CHRISTMAS TALES 10



Short stories for kids

Storm Cloud Publishing

Christmas Tales 10



A collection of Christmas stories for kids 8 – 12 years

There are nine cheeky elves on the cover. Can you find them all?

Christmas Tales 10
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Junior Fiction: A collection of Christmas themed short stories and poems from writers all around the world.
Fun and adventure, Christmas celebrations, Family relationships, Animals, Poetry, Christmas legends, Santa Claus, Elves, North Pole adventures, Bush adventures, The Magic of Christmas
Ages 8 – 12 years

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Spike’s Christmas Wish

Sandy Summons

December was *always* the busiest month at the North Pole. This was when Santa and the elves completed their final checks. This included: making sure all the children's letters were read, creating and constructing last minute toy requests, wrapping gifts, inspections of the reindeer's flying equipment, and of course, making sure Santa's suit still fit. After all, he did enjoy a cookie or two.

Spike, one of Santa's elves, lived in Elfville with the rest of the elves. Elfville was a beautiful part of Santa's village. The elves in Elfville were very nice. But Spike felt… different.

"The other elves are all so good at their jobs," said Spike, one day to the reindeer. As he gently stroked Prancer's fur he continued, "I wish I could find an elf job that I was good at too."

"There must be something for you, Spike," said Dasher. The other reindeer nodded their heads in agreeance. Spike wondered if they were right.

Then Spike started working in his dream job – testing the sweet, spicy gingerbread cookies and crunchy candy canes that Santa would leave for the children.

"Oh, Spike. You've eaten *all* the cookies!" said Hermie. Hermie oversaw the taste testing in the food factory. "Now we're going to have to start all over again. We're way behind now." Hermie threw his arms up in the air and stormed off.

Uh-oh. Now, Spike knew he was only meant to test a few. He didn't mean to eat all the cookies. But they had tasted so scrumptious. Unfortunately for Spike, he didn't last long in this role.

Spike was then sent to work in the toy factory. Surely, he would do a better job there. He loved tinkering with the toys as he built them.

"Spike! What have you done?" asked Tinsel, one of the elves. She held up a doll that had wheels attached for the legs.

Spike hung his head. He just couldn't follow the instructions properly. They always jumbled up in his brain. He had mistakenly made this toy when looking at two different instructions – one for a doll, and the other for a toy car.

"Hmm, this is certainly very interesting," said Gerard, the head elf, who had come over to see what all the commotion was about.

As the other elves pointed and giggled, Spike's cheeks went cherry red, and he lowered his eyes.

"I think the mail room could be a good fit for you instead," said Gerard, nodding his head.

So off Spike trotted to the mail room where he was instructed to sort the letters. Spike loved the mail room. Surely, he would be good at this. There were millions and millions of letters that were sent by children from all around the world.

Dear Santa,
It's Mike from Australia. I know it will be super-hot when you arrive so, I will leave a nice, cold glass of milk for you.

It's being snowing lots here, Santa. I'll leave you a hot chocolate – to warm you up. Just heat it in the microwave when you arrive.
Love Ally from Canada.

Could I please ask for a compass as it will be spring soon, and I want to go hiking?
From Cameron in Los Angeles.

Konnichiwa. This is Akiko. I would love a Pokémon toy or Pokémon cards, please.

As Spike opened the letters to read and sort, he daydreamed. How he longed to see these glorious places. And Spike imagined having a letter addressed **just** to him.

Suddenly, a huge shadow loomed over Spike. Standing in front of him was Maylee, the head elf in the mailroom.

"Oh, no. Spike, none of these are sorted." Maylee tutted and sighed.

"Sorry," mumbled Spike. As he looked around, he could see hundreds of letters that he had opened piled in a monstrous mound around him. Spike had messed up again. Was there anything that he would be good at?

"Let's go see Santa. I'm sure he will find a special job for you," said Maylee.

While Spike was excited to see Santa, he felt sad that he had let everyone down. Yet again.

As Maylee knocked on Santa's opened office door, Spike peered through. Santa was sitting in a lavish gold and red chair in front of the cosy fireplace. Stockings were hung on the mantelpiece above the crackling fire.

