

CHRISTMAS (CLASS) T(H)REE

By Duncan P. Bradshaw

“It is.”

“It isn’t.”

“Erm, I think if you look closer, you’ll see it definitely is.”

“Mate, I assure you, it isn’t.”

“Jim, don’t be a cockblocking nonce, I’m telling you, that there is Rudolph the red nose fucking reindeer”, Philip lowered the crossbow to the snow covered ground and scowled at his brother.

Jim sighed and shook his head gently, “Phil, this is Wales, the reindeer is not indigenous to this part of the world, it’s a stag, a bloody large one admittedly, but nothing more exotic than that.”

Philip looked through the crossbow scope once more, the majestic beast stood firm, its jaw gently masticating, its nose wrinkled trying to work out what the unusual smell was. “See, ordinarily Jimbo, I would agree with you, you’re a pretty learned chap, a bit of a five knuckle shuffler, but if that’s not Rudolph the red nose fucking reindeer, why does it have a red nose, oh wise and masterful one?”

Jim squinted at the animal, now stood stock still, aware of the intruders in its surroundings, “Can we have this argument after you kill it? It’s the first animal we’ve seen larger than that hibernating squirrel we bagged last week-”

Jim cupped his hands to his eyes, “-and even then the little tinker woke up and nearly got away, you need to kill first and teabag second, okay?”

Philip tutted, held his breath and aimed at the deer, its magnificent head turned in his direction, its eyes flared, “Fuck” he muttered and squeezed the trigger, the bolt flew across the clearing and slammed into the deer’s neck, it fell to the floor emitting a loud grunting and squealing.

As they approached, they could see steam rise from a puncture wound, the bolt must’ve severed the spinal column as the animal’s head thrashed around, yet its body and limbs remained perfectly still, the grunting rose in volume as the two brothers approached.

“Jimmy boy, are you going to put that poor bastard out of its misery?” Philip asked, an air of annoyance in his voice.

“On it” Jim replied, pulling Wilma from its cracked, black scabbard, despite its use, the blade remained as keen as the day it had been forged, Jim knelt down by the deer, the neck jerking was slowly subsiding, but the noise continued unabated.

“Sorry old chum, but if I have to eat instant mashed potato with kidney beans one more night, I swear I might actually turn into a zombie out of protest.” Jim patted the creature's head affectionately and then held it down with his free hand; he slid the blade into his approximation of the animal's brain.

The stag coughed up a chunk of half-chewed frozen berries mixed with yellow saliva and blood, its tongue lolled out of the bottom of its mouth and the sound of death subsided.

“Goodnight sweet prince” Jim whispered, the animal fell silent, the frozen forest became sullen, mourning its loss, broken only by a low end moan carried on the wind, like a barely suppressed fart.

Having caught up with the fallen animal, Philip looked down at his brother, who in turn looked from the stag and up to Philip, the moaning rumbled again, puzzled, Jim put an ear to the deer's mouth, the moaning stopped, “Phew, for a minute there-” he was interrupted by the same noise as before, but now in stereo, “-oh for Pete's sake” he finished.

Philip cocked his ear, in the belly of the forest, the moaning seemed to come from all directions, he cast a glance around, the view a mix of white and brown, his breath formed low level clouds around his head. He stopped, a moving shadow visible through thick tree trunks;

“Ahhh, twas the night before Christmas and all round the copse,
not a creature was stirring, especially that reindeer I just shot.
The stockings were hung in the safe zone with care,
but not for those damn zombies whose brains we will bare.”

A spurt of blood and marrow jetted into the air as Philip yanked the crossbow bolt from the dead animal's body, staining the crisp snowfall. He reloaded his weapon, nodded towards Jim and gestured towards the moving shadow;

“The broski's were nestled all snug in their beds,
visions of mince pies and cheese footballs danced in their heads,
me in my jim-jams and you in the noddy,
were determined to keep all the parts of our body.”

