

A FLAMIN' GOOD CHRISTMAS STORY

by

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A Flamin' Good Christmas Story / J. Crothall

Ah Christmas.

What other time of the year fills us with such a profound sense of fraternal love that we actually put down our cell-phones and concern ourselves with the oncoming traffic? When else do we think of loving thy neighbor instead of blasting our music to counter their pestiferous and rather intimidating love-making? What else but the season of giving has us delivering heart-felt gestures of gratitude instead of obscene gestures of contempt? Is it something in the music, a hypnotic chant deviously researched and compiled by 'big brother' to sedate us for a few weeks of the year and boost market shares in fruitcake? Is Father Christmas, Santa Claus, Jolly Old Saint Nick, just a symbol of some red political faction that likes to claim ownership of us, if only for the duration of one mistletoe-dodging day? Is this done for the glory of good and fellowship, or is it simply to fulfill some last-minute year-end quota of good deeds before sodding off into the New Year guilt-free and ready to bonk your best friend's mate?

No no, take your time, mull these thoughts over. I'm very patient. One might say I have the patience of an angel, which actually could do a great deal towards explaining this rather luminous ring spiraling around my head. Oh it looks all well and good in those old paintings, but you try nodding off when you have the golden arches shining their neon light over your

A Flamin' Good Christmas Story / J. Crothall

forehead. Still, it comes with the territory. The name's not important if it's all the same to you, but the job is what it's all about. It's your standard gaff, watching over the down-trodden and patting the kiddies on the head when they've wet the bed. Not the most glamorous job, but the benefits are good.

You still don't believe me, do you? What, just because I'm not speaking in 'thou's and 'thy's and I haven't yet 'harkened' something means I'm not some divine bloody being? Steady on, it's not all about choirs and angels singing 'Gloria'. I much prefer a little Frank Sinatra, thank you very much. Besides, I don't even know who this naffin' Gloria is. She's not on my shift, anyway. Must be a right looker if you think we spend all our time chatting about her.

No, I'm here to do my job and tell you all a poignant holiday story. Thought you were too old for that, didn't you? This ain't no bloody pantomime sunshine, so you can stop expecting some trollop in tights. I'm talking about a Christmas story for grown-ups - the kind that makes you think. The kind that makes you feel a bit guilty about all the preoccupations that stop you from appreciating what you have. It'll put you right off your Christmas pudding, this will. I don't know, do you even still do Christmas pudding anymore? Things have changed a bit, haven't they? I mean, there was once a time when there was only one place Christmas should be spent - a gathering of joy and celebration in the most sacred of places. The pub. What this world has come to I just don't know.

A Flamin' Good Christmas Story / J. Crothall

Anyroad, Christmas isn't all fun and games for everyone, and it really isn't expected to be. For example, if some mother just lost her son in a drive-by shooting right in heart of old London, then of course she's not going to be pulling anyone's cracker this year, and to tell you the truth I'll be right there alongside her sipping on the Vodka. My friends, you're not the only ones feeling blue, so stop acting like you're the most hard done by person on this earth. Ah but therein lies the rub, or some rubbish at least, don't it? The self-serving pity-me's who act a right misery because Father Christmas didn't bring them the two hundred quid piece of high-fi they had their heart set on, or those who brood every holiday season because it marks the anniversary of their pet budgie's death. There are those who are not happy unless they've got something to have a moan about. And if that is you, then 'you' are who I'm targeting, sunshine.

You and my mate Duncan.

Duncan has always had a few dirty fingers in a few dirty pies. He started doing it as a teen in order to supplement his wages at Tesco's, and it was only a game until he had a wife and two kids to care for. You see, Duncan and his brood are of the poor persuasion, and with Christmas on the way he found it a bit hard to find the enthusiasm required to crack open the egg nog. Old Duncan, it seems, was caught in the middle of two lines, one of which is designated, in plain red lettering, as the 'poverty line'. He was too rich to qualify for most social aid programs, but wasn't poor enough to have Sir Bob Geldof write a song for

A Flamin' Good Christmas Story / J. Crothall

his family and gather up a gaggle of aging rock stars to sing it. So all he had left was his mate-of-a-mate who knew a guy who could help him make a bob or two.

