

BOOK THREE - CHRISTMAS YET TO COME

CHAPTER ONE

That sinking feeling...



Flissy didn't go quietly to the bottom of the ocean. She fought, she kicked, she clawed, she held her breath till her lungs and brain were on fire, she tried so hard not to let the remaining air go... but still she kept sinking.

Luckily, though, she did not drown, since the one place where the iron rules of nature can be broken is in our imaginations. Instead she felt the cold gradually seep up through her fingers, her toes, her face, gently numbing any physical sensations and leaving her only with her thoughts to trouble her. In this respect the most distressing aspect of her descent was the darkness.

Deprived of all sensory input she assumed she was still falling, but it was almost impossible to say any more. If nothing around you is changing, how do you even know time is passing? You're left only with your own thoughts, and these make for a very unreliable internal clock.

So she really had no idea how long she had been like this when she felt something touch her shoulder, then move around and lay along her arm.

At first she noticed a very faint, tickling sensation, like being pinched, but ever so gently at a dozen different points at once. Then, starting slowly, spreading from her arm, up to her shoulder then throughout her body, she felt a wave of sensations flood through her, of touch, taste, colour and something else that she couldn't recognise. Even more oddly, they all seemed to overlap somehow - taste had a shape and a colour too. It was bizarre but strangely beautiful.

After a while she finally heard a quiet, gentle voice whisper;

"Hello."

The voice tasted slightly salty and it was a rusty orange colour.

It was an altogether very peculiar sensation, but conveyed so much more than an audible tone of voice alone could have done. She felt depth, wisdom and, above all, what was it...? Care - yes, specifically caring.

"We are sorry about the way you were delivered here."

It was very odd - she didn't so much hear the words as feel the ideas emerging inside her head.

"Ah, thank you. Yes, it was a bit of a shock."

"Corvin was concerned he was late and rather hurried"

"Yes, I got that impression when he dumped me into the sea from a great height. So I am guessing you must be Octavian then?"

"We are Octavian to others, yes."

"We?"

"Ah yes, perhaps we should explain - Octopuses are very, very old - not individually you understand, but as a species. We branched from the same family tree as humans some hundreds of millions of years ago and followed our own developmental path. As a result we have a very different physiology from you. We have three separate hearts and our arms, for example, are capable of initiating their own thoughts and actions independently from our central brains. Hence we tend to have a more communal view of identity rather than thinking of ourselves as a simple individual."

"That must feel very strange..."

"We were about to ask you how it must feel to be so concentrated into one view of yourself...but we are letting our curiosity get the better of us, and Corvin was right, we have so little time. We should be on our way."

"Here we go again. Should I climb onto your back?"

"Climb onto me? Dear me, no - we will hold you, that will be sufficient."

While one tentacle remained firmly attached to her arm, Flissy felt a second gently circling her waist. It felt odd and at the same time very reassuring. She could sense immense strength as the thick arm slowly closed around her but at the same time great delicacy, almost tenderness where it touched.

Suddenly she felt a rapid surge of water, sweeping her hair back and down and pressing on her face and shoulders as they pulsed upwards.

"So where to first?"

"First, we shall visit the great Gyre."

CHAPTER TWO

Out of sight...

Gradually the sea started to lighten and Flissy sensed they were getting nearer to the surface while at the same time travelling through the water at considerable speed.

As more light penetrated down to their level she took time to examine her travelling companion more closely.

Octavian had a surprisingly small body, though his arms were thick and relatively long. The undersides of the tentacles were white-ish and covered with thousands of different sized suckers. The upper parts of his tentacles and his body were a sort of orangey-brown colour, but it was confusing, because either the light kept shifting or the colour itself changed - she could even see patches of darker shades seem to move across his body from one side to another.

Octavian seemed to read her thoughts

"Ah, yes, those patterns you can see are us thinking. We may be very sensitive to touch and taste, but Octopuses like to express themselves through colour and shape - you could say its our artistic side."

"We have a girl at school who blushes bright red every time a teacher asks her a question."

"Interesting, though not quite the same."

"So where, or what is the great Gyre?"

"Excellent question. A gyre is a circular current."

"Like a whirlpool?"

"In a way, but much, much larger. There are gyres in most of the oceans, but the one we are heading for is in the Pacific. It is many thousands of kilometres across."

