

Christmas

1957

There was an unusual crisp chill to the air which England could barely understand: the sky shouted out a deep shade of blue, sun hung like a frozen ball of yellow wax, and the breath of man became as words on a paper, for all to see, a page of misty white lies. It was a transitory state, however, soon to be replaced by the normal damp dampness of every other day; but, for now at least, talk in the street is of its brilliance: "Brisk," some said, "Fresh," suggested others; but no matter what words they employed there was a feeling of disconcerted gratitude, as if it was a gift none truly deserved, that had been given them perhaps in error. A Christmas gift, for it was the twenty-fourth of December.

A young man, richly dressed, stood looking out on the day from the door-way of Lewis's, a department store for the well-to-do. Lean, clean-cut, with a firmness of face devoid of soft line, he awaited the arrival of his equally young wife. He stamped his feet to keep out the cold and checked his watch, a gold thing with spingles and spangles, every fifty-four seconds: that, you see, was the length of his minutes. So there he stood a-stamping, not knowing where his wife might be, nor what might be keeping her—and no more concerned with the beauty of the day than it was with him. In fact, his wife was not far away, very close even, inside that monolithic Cathedral of God the Capitalist, gazing at a display of plastic offerings: toys for Christmas; toys she would not buy. Toys she would probably never buy.

His petulance was something rather new, which he still found strange, uncomfortable, difficult to confront, that came from he knew not where, nor why, nor when. He only knew that it was new. It was always with him, would not leave him go, though it tormented him most at home; made him say things that should not be said, held hostage his mouth, put words into it and forced them out using his voice. It sat in his brain smoking stale cigarettes, feeling quite at home, thank you very much, and seeming to have no intention towards leaving. It did not sit alone either. There was something else living inside. A dark monster. Petulance and the dark monster were chums. And so it was now. "Where the hell is she," it made him think, and he glanced at that audacious watch for the thirteenth time. He took stock of the girls who walked by, hidden in layers of cloth, making do with faces.

Men walked by too.

The street was alive with Christmas shoppers rushing too and fro, skipping and dancing in and out, between one another, suffering with reluctant joy the burden of their packages. On the corner a Salvation Army soldier of dubious rank jingled bells, calling for generosity, calling for the Christmas spirit. The bells were cheap and made in Taiwan.

And so there you have it, the scene is set, but what happens next?

"Oh, sorry Tom," a voice said from behind, revolving out from a revolving door. He turned and saw his young wife make her circular entrance. "Have you been waiting long?"

"Yes, I have. Where the hell you been? What were you doing in there anyway?" He had been caught off balance: she had arrived from the wrong direction, and the facial expression he had planned to use must now go to waste.

"I was just checking the, er, perfume. I thought we might get your mother some perfume."

"Hello. Have you gone off your rocker, or what?" Mother was very particular about her perfume. He shook his head, like a teacher confronted with the untidy work of a stupid child, and took another look at his watch. "Shall we get started then?"

"Yes," she said, but he had already turned and turned some more, into the spinning door and out of sight. I think now may be a good time to introduce the wife, whose charm and good nature had been much stifled of late; who sheds more than the odd tear, odd, when alone, and tries often to remember the "nice lad" she had married. Where was he now? What had become of him? Yes, she must be introduced, for if we wait on Tom we shall perhaps wait some considerable time. Susan was her name, and her attractiveness came from inside, from the same place as her tears.

And so the Christmas shopping was about to get under way, though it all seemed to Tom a precious waste of time, whatever that might mean.

"We should get my father's dressing gown first," Susan said.

"I suppose so. Where are they?"

"First floor, I think."

"Come on then." Up the magic steps they went, finding themselves in the wrong place, where rows of blind T.V. screens gazed out foolishly at rows of blind foolish people gazing in.

"Hello. I thought you said the dressing gowns were here?" There was anger in his voice, though the tone was so familiar that Susan barely noticed. Barely, but not quite.

"I thought they were. I'll ask someone." A salesman stood nearby, neat, shirt and tie, proper. Susan walked over and Tom wandered along behind, trying to appear casual, watching the shirt and tie man.

"Dressing gowns? Yes, down in the basement Madame."

"Oh, thank you."