"Ho, ho, ho. It's young Spike," said Santa, motioning for Spike to sit next to him.

"Young!" exclaimed Spike. "I'm 364 years old."

"That's very young for an elf," replied May. "I'm well over eighthund– ah never mind." Maylee turned and left Santa to talk with Spike alone.

"I've thought long and hard about a job for you, Spike," said Santa as he stroked his long white beard. "I have got the perfect thing for you."

Spike leaned in to hear what this "perfect job" would be. Although Spike did suspect that it was another attempt to keep him from messing things up… yet again.

"You are now my Chief Reindeer Guardian. It will be your job to care for the reindeer. When they are at their happiest, we get the best flying time. And Donner hopefully won't be so grumpy if you give her some attention." Santa chuckled.

The reindeer! Spike adored all the reindeer and loved spending time with them. Just as they adored Spike.

"Thank you, Santa. I won't let you down." Spike beamed. He rushed off to the barn where the reindeer were housed.

"Can you believe it, Cupid? I get to take care of you all," said Spike. He scratched under Cupid's chin.

"It's the best," said Cupid, as she nuzzled her snout into Spike's shoulder.

Spike then fed Comet a carrot, and brushed Dancer so she gleamed. The reindeer were so happy, as was Spike.

On Christmas Eve, Santa gathered the reindeer for their flight. Spike waved to Santa and the reindeer as they whooshed off to deliver presents.

"Fly high, my reindeer friends," shouted Spike, after them. "The magic is in your heart."

However, halfway through the night Spike was called to see Mrs Claus.

'Oh, no. What have I done now?' Spike thought as he hurried to see Mrs Claus. She was outside the barn waiting for him.

"Hello, Spike. You are doing a wonderful job with the reindeer. But…" Mrs Claus clasped her hands together. "The reindeer flying time has sunk to an all-time low. Santa's on his way home now. At this stage, they won't even make it halfway around the world."

"Oh, no! I've ruined Christmas," cried Spike. His eyes welled up.

Mrs Claus smiled. "No, Spike. Santa is coming to get *you*. He wants you to accompany him in the sleigh tonight. In fact, the reindeer requested for you. They feel happiest when you're singing carols to them."

Just then the snowed swirled around like a flurry above Spike's head, and Santa appeared. He landed his sleigh, and the reindeer pranced around, delighted to see Spike.

“Hooray, it’s Spike,” said the reindeer in unison. Smiles inched their way across their faces.

“Ho. Ho. Ho. Welcome aboard, Spike,” said Santa.

Spike couldn’t believe it. He finally found something he loved doing AND he got to fly on Santa’s sleigh.

“Let’s go deliver some presents, Santa,” said Spike. He sprang aboard Santa’s sleigh. “Okay, reindeer. Let’s fly!”

As they flew around the world that Christmas Eve, Spike sang to the reindeer. When they had placed the last Christmas present under its tree, stars still littered the dark sky.

“I’m normally arriving home just as the sun starts to rise. This is the best flying time we have ever had on record,” said Santa. “Thank you, Spike. You saved Christmas.”

Spike couldn’t believe what he was hearing. His eyes twinkled and his mouth broke into a huge grin. Then Santa, Spike and the reindeer headed home.

“Let’s hear it for Spike,” shouted the elves. They had all gathered around as the sleigh landed.

Finally, Spike felt like he was good at something. And that he belonged.

After he had patted and said goodnight to the reindeer, he returned to his home. There he discovered a letter and a gift under his little Christmas tree. The letter read:

Dear Spike,

On behalf of myself and the reindeer, I would love for you to accompany me every Christmas Eve to help deliver presents.
The reindeer are very happy with you looking after them.
I am very proud of the job you have done.
You are a wonderful Chief Reindeer Guardian.

Love Santa

Spike couldn’t believe it. He clutched the letter to his chest. Then, ripping off the paper, he opened the gift. Inside, was a framed photo of Spike surrounded by the reindeer. They were laughing together. Spike hung the photo proudly. His wish had come true.

