



Wednesbury Christmas Tale

'I don't believe in Santa anymore.' Each time a child says this it may be that the shine on his large boots becomes a little more tarnished, his cheeks a little less ruddy, his girth may shrink by another pound or two, wisps of hair come loose from his beard and fall like pine needles to the floor. Each time a child doubts, a spring comes unsprung on the toy assembly line and it shudders and slows, and somewhere in the arctic wilds a snow wolf lifts its head to the baleful moon and moans like the wind.

In Wednesbury, the snow came early this winter, a great storm of snow blowing down from the Arctic. Day in, day out, the storm blew and blew. The snow fell and quickly covered the rooftops the gardens and the fences and blocked the roads and pathways. Tree branches creaked under the weight of the snowfall and slate roofs sagged and slumped. Usually, in this place, the snow comes and goes quickly - one week later all that's left is dirt crusted gobbets lying in the gutters and on the kerbs like stacks of soggy prawn crackers from the Chinese takeaway. But this storm was different.

It was as if all the snow and ice that covered the whole of Greenland had lifted high up into the air and plummeted down on one small Midlands town. With no room left on the roof, snowflakes effortlessly crept under the eaves into the house and finely coated the top of the stairs with a frosty gloss. Snow piled up on the patio and buried the largest plant pots. At the bottom of the hill, the street turned into one long unbroken dune of snow, with motor vehicles buried beneath. The snow blew up against the walls of the library turning it, foot by foot, into a

palace of ice and frost, its' broken window panes clogged with solid balls of snow. The snow coated the neon sign on top of the Bingo Hall until it no longer glowed red but pink and then, on the third day of the storm, it completely disappeared, like embers of the fire slowly fading away into that night's deluge of snow.

The snow fell. And with the snowstorm came silence. No one ventured out. The engines of the council road gritters ground to a halt and froze. The postman stayed in bed, his feet on a hot water bottle but chilled to the bone in a dream of snow. Icebound schools were closed in the very last days before the Christmas holiday. Snowploughs ordered from Canada stayed locked in their boxes at the port. All was still.

Soon it was Christmas Eve, the quietest in memory. Strings of lights shone powder blue, crimson red and emerald green on the swirling snow. Cats and dogs and children stayed indoors by the fire, warm and toasty, listening to the wind gathering the snow up and tossing it against the windows. People huddled around television sets clad in tinsel. The pelican crossing traffic light froze on amber. It was so cold that the hands of the town clock tower finally stuck at five to eight.

This was more snow than anyone had seen in a long, long time. Some people recalled the winter storm of 1968, when everyone stayed indoors and played card games and drank sherry and ate all the chocolates and mince pies before Christmas Day had dawned.

This storm was different - it was bitter and raw and unrelenting. If you poked your nose outside the door, you were chilled to the bone in an instant. If you stood in the garden and closed your eyes, your eyelashes would freeze together. The TV weathermen said it was warmer in Siberia.

So this Christmas Eve, the little town of Wednesbury slept under deeper and deeper blankets of snow.

The snow continued to fall relentlessly, disrupting the natural order of things, and out of the sky, at one minute past midnight, with the eddying snow, plummeted something that looked like a shooting star.

If you listened very, very carefully, with all your ear power, this is what you might have heard:

- a thudding sound, like a giant heartbeat
- an animal screeching sound
- a breaking sound, the sound that a meteorite might make impacting on the earth's atmosphere
- a whoosh, a shrill whistle, a sharp intake of breath □□(all at the same time)
- a crunching sound, like rough sandpaper rubbing on wood
- a scratchy record sound that was really metal and wood smashing into the snow
- and a **BOING** – like a large metal spring being released

- then silence (except for the soft patter of the snow) for a little while
- and finally, a very loud voice which said:
‘OH MY GOODNESS GOSH! GREAT HEAVENS ABOVE!
 What a **MAGNIFICENT** disaster, an occasion beyond scope....’

Just imagine. There's a huge snowdrift in the Memorial Gardens, so big that the stone memorial to the dead of the First and Second World Wars - which is over twenty five feet tall - is covered except for a tiny six inches of polished granite poking out of the snow. There's a deep, gaping puncture in the snow, next to the poking piece of granite, and a trail of torn pieces of wrapping paper adrift in the night air. Out of the hole comes a plume of steam, those animal noises, heaving, breathing, whining, the **BOING** sound, and that cavernous voice - a slightly annoyed voice, a voice shaking with shock because what has just happened has never, ever happened before. Never, ever in the long history of time or ever on any other Christmas Eve.

A head popped out from under the snow and steam. It was a man with ruddy cheeks and a white beard that looks like cotton wool coated with frost. He wore a funny, crumpled green hat with white trimmings. That huge voice boomed out again: **‘OH HEAVENS ABOVE, OH MY GOODNESS GRACIOUS ME!** I can't believe this has happened...’