"Sounds fascinating, but other than a giant whirlpool, what are you hoping to show me?"

"I think it will become clear once we get there. But in the meantime let us ask you a question."

"Fire away."

"For obvious reasons, we tend not to stray onto land too often, but Corvin and we meet quite frequently, and we have spent much time discussing his observations of human life."

"Probably not very flattering, I'm guessing."

*"You might be surprised - Corvin is more curious than judgemental. The thing which struck him most was that humans like to **move** things."*

"What do you mean?"

"Hmm, I suppose if you are to see something of the future we should go back first to the past. You're familiar with the concept of Evolution?"

"Of course..."

"Well, evolution is very rigorous in terms of how life manages its energy resources."

"I'm not following."

"A plant will expend a certain amount of energy putting up stalks and extending leaves, yes?"

"I suppose so."

"But it will only survive if the energy it gets back from sunlight falling on those leaves balances the energy spent on making them."

"Makes sense."

"Likewise, animals behaviour is finely attuned: herbivores will wander to graze, predators will hunt, but they have to gain at least as much energy from what they eat as they expend in finding it."

"Otherwise I suppose they'd starve?"

*"Exactly. So, in the beginning humans were no different - they moved from place to place to forage for food, or hunt for prey to survive. But they always had to balance the energy spent with the energy gained. Then something changed. Instead of moving always to where the food was, they started to move the the food to **them**. They stayed in one place and started cultivating plants and domesticating animals which they kept nearby. And they found that this way they could create a surplus. Pretty soon, they realised that they needn't just rely on their own efforts - they could use some of the domesticated animals to provide power too. Harnessing donkeys to carts and horses to ploughs they could use their energy to create an even greater surplus. To do this, though, they needed more things - tools, equipment, buildings. So they used more and more of that surplus energy to bring more and more things to them. They cut down trees and dug stone from the ground and moved them to build houses. In digging things out of the ground they found more and*

more materials they could transform into things to keep or to use and, eventually, other sources of energy too. Over time they moved more and more things over greater and greater distances."

"So where is all this going?"

*"A more relevant question than you might think - bear with me. So here is **my** question: what happens if you move more and more stuff to the same place?"*

"It fills up, I suppose."

"Unless..."

"Unless you throw something out?"

"Very good. Now, from the taste of the water we are nearly at the great gyre. We'll need to descend a little but there should still be enough light for you to see."

By now Flissy had learned better than to keep asking questions and concentrated instead on looking ahead to see if there was any sign of this whirlpool current, though how exactly it would show itself was far from clear.

After a while she noticed a darker patch of water ahead.

"There - is that it?"

"That is the current edge, yes."

As they got closer the darkness resolved itself into something thicker, something that appeared to rise a little way above the surface and also stretched a few metres below, but didn't extend much further than that vertically. Horizontally, though, she could see it spreading out wider and wider till it reached the horizon on both sides.

"It's enormous - what is it? Some sort of floating island?"

"That is exactly what it is. This particular example now extends for thousands of kilometres. Let us take a closer look"

Flissy was fascinated and keen to get closer to see what had created this unique phenomenon.

As they approached the island Octavian dived a little deeper then continued swimming underneath it. Around the edges at least there were still any number of holes in the structure and enough light came through to be able to make out some of the detail of the underside.

Flissy looked up and was slightly puzzled to see, among the mass of shadows, odd regular shapes, circles and rectangles as well as flashes of strange colours, whites, yellows, orange blues and reds.

"Is that...is that a cup?"

"I believe so, yes."

As her eyes became accustomed to the light, and more significantly her brain started to recognise what she was looking at, Flissy noticed more and more familiar objects.

"There's a bottle, some rope...a **toilet** seat???"

"If it floats, you will probably be able to find it here. The gyre collects everything that drifts into it then locks it in, pushing everything together into the centre, though the 'centre' of course now extends as far, further than you can see."

"Well at least there is something growing here too - see, all those feathery plants hanging down?"

"Look closer..."

Gently Octavian pushed them upwards towards the underside of the great floating mat. As he did so Flissy noticed his whole body changing, becoming a mottled, greeny-brown colour as well as sprouting assorted lumps and bumps all over.

"What's happening to you?"

"Instinct. There are predators gathered all around here - its safer for both of us if we blend in a little more."

As they got closer Flissy reached out to a green frond suspended from the great mass above and swaying gently in the water.

