



Virgin Slate
The
Christmas Edition

December 2011



Our Christmas Offerings

A Sick Child's Memory of Christmas	CF	2
Toast and Guinness	AC	3
In Memory of Santa	DM	5
Something Christmassy	DS	7
Going Home	MB	8
About VirginSlate		10



A Sick Child's Memory of Christmas

A joyous time for all but the few.
Locked up inside, they kept us too.
We were not bold or bad, you see,
but not for us the given glee.

Sick we were, in body and soul
and we were kept inside this bowl
like goldfish, roaming round and round,
looking for parents, nowhere to be found.

Yes, Santa came with presents and cheer
but for us it was just one huge tear
after another, tumbling out.
When what we wanted was to shout

for mummy and daddy to take us home.
To share this time among our own.
My friend, she got new patent shoes
she could not walk, gave her the blues.

I put on the pretty black shoes
walked up and down to cheer her heart,
but I only served to see her lose
what should have been her special part.

But in this pantomime we call life,
alone in that place where pain and hurt,
cause nothing else but loss and strife.
The daily gifts doled out were pills.
They told us they would cure our ills.

Joe slips out of Merchant's Quay leaving his wife and family behind him and begins to walk along Patrick Street or Pana as the locals call it. Of course it's a different Pana now; a changed street in a changing town. Even the old Christmas lights have gone, their gaudy cheerfulness replaced by a refined and more dignified display. Still Joe misses the old lights, cheap but colourful, the way Christmas used to be.

Joe pushes on through the crowds and a brisk ten minutes brings him to the door of the hospital. No crowds here, just a couple of relaxed porters chatting to the receptionist. Joe can never resist the stairs here, the broad double-winged flights that first take you towards and then away from the huge mirrored wall, such a delight in this age of narrow functional stairwells.

A little breathless from the stairs he turns towards the surgical ward. The corridor walls are bright, no longer institutional beige but the hospital smell is the same, sterile and evocative in equal measures. His shoes squeak on the quiet floor. He sees no one. All but the seriously ill have been discharged for the holiday.

The occupants of the ward have changed again as the remaining patients are condensed into less space. The room has an unmistakably modern feel. High windows let in the grey winter light but it dissipates quickly in the brighter electric glow of the ward. There are three beds along each wall, each with its own locker, trolley, chair and curtains. Six elderly men occupy the beds. Two are asleep, two talk quietly to visitors; another draws long agonizing breaths, the success of each being proclaimed by a loud gasp. Joe remembers that the only thing worse than the gasps is the occasional straining silence when no gasp comes.

Terry, Joe's bachelor uncle, sits propped in the final bed. On the trolley before him a slice of uneaten toast lies neglected next to a milky cup of untouched tea. Terry's eyes are closed and his mouth hangs open. Over the past year his grey hair has thinned considerably and his face has grown hollows and new spaces where shadows lurk. Only the new growth of stubble gives him any substance. Joe pulls up a chair and slowly Terry becomes aware of his presence. With his eyes closed it's hard to believe that Terry is still alive. But when they open Terry begins to be himself again. He blinks a few times, works his mouth and his tongue touches his pallet with tsssh sound. Then he looks around him, registers where he still is and reaches up to straighten his hair as he finally focuses on his visitor.

"Ah Joe, good of you to come".

His voice is surprisingly strong.

Joe pours a drink of 7Up then holds the beaker with its child's cover while Terry takes a tiny sip. Joe talks of the weather and the Christmas crowds. Terry nods occasionally but he is not listening. He is thinking of Fordes on Barrack Street. It is another Christmas Eve and Terry sits at the bar while before him a pint glass holds a seething mixture of muddy browns, creams and blacks that swirl and swoop. Fresh in from the noise of the streets Terry too is slowly settling, anticipating the creamy bitterness.

"Did you bring it"? He says to Joe.

"Yes".

"Where is it"?

Joe reaches into his pocket and pulls out a can of Guinness. It shines dully in the afternoon light.

"Would you like some"?

"No, just put it where I can see it".

Joe pushes aside the tea and toast and places the can of Guinness on the trolley in front of Terry. They do not speak.

Back in Fordes, the barman takes the settled glass and tops it up.