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Santa’s New Clothes

Jakob Hender

Santa's suit had seen better days. The jacket was wearing thin and the fur trimming was peeling away. His pants were so thin that if he bent over, the elves could see what colour underwear he had on. His belt was brittle. The hole he buckled it on had torn and slipped back to the next hole. He had holes in the soles of his boots that let in the cold and the snow.

Mrs Claus had repaired the suit so many times she said it was all stitching and no cloth. As she held up Santa's jacket to show him, they could see each other through the thin material.

As if by magic – and Santa believed in magic so he really wasn't surprised – a stranger knocked on the door of Santa's house at the North Pole.

"Can I help you?" Santa asked as he opened the door.

The stranger looked Santa up and down and smiled. "I believe I can help you."

Santa and Mrs Claus looked at each other, then back to the stranger.

"Allow me to introduce myself. My name is Drew. I'm a tailor and I make clothes, and I have heard that you, my good sir, are in need of some new clothes."

Now while Santa and Mrs Claus both believed in magic, Mrs Claus wasn't so sure about the man who suddenly appeared at the door at the exact same time that she said Santa needed a new suit.

"And what experience have you had?" Mrs Claus asked, her eyes narrowing over the top of her glasses.

"Why I have dressed some of the world's most famous royal families," Drew replied. "Kings and queens of Europe, and Presidents of the world."

"Who?"

"My good woman," Drew turned his charming smile on Mrs Claus, "there's simply so many to count."

"Uh-huh. Do you have any pictures of your clothing?"

"Pictures?" he queried all bright eyed and innocent.

"So we can see your work."

"Um… not on me."

"Surely you have an Instantery Gram or a Linking Up or a Facing Notebook account that we can access on our system."

"My good woman, you don't have to go to all that trouble and, besides, the internet access out here is quite terrible."

"I assure you our internet access is quite excellent."

"Mary, I really think we should give the man a chance," Santa cut in. "I'm quite a good judge of character. After all I do have a Naughty and Nice List of all the children of the world."

Drew smiled widely, showing most of his teeth.

"It'll save you so much time not making me a new suit. And if I don't like it I can always go back to the old one. What do you say?"

Drew's smile widened even more – if that was possible – and his eyelids fluttered.

Mrs Claus gave up, throwing her hands in the air. "Fine. Whatever you think is best, dear. I've got some gingerbread in the oven that needs tending to."

Elfton, the little elf who had come in to check on the latest supply of gingerbread for the workshop elves about five minutes before Drew arrived and had kept quiet throughout the conversation, followed Mrs Claus to the kitchen.

"You sound like you don't like it," Elfton said as he helped move the gingerbread from the baking trays to the cooling racks.

"Santa's in charge and he makes the decisions around here," Mrs Claus replied. "And if it means I don't have to make him a new suit, why should I object? As long as it doesn't turn out green or purple or something ridiculous."

Back in the main room, Drew was lumbering through the doorway carrying something immensely heavy and awkward. At least, it looked that way. Santa couldn't see that he was carrying anything.

"What's that?" Santa frowned.

"It's the finest cloth," Drew explained. "So soft and yet so warm, it'll feel like you're wearing nothing at all."

Santa reached a hand out to touch the material, but Drew pulled it away quickly.

"Do you not see it?" he asked incredulously. "It is the finest cloth in all the lands. Why only those worthy enough can see its quality. And you, Mr Claus – may I call you Santa –"

He kept talking so much that Santa barely had time to nod a yes.

" – you and all your gift giving to children of the world. Why there is no one more worthy than you. You deserve this cloth to make your new suit, and I am honoured, humbled and privileged to make it for you."

"Yes, yes, I see it now," Santa nodded, for he didn't want Drew to think that he wasn't worthy. Still, he scratched his beard thoughtfully. "How much is this going to cost?"

"In the spirit of the season and for all your kindness and generosity, I would only charge you for the materials."

Overcome by Drew's generosity, Santa was delighted.

"I can start right away. I need somewhere to work, and I may need to borrow a few items from your elves."

* * *

Drew used a spare room in Santa's house, and borrowed a sewing machine, hammer and anvil from the elves workshop. He said he didn't want to be disturbed, insisting he did his best work when he was left alone.

