

White Christmas

“And do you intend anything special for Christmas, Missus Hoyle?” said Sam.

He glowed with pleasure. His manners, his sophistication; he felt he conducted himself with unusual flair. The word ‘intend’ especially tickled him; you wouldn’t expect a twelve year old to use a word like that. The cloth napkin was scratchy on his bare knees; he adjusted it, and then straightened his tie and wool mix blazer, feeling the weight of the gold ‘chorister’ badge pinned over the breast pocket.

“Chrissy?” Mrs Hoyle laughed and passed Sam a tub of peas. “Yeah no we usually do Chrissy in June. Makes sense: you do it in winter, you can have a fire and a turkey and everything. And Dougie’s back from Mawson Station. Mind you, Sarah’s gone now.”

Dougie was Mr Hoyle. Sam had been awed at the first mention of Sarah, the Hoyles’ eighteen year old daughter, but fortunately she was off in Bali for the summer with her mates.

“Nice lamb, Missus Hoyle,” said Craig. He was hunched over his plate, and shoveled it in. He had a spot of gravy. Sam rubbed his own cheek.

“Have some more,” she said, “and some mint sauce.”

Craig grabbed the platter and forked three bloody slices to his plate before he caught himself. He turned red, glanced at Sam, and began to transfer the meat back to the platter, but Mrs Hoyle took it out of his reach, and laughed again. “There’s just us, boys, and it’s no good cold.”

Remember boys, Mr Lindsay had impressed on them, remember when you go to your billets: you are ambassadors. You represent The Melbourne Boys Choir, and you represent the City of Melbourne itself. It was a role that suited Sam like a wool mix blazer. As a matter of fact, he always carried himself like an ambassador from somewhere. Not like Craig, who was sixteen, and came out

of his sleeves half the length of his forearms. He'd told Sam he was leaving Choir to focus on his High School Certificate, an admission that Sam interpreted as a sort of failure. But in the very same conversation he had casually revealed that he had a girlfriend called Phoebe, who went to Saint Cath's. Sam thought for sure he'd made her up, but she came to Station Pier to see them off. She wore a sundress layered yellow white orange red yellow — it made her look like a trifle.

Craig was a Bass. Sam was an Alto, for now. But Lindsay was moving him to Tenor after the tour.

Sam couldn't have guessed Mrs Hoyle's age, and it would never occur to him to try. She conformed perfectly to his notion of a Taswegian: short curly hair, shapeless and domestic in a big hand-knitted wooly jumper, and thick specs with tortoiseshell frames: from time to time she took them off, grabbed the tip of her nose between thumb and forefinger and waggled it side to side as though to loosen the cartilage. She wore a blue japara indoors for the concert at the Northgate Target and stood at the back with her hands deep in the pockets. Afterwards she drove them home in a white Kingswood — Sam gripped the door handles when she cornered too fast — and parked it in her back yard right on the lawn by a Hill's Hoist droopy with wet floral sheets.

"What does your husband do in Antarctica, Missus Hoyle?" said Craig.

She chewed reflectively as though thinking how to answer, "Well," she chewed some more and recovered a bit of gristle on the end of her fork and set it on the edge of her plate, "you know about CFC's?"

"Nuh-uh," said Craig.

"I think I know," said Sam. It sounded familiar.

"Yeah," Mrs Hoyle went on, "Mawson Station, they do meteorology, some geomagnetic stuff; Dougie's with CSIRO. A lot of it's maintenance." She shrugged.

"Do you ever go with him?" said Craig. She laughed and waved a hand as though to shoo him away.

"Four months a year sounds like a lot," Craig persisted.

“It must be nice to have so much time to yourself,” said Sam, trying to think of something polite and solicitous to say. She gave him a funny look. Then she snorted and spooned herself some carrots.

“What was that song you did,” she said, “with the loo-lays?”

“Coventry Carol,” said Craig promptly.

“Coventry Carol,” said Sam, “arranged Walford Davies.” He held out his plate for Mrs Hoyle to spoon him some carrots too.

“It’s the massacre of the innocents, isn’t it?” she said.

Sam blinked.

“Herod the King dum-dee-dum young children for to slay.”

Craig sat up straight. “Are you very religious, Missus Hoyle?”

“No dear, not at all.”

He looked crestfallen.

Sam never paid attention to song lyrics, but he loved the severity of that verse, Trebles and Basses doubling the lonely melody an octave apart. The mystery of two voices, high and low, the notes at once different and the same. He heard it in his mind, and shivered.