"Plastic. It's a plastic bag - or at least the remains of one."

"You are not the only one to be fooled. Almost all of the creatures in this area, from whales to plankton have consumed some quantity of plastic, by accident or design. Sooner or later it will kill many of them."

"Where did it all come from?"

"Everywhere. There is waste here from every continent on the planet. You used to call this 'The Great Garbage Patch'."

"Used to?"

"We are looking into the future, remember? Though even in your time this existed and was enormous then, bigger than Texas. Now you could consider it a whole new continent. And this

consists only of the larger, more visible elements that float. There is a far, far greater volume of micro-particles or debris which has sunk to the ocean floor."

"But we recycle..."

"Some material is recycled, it's true. Some goes to landfill, but what the wind and rain take from there eventually ends up in the ocean. Some is flushed directly into your rivers."

"Not deliberately, though."

"You think so? Corvin tells us he has learned to watch the roads near you closely. He often sees humans throw things from their cars as they are driving, and these sometimes hold tasty morsels of leftover food. He freely admits he has become moderately addicted to these 'free snacks'."

"That's disgusting - people shouldn't throw rubbish from cars."

"But tell us - why do you think they throw it?"

"Obviously because they're lazy and stupid."

"No, but why not just drop it inside the car?"

"Well, because they want to get rid of it I suppose."

*"Precisely. Because they don't want it **near** them, they don't want to **see** it. When you send things to landfill, when you wash make-up from your face or dirt from your clothes: is it destroyed? Is it returned to where it came from? No - it's just a more sophisticated way of taking it somewhere **you can't see it**. Corvin and we have often debated how such an intelligent creature can simultaneously be so short-sighted"*

*"So how far in the future **are** we? Is all this still going on? Hasn't anything improved?"*

"You have to understand, the future, your future is a very different place from the past or the present. What you are seeing, what we have yet to show you - these are shadows, cast by the light of the past. Move the light and the shadows change. Come, we've travelled a long way. let me show you something a little closer to home."

CHAPTER THREE

The wedding of the seas

As they left the 'floating continent' behind them Flissy found the image of all those pieces of detritus hard to get out of her head. She saw the point Octavian made, but what exactly, was she supposed to do? You couldn't recycle everything, and if things were going to end up in such a mess anyway then what was the point in showing her? It was just depressing. She might as well forget it and just enjoy life.

Octavian seemed very happy to be leaving the plastic continent behind and gradually returned to his original light orange colouring while the bumps on his skin smoothed out again. Once again Flissy had the sensation of some distance being covered but with very little sense of time. She noticed the colour and the taste of the water changing around them.

"Where are we now?"

"The Mediterranean. Our biggest predator here used to be humans but we are relatively safe at this time."

"Why is that?"

"You will see. Now, perhaps you would look down..."

The water was quite clear and relatively shallow at this point so she was able to see the sea floor quite clearly. At first she could just see sand and mud, but as with the floating island, what caught her attention was when she started to notice geometric shapes, apparently etched into the surface: lines, squares, even circles.

"Not more plastic waste?"

"No - you could think of these as fossils - in a way that's what they are in the process of turning into."

Flissy looked around. The shapes extended for some distance in different directions.

"They're buildings, streets - it's a city! A whole city under the water."

"It was a city, once. Now it's just a skeleton. You see those five circles over there, with the small square next to them?"

"Yes, I see it."

"That was once a great cathedral."

"What happened?"

"The sea re-took what the people thought they owned. Let us show you something else."

Octavian dived down to the remains of the cathedral. Flissy could see more detail now, what looked like a collapsed tower, and the five circles had once been domes, but were now a mirror-image of their old selves, having collapsed inwards. They swam slowly past the debris, through what must have been a large, open square at one point, then suddenly the shapes and rubble disappeared and they were gliding again over smooth sand.

"What's this?"

"This is as far as the sea used to reach. Just over here should be what we're looking for..."

Octavian settled on the sandy bottom and began jetting water at a small section. Great clouds of sand and mud billowed up around them.

"Must you do that? I can't see a thing."

"Apologies. What we are looking for has been buried, though not very deep. We just need to clear away some of the sediment."

Flissy could feel Octavian's other arms raking over the surface of the sea bed, obviously searching for something.

"Ah! Here we are. Found one..."