But not this year. No, his wife had made a stand. No more illicit dealings. Easier said than done though, weren't it? She wasn't the bread winner. She didn't have the hopes of their children resting upon her checkbook. She wasn't the one who was going to receive the scathing stares of their disappointed children when Father Christmas didn't deliver as promised. His daughter was desperately in need of a 'Make Me Pretty', an eerily disembodied head affixed to a plastic base upon which she could sadistically practice her evil art of cosmetology. His son, not to be outdone, would apparently burst if he did not get a car model kit, complete with attachable spoilers and low-rider suspension. The entire ensemble was entitled 'Pimp My Ride'. Can you believe that? I remember a day where toys did not rely on adjectives that were once considered derogatory descriptions of a highly illegal occupation in order to boost sales. Back in my day, toys had class and taste. The Garden of Eden Playset, that's what I had. Good wholesome fun. Granted my favorite action figure was Cain - he had this brilliant kung-fu action fratricide grip.

Anyway, his wife and darling (if not demanding) children were Duncan's strength and backbone. Whenever he came home from a grueling day at work - be it on or off the taxman's books - they were the only people that could possibly show him that it

A Flamin' Good Christmas Story / J. Crothall

was not all in vain. Whenever he questioned the need behind his voluntary slavery, he had only need imagine their faces. His world revolved around their's, and their's, in turn, revolved around his. Well, technically in causality that is an impossibility. Two planetoids can not orbit each other, as the larger will snare the smaller as a satellite, such as Earth's moon. One could argue that the two planetoids are the same size, but the odds of that happening are so minute that I'm not even going to humor you, and it's really all aside from the point, isn't it?

Old Duncan, it seems, was not filled with the Christmas spirit, and was not very happy about going home and telling them that Christmas was going to consist of a processed microwavable turkey and a book voucher with a value of three quid. Well one thing was for sure, he couldn't. I mean, no one wants a book voucher on Christmas, do they? Well, most don't. I'm unfortunately barred from pointing fun at those who do. No child of his was going to be content with a sad present such as that, and he was set to do something about it.

As my mate Duncan trudged down the snow-packed sidewalk he made his way past grumbling shoppers who balanced more bags than they could possibly carry. The old urge to relieve them of one or two packages was present, but he fought that off like a vampire in a blood bank. One woman even went so far as complaining about the age old quandary - what to buy the man who has everything? If he has everything, then why the flamin' hell

A Flamin' Good Christmas Story / J. Crothall

are we so worried about him? Nevermind, force an understanding smile, there's a good lad. Must practice that pleasant disposition now, mustn't we? After a long day sweating at the unforgiving plant, it was now time to look forward to going home and relaxing with a snifter of port by the fire, sat in your favorite armchair with the kids at your feet, watching some aging comedian's holiday special on the telly, right?

Wrong. For one thing he didn't have a fire. Then, of course, there was the fact that he would not get home for another five hours. In an attempt to make that extra bit of Christmas cash, old Duncan had taken on another job, in which he sat in front of a telephone all evening calling people in their homes and interrupting them while they watched that aging comedian's holiday special, asking them if they'd like to buy tickets to a Christmas Eve Pageant. The mere fact that it was a charity justified them paying him only two quid an hour, and the charity behind the operation had him greatly suspicious.

So you're probably wondering by now what I'm going to do about all this. Am I going to do some 'It's a Wonderful Life' type of deal and show him how buggered his wife's life would have been if he'd never been born? Will I have him visited by several colorfully characterized ghosts to show him various phases in time to remind him of all his trespasses? Will I leave mysterious bundles of pre-wrapped presents under his Christmas tree? Nope. There's only one thing that can resolve a situation such as this.

