

The Twelve Days of Christmas

Edward Arruns Mulhorn



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Reading on page 119 from *Sympathy* by Emily Brontë

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Sleep brings no joy to me,
Remembrance never dies,
My soul is given to mystery,
And lives in sighs.

Sleep brings no rest to me;
The shadows of the dead,
My wakening eyes may never see,
Surround my bed.

Sleep brings no hope to me,
In soundest sleep they come,
And with their doleful imag'ry
Deepen the gloom.

Sleep brings no strength to me,
No power renewed to brave;
I only sail a wilder sea,
A darker wave.

Emily Brontë

What child is this?

I turn on the light.

The strip lamp coughs and stutters, creating a momentary false dawn, before plunging back into darkness. As if reluctant to reveal the contents of the room. It hums and sparks again, and now the kitchen is flooded with light. Suddenly, vehemently. An explosion of fierce illumination, shedding cruel clarity on the objects around me. A flat, cold, bald, aching white light that makes me want to shield my eyes; that stares at me insolently, demanding I look.

A row of cupboards lines the left-hand wall; the doors a dirty cream, chipped and stained, textured with grease. The worktop below them cluttered with islands of tins and jars, the crumbs of toast, a scattering of forks and spoons. On the table are a clutch of mugs – the skim of the coffee still stuck to their edges, their insides tarnished with cold brown fluid. There are boxes of cereal, plastic bags, the wrappings of a takeaway meal, a pile of papers and unopened letters, a small, cleared corner of red Formica – just space enough for someone to eat.

I raise my eyes to the window behind it, seeing my ghosted reflection in glass, in the unshuttered mirror of infinite darkness, staring incredulously back towards me.

The cooker is caked with a film of oil, crusted with spillage which clings round its hobs, which creeps to its edge and seeps down its sides, instinctively seeking the floor. The sink beside it is stacked with plates, strewn with deposits of uneaten food – a shallow pool of sullied water lurking lifeless within.

Georgie is lying in front of the fridge, on the righthand side of the sink. Her shoulders are resting on the floor, though her legs are pointed to one side; her knees bent, her arms straight, the palm of one hand open as if offered in greeting to me, as if reaching out to take my own, or hoping I'd place a token within it.

She looks so small and so slight. So frail. So trusting. So full of belief. Ever since a child, she's been small. The smallest in her class. The one who needed to stand on a stool to brush her hair in front of the mirror; who sat on a pillow to eat her meals; who stood on tiptoe when stretching up to reach the light in her room.

She seems smaller still for the way she is lying. She could almost still be a child. A child, fatigued by a long day's play, collapsed with the weight of weariness, falling asleep where she fell. A child, blameless, innocent. Her features calm, her face serene, her skin unlined and smooth.

She could almost be asleep. In dream. At rest. But her eyes are open. Open, but lacking in focus. Open, not looking. Open, not seeing. Open. Unblinking. Hollow.

There is so much blood. How could so much blood have spilt from such a slender frame? It has spilt from her chest and down her torso, forming a pool which splays around her, framing her body in grotesque splendour, clotting her clothes to the floor.

But now she looks at peace. Pale as an angel, but calm. All those years of discontent, of disappointment, gone. All the horror of tonight – the pain, the panic, the untold fear as life drained out and ebbed away – all smoothed to rest and soothed to quiet, stilled in the wake of the storm.

I feel the press of a hand in my palm. The slightest tightening of a grip. I look down. Simon is standing beside me; close to my side – so close I can almost feel the brush of his shoulder nudging the firm of my hip. He is staring before him. Staring as I stare, as if not quite believing. As if thinking that, were I to turn off the light, the image before him would disappear. That were I then to turn it back on he would see the kitchen once more as it was, in its pristine state of disarray, without Georgie here in its heart.

Simon is staring in front of him. His head does not move; his eyes do not waver. His whole body static and motionless. As though he's been paralysed by the shock. But he does not seem to be in shock. He seems detached, almost distant. Only the strengthening grasp of his hand betrays a semblance of feeling.