Octavian jetted away from the small cloud he had created and back into clear water and held up a long tentacle in front of Flissy's face. At the end, hanging from the very tip, was a gold ring.

"It's a ring!"

"A wedding ring to be precise."

"Oh, how sad - someone must have dropped it."

"Not quite. It was thrown here."

"Thrown? Why?"

"For a thousand years the people here fought against the sea, digging foundations, building barriers, erecting buildings. Every year the priest of the great cathedral was rowed out in a small boat for the 'wedding of the sea'. He (it was always a he) was married to the sea and the ring thrown into it as a symbol of the marriage."

"That sounds quite romantic in a way."

"Not really. It was not intended to be that sort of marriage. The words used usually revolved around the idea of the subjugation of the sea to its master."

Flissy looked back towards the sunken city.

"Well apparently it didn't work. I wonder if they'd ever heard of someone called 'Canute'?"

"Apparently not."

"So what happened to all the people?"

"Oh the people were long gone before the sea finally rose over what was left of the city."

"What do you mean 'gone'? Gone where? Why did they leave?"

"As you may have noticed, humans are an impatient species. They could not wait for the impact of all the changes they had triggered to take away so much of what they thought they had gained. Instead they turned on themselves. As resources grew scarcer and life more difficult, at first they used politics and economics to drive yet greater inequality. As those 'with' tried to hold on to what they already had, so those 'without' were pushed further and further to the margins and became increasingly desperate."

"And?"

"And it led where it always leads to - war. Not one big war, at least not at first. Lots of 'small' wars to begin with. Wars that the most powerful thought they could control, and use to their advantage. The problem was that none of these were wars that anyone could ever really win, and so they continued, and spread."

"So are you saying, in the future, where we are now, there are no humans left?"

"No, no, of course not. There are still people, but as a species, they are much diminished. There was, if you like, a 'correction' in the system. As with all such corrections, the pendulum doesn't just return to a middle position. For a while at least it swings back some distance the other way. As is usually the case, people didn't actually stop until they no longer had the power or the ability to continue. As a result humans, in this future at least, live in much smaller groups, lead much more basic lives and wield much less influence than they did in your day. At some further point in the future again they will likely be replaced by some other species as the 'dominant' force on the planet, as has happened many times in the past."

"Replaced?"

"Of course - why not? You may have documented evolution, but that doesn't mean you are exempt from it. Now, we have one final visit to make."

Flissy thought for a moment, then shook her head.

"No."

"No? No what?"

"No. I'm not going any further."

CHAPTER FOUR

A Christmas Coral

“Look - you’ve taken me out of my bed on Christmas Eve - no Christmas Day - no, I don’t even know what day it is now. I’ve been dragged all over the planet, shown truly awful things, been frozen, stung and dropped from a great height (twice!) and now you’ve just told me that humans are essentially going to wipe each other out anyway. So no - I don’t want to see any more. What’s the point? Just take me home. I want to wake up in my own bed, go downstairs, open lots of presents, eat a huge Christmas lunch and...and...”

“And forget about everything you’ve seen?”

“Basically, yes.”

“And I cannot persuade you to continue our journey?”

“Absolutely not.”

Octavian relaxed his grip around Flissy’s waist a little and spread his other arms out across the sea floor while he contemplated her through the wide rectangular pupils of his oversized eyes. Eventually he changed colour again, to an almost complete pale white all over.

“Very well. Then there is not much point in continuing. We will take you back.”

Flissy was surprised. At first pleased and happy to be going home, then strangely disappointed. Frankly she had expected Octavian to put up more of a fight and perversely she now found herself wondering what else it was he had intended to show her.

Octavian tightened his grip again, pulled Flissy gently back in towards him and slowly lifted off the sea bed and started to move through the water.

Flissy suddenly felt very awkward. Part of her, she realised, was not quite ready to end this weird, but fascinating journey just yet. She thought she might at least try to find out a bit more about the creatures who had taken her on it.

“So...how exactly do you know Corvin?”

“Corvin? We are both ambassadors for our respective chains...plus, of course, we play Go together regularly.”

“Go?”

“A board game, very popular in Japan, though we have never played there.”

“Oh? Why’s that?”

“Seafood is also very popular in Japan...”

“Oh, sorry. So is it like Chess then? I thought only humans were into games of conquest...”

Octavian flushed briefly bright orange and for a moment Flissy thought she had overstepped the mark, but he carried on quite calmly.