The elves complained, saying they needed their equipment to make toys. Drew ignored their concerns, talking over the top of them as he insisted they had more than enough equipment already, and that this was for Santa's suit after all and really did have top priority.

When Mrs Claus asked why he didn't have his own equipment, Drew simply explained that it was too hard to carry such things all around the world.

Drew also insisted that Santa needed new undergarments because he said any ordinary fabric would wear away at the suit like sandpaper.

So Santa agreed, and Mrs Claus spent more and more time in her kitchen baking more and more Christmas treats. She made so much, the elves were in danger of becoming little beach balls.

While Drew worked away in the spare room making Santa a suit that no one was allowed to look at, everyone at the North Pole was curious to see what it was going to look like. So, naturally, Santa, Mrs Claus and some of the elves kept sneaking up to the doorway and peeking through the keyhole. They could see and hear Drew working away but none of them could see any part of the suit. No jacket, no pants – no anything!

Santa was sometimes called into the room for measuring and fitting. Whenever anyone asked about his suit, he said that it was a special cloth and only those who were worthy could see its quality.

The elves didn't want to admit that they couldn't see it. Mrs Claus didn't want to admit that she couldn't see it. Santa certainly didn't want to admit that he couldn't see it.

Mrs Claus was even more suspicious when Santa's belt and boots – which had never been made of the same material as Santa's suit – were also something she couldn't perceive.

* * *

During a fitting one morning, Drew said the suit was nearly ready.

"That's wonderful," Santa beamed. "I need to go outside and test it immediately."

"No, wait…" Drew tried to stop him but Santa was out the front door.

"It's a little bit chilly," said Santa.

"Ah, it'll just take a little getting used to. Have you ever been scuba diving?"

Santa shook his head.

"Well, you put on the wet suit and when you first get in the water, a bit of water gets inside the suit. It's a bit cold, but then your body heats the water inside the suit and it becomes all warm and toasty and you don't feel the cold any more."

"Well…" Santa admitted slowly. "It is a little bit warmer where my beard covers my throat and chest."

"See? That's exactly what I was talking about," Drew continued, all smiles. "In a minute or two, the rest of you will be just as warm. Now, how about we go back inside." He opened the door and quickly ushered Santa back inside.

*

Peering out from the workshop window, Elfton mused, "Why is Santa's new suit pink?"

"Pink? What are you talking about?" Elfred, one of the other elves, rushed to the window as Santa's door closed with him inside. "There's no one there. You must be seeing things."

Elfton scratched his head.

"I think you've made too many pink dolls for one day," Elfred said. "Maybe you could help Elflin with the jungle jigsaw puzzles."

Elfton was quite sure of what he'd seen. Or was he? Maybe Elfred was right. He rubbed his eyes and shook his head. Turning back to the workshop, all he saw were rows and rows of pink dolls. Even the teddy bears and wind up cars looked like pink dolls.

*

There was something about Drew that Mrs Claus simply didn't like. His smile was way too big – all the time. He had an answer for everything. And he had turned up at the very moment that they had decided Santa needed a new suit.

But, she had to admit, when Santa had gone outside in his new suit, she had seen a slight colour change as the cloth took on a pink hue. It could have been a reflection of the northern lights in the sky glinting off the suit. It could have been the dark night and the white snow. Whatever it was, she also had to admit – but only to herself – that now that he was back inside, all semblance of colour had disappeared.

She shook her head, took off her glasses, wiped the lenses on her apron, and went back to the kitchen to check on her shortbread cookies and to make some hot chocolate. She felt much better in her kitchen, away from Drew and his clever talking.

* * *

Christmas Eve arrived and Santa's sleigh was packed. The elves were waiting to see Santa's new suit.

Inside, Mrs Claus was holding her tongue – her lips pursed so tightly that they were barely visible on her face – while Drew was busy putting the finishing touches on Santa's dressing. He arranged the hat neatly on Santa's head. He fluffed out Santa's beard. He fiddled with

the fur trim around Santa's neck so that it sat straight, pulled the jacket down at the front, then around Santa's fat belly as he made an exaggerated effort of buckling the belt.

"Suck your breath in," Drew instructed.