Terry licks his lips.

In the more than sixty years since his first pint Terry has never been unfaithful. He neither took a wife nor made a child. All he asked was a few pints of an evening and maybe a chat about the horses or the state of the world. Camaraderie, that's what he had, a lifetime of camaraderie. Oh they had some fine laughs. There was a crew of them. Back in London they used to go to the races for the day, great days! But it was the evenings, the swirl of the pint, their overcoats hooked beneath the bar, a damp musty smell in the smoke filled air and the night stretched out before you..

Slowly Terry's eyes begin to close and he drifts off leaving Joe alone with the untouched toast and the gleaming can of Guinness.

'When did you stop believing in Santa?'

It was an odd question, especially from someone in his thirties; especially to someone in his thirties, but M. was not the type of person to let the oddness of a question stop him from asking it. It was a rare quality and it had taken me a long time to appreciate it in M. He was also not the type of person to let the oddness of an answer stop him listening to it, which was a rarer quality and one it had taken me even longer to appreciate.

'I guess I was seven or eight', I started and paused for a sup of my pint. The tightness in the pub meant it took me a few seconds to get the glass to my lips and back to the bar, and M. was beginning to get distracted by a stranger's woollen hat before I continued.

'I think I was the first down on Christmas morning and I found sellotape and a stapler in the sitting room. I don't remember what I got, but the box it came in must have been too big for the wrapping paper, so the wrapping paper had just been stapled across the top.'

'How long did it take you to figure it out?'

'A day or two', another sup, 'I asked my Dad if the elves used sellotape or staples to wrap the presents and he said "Neither, they use magic and reindeer poo."'

M. laughed and I laughed too. 'I think he'd probably had a couple when I asked. What about you? When did you stop believing?'

M. didn't answer straight away, he just smirked and raised a finger to show he'd heard the question and was considering his answer. Then he turned to the bar to order another pair of pint.

Christmas was the only time I was sure of seeing M. We'd grown up within a few miles of each other, but had both lived in various places since then. We usually caught up at Christmas time in Dublin when we both came home. He had a family, but they had stayed with her parents while he spent the last days before Christmas eve with his own parents. We were in a narrow and busy pub in Dublin at 4pm on a Saturday and at 35 each, we were probably the youngest there by 20 years and struggling to get orders in.

M. turned back to me, still a smirk on his face and a pint in each hand. He jerked forward as a short fat woman pushed passed him from behind. The head of his Guinness landed on my left shoe and a mouthful of his Heineken splashed the woman's elbow. 'Is that an early Christmas present, yis tossers?' she growled, then waved her stubby arm up and down and continued pushing her way towards the door, cigarette in her mouth and lighter raised to chin level.

"I tried to catch the bollox!", M. said, "Woulda worked too!" I was confused for a while, thinking M. was referring to the spilled pints rather than to Santa, but I knew better than to interrupt him. He always told his own stories, not the listeners'.

'I put superglue around the neck of the bottle of brandy my Mam had left out for Santa', he laughed. 'My dad had to go the A&E the next day and he couldn't talk to me for a week. In fairness though, he never touched brandy again. Haha!'

As we left the pub a few pints later, M. started theorising about Christmas, 'that's what it's all about though, isn't it?', he asked.

'What's that?'

'Well, all this complaining about Christmas starting too early and all. I mean, it's crap isn't it?'

'What, it's crap that it starts so early?'

'No', said M. 'it's a crap argument. Christmas is just about memories. It's just about remembering your own Christmases or making Christmas memories for kids. That's the whole point.'

'What's that got to do with Christmas starting early?', I asked.

'Well, the special thing about Christmas is that it's everyone's at the same time. I mean you have a birthday and I have a birthday, but they're different. And there're holidays and weddings and parties, but everyone has their own. Christmas is different – it doesn't matter if you love Christmas or hate it or what you think of all the religious rubbish, it's still Christmas for everyone, so everyone is sharing the same memories...

'Christmas is everyone's at the same time. It needs to start early, so it can fit everyone in.'