“Like many games, it is a reflection of some of the struggles of life - a quest to survive, a competition for limited space and resources. But in other ways it is very different.”

“How?” Flissy was intrigued now and hoping actually that they did not get back too quickly.

Fortunately she seemed to have got Octavian onto a favourite topic and he appeared in no rush to end their conversation either.

“For one thing, the rules are much simpler, but the game infinitely more complex to play. Above all, though, the philosophy is different.”

“I know how to play chess, but I’ve never played Go.”

“In Chess the aim is to dominate the board, you must crush your opponent, squeeze them into a corner and, effectively, kill their king to win.”

“So how do you win a game of Go?”

“Technically, the winner is the one who has secured the most territory for themselves. But, unless you deliberately pitch yourself against a very unequal opponent, power on a go board is much more finely balanced. A poor Go player often sets out to dominate the board only to find they lose almost everything. A great Go player knows that they stand to gain more if they recognise that they must share the board with their opponent, even if the sharing ends up a little unevenly.”

“I’m not sure I follow...”

“Let me think of another example...Have you ever taken antibiotics?”

“The medicine? I don’t think so...no, wait, I had a tooth out once and I think they gave me some then.”

"Very good. Yes, wonderful discovery. Harmless to most humans and animals, but they kill a very wide range of bacteria (though not viruses). So when you had your tooth pulled, you didn't get an infection in the wound and subsequently die?"

"I'm here, aren't I?"

"Exactly. Now have you heard of anti-microbial resistance?"

"Maybe - go on."

*"So imagine, now you have this wonderful power to kill your enemy (bacteria). What do you do? You **can** use it anywhere and everywhere, absolutely crush those microbes and try to wipe them out of existence. But there's a problem. If you do that, you just create a space for evolution to work in. Suddenly there are a lot fewer bugs around. But the ones which are left are most likely to be the ones which have evolved a natural resistance to your antibiotic. So what do they do? They grow. Soon they grow to fill the space you just created and before long your antibiotics stop working because all the bugs are now resistant. You have another tooth out, and...the outcome may not be so good."*

"So what has all that got to do with Go?"

*"You **share** the planet. Even with the smallest microbes. When you exercise power over them, do it wisely. Take the important wins, but be prepared for some losses."*

"Because in the end you'll win?"

"Because in the end it is a better reflection of how the world really works. And now we are nearly back - we must leave you here."

"Oh...Look - I'm sorry if..."

"No. You spoke as you felt, and that's important too. These are very weighty matters, and the sad truth is that they will fall, inevitably, more onto the shoulders of the young, like you. It's not surprising you should feel angry."

"I will think about what you've shown me, though, I promise."

"Good."

"Can I ask you one thing, before you go though?"

"Of course."

"All those things you showed me - is it really possible to change any of it, do you think?"

"With respect, I think you are asking the wrong question. Is it possible to turn back the tide? Unlikely to be honest, though as we have said, what we have shown you is but one of many futures. Is it possible to change yourself? Of course. If you change only one thing, if you swap 'take' for 'share' you might find your world at least considerably richer as a result - who knows? Now, since it is Christmas, we have a parting gift for you..."

Octavian reached beneath the mantle which stretched between his eight limbs and with a free arm extracted something that looked like a tiny red tree and presented it to Flissy.

"Oh thank you - it's beautiful...but what is it?"

"It's very precious - it's a coral."

"Oh no, now I suppose you are going to tell me it's one of the last ones left."

"Goodness, no. That would be irresponsible in the extreme. No this particular example comes from a giant reef in the southern ocean. It is very much alive and well. It's ancestor grew in the Red Sea and happened to be particularly resistant to higher temperatures and increased acidity. As the sea changed and other corals died, it survived and evolved further and (over many, many years) gradually spread to take over some, if not all of those empty spaces left by its predecessors."

Flissy carefully took the coral and stroked it gently. As she did so she felt Octavian's arm gently slip from her waist and she started to rise, slowly at first, then increasingly quickly.

She looked down and could just make out a faint orangey shade in the water below. She thought she could just hear a faint voice:

"Hold it tight Flissy and never let it go - it is hope."