On his elbows, he dragged himself a few yards away from the hole. He sat up and rubbed his head. ‘I can't believe this has happened...’ he said again, but quietly this time and a little breathlessly. Oh, but it has. Santa's famous sleigh has come crashing to earth without bidding, smashed into the ground at 100 miles per hour in the biggest snowstorm of the century.

Santa. The **REAL** Santa. Not the one of the fake Santas who sit inside the moulded plastic Peter Pan Grottoes, who ring bells outside of an Enchanted Castle and wear red costumes. This was the **REAL** Santa, who worried about the growing army of fake Santas. He had counted at least one million, three hundred thousand, two hundred and sixty four around the globe last Christmas. In some countries, the fake Santas had dispensed with traditional Christmassy grottoes with elves and such, and instead stood on the frost glazed styrofoam ramparts of Castle Dracula, or stamped along the shiny tinfoil corridors of the Death Star from the Star Wars movies. The real Santa worried about the day when Christmas decorations would appear in the shops in the middle of the month of July.

The genuine Santa sat in a daze and while he sat there, slowly, some toys began to stir with a quiet satisfied yawn, as if they were waking from a long, enjoyable sleep.

‘Oh deary deary me,’ muttered Santa, looking around. His voice seemed to have lost all its power, rather like his sleigh.

Toys were all over the place, miles of wrapping paper lay shredded, ribbons trailed across the snow like thousands of shiny snakes. There were singing dogs, crying dolls, giggling dolls, burping farting dolls, talking pets, The Feeding Fun Stable With Water Pump That Really Works (only it was frozen solid at the moment), Action Men upended with just their boots showing, coloured pencils and crayons sticking up out of the snow like arrows. Santa could see racing cars, wooden railway tracks, pogo sticks, play food, roller skates, skateboards, bead sets, books and chocolate oranges strewn over the icy landscape. Zebras, giraffes and lions from the Circus set were making a break for it, chased after by their Ringmaster, who was already sweating profusely and shouting for help.

‘What a **MESS**,’ Santa said, ‘I’ve come a cropper.’

In a gleaming flurry of snowflakes, a bear shape struggled to break free of the snow. Two bear eyes popped open with a frosty crack. Santa looked down at the bear shape and asked, ‘Now, little fellow, are you a polar bear or a snowman?’

The bear shook its foamy white pelt and began to look more, well, like a tiny brown bear with some odd white patches. ‘No, it’s me, it’s Old Bear,’ he said. ‘I’m just covered head to toe in snow. I was thrown out of the sleigh when you crashed.’ He vigorously brushed off the white patches.

‘I’m **SORRY**, I really don’t know **WHAT** happened...’ said Santa.

‘What happened...’ said Old Bear, ‘...was that you were **roaring Ho! Ho! Ho! Ho!** through the middle of the storm and telling us toys that this was the best white knuckle ride ever, and looking over your shoulder at us and not in front of you – where you should have been looking - and then we hit a huge chunk of ice flying right in front of us.’

‘Oh deary me... I really must pay more attention to my attention deficit problem,’ said Santa. ‘But are you alright?’

‘Never mind me, I’m just freezing out here. I should be tucked up in a stocking at the foot of a bed by now,’ said Old Bear. ‘It’s you I’m worried about. If I’m not mistaken, that looks like a broken leg to me. And I’ve seen a few broken bones in my time.’

It was true. He had spent a lot of time in the Broken Toy Workshop and he could tell that Santa’s left leg was broken in two places. ‘Try not to move,’ he said. ‘And definitely don’t try to stand up.’

‘Oh deary me,’ said Santa. He was beginning to feel a little dizzy.

Old Bear headed for the sleigh, buried deep in the hole. ‘It’s a good job kids still want Doctors and Nurses Kits as well as computer games,’ he said. ‘And it’s a good job you’ve got me here,’ he added to himself.

He dragged back a large box with a red cross on it and a Barbie Medic. He pulled her free from the crumpled packaging and gently rubbed some snow on her cheeks to wake her up. ‘Get to work,’ he said.

Santa looked worried. 'I think we'll need some help to get all of you delivered on time' He pulled from his robe a Talk and Tell Mobile Phone. He dialled Lapland 2700 and waited. Nothing happened. 'It just rings and says service disconnected,' he said with some disgust. 'We'll have to do a better job on this brand of toy next year...'

'Leave it to me, Boss. You know you can trust me,' said Old Bear. A plan was already forming in his head. He told himself it was simply a question of organisation and of keeping calm.