“But you’re innocents yourself,” said Mrs Hoyle. “That’s the pity of it.”

Now Sam was offended. His face flushed hot. He helped himself to the last two slices of lamb. Mrs Hoyle beamed affectionately. He forked a lump that was too large, and he could still feel it in his throat after he swallowed it.

Craig continued to stare at the table. Mrs Hoyle rubbed his shoulder. “Never mind me, sweetheart. You said a lovely grace before.”

He looked as though he was about to say something, then thought better of it.

“Not very loquacious, your friend,” she said to Sam. She rose to her feet, and began to collect the plates. Sam started at the word ‘loquacious’, then relaxed and watched her clean the table. Craig carried his plate to the sink.

“Now.” said Mrs Hoyle, when the table was bare. “Maybe time for us all to

turn in. You'll be in Sarah's room. But she's starting Arts-Law at Sydney Uni in February, so I suppose it's not really her room any more. There's a bed and a fold-out."

As soon as it was lights out in the bedroom Sam turned to talk to Craig. The older boy was hunched over in bed, whispering to himself. Sam sat up. Craig swiveled so Sam couldn't see. Then he quickly made the sign of the cross and lay down. Sam was so struck by the absurdity, he nearly burst into laughter.

Instead he whispered, "what're you thinking about?"

"Dunno. Stuff. Phoebe. How Missus Hoyle comes to a Christmas concert but she's not religious."

Religion for Sam was Choral Music, and School Chapel. It was Nanna with her rosary beads and her open-heart surgery scar, and old lady stink of stale garlic.

"How did you and Phoebe meet?" said Sam, thinking Geebung Polo Club. He once heard some year twelves boast they met drunk girls there, and Craig looked old enough to sneak into a pub.

"Sausage sizzle."

"Do you pash?"

"Sometimes." Craig didn't sound so sure.

"Do you feel her up? Did you have sex yet?"

Craig adjusted himself in his sheets. Sam could make out the silhouette. The sheets were tucked in tight on either side, and Craig struggled to get some slack, pushing up with his knees and forearms. "It's not like that. We're saving ourselves."

"How d'you mean?" Sam still didn't get it.

"We're getting married when we finish HSC." He pronounced it 'Aitchessea,' like one word.

"You're joshing me!"

Craig said nothing.

“You can’t be serious!”

Craig still said nothing.

Now Sam actually laughed aloud. He didn’t mean it cruelly, but come on, he thought.

“You’re not old enough to understand,” said Craig.

Sam thought privately it was Craig who wasn’t old enough.

“What if she gets sick of waiting?” said Sam, “What if you’re not compatible in bed?”

“God commands us to wait as a test of our commitment.”

“You sound like an American.”

“Look,” said Craig, “I’m not really explaining it. You remember when we got on the Abel Tasman at Station Pier, how it was sort of rocking, but it was okay? and we were joking all through dinner about getting seasick, but it wasn’t really anything?”

Sam said nothing.

“But when we got through the rip and out of the bay into the Strait it got more choppy? and it was going up and down, and Forbes and that were chucking over the side?” Craig gave a helpless shrug.

“Yeah, so?”

“So that’s just Bass Strait. It’s not even the ocean. And it wasn’t even stormy. It’s just: the scale of it, you know? The size of it. You think you know what it’s gonna be like, but you don’t realize. It’s bigger than people.” He paused. “Anyway . . . that’s why we’re saving ourselves.”

Der Fred, thought Sam, it’s calmer in Port Philip Bay than the Strait. Why do you think they call it the Shipwreck Coast? Now he held Craig in contempt. It annoyed him even more to recall how he too had been caught unprepared for the rough sea beyond the Bellarine Peninsula. Woken around midnight by a sudden squall, and overcome by claustrophobia, he had climbed on unsteady pins above deck where the cold air and the spray and the smell of sick hit him

in the face like a wet sack.

Craig was quiet now. Perhaps he had gone to sleep. Sam put his cold hands down his warm pants and began to play with himself. He thought about Phoebe. He thought about Jana Wendt in a blouse with bow tie collar on the Channel Nine News. He thought about the lady in the straight hair wig and thick makeup who caught the tram to Barkly Street in the mornings.

He pulled back the skin; he could feel the end protrude like Craig's forearm from his blazer sleeve. He wedged it between his thighs and held it there firmly, then began to roll his legs back and forth, maintaining pressure and balance, taking special care that it didn't pop out while at the same time moving slowly enough that there was no sound from the fold-out. When he was done, he relaxed slowly into a pleasant fog.

