

TO ELLE AND BACK

by

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Another Christmas story for my daughters

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Freakin' Christmas. All anticipation and disappointment, dog-eared rituals, godawful plum pudding and yucky mince pies. Too much Mum and Dad, no Jamie and Ren. Awkward family get-togethers and, worst of all, tedious questions from relatives trying too hard to connect: "what are you going to do when you grow up?", "where are you going to university?", "what do you want to study?" or, most squirm-worthy, "do you have a boyfriend yet Eleanor?" I envy Sal, ten years younger – mum and dad's little mistake -- still spell-bound by holiday magic at eight years old. She's what makes Christmas worthwhile.

I'm the troubled teen around here. The Goth with a black exterior that hides ... Hides what? Well, a black interior I guess. Least that's the way I play it. I've got sulking down to a fine art. They call me morose or, when I'm really good at it, dumb insolent. But it's just protection. Don't get me wrong, they're 'good parents'. They give me lots of rope but step in just before I hang myself. Why they bother I don't know. Maybe they don't fancy getting one of those middle of the night fentanyl overdose calls. Who would? Anyway, being the troubled teen, the one you have to handle carefully, works like a dream to fend off the same freakin' tedious questions the relatives ask. It's not like they're not good questions. Shit, they're about something important: me, my future, that little thing called *my life*. But it's the answers I want, the plan, not the freakin' questions. I sure ain't alone. Just about every other kid's having the same struggle – 'cept the nerd-heads like Foster with their certainty. He pisses me off. Christ, he was probably doing Steve Jobs dress-up in his crib. Easy for him, off to Waterloo – with his grades he'll ace a scholarship – computer science, electrical engineering, co-op with some start-up and millionaire with a country getaway and private jet before he's thirty. Where does that come from, actually *knowing* what he's going to do? Dad's the same. How did he know he was going to be a pharmacist? Insists he always did: "I liked the idea of potions, mixing up things to make people better." Mum's different, never sees further than next year, next month, next week. She does whatever comes into her head – muralist, graphic designer, yoga teacher, and now she sells those weird essential oils on the web. Dunno how she does it, she just makes it up as she goes along. I'm not like that. I've always needed a plan, an ordered set of steps. That's what I do well – plan. Like when I decided to join the Goths. I knew I had to become friends with Jamie first, and then start wearing the gear, listening to The Banshees and Bauhaus, talk up the piercings till mum

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gave in, and then it was easy. Once I got the nose ring and the sneer down I was in. Worked like a charm. If I could just do that with the rest of my life.

At least one thing's for sure. No kids. Not for me. It's not like I don't like sex, but don't confuse that with babies: "to be avoided at all cost," as Ren says, in that funny official voice she uses. You wouldn't believe how safe my safe sex is. Those wiggly tadpoles would find it easier getting into Fort Knox than breaking down my door. One time, with Jamie, we'd no glove so he wanted to bareback. He said "I can withdraw any time, honest". He went on and on about it but I kept saying no. When he wouldn't stop I pretended to go down on him and bit the end of his cock. Hard. Did he ever yell, probably woke up Mum and Dad. I did a BJ on him after though, to sort of make up for it, but no more argument from him. Anyway, back to the kids. Or rather the not kids. There's all that puking and waddling around when you're pregnant, then the godawful pain of pushing it out – never could figure out the mechanics of that, just doesn't seem possible, a big thing like that out of a little thing like my pussy – only to have this limpet stuck on you sucking and pooping, bawling and never letting you sleep, and finally you've got this bottomless pit that keeps taking all your money, like a legal bank robber, and demanding more and more freedoms, which just means you're fighting about shit most of the time. How could you fit a life in around all that?

So kids are off the menu, which makes a soulmate kinda redundant doesn't it? Mind you, I can see the value of a house-bitch when I'm getting old. You know, when the wrinkles and sagging mean no amount of flirting is going to get me any action. Fuck buddies probably don't make it past your thirties. And there are all the advantages of the sharing thing: movies, meals, mortgage, travel and maybe a car, but a red one. Jamie's out cuz he wants *everything* to be black. He even painted his Apple ear buds black. I really like that red Mustang Ren's dad drives. We get to drive it as soon as she passes her test next month. Awesome. Better than our black Honda. Boring. So I'm not sharing the car unless it's red.