As if sensing I am watching him, he looks up. His eyes meet my own. They do not question; they do not condemn. They are not filled with doubt nor with pain. But neither are they impassive. His eyes are so luminous and blue – caught in the pallid palate of his face – that I feel I see into his soul. I can see without seeing, without comprehension. Sensing only a fragile strength, a knowingness that is locked within him. A serenity, a compassion, a truth.

He is his mother's child. So slight and slender that the wind might break him. His skin so pale it is almost transparent. His hair almost white for being so fair. And here, in the harsh electric light, in the unforgiving neon glare, he seems more a wraith than a child.

He turns his head once more, as he gazes before him. What did he see here? What has happened? How much of this did he witness? How long has he been standing here? What thoughts are consuming him now?

And what am I thinking for letting him stand here? For being so caught in my dark fascination that I've let him remain in this room.

I return the squeeze of his hand, and he looks up again. I turn and lead him out of the kitchen, through the soundlessness of the hall, into the shadowland of the bedroom, patched with idle pools of grey spun from a neighbouring streetlamp.

He sits on the bed, and I crouch before him, taking both of his hands in my own. Again, he looks up into my face, but now his eyes are obscured. He is sitting upright and still. Unworried, unhurried. As if he is waiting for me to speak. As if he believes I know what to do.

I put my hand to his cheek, and he doesn't resist. Then I brush the hair from his forehead, as if that would clear the path to his mind, to instil a meagre assurance in him, a half-convincing comfort, a calm. I tell him to lie down and stay on the bed while I go next door to make a phone call. I won't be gone for too long.

He lets his body fold onto the covers, here on the edge of the mattress. I reach over, pulling the counterpane away from the wall and over his shoulders, melting him into its icy caress. I slip my hand beneath his head, raising it, dragging the pillow towards him, resting it under his neck. Then I stand and watch him silently, seeing his eyes obediently close, before walking back to the hall.

I resist the temptation to return to the kitchen. There is nothing new there to see. Instead, I reach for the phone in my pocket. I dial the number and speak. My name. Georgie's name. The address. Scant detail. They know enough to come now.

The silence in the hall is intense. It throbs in my ears. An inaudible ringing, a carnage of sound, filling the blank and dismal space. This vacant corridor. This blackness on blackness. This absence of being, sucked dry of existence. This life bereft of all life.

I take a step towards the door behind which Simon is lying, motionless, his slight body wrapped in the carcase of shade. Hoping to catch the sound of his breathing, the slow and regular rhythm of sleep. I gently push on the door. I hear a faint noise as the brush of the wood sighs in sympathy to the rug. I peer inside.

Simon is sitting up on the bed, much as he was when I led him here. Only now, the mantle is round his body, cocooning him in its delicate warmth, protecting him from the cold. He is facing me. He is looking at me. He must have heard every word.

I come towards him cautiously, slowly, not wanting to frighten him or alarm.

'Simon, put your head down.'

‘_’

'Don't you want to get some rest?'

‘_’

'You're safe now. It's going to be all right. Try to get some sleep.'

'I'm not sleepy.'

‘_’

‘_’

‘I’ve phoned the police. They are going to arrive soon. I don’t want you to get worried because they are coming to help. I don’t know exactly what’s going to happen, but they will look after you. I will look after you. I promise, you have nothing to fear.’

‘_’

‘_’

‘_’

‘What happened, Simon?’

‘_’

‘What happened here tonight?’

‘_’

‘Did somebody come round? Someone who doesn’t like your mother?’

‘_’

‘Was there an argument? A fight?’

‘_’

‘If you don’t want to talk about it, that’s fine. But at some stage the police will want to know what you know. They’ll want to know what you saw. It may be easier for you to tell me than to tell a person who you’ve never met. And once you’ve told me, it will all be all right.’

‘_’

‘_’

‘_’

‘Do you want to tell me, Simon? I think you do. I think that’s why you phoned me and not the police. I think you want me to know...’