Jim coughed and pointed to another shambling shadow on the periphery of the dell, its grey, lacerated arms extended from the gloom, reaching for its lunch;

“When out on the glade there arose such a clatter,
we sprung from our kill when we had them chatter,

I grabbed my weapon as quick as a flash,
I actually don't mind if we make do with Smash."

A crackle sounded as a frozen foot stood on brittle twigs, stumbling from the murk of the forest and into the daylight of the clearing he was revealed, the white snow bouncing the sun-rays onto the undead visitor, "What the fuck-" Philip uttered, barely believing what he was seeing, "-I told you that was Rudolph, look who it is bro."

The zombie was clearly a man, though its left leg had been twisted ninety degrees round by some devastating injury, he moved like a bipedal crab, one leg bending forward and the other doing the same, but backwards as he lurched across the pristine glistening snow.

He was wearing a heavily stained white t-shirt, ripped and torn, with a red pair of dungarees resting off one shoulder strap; a thick black workman's belt was tied tightly around its distended waist. Its pallid grey face was fixed onto Philip, its jaw gently chuntered, sensing its first warm meal for weeks, as it chewed the air, its white bushy beard bounced up and down.

Jim lunged towards the assailant on his side and slid the wakazashi through the side of the zombie's skull and into its brain. Like an expired clockwork toy its arms dropped to the side and it plopped onto the snow, he turned to his brother, "Phil, are you going to kill it or what?"

Philip gulped and looked across at Jim, "Are you shitting me, I've already plugged Rudolph today, not entirely convinced if I dismember zombie Santa that I'll ever get myself back onto the 'Good' list."

Jim visibly sagged and walked across to the other walking cadaver, as he moved past Philip, he gave him a disapproving sigh. Wilma slid through another skull and Zombie Father Christmas slumped to the ground, as it landed, the frost and snow which had encrusted its face shook loose, revealing a black beard, "See, you mug, let's see if they have anything of use" Jim shook his head and crouched down by the extinguished deadhead, rolling him onto his back.

Philip crouched down by his brother, Jim looked at him, "Told you, it was just snow and that on his beard, must've worked in a shop or something, look, here's his name tag:



Philip looked at the body and then at Jim, "Saint's Nick, are you pulling my plonker and calling me a woman? Dude, this is pretty messed up, first Rudolph and now Santa, what the hell next? Are we going to have to stove the Tooth Fairy's head in? Perhaps we get to trap, strangle and gently sauté the Easter bunny?"

Jim laughed, "Mate, this is all just a coincidence, look, this isn't a reindeer, it's just a bog standard, run of the mill.....why in the name of fudge is its nose red?"

"Told you" Philip replied snidely, giving Jim his best I told you so face.

Jim peered closer at the stags crimson schnoz, poking it with the scabbard as if it was some vile, hideous malformity, "Hmm, must've been allergic to something, those berries perhaps?" he ventured.

"More like your fetid wang mate, probably got a whiff of that down-wind and that was it, red nose" Philip said, pointing at Jim's crotch.

"Ha-de-ha-ha Phil, c'mon, lets search these two, we need to make a sled or something and get Rudol...I mean this deer back to base" Jim huffed and started rooting round the dead zombies pockets.

As Philip cautiously knelt down by Saint's Nick, an idea flashed across his brain, a smile formed, "Hey bro, check this out" he hollered and plunged his hand through Nick's trouser fly and into his sweet potato garden.

Jim looked across, his face wracked with puzzlement, "What the hell are you doing Phil?"

The clearing echoed with the sound of Philip laughing, "I'm seeing what Santa has in his sack for you, ha ha ha ha....URGH, what the fuck is this?" his hand retracted from the trouser opening cupping a shrivelled pair of testicles, "Dirty bastard could've put some pants on before the apocalypse, fucking hell, I wanted Scalextric not weathered zombie nuts, here you go Jimmy, early Christmas present, heads up."