A Flamin' Good Christmas Story / J. Crothall

I'm gonna give him a right kicking.

As always, the battery-operated chime played a brutalized version of 'Joy to the World' as Duncan opened the door. He planned to take a hammer to the thing on his last day of work. It was a small rented office space, occupied by a few tables, a variety of chairs in assorted condition, a few phones, and a mass of wires that wormed their way underfoot and towards a panel on the wall. Oh, and a short twelve inch Charlie Brown quality Christmas tree sitting on the corner of the supervisor's desk. There were no windows and only one exit, and he could not imagine it being up to any sort of building code.

"Dunk!" a lanky man in festive red suspenders called, greeting him with a horribly wide smile and imitating a basketballer's slam-dunk.

The supervisor was an odd sort with a most unfortunate disposition from which he suffered quite noticeably - he was American. It never ceases to amaze me how cultures can contradict themselves so severely. After all, you walk down virtually any street in England, approach a complete stranger, make direct eye contact and ask them how their afternoon is, and next thing you know you're chatting up a storm. You try that in New York City and you're liable to wind up shot. However, you import an American businessman and allow him to impose his ideology upon his employees and you have a level of familiarity so invasive that even your chatty neighbor would feel intimidated.

A Flamin' Good Christmas Story / J. Crothall

"Duncan," our man corrected, and not for the first time.

"Not a basketball fan, eh?" the supervisor asked, patting his back forcefully. "Is it just soccer in this country? Do you play?"

Duncan gritted his teeth. "Haven't the time," he muttered, trying to force a smile. It hurt his face. It really, really hurt.

The supervisor looked at his watch. "Speaking of time, five o'clock, right on schedule!" He pronounced it '*shed*-ule'. Duncan wanted to bludgeon him to death. The supervisor punctuated his sentence by pointing two fake finger-pistols at him and making a clicking sound.

The beeping version of 'Joy to the World' went off again, and Duncan took advantage of the supervisor's distraction to break away and make it to his workstation. As he set his coat over the back of his chair he looked over to his neighbor, a young man who had taken the job to help pay for his fast-approaching wedding. They nodded a hello, which pretty much covered all that needed to be said between them. They were both in the same boat, only Duncan had two kids and a mortgage twice the size of his house. But who's counting?

"Good evening Mr....name," Duncan recited quietly as he stretched his arms and cracked his knuckles. "My name is...Joe and I'm ringing you on behalf of the Hackney Young Actor's and Playwright's Society...got it..."

Well, with the whole spiel fresh in his mind, Duncan dialed

A Flamin' Good Christmas Story / J. Crothall

the first number on the long printed list set before him.

'Hello?'

"Yes, Mrs. Bradden?"

'Yes?' the voice asked suspiciously.

"Good evening Mrs. Bradden! My name is Fred and I'm calling on behalf of the Hackney Young Actor's & Playwright's Society and..."

'Is this some sort of flamin' telemarketing??'

"Well...I hesitate to use the word Mrs. Bradden. We're a charitable organization and..."

'Listen squire, don't you think I'm spending enough Bugs Bunny over the naffin' holidays? It's not enough that me husband is off down the rub-a-dub skiving every evening and I'm sat here on me April watching the Liza all on me Jack, but you want to ring me up on the dog and beg for my bees and honey? I've told you lot to bugger off, now scarper!'

Click.

Duncan still held the phone a few inches away long after she hung up. He couldn't hear the dial tone for the ringing in his ear. Well that went well. Sadly, you're looking at the archetype for his entire evening.

5:45pm

"Good evening Mrs. Jackson, my name is Thomas and I'm calling on behalf of the Hackney Young Actor's and Millwright's Society, and I was wondering if you'd be interested in purchasing tickets to our Christmas Eve Pageant. All proceeds

A Flamin' Good Christmas Story / J. Crothall

go to charity."

'You must be joking. I just sat through me kid's Christmas pageant. I'm glad I only have to do that once a year.'