"My pleasure," and he smiled at them both. Tom looked down as they walked away, glanced back and looked down some more.

"My pleasure," he mimicked sarcastically. "Jesus Christ."

"What's wrong?"

"That fellow, he's as gay as a sunny Sunday afternoon. My pleasure!" and he shook his head with exaggerated disapproval. "Bleeding puff."

"Why do you say that?"

"I can tell. I can always tell."

And so the trivial business of Christmas shopping went on, and I think that I, like Tom, have had enough, though our respective reasons share no similar feature.

As they drove from town, in a car of such strange configuration that its entirety was lent a decidedly comic aspect, whose boot and back seat were filled with the chattels that typified pretentious good will and counterfeit joy to all men, a dribbling of rain began to fall from a now sombre sky. That glorious morning was gone, had probably never been, was perhaps nothing more than a stream of fervid half-truths. This gloom, this greyness did not help. The wishy-washy wipers began to do their stuff, and the path ahead was cleared, though neither Susan nor

Tom knew really in which direction it was bound. The road was more or less empty and the car drew a straight line, unhindered as it went; passed a crowded double decker bus. The bus was filled with swear words, who clutched those Christmas parcels against their hearts for all they were worth. Faithful followers of a new prophet, who drinks their blood fresh from the vein, slobbering and talking gibberish. A Multi National Son of God. A mass of almost liquid fat tattooed with pin stripes. People and bought stuff then—though which was which is hard to tell.

And so the car sped on into the solitary distance.

As they turned into Oak Wood Drive, a pleasant little street, a pack of children were at play on the curb side, jumping into puddles, flopping about in over-sized Wellington boots. Susan looked over at them, their tiny, smiling faces surrounded by the hoods of anoraks, watching their antics with a certain smile: a longing smile, a sad smile, a troubled smile. She turned her head as they drove on by, reluctant to leave them be. Tom, from the corner of his eye, saw the smile, knew what it meant, quickly returned his attention to the road without breathing a word. The children were gone. They would never be.

The house welcomed them with a resolute silence. They carried their parcels to the door where Susan fished beneath an empty flower pot for the key. Inside, the offerings were put down, the gas fire turned on and coats hung neatly on the stand.

Tom opened the television, put up his feet, and listened to a thirty second sermon articulated with great fervour by a faceless man who preached the ethos of consumer commerce, a throw-away philosophy that all must buy—or be damned. It was all black and white, remember.

And so the afternoon drifted on, and if you should think by now that nothing is likely to happen, allow me to mention that you are quite right, and also completely wrong. For now though, we must settle for the mundane, dull though it is, for it is the very fabric of life, and only when it tears open do we come to contemplate how it should really have been.

Susan sat down in the easy chair, and staring into the flickering flames of unnatural fire, she drifted away.

They began to meet out of school, to take secret walks together, to feel the vivid emotions of youth, to steal kisses and laugh—for they would never have to pay back. Together, the two criminals at large fell in so much love that it covered them from head to foot, left them smelling of its innocent perfume, and everything was so bright, so strong, so felt. The love was the marvellous love of youth: painful, aching, enchanting, mysterious, ambivalent, all knowing, intoxicating, larger than life more wonderful than wonder. It was all that and more. One fine summer's evening, after dark, they made awkward love in a stack of hay. It was all fumbles and falls though it was the most poetic moment the universe had ever seen. How might I describe the opening of a flower by moonlight? the dance of silver shadows on naked and innocent skin? the atomic powers feeling feeling felt? How might I whisper to the deaf of these untold secrets?

Susan was sterile. Her youth had all dried up and her womanhood failed to flower. She could never have a child. There seemed little left. The romance, or at least the

perception of romance, was long gone, and nothing remained but those flickering flames of artificial fire.

"I suppose we should be going now."

"Wait till this has finished," he said, without turning from the show.

Outside children arrived at the door and began singing Christmas carols.

"Oooh, listen," Susan smiled. "Have you got some change for them?" Tom reached into his pocket, took out a few coppers and put them on the arm of the chair. Susan grabbed them and went over to the door where she listened quietly, still smiling, to the squeaky voices without.

"God rest you merry gentlemen may nothing you dismay.

