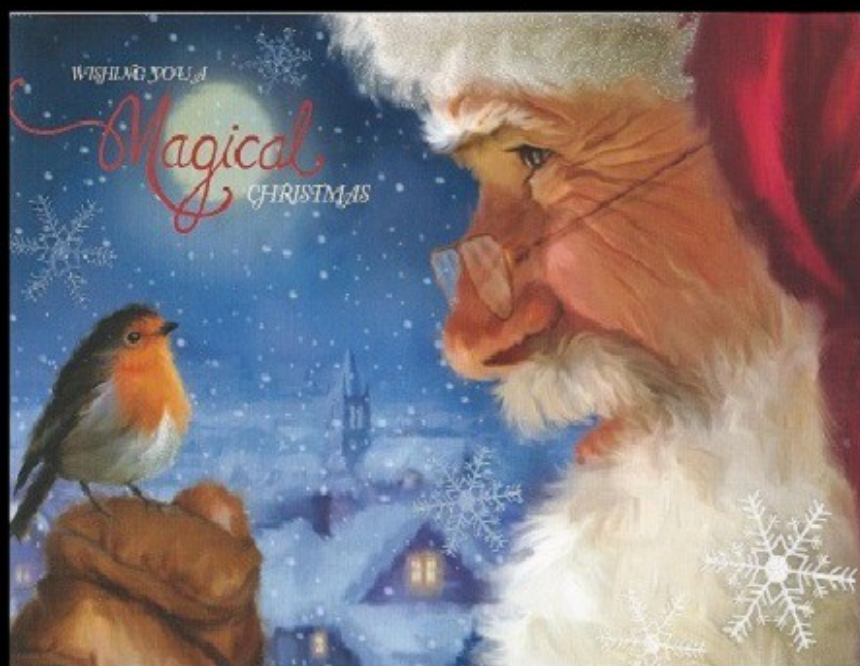


CHRISTMAS IN THE DOGHOUSE



John O'Loughlin

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Short Prose by

JOHN O'LOUGHLIN
Of Centretruths Digital Media

CDM Literature

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Christmas in the Doghouse

It was Christmas Day and we were all seated in the drawing room around the large Christmas tree, against the substantial base of which all the presents that the houseparents had bought and wrapped for the children in their care were piled up in such fashion that, with one glance, you knew they'd gone to no little trouble in so presenting them that they appeared as though deriving from the tree itself, like so many nuts or seed pods or other offerings from its copiously-bedecked, bauble-laden branches.

As it happened, it was early afternoon and we'd just eaten Christmas dinner in the dining room, across the hallway, and generally put ourselves into a receptive and grateful frame-of-mind, glad to have got this far without undue mishap or serious regret. I must've been about twelve or thirteen at the time, but there were others, in this all-boys Children's Home, who were younger still, maybe eight or nine, with a markedly more excited and expectant air, as though on tenterhooks for 'Father Christmas', either the male houseparent or, on this occasion, his stooped father who, even without a fiery red gown and pair of high boots, that must have been dragged out of hibernation in some remoter part of the house, would still somehow have looked the part, what with his white beard and twinkling eyes and other well-known trademarks of Santa Clause.

Today it fell to him to dispense seasonal *largesse* to each of the boys, as he read out the name dangling on a card from whichever of the well-wrapped Christmas presents he happened to have chosen from the huge pile under the tree, presents which, experience had taught me, the houseparents had done their best to match to the particular tastes or character or age of each one of us,

whether younger, like Derek, a curly-haired kid who sat cross-legged on the floor no more than three yards from the Christmas tree, or older, like myself and one or two of the others, who'd managed to grab one of the armchairs that stood in a semi-circle to either side of it.

Both the senior houseparents, who happened to be husband and wife, were seated in their customary places, the one opposite the other, and if memory serves me there were also a couple of junior houseparents in the room, neither of whom were married, even though they were of marriageable age, and one of them, in particular, was passably attractive, despite having a slight limp. Old 'Father Christmas', as we shall call the male houseparent's father, bearing in mind that he was only standing-in for a symbolic figure, was well into the distribution of presents by now, and as each boy's name was read out, whether punctuated by a roguish chuckle or supplemented by an involuntary and possibly knowing grunt, an eager hand would reach for the proffered parcel which, on being shyly or even boldly accepted, was then stashed away at the individual's feet or, if he already happened to be on the floor, just in front of him, so that, instead of being distracted with the business of tearing them open, every boy – and sometimes a houseparent – was as soon ready to receive the next parcel, in like vein, as he'd been to take the previous one, keeping 'Santa' on his toes, as they say, and certainly on his high-booted feet for the duration of a process which, given the large numbers of presents involved with the multiple distribution to sixteen or so persons, including the houseparents, could prove quite demanding and invariably pretty time-consuming, time being something which 'Father Christmas', in no way analogous to 'Father Time', seemed to be in short supply of, as he busied himself with this present and that, holding the label up close to his dim-sighted eyes in order to accurately decipher the name on it, and then either shuffling over to the person concerned or, if this proved

unnecessary, simply handing it out to him before returning, with stooped back, to the foot of the tree in order to retrieve the next one his hands happened to alight upon until, by and by, and with a sort of inexorable logic, the pile of presents stretching right around the banked-up base of it began to diminish, and the pile either in front of or at the feet of each of the eager recipients, whether adult or juvenile, to grow correspondingly larger until, with several such piles on the floor alone, never mind tables and chairs, there was scarcely any room for him to manoeuvre in, let alone for us to stash our presents!