Old Bear had been out on the sleigh twice before in the last century. Once he'd belonged to a family in Peckham who looked after him very well and fed him tea and his favourite cake, Battenburg. He'd joined in with two generations of family games until he became quite threadbare and had finally found himself back in Santa's Repairs & Renewals Workshop getting a fine new coat of hair, the sticking plaster on his paws replaced with lovely new felt patches and he even got two new shiny eyes. Then he'd found himself on the floor of the bedroom of a little girl in Halifax who grew to be quite stuck up and horrible. She would stamp on him when she wasn't allowed sweets and quite left him outside in the garden in the rain, where slugs would run over his tummy in the night. When she finally bothered to find him, she would laugh at his condition and throw him into the holly bushes.

Santa had promised him a good home this time and Old Bear was determined to get there before dawn.

He tugged two Action Men from the wreckage. 'OK, boys, get one of those igloo play tents set up to protect our patient. Then let's see what we can do to fix the sleigh. It's still Christmas Eve and we've all got homes to go to...'

The Action Men nervously scanned the landscape. Once the tent was up, one of them pulled on his Air Patrol suit. He powered up and hovered a few feet in the air. 'Before we get to work on the sleigh, we'd better check if Dr. X or any of his X-bots have escaped.'

'Better safe than sorry,' said the other Action Man. 'Just when you thought he was dead, he returns more evil than ever.'

'Ok, Ok, I know,' said Old Bear. 'Just do your stuff.'

He began to organise all the toys available. The Pirates from Skull & Crossbones Island went up into the bell tower above the library to keep watch. 'Don't drink any of that grog and fall asleep, me hearties,' said Old Bear as they began their climb. He didn't think anyone would be out and about, but it was as well to be prepared.

Snow Sindy and her trusty Husky Dog emerged from the snow heap. She pulled her accessory sledge and skis out. 'Let me help too,' she said. 'I'll take a quick look around and be back, OK?' She sped off. She was glad to have something to do.

‘Well, let's see where on earth we are,’ said Santa, pulling out a crumpled map. He pored over this for a long while, as the Barbie Medic gently prodded his leg.

‘Hmm, let me just check the longitude. Umm, I wonder if we could be in Wedderburne, Australia? It's the **RIGHT** longitude, **WRONG** latitude. It starts with a W, I'm sure. Wana, Pakistan? Weichang? Waikiki? No, no, that's not it. **JUST WHERE ARE WE?**’

‘I can tell you, Santa,’ said Snow Sindy, her skis coming to a halt with a screech. ‘There’s a sign at the bottom of the street. We're somewhere called Wednesbury.’

‘**WEDNESBURY? WED-NES-BURY!**’ roared Santa. ‘Good Heavens! No. No. No. I'm on the **WRONG** side of the planet. I've already delivered toys here! About two point five hours ago. We must hurry, Old Bear. **OUCH!** For goodness sake, will you be careful, Barbie?’

‘I'm sorry,’ said the Barbie Medic. ‘I'm brand new. I've never done this before.’

Old Bear wondered whether Santa had ever broken any bones before. He walked back to the crash site with Snow Sindy to assess the damage.

It was too dark down in the hole. The fairie lights on the back of the sledge refused to work. Several of the bulbs were smashed to pieces. ‘Anyone got a torch?’ he asked.

‘Hug me and I'll tell you a story,’ said a Pooh Bear.

Old Bear pushed Pooh out of the way. ‘Give me a break,’ he said.

‘Please let's sleep now,’ uttered Pooh drowsily and softly began to snore face down in the snow.

Spiderman, Shrek, Batman, The Hulk and several of the Bratz dolls all offered to help. They found a Junior Garden Set and started to dig the sleigh out.

‘Help get the reindeer out first,’ said Old Bear. ‘Let's make sure they're not hurt.’ Soon, there were more toys than space to work. Snowboard Raider Action Man used his motorised ice cutting chainsaw to widen the tunnel. While they dug under the sleigh, four Giant Trucks helped shift the snow, co-ordinated by two Robo-Sapiens, giving directions in their distinctive voices. Several Sindys and Barbies began to patch the sledge with the help by the light of a Make Your Own Glow Candle Kit, and the Brahms Lullaby Light Show. Snow Sindy was put in charge of helping the reindeer. Her Husky Dog helped dig out the snow with his huge paws.

Old Bear reported progress to Santa. ‘It doesn't look good,’ he said wearily. ‘The sleigh is badly damaged. Quite frankly, it looks like firewood.’

‘You **MUST** get it working, Old Bear,’ said Santa. ‘There's **THOUSANDS** of children out there waiting to wake up and play with their gifts. We **CAN'T** disappoint them!’

The reindeer had been freed, but looked in a sorry state. 'We won't let you down,' they said in reindeer language to Santa. 'We'll eat a few carrots, have a sip of brandy and we'll be fine.'