‘_’

‘But if you don’t want to tell me now, you don’t have to. I won’t force you. I promise. I promise I’ll look after you

and protect you, regardless. You are such a brave boy. You've been so strong. Why don't you lie down and rest awhile, before the policemen arrive.'

Simon lies down again, but I know he won't sleep. I can see his eyes are no longer open, but that is just a concession to me. As soon as I go, he will sit up again. He will sit here, silently, waiting for them. And whatever he knows will revolve in his mind – torturing him with its repetition, with its bold and blatant aggression. Every last detail. The knife, the blood, the person who did this. Punishing him for witnessing it; damning him for being a child. Why won't he tell me who did it?

I pull the counterpane closer around him on seeing him shiver. Is that from the cold of the flat, or his fear? I fear Simon feels no fear. Though I'm certain he feels. He feels for his mother, for the lifeless woman who lies next door. It was foolish of me to expect him to sleep – to close his eyes and to rest his mind, to expect it all to wash away.

How long will it be before they arrive? How long has it already been? I wish that Simon would tell me what happened. But it's been so long since I was a parent, I can't remember how to relate. I've forgotten how to speak to a child, how to coax them into telling the truth. How to win their favour, their trust.

I look back down at the boy. He is still now – his body no longer trembling. Though it is so cold in this flat. Perhaps Georgie couldn't afford to heat it. Perhaps the council have not maintained it. The windows are all single-glazed, and the biting chill creeps in through the frames. There is mould where the ceiling meets with the wall, there in the corner above me.

I stand up and gradually back away, retreating into the gloom. I sense Simon feels my every movement, though he doesn't stir nor open his eyes.

I leave the door ajar as I re-enter the hall. In front of me are three choices. The front door, the bathroom, the kitchen. That is all. When Georgie secured her tenancy, she was the only one who lived here – a pregnant woman brought in off the streets as a high priority case. But now there are two of them. Where do they sleep in this tiny flat? Do they both share the one bed together?

I push at the bathroom door with care, uncertain of what I might find. I search with my hand for the light cord and pull. Inside, the room is filthy but bare. The shower screen is smashed, and a mound of clothes is heaped between the bath and the wall. I catch sight of myself in the face of the mirror standing over the basin. It is late, or I'm tired. Or just old. I pull back the mirror and look through the cupboard, searching for pills and for drugs.

Back in the hall, and I reach behind me, pulling the light cord strung in the bathroom, returning the squalid bedsit to pitch. To my right is the unwelcoming portal which leads to the kitchen where Georgie is laid out, unmoving. To my left is a half-open door behind which an eight-year-old lies, as still as his mother – as quiet and as frozen – pretending to sleep.

I don't want to disturb him. I don't want to leave him. It is awkward both being and not being with him, knowing he knows how frightened I am – that I haven't the strength that he seems to possess.

I go through to the kitchen, skirting the table, hugging the row of broken cupboards to avoid what is lying beside the fridge. I stand in front of the cooker, looking through my hollow reflection into the darkness, the emptiness. Four floors below is an oblong courtyard behind a set of black iron gates, hosting a line of recycling bins and the back of the red-brick building beyond – faceless save for its white-framed windows, for the turrets of chimney pots on its roof. There is light from behind a half-dozen windows, though the curtains are drawn, or the blinds are down, so there's no sense of presence beyond. No sound, no movement within.

To my right, over the frame of the iron gates, I can make out the pavement on Swanfield Street. Two or three cars are parked by the kerb, sheltering under the shining eye of a single brilliant streetlamp. On the other side of the road, there's another cluster of social housing, crouching in waves of obscurity the further it lies from the light.

Out there, somewhere in the impenetrable blackness, in the creeping shadow, a deeper darkness lingers still. A dark heart. A heartless being. For plunging a knife into Georgie's chest. Into Georgie's heart, in front of her son, rupturing both her heart and his own. Who would have done that? Who could have done that? Georgie. Small, unsure, lost Georgie. Harmless, helpless, hapless Georgie.