Our christ the lord and saviour was born on christmas day....."

The children concluded their short repertoire and knocked little hand knocks on the door, which Susan opened at once.

"That was very nice," she told them.

"Thank you," a couple of them mumbled, looking to her hand, guessing how much she would give.

"There we are," and the deal was made. The children, already true believers in the new God, went away down the garden path counting and whispering, "How much? How much?" Susan closed the door. The rain had stopped, though the sky was still heavy with cloud.

Susan and Tom, who drove on towards his parents for the annual visit, passed by The Squinting Cat, a middle class pub for working class people. Tom watched it go by like his spent youth, and thought of the happy hours he had lost there with his father, after work, listening to the talk of men: Hard talk, opinionated talk, keep-it-in-your-pocket-

and-use-as-your-own talk. He had enjoyed the company of those working muscle men.

With the pub slipping further into the distance, Tom felt a sudden guilt, and the guilt brought a new guilt. After five years of marriage, he was sure Susan suspected. She was approaching the truth-head-on. She surely knew that something was less than above board, that a beast within him was no longer dormant.

No longer dormant, that dark deep something, dark deep inside-whose identity only Tom had inkling of-that beast of sorts, whose nature was obscure even to him, gave a shallow, though pungent, breath, red hot. Tom felt the sudden flush and pushed his foot down on the accelerator.

They pulled up, in their funny looking car, in front of another house. The air outside, with early winter darkness beginning to creep up on the light, was unusually cold and they hurried inward, where Christmas greetings were grudgingly exchanged. There was polite contrived conversation, cups of tea, everything was very nice. Tom had decided an hour and a half would be a polite time to stay, and kept glancing at his watch slyly until it was up.

Next they were to call at Susan's parents where they would have supper and show again how happy they were and how delightful was Christmas. They never arrived for a miracle was about to pounce on them and cover them with kisses. A Christmas miracle. It began almost at once:

"Look Tom, look. It's starting to snow." A white Christmas in southern England was more than even the most ardent and foolish of optimists would have dared hope for, and perhaps it should there and then have been recognised

as a symbol of something wondrous, have suggested that some great change was afoot.

"It's only snow," Tom said soberly.

"Yes, I know, but on Christmas Eve and everything...." Only the English can appreciate how Susan must have felt, the pleasure that ran through to her core; and only the dead, Tom. All around Surrey, children were chanting:

"Snow snow faster,
alley alley aster.

Snow snow faster..." And the spell began to work. Large flakes began to tumble from the sky like feathers from a thousand shot geese, tumbled in a very hap-hazard kind of way, unhurried, as if gravity merely suggested that they come to earth. It was all like a dream, though it had barely begun.

They turned onto the red line of a map and were met by a strange sight: A young woman, perhaps only a girl, stood beside the road, hitch-hiking, a small suitcase at her feet.

"Look, there's a girl thumbing it."

"Mmm."

"She must be freezing out there; let's stop."

"Hello, are you mad or what?" She seemed to carry a bundle of something in her arms. Quickly she was passed.

"No. Stop." Susan's voice was not raised, but had in it a thing, a tone, a quality that made Tom look to her. He saw the same in her eyes. The thing was good conquering evil. He put his foot to the brake. As they reversed back to the girl Tom peered into the mirror to her, and so it was he who saw first what indeed that bundle she carried was.

"She's got a baby," he said.

"Where are you going?" Susan asked the lost soul as she climbed into the back of the car.

"I don't know. I was cold." She gazed blindly out of the side window and they knew at once, by the voice, by the words, by the dazed look, that she was not quite right. Tom breathed a sigh. What had Susan involved them in now?

"Well where do you live?"

"I don't..." she looked up to Susan who was turned twisted in her seat and seemed almost to focus her eyes. "I'm okay, just drop me in town."

"But where do you live? Your baby, is it all right?" The girl looked down at the small thing in her arms and tucked the blanket in around its face. She touched its soft skin and then drew back her hand quickly as if burned, resumed her outward gaze.

"Yes, it's fine." A terrible idea came to Susan and she felt the chill of eternal winter rip off her clothes and leave her shivering with a terrible foreboding. What if the baby was dead? She looked at the lump and it did not move.