Then he heard a rustle, and a faint creak. Sam froze. He tried to tell himself it was nothing, but there it was again, and unmistakably. He cleared his throat. There was a pause, then the rustle began again. Sam felt a little sick. Eventually the rustle stopped, and he fell asleep.

The next day was sunny. Proper summery weather. Not humid like Melbourne, but warm enough that Sam hoped Lindsay would let them sing without blazers. The living room was transformed, and Sam felt different too: like he'd gone through a pencil sharpener.

There were rainbow squiggles on the wall, from the leadlight wattle over the picture window. Sam stared for a minute and then realized the rainbows were cast, not by the thick color panels in the middle, but by the bevels on the clear glass around the edge. There were no photos on the mantelpiece, just a curious print of a baboon. Mrs Hoyle came in. She wore jeans, and a pleated blouse with a floppy bow tie collar. She moved briskly, with an air of distraction.

"Morning Missus Hoyle," said Sam, "scuse me."

She glanced at him, "got a frog in your throat," then swept past to the kitchen.

He followed her in and sat at the kitchen table. She had the kettle on. He hoped she would make him a mug of Milo.

"I like your print in the good room, the baboon with the nails through his hands."

"Hoh yeah," she punctuated each word with a flutter of breath like a laugh, so they came to two syllables each, but she did not really attend. Craig entered clutching a plastic Coles bag.

"Got a call in a few minutes," said Mrs Hoyle.

The receiver was a large steel brick with a grille and plastic dials. It sat out on a bench mostly taken up with a sewing machine and a denim skirt into which were being inserted pleats of colored fabric. Mrs Hoyle moved aside a pile of patterned squares and reached around to flick a switch. Mr Hoyle's voice came through almost immediately.

"Bahbra."

"Douglas."

He grunted in reply.

She went on, "Got a couple of boys here, from the Melbourne Boys Choir. Billeted here last night. Is that alright with you?"

"You can do what you like."

"Yes . . ." said Barbara. "How's your week been?"

"Balloon snagged an aerial Thursday."

"Mmm. Sorry to hear that."

"You don't sound sorry."

"Just making conversation," said Barbara.

There was a pause. Sam noticed Craig fiddling with the Coles bag. He kept opening it and peering in, then shutting it again. Then he would swing it side to side.

"Liam's there, is he?" said Douglas.

"No Douglas," Barbara's voice grew louder, "just the boys from the choir."

“Been in and out though, has he?”

“None of your business, Douglas.”

Sam glanced at Barbara’s face, but she seemed perfectly composed.

“Yeah . . .” there was a pause then Douglas went on more briskly: “you boys slumming it in the Boonies, then?”

This tickled Sam. It dovetailed nicely with his own thoughts from last night.

“Hi Mister Hoyle,” said Sam, “it’s Sam here. I’m an Alto. If you don’t mind my asking, what’s the weather like at Mawson Station? Has there been precipitation?” He liked ‘precipitation.’ He planned as a follow-up to ask if it might be a White Christmas.

“Are you a bit retarded, Sam? What the bloody hell d’you think it’s like?”

“Alright Douglas,” said Barbara.

“Got the letter from the solicitor,” said Douglas, “me only bloody mail in three weeks.”

“Let’s talk later,” said Barbara. “Take care,” and she switched a dial.

She peered at Sam’s face and there was something acute in her stare that startled him.

“You crying, love?”

“No,” said Sam. He blinked rapidly.

There was a rustle from the Coles bag. Craig was evidently ready to pop.

“Scuse me Missus Hoyle,” he said, then reached in the bag to retrieve a small white box.

“As the culmination of our billet,” Craig began, “I would like to present you, to present to you on behalf of the Melbourne Boys Choir and the City of Melbourne,” his voice was anxious but monotone, “. . . this elegant box, containing a pair of Sterling Silver plated commemorative spoons, with the monogram of the Melbourne Boys Choir, as a token of our esteem and gratitude.” He visibly relaxed. Then, a moment later, he looked up and handed the box to Barbara.

But Barbara was still looking at Sam.

“You sure? You don’t want a hanky?”

Sam continued to blink. He looked at the box in Barbara’s hand. He tried to imagine the spoons, hanging up on a rack in the good room, and he remembered the wattle, and the rainbow squiggles, and the print of the screaming baboon with the perforated cheek and long rusted nails that transfixed his hands and, Sam now realized, a tiara of thorns. And the baboon was somehow not just screaming, but laughing, horribly laughing.