In the meantime, Derek had become well-nigh hypnotized by the pile of brightly-wrapped presents that had gradually built-up in front of him, and it was as much as he could do to contain his excitement and, what's worse, lust for receiving them.

Fortunately for 'Santa', however, there were now fewer parcels for him to distribute, and he must've been looking forward to a well-earned rest, to be able to take his boots off and put his feet up somewhere else, especially since he was, appropriately enough, no 'spring chicken' but, as the father of an adult himself, quite elderly, and not a little, infirm.

Soon, however, the last of the carefully-wrapped gifts would be handed out to somebody in the assembled throng, since it only remained for a couple of us to enable him to complete his task by thanking him, with good-natured irony, for his seasonal generosity, the product, as I well knew, of several days if not weeks' preparation on the part of each of the houseparents who, now that proceedings were drawing to a close, would have the satisfaction of witnessing the joy and pleasure on the faces of those boys in particular who, being comparatively new intakes to the Home, hadn't experienced such an event before, and wouldn't, in all likelihood, have encountered anything similar outside the framework of care into which circumstances had perforce thrust

them.

Up till this point that joy and pleasure would've gone some way towards recompensing the houseparents for their efforts; though they were further compensated by the presents which they'd bought and wrapped for one another, and which some of the older boys, including myself, had managed, in spite of straitened circumstances, to buy for them as well, making for some degree of reciprocal emotion. With what sounded like a sigh of relief, old 'Father Christmas' had just distributed the last present, as it happened a quite large one, to the younger and prettier of the two junior houseparents, who graciously accepted it with a giggle of surprise.

Now it was at this juncture that young Derek, who was still sitting cross-legged on the floor not more than a couple of yards from me, kind of snapped out of his trance or spell and cried out, apparently in all innocence of any Dickensian connotation: "Is that all?" The question, which evidently referred to the presents, wasn't addressed to anyone in particular, not even the retreating 'Father Christmas', and it took a moment or two for its disappointed tone to penetrate the general hubbub of excited expectancy at the prospect of our now being able to actually open the presents, and thus discover what the wrappings were intended to conceal! But when it did, there was a sudden hushed silence, as though in shocked disbelief, and it wasn't long before the female senior houseparent, unable to regard this question as a joke or to dismiss it as an ironic inversion of gratitude from someone who, to judge by appearances, had more than enough presents piled-up in front of himself, shouted back: "Derek!" in a tone at once deeply censorious and bitterly disillusioned.

The senior male houseparent had also come around, as if by a prompt, to her point of view and, filled with a sudden rage, rushed

out of his armchair to grab the unfortunate boy by the ear and wrench him to his feet, preparatory to dragging him from the room and, even before they'd reached the double doors to the hall, administering not one but several smacks in quick succession to what I presumed – for I couldn't see from where I sat and felt, in any case, somewhat reluctant to look – was the back of his legs, since one could hear the sharp sound of a large thick-fingered hand on naked flesh, followed by a renting of the air by high-pitched shrieks of pain which burst from Derek's mouth at the ferocity of his chastisement, a ferocity which may well have impacted on his buttocks as well. It was all too much for the senior male houseparent to be confronted by such ingratitude, such naked greed and lust for more presents from a boy who'd had no shortage of presents in front of him and appeared not to realize how much effort they, the houseparents in general, had gone to, psychologically as well as physically and financially, to provide a sufficiency of presents for some twelve boys of different ages and four if not five (if we're to include 'Father Christmas' himself) adults.

Meanwhile, Derek's shrieking continued to poison the atmosphere, even from the hall and the dreaded front office that had once been a dentist's surgery but which, in the context of this Children's Home, had usually functioned as a kind of punishment cell into which miscreants were vigorously hauled to be summarily interrogated and/or physically chastised, and now we sat in our various places as though frozen with embarrassment, unable to fully comprehend the enormity of the situation and why, on this day of all days, the celebration throughout Christendom of Christ's birth, the hope and happiness of a few minutes' ago had now been eclipsed by fear and woe, even by a sense of panic and helplessness that, as a boy in care, anything could happen at any time of the day or night to shatter the illusion of family security, of social wellbeing, and cause one to feel conscious of just how

vulnerable one was to be in such a position, to be a child who, with the smallest of psychological or social slips, a failure to meet fire-drill criteria in the middle of the night or to get out of bed when roused at 6.45am to do housework before breakfast, could be subjected to the grossest uncaring brutality and made to feel guilty for just being alive, the product of some miscarriage of familial justice that had caused a social problem the solution to which necessarily required exceptional measures.

Derek was now, alas, the catalyst of our communal woe, as we struggled to return to the customary Christmas Day atmosphere and, with tentative moves towards opening our presents, carry on as if nothing unusual or unexpected or indecent had occurred, even though any real semblance of the Christmas spirit had now dispersed, and we were once again confronted by the existentialist horror of our earthly lot in the care of persons who, despite the best of intentions, weren't our real parents, and had no reason to love us or to regard us with anything but a cold professional contempt. This, sad to say, was one Christmas that none of us – especially Derek – would ever forget. *Der erste Weihnachtstag ist verdorben, weil die Geschenke schon vergiftet sind!*

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