"Where do you live?" she asked again, urgently.

"Elephant and Castle...but I had to....."

"What?"

"I had to leave."

"Do you have some where to stay, dear?"

"What?" she turned to Susan.

"Do you have somewhere to stay?"

"I...I...." she seemed to think.

"Don't worry, we'll take you home." Tom looked around with a certain expression that I will leave you to guess at.

"I'm cold."

"You'll soon be warm," and she turned to her young husband. "Let's take her home."

"Maybe we should call the police," he whispered.

"We'll see at home." The terrible thought of the baby being dead held fast. It had grabbed Susan by the neck and was throttling her, kept her silent, choking. As long as she just sat there though, sat there and did not ask, there was a chance that it lived, was alive, so she just sat there.

The sound of the engine began to hypnotise and they went on without further word, back the way they had come, into town where the shops had all shut, where the streets lay mostly empty, made ghostly by the covering of snow; windows blackened, except those of the public houses from which a warm glow radiated outward, kept company by the ubiquitous Christmas cheer that sang its merry song, but went on unheard inside that funny car with the lifeless baby.

They turned into Oak Wood Drive, where an impossible sight met their eyes. So impossible it was rejected by brain one and all, so, though it was plain as plain is plain, it may as well have been invisible, for it was not seen nor ever would be. Above Susan and Tom's home, in the black ink of sky from which white flakes of Christmas still fell, a bright star, a Christmas star, had appeared, and the shadows it cast stretched long and thin, elongated and distorted like a Lawry, painted with naive brush strokes; into the future, beyond this story, to the very end of the book. And perhaps further. The star was odd, but odder than that, for it refused to twinkle as stars are wont to do. It refused. Perhaps it was not a star, perhaps it was Mars

bent on something despicable, out a roaming in the heavens and up to no good.

As they walked down the garden path Susan stayed beside the mother, trying to see if there was indeed any life in the bundle she carried. It seemed as inanimate as a rag doll and suddenly the snow seemed to fall black as coal.

"Sit down dear, it'll soon be warm, here beside the fire." The gas was turned on and the curtains closed. "Go make some tea, Tom, or cocoa. Would you prefer hot cocoa?" The girl, a mere scratch of a thing, looked up.

"Yes. Yes please," she said. Tom went off. Susan stood by the fire, warming her hands and looking at the infant.

"You have a boy then?"

The mother glanced down at the dead thing she held. "A boy," she said.

"Oh. How old?"

"Just...just a few days, I suppose. Just a few days."

"What's his name?" Susan moved her hand slowly to the small face and touched gently. It seemed corpse-like, and she felt about to cry: a volcano of sadness began to erupt inside.

The mother stared at the carpet. "It doesn't have a name."

"He doesn't have a name." Susan repeated.

"Yes. I mean no." It was all starting to be like a nightmare, but the terrible thing was, everyone really was awake.

"Oh.....Oh. Shouldn't we give him one?" There was only silence. "Let's give him one."

"What?"

"A name."

"If you want."

"Everard's nice. Do you like Everard? Let's call him Everard." The dead baby had been given a name, his star was outside, and with that he began to cry. It was the happiest sound Susan had ever heard. She too began to cry, silent, dry tears. "Can I hold him?"

The snow still fell outside and three wise men walked by the house on their way to the pub, leaving a trail of wise white foot prints as they went. The way was lit by the heavenly body and their pin men shadows mocked them from behind, pointing string fingers and skipping about in a mad dance, laughing and yelling without sound, while the three men continued on soberly.

Inside, the living room was warm. The baby had been fed and lay on the couch sleeping.

"Drink your drink, dear. We'll have supper soon. Are you hungry?"

"Yes."

"Drink your drink." Susan was at the girl's feet, on the rug in front of the fire, and from there she turned to Tom, who sat stiffly at the large dining table. "Could you start seeing to the food? We'll have the pork I bought for tomorrow."

"All right," he said with a gentle smile, which seemed completely out of place on that usually stony face.

"I don't even know your name," Susan realised. "What are you called?" Could it have been Mary do you think? How splendid, how silly if it was. Mary, then?

"Irene," she said.