Santa took a big breath and held it as Drew fiddled. He couldn't see exactly what was happening as Drew struggled to push his belly in, using first one hand, then his shoulder and throwing his whole body weight behind it as he buckled. Santa's face grew redder and redder as he held his breath.

"There." Drew stepped back, looking satisfied. "You can let out your breath now."

Santa did, exhaling so much that he nearly blew Drew over.

"Doesn't that feel much better?" Drew asked.

Santa took a moment to breathe, then agreed. "It doesn't feel tight at all. It feels…" He couldn't find the right word.

"Relaxed," Drew said. "It feels comfortable and relaxed. No tightness or straining whatsoever. It's just the comfortness of the cloth."

"It is comfortable," Santa had to admit.

"Now, if you'd just like to pay me," Drew hinted. "Before you go off on your trip around the world…"

"Oh, yes, of course."

Santa paid Drew and was all smiles as he stepped outside his house and, paraded his new suit towards the waiting sleigh.

There was complete silence at the North Pole as Mrs Claus and the elves didn't know what to say.

I'm going to say it, Elfton said to himself, unable to keep quiet any longer. He took a deep breath to compose himself then spoke loudly so that everyone could hear him.

"Santa's not wearing any clothes!"

"What?"

"Who?"

"Santa?"

"No clothes?"

As if by magic – but really it was only the determination of one little elf – everyone suddenly realised the truth. Santa wasn't wearing any clothes.

Santa looked down at his naked pinkness in embarrassment, and quickly did indeed turn the same red colour as what his suit should have been.

"Oh, my dear! Oh… Ohhhh!" He quickly tried to cover his nakedness and ran back inside his house.

"I knew it!"

Mrs Claus slapped her fist into the palm of her other hand. She knew exactly where to find the cause of the trouble.

"And just where do you think you're going?" Mrs Claus asked as she caught Drew trying to sneak out the back door.

"Umm… I…" Drew had nothing to say and nowhere to go as he was surrounded by angry elves.

"I guess one more wear won't do any harm." Santa took his old suit from the wardrobe.

He pulled on some underwear, dressed and ran back outside. As he climbed into his sleigh, his pants burst at the seams, showing his blue polka dot underwear.

"Oh, dear," Santa sighed.

It was too late to worry about that as the sleigh took off into the night sky. There were presents to deliver. But Santa promised himself that for next year, he was going to listen to Mrs Claus and let her make him a proper new suit.

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The Magic of Trees

Sam Blake

The night fell to quiet as the family slept. On the hearth, the little pine tree began to sag under the weight of its decorations. All day it had stood tall, hiding a sadness that no one knew. All the bright lights and baubles that drew excited laughter from the children couldn't even bring a smile to the tree.

For the past week, since the family had brought the tree into their home and decorated it with lights and tinsels, balls and bells, stars and candy canes and other assorted trinkets, it had been the centre of attention. Its fresh pine scent had filled the house, along with the baking smells of shortbread, gingerbread and other spiced treats.

Not one member of the family – not Mum, Dad, Nan, Pop, or any of the children – had been able to walk past the tree and not stop for a few seconds and admire it or smell its scent. Their hearts and minds were full of the Christmas Spirit and all the joys of family, friends – and Santa.

Their excitement had filled the tree with the same spirit and the joy that it was part of such a special occasion.

Now, everyone had gone to bed. The children so full of excitement that they kept venturing out of their rooms, only to be sent back by their parents. The parents, so exhausted they had gone to bed not long after the children were finally asleep. Tonight was Christmas Eve and Santa was coming. Everything was prepared; everything was ready.

The stockings hung on the mantel above the hearth, waiting to be filled. And that only brought more sadness to the tree. For the truth was, the stockings were reusable. The tree wasn't.

And now that the house was quiet, the tree's tip dipped and it bowed its branches under the weight of decorations and sadness. Its tiny fairy lights lit up silent tears that poured from it like tree sap.

Suddenly a soft thud and whoosh filtered down the chimney. A minute later, Santa appeared. He strode to the tree and put his sack down. As he opened his sack and took out the first present, he looked at the tree and frowned.

"Why do you cry, O Christmas Tree?" he asked gently.