I train my eyes through the gloom, as if I could see through the swathe of night into the inhuman face of the person who stood in this flat so recently, who took Georgie's knife and made it their own, who severed her life while Simon looked on, who fled into that blackness while she bled out – here, on her own kitchen floor.

Though perhaps the offender won't have escaped. Perhaps they are still looking on. Intrigued to see what will happen. Eclipsed by the indistinct spectre of nightfall, watching on from afar. Just a hair's breadth away from the light. In a pocket of darkness behind the bins; shielded by leaves in a bush in that garden; slouched in the seat of a car.

As I look, I can see – I am sure I can see – behind the frosted glass of the windscreen of the car parked furthest away from the streetlamp, the shadow of movement, the faintest of shadows – a greyness superimposed upon grey – a silhouette, an appearance of life.

There is a knock on the door. I turn round.

I should go back to Simon and be with him now. I should never have left him all on his own. Being here in the kitchen isn't being with him; it's not protecting or shielding him. I need to keep him safe from all harm. But now it's too late. Between Simon and me is the door.

I walk round the table and into the hall. I turn on the light as I open the door. In the corridor outside there are two policemen, and a woman behind in plain clothes. I usher them in and point to the kitchen. One of the officers stands beside me while the others enter the room. I can hear them talking in muffled tones, though I cannot distinguish the words.

There's a crackle of a radio and metallic voices filling the kitchen with sound. Then more shuffling, more tentative, furtive movement, concealed behind the half-closed door.

I glance at the officer standing beside me, surprised he hasn't yet spoken. I realise, based on where he's positioned, his function is merely to monitor me, to prevent me reaching the door. And that gives me no comfort at all. I should do the very British thing of offering them all a cup of tea, but the notion of it seems absurd. Instead, I inform him there's a young boy next door, who's fallen asleep in the bedroom.

The officer summons the plain-clothed woman, briefly relaying what I have just told him. She walks past me into the room behind me. Simon must be feigning sleep, for she pauses by the edge of the door before turning back to the hall. She calls on her phone for more assistance, before finally speaking to me.

'Are you the person who dialled 999?'

'Yes.'

'And who are you?'

'My name is Martin Frost.'

'How are you related to the woman in the kitchen?'

'I'm her brother. Her elder brother.'

'So, you found her?'

'Yes. No.'

'Which?'

'I received a call from her son, Simon, who's sleeping next door. He asked me to come round, so I did. And I found Georgie lying there. But he found her first.'

'Why did he phone you not the police?'

'I don't know.'

'Haven't you asked him why?'

'I tried, but I think he's traumatised. He may not have known who else to call.'

‘Was he here when this happened? Has he told you what happened?’

‘I think he was here, but he hasn’t said a word.’

‘Are you sure he hasn’t told you anything? He’s told you nothing at all?’

‘Yes.’

‘And what is the name of the deceased?’

‘Georgie Frost.’

‘Does she have any other family?’

‘No. Only me and Simon. Our parents are dead.’

‘Is she in a relationship? Are there any other people who live here?’

‘Not that I’m aware of.’

She pauses and looks at me. Not that she has run out of questions, but she seems to be sizing me up. As she does so, it occurs to me she views me as a potential suspect, and that is why they are guarding me. I put out my hand to reach for the doorframe, steadying myself on my feet.

More people begin to arrive. Two medics. Another man with a case. A woman who appears in the hall, then turns straight into the bedroom. I want to remonstrate, but the woman I spoke to is clearly in charge. I hadn’t thought through what was likely to happen, but I hadn’t envisaged this scene. This loss of control, this helplessness, this confusion of people and movement.

Once more the woman is talking to me. She tells me that she’s from Bethnal Green, from the police station where she is assigned. She is inviting me to go with her to attend a voluntary interview. They can take me there in a car. I want to know what will happen to Simon, and she tells me a social worker is with him. He’ll be taken into

emergency care and placed in a foster home for the night. He'll be safe there, and then tomorrow morning I can see him again and discuss the way forward. For now, they would like to talk to me further if I would be willing to come.