CHAPTER FIVE

Hookey Walker

As Flissy rose through the water more and more bubbles flew up around her. There were soon so many that it felt like she was inside a champagne bottle, about to fly out after the cork and spray across the room. Something else was odd, though - instead of getting lighter it was getting steadily darker. Soon it was pitch black. She could still hear the bubbles steady hiss, and feel them bursting against her face, but now she could hear something else - a banging, crashing noise that kept repeating: "bang, bang...crash! Bang, bang...crash!"

Flissy sat upright and gasped. She was soaked to the skin and freezing cold. She looked around the room (for it was her room that she'd finally returned to).

The candle had long since given up the ghost but there was just enough light to make out Rashty asleep on the floor, her chin resting on a pile of books scattered across the wooden boards. When Flissy turned she saw that the sky was just starting to lighten a little. She also saw that the window was wide open, banging hard against the casement and rain was gusting through, soaking the window sill, the floor and that side of the bed.

Just then the bedroom door burst open and Flissy was blinded by a giant spotlight being shone directly in her eyes.

"What on earth is going on here? What is all that banging about?"

Grandma dropped a huge torch onto the bed (still shining in Flissy's face) and marched across the room to the window. Rashty quickly scabbled up to get out of her way (she knew better than to be in the way when Grandma was on the march).

"Goodness me girl - whatever are you up to? Why is the window wide open in this weather?"

She reached out and slammed the window shut, slapping the handle down as though it was directly responsible for letting in the weather.

"And look at you! You're soaked through - you must be freezing. And why are you fully dressed? Come on - let's get you out of those wet things, into some dry clothes and downstairs in front of the fire - I've already made hot chocolate."

Flissy shivered while her Grandma pulled two pullovers and a T shirt off over her head.

"What day is it Grandma?"

Her Grandma stopped for a moment, gave Flissy a very quizzical look, then reached out a hand to press against her forehead.

"I hope you haven't got a chill...It's Christmas Day of course - did you forget?"

Flissy smiled.

"No, I didn't forget. I just thought...I thought I might have missed it."

"Missed it? How? Silly girl - did you think I'd let you sleep through."

While Grandma was moving around the room looking for dry clothes for her Flissy suddenly remembered the coral. She looked all around the bed, on the floor and rummaged through the pile of wet clothes, but couldn't find anything.

'Oh well,' she thought. She knew it must have been a dream, of course, but the coral had been so beautiful. For a moment she wished it had been real. She sneaked a quick look at Rashty.

"What do you say Rashty? Was it all just a dream?"

"Was what just a dream?" Asked Grandma, passing her a pile of dry clothes. Fortunately Grandma was usually way too busy to bother waiting for an answer to most questions she asked, so Flissy didn't feel the need to try to explain too much. Rashty was busy scratching herself in the corner and didn't even look around, let alone reply.

Flissy sighed, "Never mind," and started getting dressed.

"Chop, Chop!" Said Grandma, clapping her hands. We've a lot to do before everyone gets here. Once you've had your hot chocolate we've got to pop round to Hookey Walker's to pick up the Turkey."

"The turkey? That prize one, they had in the window?"

Grandma gave her another one of her famous looks.

"The one that's bigger than me?"

"Yes - that one. Remember? You insisted on it when we went round last week. You had to have the biggest one they had."

Flissy thought for a moment.

"Grandma?"

"Yes dear - come on, your chocolate'll be cold."

'Could we...would you mind if...'

"What? Spit it out?" Grandma was busily tidying the room, picking books up off the floor and re-stacking them on the shelves.

"Could we have a smaller one instead? Actually - what if we ALL just had nut roast, along with Mum, and Aunty Karen and uncle Luke?"

Grandma stopped.

"Don't tell me you've suddenly decided to become vegetarian too? What's brought that on?"

"Yes. No. I don't know...it just...it seems a bit...*greedy*?"

"You do know it's not going to make any difference to the Turkey, don't you?"

"Yes, I know. But it'll make a difference to me. Please?"

Grandma continued tidying. All right. I'll phone and cancel the order - I'm sure someone else will take it, they didn't have enough anyway. But **you** can explain to everyone why we're not having turkey this year - I'm not sure your dad or uncle Steve will be impressed."

Flissy jumped out of bed and gave her Grandma a giant hug.

"Thank you Grandma - you really are the best!"

Grandma looked down.

"I think I'll check your temperature when we get downstairs. You really are not yourself this morning."

While she was talking Grandma bent down to pick something up from off the floor. When she straightened up she held her hand out to Flissy.