The tree lifted its tip at the kindly old man.

"Tomorrow is Christmas," the tree answered. "A great day to celebrate."

"Come on, Santa," a reindeer called down the chimney. "We'll be late."

"Hush now, Rudolph," Santa called back. "This tree needs me."

"Tree?" Rudolph queried. "But the children…"

"All life is important," Santa said. "And a tree is no less important than anything else."

Reindeer grumbling drifted down the chimney. They only had limited time to get around the world and deliver all the presents. Any delays, even a minute or two, would have to be made up before the sun rose.

"Now, my little tree friend," Santa lifted and held a sagging branch in his hand. "Tell me why you're sad on such a joyous occasion."

"All week, the family have fussed over me and made me feel important and so full of life. But the truth is, after tomorrow, I'll be dead. Thrown away as if I never mattered," the tree sobbed.

"Ahh," Santa tapped the side of his nose. "A tree does matter. It matters to the forest. It matters to the birds. It matters to all the animals who make it their home, who feed from its flowers and fruits, who shade from the heat, shelter from the rain or hide from predators. You take in the carbons and produce oxygen, the very thing we all breathe."

The tree listened quietly, still not seeing its own value.

"And at the end of its life, a tree will return to the forest. Whether you burn and your ashes drift on the wind, or you slowly decay and decompose back into the earth, it matters not."

The tree frowned. Santa's words weren't making it feel any better. But Santa continued on, full of love and respect.

"I remember those trees who came before you, those who stood proudly in houses all around the world, who returned to the forest and then gave birth to whole new generations of life. I go around the world giving presents. But you are the real gift. I provide a year's enjoyment, while you provide the life to be enjoyed. So cheer up, my little tree friend, for this is not where your journey will end. You are the magic this Christmas night."

Santa turned back to his job and began surrounding the foot of the tree with presents for the family, and the tree had a few moments to really take in his words. Then Santa straightened back up and gave the tree and wink and a smile as he lifted a hand and gently stroked its needles.

The tree's lights suddenly doubled in brightness. Its tip straightened and rose tall, nearly touching the ceiling, and its branches lifted the heavy decorations as though they were weightless.

Without another word, Santa turned to the stockings, filled them to overflowing and drifted back up the chimney.

The tree woke in the early morning to the sounds of excited children. It stood proud and tall as they raced to it and squealed with delight that Santa had been. They opened their presents, laughing with such joy and happiness that the whole house was filled with the Christmas Spirit. The parents joined in, exchanging presents and Christmas wishes.

And as the Christmas Spirit filled the house and spilled out into the neighbourhood to be shared by family and friends, the little tree saw its true value – and found its peace with the world.

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Beneath the Strawberry Moon

Elizabeth Klein

Long before evening draped its satin shawl across the rain-scented bush, all the crickets began to sing and silver stars winked down upon the bark-lined trails. Such a wondrous evening it was for a gentle walk, Possum decided. On this special evening, he wanted to visit Bandicoot in her burrow where the toadstool cap that never aged stood. Her amber lantern always glowed in the darkness so no one ever lost their way.

So Possum climbed down from the scribbly gum and waddled along the bush trail towards Bandicoot's burrow, guided by the glow of her lantern. Possum loved spending time with Bandicoot, but this night was extra special.

It was the night before Christmas. And Christmas in the bush was a wondrous place to be for anybody. A great big strawberry moon hung in the night sky, so Possum decided to bring Bandicoot a bag of freshly-picked strawberries. He also hoped she might share a new tale with him.

Once he arrived, he gave the toadstool a gentle tap with his paw and waited in the golden pool of light made by the lantern.

"Oh, it's you, Poss," said Bandicoot when she opened the door. "Come inside and have some wattle scones with me, with dandelion jam and freshly whipped lavender cream. They're fresh out of the oven. There's also a hot cup of lemon myrtle tea brewing in the kettle, steeped just right."

"Sounds rather nice, Bandy. I think I will," said Possum and stepped inside just as Bandicoot's kettle began to sing its *I'm-ready-now* tune loud and crystal clear on the stove. Bandicoot hurried away – leaving Possum to close the door – hopped up and pulled the kettle off the stove with two paws.

