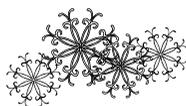


A Child's Christmas  
In Newfoundland

(With Apologies to Dylan Thomas)

by  
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**W**hen I look back on being a child growing up in Newfoundland, one Christmas seems exactly like every other. I can't remember if it snowed for seven days and seven nights when I was twelve, or twelve days and twelve nights when I was seven.

But it snowed until the cars were buried blobs and the stop signs were buried and the black tree branches were bent over with ice. The big yellow plough came out in the dark, like an ancient monster swinging its blue light, round and round, the winking blue eye of a Cyclops all over the parking lot, and the plough dropped its big shovel-jaw on the ground, as if it were awed by all the snow. The metal clanged and the teeth of the plough scraped the snow down to the shiny black pavement and made giant hills that seemed to reach right up to the streetlights.

And the next day everything sparkled and shimmered and we'd cracked off the longest icicles from the eaves for swords and smashed them against each other, a thousand glittering pieces flying through the air.

In the afternoon we'd let the horse out of the barn, bucking and kicking, whinnying, snorting steam, the wild white of her eye, rearing up, and we could see the sun, small as a grapefruit, peeking through her churning front hooves.

We'd dig tunnels and build forts you crawled through, wiggling forward on your elbows and hips, and had snowball fights where we could have taken out somebody's eye.

And we went to Pike's Peak with our crazy carpets and toboggans and flew over the bumps and smacked down hard and sent up waves of flying snow, and once somebody hit a tree and broke a few ribs and couldn't move, all curled up, until an adult came and carried him home in a red wool blanket.

Sometimes we'd go down to Hogan's Pond in our skates, my sister and me. When the wind hit our backs we could sail down the pond, our arms out, hardly moving a muscle, flying as fast as fast could be, until it got dark and the black boiling clouds, boiling like blueberry jam, would drive us back home and we'd take off our skates and the ground felt hard and stubborn after all that gliding and my father would make cocoa with marshmallows. Our toes would feel like wet wood because they were so cold and then they'd start to tingle with a fire of pins and needles.

We'd shop, my father and me, down on Water Street and buy my mother perfume and leather gloves at the Bowring's cosmetic counter and eat in the cafeteria and then we'd drive past the houses that had cats and red geraniums in the front windows pressed between the glass and the lace curtains, and the old women taking small steps in their big coat with big buttons down the front and the squashed looking felt hats or rain bonnets and zip up men's gators over their shoes on their way to the Basilica where the mass was in Latin and we stop into the Mount Cashel Raffle.

There'd be a live turkey strutting under the warm lights in the big storefront window, its nasty black eye and the red wattle quivering, each scabby, eczema crackled claw placed carefully, step-stepping through the sawdust, alert and infuriated, ruffling up her feathers. The place was full of cigarette smoke and the men all knew my father and they'd shake hands and say, How's she going bye, and I'd have to stand there and wait and wait and

wait. And the ticket man calling one for a dollar, three for two, one for a dollar, three for two, a string of tickets my father bought me in my wet mitt. The man gave the spinning wheel a fling and it roared up and became a blur until it slowed down, tickety tick, tick, tick, tick, and the wheel came to a stop and when you didn't win you'd throw your tickets on the ground and they were ankle deep at our feet.

But get to the presents. And what kind of present did you get? There were chocolate Santas with marshmallow filling, and chocolates in gold foil stamped to look like ancient coins, and cap guns and extra cartridges of caps, sold separately. That smell of smoke and phosphorous that hung in the air over a cap gun, the sharp crack of the gun and sometimes super-white threads of light that escaped through hairline fissures in the body of the metal pistol, and the round burnt hole in the coiled paper that curled out of the top of the gun where before there had been row upon row of perfect red dots of gun powder. Silly Putty and Crazy String that wiggled out of aerosol cans, and slinkies and trolls and glitter glue, pipe cleaners, popsicle sticks, candy necklaces, rocket candy, lollipops with bubblegum centres. We had a herd of life-size plastic reindeer that galloped across the lawn, one reindeer glancing back over his shoulder as if something menacing were coming from behind. And a doll, you pushed a button on her back, and her hair grew and grew all the way down to her ankles, and another button and it got sucked back in and must have filled up her brain with coils of hair.

And another time, a doll with blonde sausage curls and a smile so wide it looked manic and enlightened, almost three feet tall, the doll. She had batteries in her back as big as my fist and you flicked a switch and her heavy eyes flickered open and she looked straight at you and an engine purred inside her and she rocked a little and shivered and lifted one foot by tilting to the side and the foot had a frilly white sock and a patent leather shoe and she set it down and tilted the other way and lifted the other foot and soon she was gathering speed, walking down the hall until she hit the front door

and she put her forehead against it and kept going like she wouldn't stop until she knocked it down. And she could talk too.

She came with a cassette tape you put in a little door in her back and there were two seams that ran down her chin from the corners of her smile and it meant her jaw could move up and down. She said *Let's clean up your room*, the jaw gently rising and falling as she spoke as if on a tiny mechanical winch that was buried deep in her cheek, and *You are my friend* and *I love you* and *Let's bake cookies* and *Please take me with you*. But once somebody put a Metallica tape playing "My Apocalypse" in her back and her eyes flicked open as if she'd had a vision and she tore down the hallway hobbling, dragging one foot, her shoe falling off, drums and guitars and screaming banshees wailing out her snapping jaws like some wild possessed thing the devil had taken over.

There was Kerplunk and Operation and Monopoly and there were Christmas crackers, envelopes of tinsel, mini-lights, and wind-up snow globes that tinkled out "O Holy Night" and a wooden crèche that had a wooden Mary with her head bent and a little wooden bowl for the wooden baby Jesus that had come all the way from Monsefu where my father had two distant cousins who were missionaries and who sent presents for us from Peru, once a little woolly camel and once a tin flute.

And on New Year's Eve there would be a party for the adults where the women wore satin dresses that were magenta and royal blue and cherry red with beads and my mother's jewellery box with her big rings, and silver bangles and rhinestone earrings that hung like chandeliers from her ears and a bracelet that was a snake coiled three times around her arm and a giant locket on a chain that had my school picture from grade four on one side and my sister's picture from grade two on the other. They'd go out, my mother and father, and leave us with the babysitter named Wendy who always had big books with her because she was studying to be a nurse. And we stayed up until midnight with the radio on doing the countdown and

then we see the fireworks breaking across the sky, loud but delicate, like the feathery seeds of dandelion clocks when the wind blows on them, or big beautiful roses with the petals fluttering across the sky and the crack of distant gun shots.

And when the fireworks were done, Wendy would tuck us in and go back to her books with the plastic pages of diagrams of bones and organs and the circulatory system all dropping over each other, finishing with the heart and all its ventricles and atriums, to make a solid man, and the magical equations and symbols for chemicals that could make people heal and feel better and become full of hope and I would cuddle under the covers and say a few words to the close and holy dark.