6:15pm

"Good evening Mr. Watts, my name is Donald and I'm ringing on behalf of the Young Hack Actor's & Playwright's Society, and we would like to know if you'd be interested in buying tickets to our Christmas Eve Pageant. All proceeds go towards buying presents for the needy."

'Needy? Mate, I *am* the needy.'

7:45pm

"Is there a Mr. Caplet there?"

'This is *Mrs.* Caplet.'

"Mrs. Caplet, I was calling to speak to your husband, but I'm sure a woman such as yourself can make decisions on his behalf."

'Well I have to, really. He....he died three weeks ago.'

"Oh. Well. I'm sorry. Perhaps....perhaps I'll call back later."

8:34pm

"Good evening Mr. Stout, my name is Moses and I'm ringing on behalf of the Hackney Young Actor's & Socialist Playwrights, and we were hoping that you'd like to buy tickets to our Christmas Eve Pageant. All proceeds go towards buying presents for the needy."

'Christmas pageant, huh?'

A Flamin' Good Christmas Story / J. Crothall

"Yes sir. It would be a great evening for the kids."

'Yeah. It would, wouldn't it?'

"Can I put you down for a family pass?"

'...uh, no. No, I can't...'

"Are you sure? There'll be games and prizes for the children afterwards."

'Yeah, they'd love it, I'm sure, but I've just finished with the divorce. My wife got custody of my kids. Ex-wife, I guess I should say. I still can't get used to that.'

"I'm sorry sir. Really...I am."

'You and me both, mate. I'll be lucky to see them even on weekends. Listen, I'll sort you out for a donation though, how's that? Maybe I can help out some other kids.'

"That's kind of you sir, very kind."

He jotted down on his notepad as the man gave him his details, then simply said his goodbye. Duncan had opened his mouth to say something comforting to the man, but when he took too long to think of something relevant the man simply hung up, assuming that he wouldn't even get a 'goodbye' in gratitude for his donation. Duncan very slowly put the receiver down and scratched the name off the list.

9:56pm

He turned to his neighbor.

"Last number," he said with almost a hint of a smile. It had always been a competition between the two to see who could finish their list before ten o'clock.

A Flamin' Good Christmas Story / J. Crothall

"Done," the young man replied, hanging up the phone.

He always won. There went his almost-good mood.

Duncan dialed the final number on the seemingly never-ending list. It rang about five times, which was the maximum he gave before giving up. He fought with his urge to abandon the call and leave, but he was hoping to make at least one more sale for the night. Finally, as he motioned to hang up, a faint and child-like voice answered the phone.

'...hello....?'

"Hello," he said, applying the same tone he still spoke to his daughter with. "Is your mummy or daddy home?"

There was a long pause until the child spoke again, her voice quivering as she tried to remember how to address a stranger.

'...i don't...i don't know...'

"Well my name is Jamhal and I'm calling from the Hackney..." He hesitated, his concern budding. "Do you know where your parents are, luv?"

'...i...i don't know...' she said again, a little more distraught this time.

He leaned forward. "Are you all by yourself?"

'...i'm not supposed to say...'

That was an obvious 'yes' to him.

"How long have you been on your own, sweetheart?"

'...i don't know...'

It was at that point that she began to cry. She said a few

A Flamin' Good Christmas Story / J. Crothall

more words, but they were unintelligible while veiled in her sobbing.

Duncan felt a tap on his shoulder. He turned to see his supervisor making a circular motion with his finger - a signal to wrap it up. Duncan underlined the number on the list and pointed to it. He then cupped his hand over the mouthpiece.

"Find out the address of this place."

"Why?"

"I think there's something wrong there. There's a little girl all by herself."

A knowing authority assumed the persona of the man that Duncan had grown to resent. He gained a take-charge aura as he held out his hand. "Here," he said in his 'I'll take care of this problem, citizen' voice. For a moment Duncan could actually understand why he was the man in charge. He handed the supervisor his phone.