Possum settled himself by the fire with a cup of perfect tea on his lap which Bandicoot poured for him. Then he gave Bandicoot his whole attention as she set about lathering the scones in jam and cream. She placed them on a floral plate and brought them over for him to try.

"Thank you," said Possum, licking his snout. "These look so plump and delicious."

"They are, now eat up. Have I told you the tale of the Bunyip that came to the billabong?" she asked, as she sat with her own cup of tea at the kitchen table and set a jigsaw puzzle in front of her. She tapped a paw on the side of her pointy snout and held one of the pieces in her other paw and still managed to glance at Possum over the top of her delicate, pink-rimmed spectacles.

Possum took a bite of the scone. *Mmm.* He closed his eyes as he savoured the marvellous taste in his mouth and didn't seem to care if cream or jam stuck to his fur.

"Always tricky, these jigsaw puzzles," Bandicoot muttered and smiled. "He wore a nice green coat and long pointy tail that dragged behind him wherever he went? No? Oh, goodness me. Well, let me tell you about the warm summer day he first appeared. I don't think anyone in the bush was quite ready for him, which is another story in itself. You see, no one knew *what* he was or *where* he even came from."

"So, he was a puzzle too?" said Possum, reaching for his second scone.

"Indeed he was," agreed Bandicoot and nibbled her own scone daintily. "By the way, I noticed pretty pink and mauve waterlilies under the willow this morning."

"What happened to the Bunyip?" Possum asked, steering Bandicoot back on track since she liked to ramble on.

"Well, yes, I first saw him when I had a picnic with Rabbit," she said and slotted the jigsaw piece she held in her paw into the correct spot in the puzzle. "The water swirled and bubbles wobbled in the air and popped near poor Dragonfly, who zoomed off in a right fit."

"Oh, before I forget, I've picked ripe strawberries for you to make a jar of sweet jam," interrupted Possum and handed over his bag.

"Thank you. I've been eyeing off your bag ever since you came in, Poss, since I could smell them all the way down the path. I do so enjoy strawberries and cream," Bandicoot said as she peeked inside the bag. Her whiskers wobbled up and down as she sniffed the scarlet strawberries. With great deliberation, she chose a plump one and sucked it into her snout with a loud slurp. "Mmm. These will make delicious jam indeed."

"Do you know there's a Strawberry Moon in the sky tonight?" Possum said. "It has a huge face shining over the billabong, setting its waters all aglow. The owls say it's a time of magic in the bush, when all the animals come out to play. Only ever happens beneath a Strawberry Moon."

Bandicoot placed another piece into the puzzle and glanced up at Possum. "That explains why the Bunyip came to the billabong. He was rather nice, you know, to White Heron when she came and danced to the songs the Frogs sang in the bulrushes. Even Koala climbed down from her gum tree, baby on her back nibbling leaves, just to watch and listen. In spite of Bunyip's size, no one was frightened of him. He brought us all crocuses to wear in our fur."

"Is the Bunyip still in the billabong?" Possum asked with a desire to go and see what he looked like for himself.

Bandicoot shook her head and slotted in two more pieces on the puzzle board. "Sadly, no. He had to go home. But he was a jolly nice fellow, giving us crocuses like that. It really felt like a proper Christmas. My, these strawberries are delicious. Hope you come again, Poss." Then she gave a squeak. "Oh, look, my puzzle is finished."

Possum rose and waddled over to view the picture. He laughed when he saw it.

In the sky hung a big, strawberry-coloured moon like a brooch on a satin black gown. The picture showed a bush scene with animals under the moon's silvery light. Possum recognised Owl on a tree limb, Koala with her baby, Rabbit and Echidna. Behind them in a pond, the head and neck of the Bunyip peered at the animals with a grin on its wide snout. Possum was right; he didn't look scary at all.

Possum giggled when he noticed himself, too, hanging upside down from a branch. He gave Bandicoot a nod. "I like it. I like it a lot."

Bandicoot smiled and looked very pleased with herself.

Possum finished two more cups of hot tea and several scones. "Well, I'd better go, Bandy. Merry Christmas to you."