Maybe I could see hooking up with someone, if it's the right person, but it's got to be on my terms.

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What are my terms? What the fuck do I want from life? This is where it gets serious – images of me as a grown-up. I do have them you know. Sometimes. Mostly after I've just aced a test or written what I know is a wicked essay. These ideas come into my head. Like what I could do with whatever talents mum, dad or the big blob in the sky gave me. Do you want to hear them? Okay, let's get analytical, figure out the main themes from these recurring fantasies of my future. Well, first off there's travel. I'm always on a plane headed to some far-off country – writing an award-winning blog or taking awesome photos for Instagram and Pinterest. Sometimes I'm a travel guide speaking four languages and organizing expeditions to places like Patagonia. I even see myself as a pilot, mostly for the free flights though. But it's always travel, getting out of this place. Eighteen and I haven't even left the country yet. Another thing's the money. It's weird, I'm never rich in these fantasy futures, but money doesn't seem to be an issue. I've always got enough to get by but not enough for like designer clothes or cocktail hour at four – somewhere in between. 'Middle-class' I guess. But do people actually aspire to be middle class? It sounds like wanting to be average. I don't want to be average. But I don't want to take more than my share. When it comes to the planet I want *less*, there are too many one-percenters taking more than their fair share. I've got to make up for them. They've used up the resources, polluted the planet, contracted out all our thinking to algorithms and half the jobs to automation. I'm thinking that's why my future fantasies never put me in a 'career'. I'm not deputy manager of this or vice-president of that, or even assistant to the manager of something or other. All these globalising capitalists are shipping the jobs you can't automate to Vietnam or China and housing their executive masters in corporate headquarters in London, Paris or New York. If we millennials don't want to be robot substitutes or greedy capitalists we're left picking up whatever's left as contract workers. How do I make a plan through that quagmire? Mum's the one I should talk to. She made her own quagmire and then found the perfect balance between predictability and variety or acquiring skills and refining them. Christ, even between work and life!

So what have we got? A childless spinster – what a godawful word that is – who travels for a living, earns enough to get by – but not so much as to feel guilty – and somehow makes the best of a precariat life of contract-living. Not a lot to go on. It sure doesn't tell me where to go to university – or even *whether* to go, I'm probably better off becoming an apprentice plumber or

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something – or what to study if I do go. Hmmm. You got any ideas? If not, I’ve had enough of this. I’m off to Facebook for a while.

“Elle! What are you doing up there? Wasting your time on Facebook I bet. Come on down here. Your sister wants you to read her a bedtime story.”

“Coming.”

When did they say the dinner started? It was supper-time, wasn’t it? Or was it lunch? Yes, it was lunch. People just say “Christmas dinner” because that’s what you say isn’t it? Whatever time of day you have it. Just confuses me though. I have to admit, I don’t much like Christmas here. All the routine gets jumbled. No Sadia or Pai-Mai either, away for the holidays. No one to talk to, least no one worth talking to. As long as they keep to the schedule I’m fine. I know when to expect the robo-carers, I don’t have to use up stupid energy figuring out the time for the Christmas meal, when to get up, what to wear, where to sit, which night is moviemersion night – I’ve never got used to the smells and tastes inside those VR visors – and which night is CompuQuiz – I’m pretty damned good at that, but I have to lose on purpose half the time so they don’t get mad at me. I know they don’t like me. Oh, most of them are very polite – “how are you this morning Eleanor?” “Oh you do look nice, you look good in blue,” “Have you heard from your sister?” and all those other time-wasting, pro-forma comments – but just below the surface they resent me. They think I act above my station because I don’t reciprocate, save myself for *real* conversation with Sadia and Pai-Mai. It’s none of their business how I am or whether Sal’s cybered or not. But as soon as the Christmas disruptions start I’m no better than them, I can’t seem to rub two thoughts together. Perhaps it’s good that Sadia and Pai-Mai aren’t here. It’s not that each of the events here at Christmas aren’t good – the food, the party, the carol-sing, even the animatronics play – it’s that I feel like I’ve got to talk, or at least listen, to the others. I don’t though, at least not hardly at all. I remember Dr. Mberek’s advice, the main psychiatrist at the Phlastio Institute: “better to remain silent and be thought a fool than to open one’s mouth and remove all doubt”. I’m the silent one around here so they think me the fool. I am sometimes.