The rock hard, crinkly, undead ball-bags hit Jim in the face just as he turned to look at his brother, whilst Philip fell about pissing himself with laughter, Jim shot him the death stare, "Philip, please, let's get this done" he managed to growl through clenched teeth.

With tears still rolling down his face, Philip calmed himself, "Yeah man, my bad, what did you want for Christmas anyway Jimbo?" he asked as he started to rifle through the workman's belt, casting rusty screws and bolts behind him.

Jim rolled the zombie over, patting down the shirt and trousers in case there was anything of use hidden away, "Hadn't really thought about it to be fair, suppose with everything that's happened, one night of unbroken sleep would be good, this deer should give us a good meal tomorrow, that'll do me mate."

Jim sighed in disappointment, stood up and blew air into his freezing hands, “You find anything dude?”

Philip looked up, “Nothing really mate, rusty screws, a tape measure, which unfortunately for you doesn’t measure in millimetres, a screwdriver and a phone number for some bird called Big Bertha.”

The pair walked over to the cooling carcass of the stag and looked down at it, “Guess we better go get a couple of sturdy branches, use some rope to lash them together and drag this back to camp, we’re gonna be super popular when they see us with this” Jim said, still breathing on his hands to get the sensation back in them.

Philip laid the two branches on the frozen ground, pulling the rope from his rucksack, they started to tie the rope around to make a makeshift stretcher-sled, “Jim...” Philip asked quietly.

Bracing himself for what hilarity Philip had in store for him now, Jim looked up slowly, “Yeah?” he asked tentatively.

Philip stopped working the rope round a branch and muttered, “Do you still think about them? Mum and dad I mean, do you still think about them?”

The question took Jim back for a moment, unprepared for the solemnity of the question, he breathed on his hands before replying, “Yeah man, every day, I think with it being this time of year, it hits home even harder, we get respite from thinking too much about it with just having to survive, but Christmas was always about spending time with them huh? Even when we left home, we’d always see them for at least one day over the festive period.”

Philip was still looking down, Jim could hear him sniffing, “You alright mate?” he asked, placing a cold hand on his brother’s shoulder.

“Yeah, I’m cool, know what you mean, I always remember Christmas Eve as a kid, dad would be at work, saying he would finish early, but would always roll in around six, stinking of fags and beer. Mum never minded though, it was always you, me and her making all the cakes and food for the buffet on Christmas Day, she’d always have a cheeky sherry or two eh? She’d get to a stage during the afternoon where she was half-cut and would pour us a little glass each” Philip recalled the fond memory, a half smile, tinged with sadness was painted to his face, when he looked over to his brother, Jim could see that his eyes were red.

Jim put both arms around Phil and pulled him closer, “It’s alright bro, they’re always with us, as long as we are alive, then they will always live on, it’ll be alright mate. Think of all the things we’ve done in the past seven months, the people we’ve saved, the camp we’ve helped to build, we’re creating a real community here, that printing press was inspired, your guide is out there now, hopefully helping people. Mum and dad would’ve been proud, really proud.”

Philip closed his eyes tighter, forcing the tears which had been held in reserve to roll down the side of his nose and onto Jim's parka, "I know mate, just.....wish we could've saved them, done something, I keep thinking of dad out there, alone, as one of them, I...."

"What?" Jim asked, pulling back to look his brother in his red eyes, "What is it Phil?"

"I had that dream about him again, the one I've had since we got here. I'm in hospital, it's like when I had my wisdom teeth out, I wake up and there's no-one there, it's daytime, light is coming in through these dirty windows. I look at the pillow which is soaked in blood and look up, and there he is, standing there, just looking at me" Philip said, recounting the dream which seemed so real with every replay.

Jim gulped, "What happens next Phil?" he asked gently.

Philip sniffed up a huge chunk of snot and boogies, before running his sleeve across his eyes, "He's kinda shaded as he's standing in front of the window, but I know it's him. I ask him what happened to him and mum, he doesn't answer. I ask him where he's been and what he's done, he doesn't answer. Then I ask him what he would've done if he was me and he..."