She makes it clear I am free to choose, but it doesn't seem much of a choice. I glance once more at the bedroom door – tempted to look inside at the boy – then nod my acceptance and follow the woman out of the flat, to the common concourse.

The stairwell is filthy but brightly lit, as if to deter any vagrants or dealers. A smell of urine stains the air. I hear the boots of the man behind me echoing off the concrete walls, while focusing on the woman's head descending at pace before me.

We come to the courtyard. A tight bunch of cars are parked on the tarmac, washed with intermittent blue light. There is more light that shines from the shuttered windows carved in the brick of the neighbouring block. I sense curtains are opening and faces are peering – they are looking out at this person, this stranger – they are judging me with their eyes.

The door of a police car is opened for me, and I take a seat in the rear. The officer who has accompanied me ever since they first entered the flat, sits silently to my side. There is a closeness here in the back. An airlessness. An unwanted intimacy. The smell of leather upholstery is pungent, and the panel of lights which blinks on the dashboard reflects off the windscreen like Christmas tree lights, sparkling and winking at me.

I have never been in a police car before.

The woman outside is giving instructions to a group of officers huddled around her; then she opens the passenger door and climbs in. The sound of the engine is deep and smooth, like the silky voice of a bass-baritone. We turn into Swanfield Street and nudge down the road, soaked in light and then pools of darkness as we pass a steady line of streetlamps. We turn the corner into Redchurch Street, and now we are here on Bethnal Green Road. I look out onto the shops and cafés. They seem so removed, so far away. So familiar, yet somehow so different now. Divorced, in a separate world.

The woman sitting in front of me is talking again on her handset. A constant stream of curious words, of crackled code in return. She doesn't look round, nor speak to me. It is as if she doesn't know I am here.

We stop at the lights. I can see St John's ahead of me, and the steps which lead to Bethnal Green Tube. I watch as the lights turn green. We creep onto Cambridge Heath Road, veering right just past the museum, then turning again down a narrow road, pulling up by the park.

The officer gets out and walks round the car, opening my door and escorting me up a small flight of steps to the red-brick building. I follow him down a well-lit hallway – twisting and turning and brushing through fire doors – into the core of the station.

He opens the door to a room and asks me to sit. It is the first time he has spoken to me. He tells me his colleagues will be along shortly; that if I need him, he's stationed outside.

He closes the door. I am left on my own, in the silence, in the heart of this building. The room is bland, but it feels oppressive – it feels like the weight of this whole solid structure is pressing upon me, stifling me, depriving me air I can breathe.

A different officer comes into the room. He hands me a thin stapled sheath of paper and asks me to read it all through. I look up at him, and he smiles. An encouraging smile. He asks if he can get me a drink, if I need to make use of their bathroom. He tells me I am not under arrest; I am free to go whenever I choose. He senses my innocence, my fear. His voice is reassuringly warm, his words well-meaning, his diction slow.

I glance at the title of what I've been given. "Remember Your Rights – Voluntary Interview." I try to focus in on the words. They are written in large print, and the terms are simple, but the meaning doesn't stick in my brain. Instead, I explore the room with my eyes, wondering who else has sat here and why; wondering where they are now.

I wonder where Simon is, too. They will have led him away from his home. They will have ushered him into a car, with a stranger sitting beside him. And I know how frightening that is now. They will have taken him to an unknown house, where an unknown person will have shepherded him into a sterile and unknown room, and told him to lie down and go to sleep on an unknown bed in the corner. And however kind and gentle their actions, however soft and soothing their words, they cannot disguise they are wrenching him from the only world that he knows.

They will have turned off the light and shut the door. They will have left him alone in the dark. I expect they will linger awhile, just to listen; they will station themselves in the hall. But however caring, how well-intentioned, that is slight comfort to him. I hope he sleeps. I hope it comes easy. But I fear for him, and for what he might dream, for knowing all he has seen.