loved Christmas when I was younger - and I decided to do everything I can to make every year's celebration the best Christmas ever.

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"And you do it so well, my love," Mary said with a twinkle in her eyes. Forestalling our son's request for another story she added, "And now we have to hurry. The car is already packed and Father Michael is waiting at the orphanage."

"Mom, when we get back will you read the Christmas poem to us? You know the one with the miniature Santa and the Lilliputian reindeers?" Meghan asked.

Her eyes are brown like mine but I still have as hard a time denying her anything as I do with Paul and their mother.

"Do you mean the Christmas Alphabet?" I asked to tweak her a bit.

"That's just a silly song, Mom. You know that she does not talk about a song but a poem. You know the one with 'when all through the house not a creature was stirring, not even a mouse'. Don't play games with Meg," Sam said with her serious, all grown-up expression on her face.

I hugged them both. "And it ended with 'Happy Christmas to all, and to all a Good Night!'" Yes, I'll read it to you when we get back. And now scoot. We don't want to be late."

THE END

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