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Like I said, when the routines go to ruin so do I. But most of the time I fool them. Still the best in the place at CompuQuiz.

Talking, least ways talking for the sake of it, has never been my strong point. Always been a doer more than a talker. “Get ‘er done” was my motto in life. They liked me for that, the big wigs at CombatPoverty.com. Along would come a harvest failure in Sudan, civil war in Guatemala, some over-reaching despot in Hungary and they’d say “Sounds like a job for Elle.” I’d drop everything and fly off into another war-torn hell-hole or climate wasteland. The adrenaline, God I love the adrenaline. Sudan – so many trips to Sudan, what was wrong with that place? – anyway, landing in Khartoum for the umpteenth time and, as usual, it was chaos, all the NGOs fighting with each other, no idea of logistics. I’d gather them all together, read the riot act and have it coordinated and running smoothly in days. Secret was to have a clear plan and give everyone a designated area of responsibility: “you take Kassala, you Equatoria, we’ll take charge of incoming food aid and you handle medicines.” Simple really, just needed someone with a bit of vision, experience and organizing skill. Oh yes, and tolerance for weeks of sleep deprivation and an ability to block out the violence, mutilation and sheer, unbelievable depredations. When the PTSD pill came along it got a bit easier I think. Surreal: a pill to make all the crazy stuff seem normal. Something wrong with that. I could do with one here some days, when Astrid or that man with the stupid comb-over go off on one of their rants. I loved whatever protection those pills gave me though -- made it possible to get back on the horse. Another one of those things that came out of the marijuana research. Certainly made Dad rich, the marijuana market. He called it “the new aspirin”. How did he know to get in early and turn his whole pharmacy thing over to cannabis dispensing? I never got an answer to that and how he became a rich capitalist, a one-percenter. I shouldn’t complain really, his trust fund’s made my life easy. Could never have afforded this place on the peanuts CombatPoverty paid me. I’d have ended up in one of those indigenous homes where they treat us whites with the racist disdain that comes with being a forgotten minority. Nothing less than we deserve really but I’m happier here with the cliques of Chinese, Jews and middle-east moguls. I should rail against using my privilege like this. Social justice guilt. Screw that, I’ve made the sacrifices. I deserve this. I look back from the ridge – that’s where I think of myself now, clambered up the ridge and looking back down on my life below – and I can’t say I’ve many regrets. Sorry, is this boring you? Just tell me to stop if it

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is. I wander in the wilderness of the past a bit these days. Maybe one regret. I never did find that right person with whom to share it all. Alice was a saviour for a while, a great lover too, but she could never commit. Just wasn't that kind of person and ran a mile when the going got tough. And she never liked how I was away so much and how racked out and empty I was for weeks after I got back. She never understood that it was just part of the life I led. I had to fill up the tanks again, ready to sally forth once more. Lazing around watching the immersivision and calling in drone deliveries of gourmet meals was my way of recovering. That was the only real bump in the road, her leaving like that.

“You have a visitor Eleanor. Your sister is here for Christmas dinner.”

Oh I hate that monotone of the robo-carers. Can't they inject a bit of human intonation in the voice?

“Sal. It's good to see you. My you look rosy. But goodness, you've put on a lot of weight. What's happened?”

“Hello Elle. Here, give me a hug, if you can reach around the baby.”

“You're pregnant?”

“Yes, but you have trouble remembering that don't you. How are you doing?”

“Right as rain dear, right as rain.”

“Really? That's not quite what they told me at the desk. They said you've been having nightmares again, yelling about Equatoria and calling out for Alice.”

“Not true. They must be confusing me with someone else.”

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“This is a facility-wide announcement. The Phlastio Christmas dinner will be served in ten minutes. Will all those attending please make their way to the Sunshine Room now.”

“Let’s go find some turkey Elle.”