"I'm Susan." The two looked at each other, looked at each other, looked to each other. "How old are you, Irene?"

"Sixteen," and her eyes fell, crying out on the way down until they hit the ground with a dull thud. They sat in silence for a long time.

"What happened, Irene? Why were you out like that in the snow?"

"I don't know."

"You must know."

"I do."

"What?"

"I had the baby. I had the baby. It wasn't nice you know. Every one, all the others had visitors. Every day they came with flowers and fruit and chocolates and took pictures. They were so happy. It wasn't nice. Sometimes they looked at me."

"Oh."

"Then I had to leave, I knew I would, I was glad, but I had no place to go."

"When was that?"

"Just now."

"What about your parents? Do they know?"

"Do they know?"

"Yes."

"Yes."

"They didn't visit?"

"No. They threw me out when I told them. He said I was a slut and she said it too. He shouted at me and hit me and she let him." Tears grew in her eyes and spilled out, though she made no sound.

"When?"

"Ages ago. I lived on my own."

"But you don't have a place any more?"

"No . It was just a bed-sit, anyway. It was cold. I didn't have any money for the gas. I suppose someone else is there now, I suppose."

"Oh."

"Maybe they don't have money for the gas either." A dog barked next door and the silence which followed was deafening. Susan looked up at the young girl and breathed a heavy sigh. "Maybe you should call on your parents. Let them know."

"No."

Tom came in, opened the curtain Susan had closed, sat down at the table to watch the storm outside. He had been listening from the kitchen. He glanced over at Irene and saw a stupid girl nestling the cup of Cocoa in her tiny stupid hands.

The next morning the guest slept late. They had heard her in the night, feeding the baby, changing his nappy , or rather the towel which served as one, for want of the genuine article, both laying awake wondering.

"Thank you for letting me stay," Irene said when she came down.

"That's all right my dear. Sit down and have some breakfast. Tom, would you mind making some more..."

"Hello, what did your last servant die of?"

"You're right, I'll do it."

"Sit down," Tom said to the girl. She sat herself at the table and stared out into the garden.

"There's a lot of snow," she said.

"Yes, it must have kept going all night." Stared out in silence. "Did you think about what you're going to do? Maybe you should go back home." Tom said at length.

"Maybe that would be best," she said, distantly.

"You can't go home. Tom, you know she can't." Susan arrived back, bringing the breakfast, glaring at her husband, the nice lad no more.

"Hello," he said, returning her look with a cold stare.

"I don't know."

"Don't be silly dear. Stay with us and we'll help you find a place to live next week. I'm sure you could find a job in no time. There's lots of work in London. Everything will be fine."

Irene turned from the white world outside, tried to smile, but was unable.

"I couldn't impose like that. It wouldn't be right."

"I insist. You stay here for a while and we'll help you get settled in town."

"But what about the baby?"

"Well...."

"Would you like to keep it?"

"Don't be silly, Irene."

"Would you?"

"You're upset. You don't know what you're saying."

"I do. I really do."

"No. How could we?"

"You could. It would have a real life with you. You could buy it things."

"But.."

"Don't you want a baby?"

"I'd love one, it's just that..."

"Then why not?" Susan turned away, gazed outside. Tom looked at Irene. Irene looked at her breakfast. No one dared speak.

"Suppose we agree, Irene," Tom began finally, "and we keep the baby. We keep the baby and then one day some time you decide that you want him back. What then?"

"But I won't"

"How do you know?"

"I don't know."

"Hello."

"I just know. You could buy it things. Love it. We can do it all legal like. We can do it like that."

A cry came from upstairs, a cry that grates at the heart and thus cannot be ignored.

"Everard is crying," Susan said. "I'll go fetch him." She walked to the door of the staircase and went running upwards, yelling inside with something much greater than joy, calling to the world that it was Christmas Christmas Christmas. Everard joined her chorus. His bed was made from a large empty drawer with masses of soft blankets spread within. His eyes were wide open.

Susan picked up the baby, held it close, gazed into his bright eyes, smiled, cried, smiled, cried, cried cried cried, dreamed, laughed, whispered gently words with out meaning, kissed his little cheek, his velvet smooth chubby little cheek.

And then she took her son downstairs.