"What Phil, what does he do?" Jim moved in closer.

"...he staggers forward on unsteady legs, I can see his face now, its grey, you know the colour, we see the same shade of it every day on a hundred nameless faces, man, woman and child. Those pinprick pupils look at me; dried blood in the corner of his mouth cracks and flakes as his mouth yawns opens showing rows of broken teeth. I try to scream but nothing comes out, he reaches out for me and grabs me by the shoulders, his mouth moves in and just as he's about to chew a chunk out of me, I wake up."

The silence in the clearing seemed deafening, Jim patted his brother on the arm, "It's alright mate, come on, let's finish this up and get back, mum won't be there with cake and sherry, but the others will be there and they need us, same as we need them, come on bro."

They finished tying the sled together and hauled the dead animal onto it, lifting one end up satisfied them that it'll take the weight, "Good work bro" Jim said, tucking his freezing hands under his armpits, the warmth instantly sends pins and needles tingling down his numb digits.

Philip gave him a thumbs up, "I'm going to do it Jim, I have to, I know you think it's crazy, but I've got to do it", Jim looked at him sideways, knowing that when his brother's mind is made up, it can't be shifted, he merely nodded in agreement.

"Fine, here you go mate, was going to save this for tomorrow, but you may as well have it now" Jim fumbled through an inside pocket in his coat and pulled out a small object wrapped in lined note paper.

"What is it?" Philip asked, genuinely surprised.

“It wouldn’t be much of a surprise present if I told you what it was huh?” Jim replied, a smile spreading across his face, “Are you going to take it or what, I’m flipping freezing here.”

Philip reached out a hand and took the roughly wrapped present from him, “I...I don’t know what to say, here, I’ve got you something too.” Philip plunged his hand into his trouser pocket and pulled out a balled up hand, “Here you go mate, take it.” Jim leant forward and looked at his brother’s hand, *it must be pretty small, doesn’t look like anything there*, “You gotta work for it Jimbo, pull.”

A pall of breath exits sharply from Jim as he wrapped his cold fingers around Philip’s fist and tried to pry open his fingers, “Nearly there Jimmy Saville, a bit more, a bit more...” as Jim pulled Philip’s fingers open to reveal an empty palm, a solitary high pitched squeak breaks the winter chill causing Philip to crease up with laughter, “I give you the gift of gas” he managed to get out before being overpowered by his chuckling.

“Very grown up of you mate, thanks. What colour is it, green or brown?” Jim asked, “God almighty, that stinks, did you follow through on that?”

Philip stopped laughing and wiggled his hips, “That is entirely possible mate, anyway, sorry for ruining the moment, just been brewing it for ages. I appreciate the present, if you don’t mind, I’ll keep hold of it and open it when I need reminding of you, is that cool?”

Jim nodded slowly, “Course bro, I can’t say I agree with you leaving, but I think if you don’t go now, it’s going to drive you loco, you should speak to Grete before you go though, she might have a lead on that thing you were going on about the other day, might be able to point you in the right direction.”

“Cheers mate, come here-” Philip pulled Jim into a sincere, bone crunching embrace, as he released him he said softly “-I’ve got your real present back at camp, I’ll chuck it to you in the morning before I go.”

The two brothers took an end of the sled each and started to haul the stag back towards base, “Hey Jimbo, it’s Christmas, how about I sing you a little carol on the way back, if you know the words, join in;”

“Violent night, gory night, all is calm, all is bright,
watch out for zombies, they will bite,
holey guts, tender and mild,
sleep in one piece, sleep in one piece”

Jim looked over at Philip, “Okay, slightly different to the version we used to sing back in school-”, Philip started laughing, “-Merry Christmas Phil.”

“Merry Christmas Jimbo” he replied, trudging on through the snow which cracked underfoot.

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“Happy Christmas mum” his laboured breathing formed denser swirls of mist as he looked into the grey, miserable sky.

“Happy Christmas dad, I’ll be seeing you soon.”