"Hello? Hi there, is your mom or dad home little girl? No? Do you know when they'll be back? Oh. Well just you tell them that the Hackney Young Actor's & Playwright's Society called. Can you remember that? We'll get them a shout back, so never you mind. Bye now."

He casually hung up the phone. Duncan stared at him with the bewilderment of a man who had just witness a horrid and spectacular crash.

"What the flamin' hell was that?"

"We're not babysitters, Dunk. It's not our place to

A Flamin' Good Christmas Story / J. Crothall

interfere."

"What are you talking about? That girl could have been..."

"Here Dunk," he said, trying to maintain his spirited attitude as he handed him a cheque. "Last week's wages. Listen, we only have a few days left, and your sales are down. I'm really going to need you to push a little harder, okay? Now I don't want to be the bad guy, especially on top of Christmas, but we've got to help those kids. You understand what I'm saying, right?" He wasn't about to wait for a response, and was prepared to walk away when he saw the page with the underlined phone number still sitting on Duncan's desk. "Ah, I'll take that, shall I? I'll add it to the finished list pile."

Duncan tried arguing a few more times, but he just received that plastered benign smile in reply. It was the supervisor's best response in the face of adversity. He'd like to see how he'd respond in the face of a cricket bat. At a complete loss, Duncan left the rented office. As he trudged off home he desperately tried to recall the number, but the order of digits was overwritten by the flood of other arrangements he had encountered through the course of the evening. He had to leave it to the fates, as it were, and hope that he was over-reacting, or at least the girl had a nosey neighbor who would intervene.

Duncan took the cheque out of the envelope and hoped to console himself with the fruits of his labor. It wasn't half bad. Well, it wasn't that good either, but it was a few quid more than he had five hours ago. That dark cloud that hovered

A Flamin' Good Christmas Story / J. Crothall

over him parted to allow a ray of light in, if only slightly. Perhaps the turkey would be a little dry, and the only port he'd be 'sniffting' would be Tizer, but if he planned his money carefully then he and his son just might be pimping some rides this holiday season. He threw off the chains of an arduous evening and decided to return to his family with a newfound appreciation. He'd stop by the sweet shop and pick up a few candy canes on his way, and maybe even wake them up when he got home to tell them that he overheard Santa at the mall talking about a little girl who wanted a severed head to practice her makeup on. The anticipation of seeing her face light up increased his step.

And that, in a nutshell, is my mate Duncan.

Now I know you're trying to one-up me. You're making all sorts of assumptions on what exactly it was I did in this situation. Did I arrange it so that Duncan would get that particular list? Did I fix it so that he'd talk to those particular people? Was I the little girl on the other end of the line? Nah. I was the yob who kicked the stuffing out of his supervisor and nicked his wallet as he made his way to his BMW. That put a right smile on old Duncan's face the next day when he heard. I told you there was a ponce who needed a right kicking. You just assumed I meant Duncan. You just assumed I was being metaphorical. Oh come on, you'd have done the same thing.

The moral of this tale, kiddies, is that there is always

A Flamin' Good Christmas Story / J. Crothall

someone worse off than you. Yes it's nice if you can go on a crusade and save them all, but no one is that productive. Sometimes it's just enough to realize that you're not as bad off as you think. Every man and woman is capable of happiness provided they can just shut it and take a good look at themselves. Count your flamin' blessings, squire. And if you can help out one or two of those people worse off than you in the process, then you'd be doing me a personal favor.

Well that's it for me. I've done my bit, and now I'm off. I know you probably have a few questions, and quite frankly that's why I'm going to scarper now. Not happy with such a simple concept? Not what you expected from my sort? Oh well, mustn't grumble, could have been worse. I didn't guilt you into going to church, did I? Mull it over, talk amongst yourselves, and have a good flamin' Christmas.

Oh, and don't worry about the little girl. I know you were wondering about her. Relax, mate. It's just a bloody story.