"Oh look, a little black feather - where on earth did that come from?"

CHAPTER SIX

Powering back up

Flissy drank her hot chocolate standing in front of the log burner in the kitchen. She was already feeling much warmer. Just as she put her cup down there was a flicker of light, followed by a series of beeps from around the kitchen as the power came back on and all the appliances turned themselves on again.

"Hallelujah!" Grandma clapped her hands. I was beginning to think we'd have to cook Christmas dinner on the range - though it will be a bit easier without that huge turkey to worry about." She winked at Flissy.

"You don't mind Grandma?"

"Mind? Why would I mind? So long as we have everyone here together, that's what counts. I'll just do extra sprouts..."

Flissy grimaced. "Yorkshire puddings would be nice..."

Grandma smiled. "Yes, those too."

The morning passed very quickly as Flissy ran around the kitchen helping her Grandma chop and prepare food ready for the big family meal.

After a couple of hours there was a knock at the door and Flissy ran to open it to let in her cousin Rosie with her little brother, 'Terrible Ted' and her mum, aunty Laura. As Laura rolled up her sleeves and set to helping Grandma with the cooking, Flissy took Rosie through to the living room, carefully closing the door to keep Ted locked in the kitchen.

"Look!" Said Rosie, twirling on the spot "I got a new dress, two pairs of shoes, loads of books and a new iPad. What did you get this year?"

"I don't know," said Flissy.

"What do you mean, you don't know?"

"I haven't opened any presents yet."

"What????"

"I'll open them when my Mum and Dad get here."

"Why? Don't you want to see what you've got?"

"Of course, just...well, it doesn't seem quite so important this year. I'm just looking forward to seeing everybody."

"Grandma said you might have caught a bit of a cold. She didn't say anything about going bonkers..."

"There's nothing wrong with me. I've just been thinking, that's all."

"Thinking? About what?"

"I don't know, about the Polar bears, and the wasps, and all the plastic." She looked around.

"About how much stuff we have - I mean where did it all come from? And where's it all going to end up?"

Rosie stared at her. "Wasps? You sure you're feeling all right?"

Flissy smiled. "I'm fine. I had the weirdest dream though. It was a bit scary, to be honest. But it made me think a bit, you know. Maybe I'll do things a bit differently now."

"Differently? How?"

Flissy thought for a moment. "Share, instead of take..." she muttered.

"What? Well, you can start by sharing that big box of chocolates over there - I **am** your favourite cousin after all..."

Flissy laughed. "You're my *only* cousin...apart from Terrible Ted, that is. We should probably take him one too."

Rosie tipped her head to one side. "You *are* different. Still, I suppose it is Christmas, and it's a very big box. Come on then, let's take it into the kitchen. Who knows, the mince pies might be ready..."

CHAPTER SEVEN

Eat, Love, Hope.

Just after mid day Flissy's mum and dad arrived, together with their two dogs, Izzy and Lexie. As pleased as she was to see her parents, Flissy threw her arms around Izzy's neck and whispered in her ear, "I know you can talk, really. I promise to listen more carefully in future." Over the next couple of hours more and more people arrived, together with several more dogs and even three cats (who rapidly took to the higher surfaces and tops of cupboards where they could look down on the rampaging dogs with disdain).

It seemed like every room in the old farmhouse was full with people talking, drinking, nibbling on mince pies or sneakily feeding treats to whoever was their favourite among the dogs, hoping none of the others would notice. Of course, they all did, and the entire pack ended up clamouring around whoever looked like being the softest touch for sausage rolls (even if they were vegan), biscuits or bits of cheese.

Later in the afternoon they all squeezed in around the huge old wooden table in the dining room. Everyone pulled crackers (which set most of the dogs off barking until they were driven back out into the kitchen) and put on silly coloured paper hats.

Uncle Mike looked a little bit sad when he looked around the table for the turkey, only to be told there was none this year, but he quickly cheered up when Grandpat passed him another bottle of beer, and nobody really seemed to mind.

Terrible Ted dropped half his dinner on the floor, which made him extremely popular with those dogs who had either hidden when the others were being driven out or snuck back in as various plates were carried in and out of the door. Uncle Luke, who was sitting next to him, made sure his plate was kept topped up so he probably ended up eating more than most of the adults anyway. Auntie Lizzy was 'cheers-ing' everyone at every opportunity and Grandma drank half a glass of shandy which she swore had made her 'tipsy'.