Something Christmassy

(A poem with no rhyme or sense :))

Too excited to sleep
Santa's on his way
The kids are in bed
Time for the pub
Woolly jumpers are out
Rain's pouring down
Shots all around
Turkey's in the oven
Midnight mass has been done
Bed for an hour
Up at the crack of dawn
Windows all frosted over
Gifts under the tree
Santa has come
Time to relax with the family.

Lucy's excitement was welling over to fever pitch. She couldn't ever remember having been quite so elated; she had infected all around her with her unbridled exuberance.

Yes, this would be her best Christmas ever., After a forty year absence from her beloved homeland, she was returning. In just seven days she would have her feet on "Holy Ground". She smiled as she kept repeating the magical phrase: "going home, really going home, this time".

Alone in her room in Parco Grifeo, overlooking Vesuvius and the enchanted, fairy-lit Bay of Naples, the far off home memories flooded back nostalgically; Christmas with its glamourised magic moments of yesteryear. A clear picture of the modestly decorated kitchen flashes past. There were no coloured fairy lights, Christmas trees or glistening ornate decorations then. Oh no. Instead, garlands of ivy trailed around the dresser top while the pictures were decked out with ruby red clusters of holly berries peeping down from amid the menacing pointy holly spikes. The little hand-made timber crib, comprised only of the three main nativity persona, watched over by an enormous silver star completing the festive decorations.

But of course, no thoughts of the festive season could ever be entertained without remembering and recreating again the visit of the old fat man with his "ho, ho, ho!" After all the weeks of waiting, longing dreaming counting the days, our excitement could hardly be contained (Lucy remembers), when the loud knock echoed through the stillness of the midnight air. While the eldest family member had the privilege (or the courage) to admit this most welcome visitor, the younger members were waiting in trepidation for the "surprises" from the great cloth sack. 'Oh', thought Lucy, 'how simple life was then'. In the pre-*Toy Show*, pre-television days, a doll or a train set overwhelmed the grateful recipient. Santa was never over-taxed or forced to downsize. Demand was minimum; expectations low.

'Wait', she thought, 'did it always snow at Christmas? It couldn't have had.' Yet, she had crystal clear memories of her brother and herself, examining the marks left in the snow by the reindeer hooves on Christmas morning. That happened not once, but she remembered "seeing" them on several occasions!

Christmas morning was, in her present romanticised recollection, a wonderful pure magical, heavenly occasion. A leisurely quiet moonlit walk along a country lane led to the little wooden church in the valley for early morning Mass. One quickened one's steps as one neared, drawn alluringly closer as the strains of Silent Night wafted invitingly in the frosty air.

The longing for a piece of this childhood magic became more intense as Lucy repeated once again, 'Oh my God, I am going home!'

To bright lights and distant voices Lucy opened her eyes, slowly, heavily, painfully. She tried frantically to move her arms, to call someone's attention, they felt heavy, leaden, numb.

No one answered.

Where was she?

Who were these people?

Why was she here?

After what seemed like an endless silence, slowly, painfully the terrible memories started flooding back. The vibrations, the panic, the screaming then the terror and the prayers.

In an instant she was back, back floating through an endless dark tunnel. Lights came into view and flickered in the distance.

Were they the lights of Rome ahead saluting her on her homeward journey? Or were they the lights of the other eternal city calling her home home home?

Was she really going home at last?

About VirginSlate

VirginSlate is a group of would-be creative writers based in Cork, Ireland.

Our inaugural session happened in the Slate Bar in Cork on Tuesday, 11th October 2011. We can blame the teacher of our creative writing class for cancelling that night, so we had nothing better to do than go to the pub and get creative.

Each of our fortnightly issues will begin with a theme (a word or a phrase). We then have two weeks to submit a piece of writing on that theme. The writing can use any form and take the theme in any direction the author wishes.

Every two weeks the group meets (in a pub) to discuss the various submissions and decides upon a theme for the following fortnight. The authors then have a chance to make any edits they like before the submissions are published online.

We provide a forum for would-be creative writers to practice their writing and get some friendly feedback and constructive criticism.

Selecting a theme each fortnight makes it easier to stop wondering what to write about and to concentrate on just writing something.

New members are welcome to either join us in the pub or to submit entries by email or post.

Email us at: virginslate@gmail.com

Or follow us on Facebook: <http://www.facebook.com/VirginSlate>