Old Bear was already thinking of Plan B. He talked to Snow Sindy. 'I think we need to find another sleigh,' he said in a whisper.

'In Wednesbury? That's a tall order, Old Bear,' she said. 'But maybe I can find something that just might do the job.' She led her Husky Dog back to her tiny sledge. 'I'll need to take one of the Gargoyles with me, one of the Legolas action figures and some Sky Dancers to help.'

'Good luck,' said Old Bear, watching the sledge skim over the snow until it disappeared.

Some of the Action Men had found a table soccer. They'd set it up and asked Shaving Ken if he wanted to play game. 'We haven't got time for that!' said Old Bear sternly. 'Every toy must help. Got any bright ideas?'

The hard plastic face of the Action Men looked mournfully at the Bear. 'We were just trying to keep warm,' one said in a grumpy voice as hard and cold as iron.

Ken rubbed his beard. 'We could tie the reindeer harness to the back of the sleigh, and then use one of the Police Patrol Vehicles or Power Wheel Trucks to pull it out of the hole. What do you think?'

'That Police Patrol Vehicle is too small,' said Old Bear. 'Use one of the Tow Trucks instead. OK, tough guys, get to work, and put some muscle into it.'

Soon they were ready. Sparkle Beach Barbie claimed to be the best driver, so she climbed into the seat of the Tow Truck, switched on the engine and put it into first gear. The Truck edged forward slowly. It strained and tugged at the sleigh, but it wouldn't budge. All the toys grabbed onto the harness and helped to pull. With a great wrench the sleigh came free of the icy hole. They all could see the huge gash in the side. The front end was splintered into little pieces. All the jingle bells were crushed flat. Old Bear knew in his heart that it could not be repaired in time.

'**OH DEARY ME,**' moaned Santa. 'What can we do?'

From inside a sack in the sleigh, the biggest crying baby started crying.

'Oh please shut up now,' said Old Bear. 'You haven't even been unpacked.'

The clock was ticking and the toys needed to be delivered. Old Bear waited for what seemed like ages for Snow Sindy to return. When she did, she had a big smile on her face. 'I'll need Sparkle Beach Barbie, the Tow Truck, Stretch Armstrong and several Hulks,' she said. 'Come on, follow me...'

Old Bear jumped on her sledge and she led the way over the hill.

'Look,' said Snow Sindy. 'Do you think we could use that?'

On the top of the hill, only half buried in snow, was a very large skip empty except for 10 large sacks of rubbish. As quick as they could, they dug it out and towed it back

Santa looked aghast. 'It just doesn't look RIGHT,' he said. It was bright yellow.

'We can use the fire engine red from the Paint by Numbers kit to spruce it up a little,' suggested Old Bear.

They set to work turning the skip into a makeshift sleigh. One by one, all the toys were carefully replaced in their boxes. The wrapping paper was glued back together, the ribbons retied, and the boxes stacked carefully in the skip. The reindeer took their places, their harnesses attached to the side of the skip. A seat for Santa was fashioned from pieces of broken wood from the old sleigh. Three squashy sacks of rubbish was left in the skip as a cushion for Santa's broken leg. Finally, the only toys left were Old Bear and Snow Sindy.

'One of us will have to stay awake and help Santa,' said Old Bear.

'You climb into one of the sacks and get snug and warm,' said Snow Sindy. 'I'll stay with him and help.'

'But that means you won't get delivered in time!' cried Old Bear.

'Look, I'll be fine,' she said. 'I've got my sledge and trusty Husky Dog - he never gets tired. I'll make sure Santa gets home safe and then I'll sledge back to my destination. I'll just turn up a week or two late, that's all. No-one will really notice with all those Bratz girls around this Christmas.'

Old Bear kissed her goodbye. 'I hope I'll see you again,' he said. 'Take care.' He climbed into the nearest sack and promptly fell asleep.

Santa took up the reins with Snow Sindy by his side. 'Ho! Ho! Ho! Ho!' he chuckled. 'Off we go!' He had almost forgotten about his broken leg and the fact he was sitting in a skip.

The reindeer breathed in deep, bowed their heads, pulled the skip forward, trotted round in a circle going faster and faster until their hooves no longer touched the ground. Up and up they went, in bigger and bigger spirals in a foam of frost spume, until the freshly painted skip was a tiny twinkling red star in the sky.

In Wednesbury, the snow no longer fell. All was silent except for the creak of tree branches. As dawn approached, if you were awake, you could hear the sound of snow slowly melting down the chimney. Drip drip drip. Icy drops of water dripping into the ashes of the fireplace.

In the early morning, an old man walking his dog in the Memorial Gardens saw a big hole in the snow filled with seven large sacks of rubbish and a pile of splintered wood and broken Christmas lights.

'Litterbugs,' he grumbled.

For Katy x x

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