Flissy put down her knife and fork and took a moment to look around the table.

Her family. When you thought about it they were an odd bunch, really. Every one of them very different. They weren't always this easy to get on with. Grandma could be a bit stropky at times and Grandpat was quite forgetful and swore a lot. Her mum and dad always seemed to be busy, even Rosie could be a bit demanding at times. But there was something that tied them all.

Her uncle Steve put it best, she thought, as he helped her pick up the pieces of a plate that Terrible Ted had finally managed to slide off the side of the table:

"We're family, Flissy. That means we're all in it together..."

After dinner, when all the plates had been cleared away, everyone settled into whatever space they could find in the living room. Rashty was eventually dragged off one of the sofas and promptly went to sit on top of the other dogs until they made space for her (not easily done) on the rug in front of the fire.

Presents were shared and thanks exchanged, even for those things which nobody quite wanted ("Ooh, an electric hairbrush! Lovely!" - "A portable pizza pouch, that'll be handy, thank you!") and the wrapping paper used to keep the fire going.

There was a moment of panic when someone thought Ted might have put a present in the fire *before* unwrapping it. Luckily, uncle Mike jumped to the rescue and pulled it out, slapping out the flames with a pair of oven mitts, before handing it back to a tearful Ted. Fortunately the wooden toy Grandpat had made him was only slightly scorched and really none the worse for wear inside.

Later still a very old movie was running on the TV, half of the adults were asleep, the other half scrolling through their phones. Flissy was curled up on the sofa cuddling her mum.

"Mummy?"

"Yes darling?"

"Tomorrow - can we go down to the refugee centre?"

"Down by the coast? Really? It's Boxing Day darling, everyone just wants to relax. Why do you want to go down there?"

"They were making an appeal, last week, for toys and things. I've got so much stuff - even more now. I thought we could take some down there and, maybe, have a look...?"

"Look darling? Look for what?"

"Oh, nothing really - but could we? Go and take some stuff?"

Flissy's mum sighed.

"All right, I suppose - if that's what you really want. It's a kind thought. We could have a walk on the beach after."

Flissy squeezed her mum. "Thanks mum, that would be nice."

At that point Grandma walked in carrying a small wooden box.

"Ah there you are Flissy - I almost forgot, I have one more present for you."

She handed over the box.

Flissy turned it over carefully.

"Honestly Grandma, I've had loads of stuff already, you needn't have found me any more."

"No, I've been meaning to give you this for a while - sorry it's not wrapped."

"What is it?"

"Well why don't you open it and see?"

Flissy turned the box over again and eventually found a sliding cover. She pulled it open.

Inside was a small bracelet that seemed to be made up of a number of shiny pink and red beads.

"Oh, Grandma - it's very pretty, but..."

"But?" Grandma raised an eyebrow.

"Well, I hope you don't mind, but I'm trying to use less plastic."

"Plastic? Oh dear me no, it's not plastic, dear. No, this is very old, it was my grandmother's."

Flissy held up the bracelet and ran her fingers over the smooth, shiny surface. It was a very beautiful colour.

"What's it made of?"

"Coral, dear, it's coral. I believe it came from somewhere in the Red Sea originally..."

EPILOGUE

"I have endeavoured in this ghostly little book, to raise the Ghost of an Idea, which shall not put my readers out of humour with themselves, with each other, with the season, or with me. May it haunt their houses pleasantly, and no one wish to lay it."

So wrote Charles Dickens in his Preface to the original 'Christmas Carol', and really I can only echo his wish.

I hope you have enjoyed this little book. Some of the characters portrayed may well resemble persons real as well as imagined, and I haven't always changed the names because, well, this is for them too. I hope no-one has been offended, or put out by it.

Most of all I hope you all manage to have a pleasant, or at least comfortable Christmas in these increasingly difficult, and occasionally scary times. There is nothing new or particularly special in the ghosts of any of the issues I have raised here, but they are ideas which should haunt us all, at least a little - after all, what's the point of a ghost story without any ghosts?

Finally, my apologies to "Terrible Ted". Despite occasionally driving his mother to the point where she threatens to 'sell him for body parts', he really is the most delightful little grandson anyone could ask for.

In memory of Ella, who didn't quite make it to Christmas this year. X



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