"And a Merry Christmas to you too, Poss," Bandicoot said with a generous smile that spread all the way across her snout.

* * *

Next morning, when Possum climbed down from his tree, he found a package wrapped in waterlily leaves and tied with vines. There was a small note attached, written on a thin sheet of paperbark in blackberry juice.

"Hm," said Possum, picking up the parcel and feeling with his paws what it might be. It was hard and rectangular. He read the note.

To Possum, Merry Christmas. Hope you like it. From Bandy.

"I wonder what it could be," he muttered as he untied the vine string and allowed the waterlily leaves to fall away.

It was the jigsaw puzzle Bandicoot had worked on when Possum went to visit. The pieces were all stuck on the bark with sticky tree sap. The picture made him smile.

"This will look very nice on my wall," he said with a smile. "Very nice indeed."

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Dragons Love Christmas

Li Mitchell

Ronnie kicked a chip in the sidewalk and glared at falling snowflakes. It was the last day of school before Christmas break, but he knew it wouldn't be a merry Christmas. His dad had left him and his mum two weeks ago to "finally be with the woman he loved," and Ronnie was coming to find out that that meant losing more than the dad *he* loved. It meant no money for Christmas presents, or the new artificial tree his dad had promised him last year when the base on their old artificial Christmas tree broke.

Ronnie had asked his mum not to put up any of their other decorations. Seeing the "trappings of Christmas," as she called them, would only hurt more. They would have no Christmas. You couldn't have Christmas without a family, and thanks to his dad, his family was more broken than the Christmas tree's base.

At least he had a present for Mum.

Ronnie stopped and pulled out the wrapped box he'd nestled into one of the inner pockets of his coat. It'd been a "surprise assignment" that his art teacher had given the class to complete before Christmas vacation, and Ronnie was very proud of it. He could have finished and turned it in before the last school day of the year, but he'd wanted to take his time and do a good job. And he had.

If nothing else, Mum would have a gorgeous blue ornament – not that she'd have a tree to put it on.

Ronnie kicked the sidewalk again and approached the corner where he always turned to walk home.

Soft sniffling made him stop, and then he crept forward. One of his classmates, a boy like himself, sat on the curb crying softly, pieces of a shattered ornament lying at his feet.

Ronnie sped up, at first wanting to pass him, to save them both some embarrassment, he thought, but then, he slowed. He wouldn't want to be left alone crying. Maybe his classmate wouldn't either.

The boy saw him and quickly swiped his sleeve across his eyes. "Hi."

"Hi." Awkwardly, Ronnie sat next to him. "What's wrong?"

The boy tried to speak but could only point to the shattered ornament as more tears flowed down his cheeks. "F-for my s-s-sister," he finally choked out, "s-sick in the h-hospital. But I b-b-broke it."

Ronnie felt bad for him. He hadn't known he had a sick sister. He patted his shoulder a little stiffly, wishing he knew what to say to make it better. But then, nothing anyone ever said to him had made his situation better. "Will she be home for Christmas?"

The other boy shook his head.

Ronnie reached into his coat, felt the cosy lump of his own ornament safe inside. His mum would understand. He pulled it out and handed it to the boy. "Here."

"W-what?"

"For your sister." Ronnie stood. "Carry it in one of your inside pockets." He patted his own coat to demonstrate. "Merry" – the word got stuck for a moment – "Christmas."

Before the boy could even thank him, Ronnie fast-walked away.

Footsteps – clicking like the nails of a dog or cat – sounded behind him, and he turned, expecting to see his classmate. He had to look down to see what was following him, and even then, he didn't believe it.

A small green dragon.

"That was a good thing you did." The dragon spoke as if it were perfectly normal for him to be following Ronnie – or for a dragon to exist at all. "But you didn't let him thank you."

"I didn't need him to – I mean…" Ronnie tried not to, but he couldn't help but stare. "What are you?"

"A dragon."

"But – what?"

"A dragon." The little dragon shivered. "Do you mind if I come home with you? The snow's cold."

"Um, sure." Ronnie wasn't sure how his mum would feel about that when he told her, but the dragon did look cold.

When they got to Ronnie's house, the dragon shook himself off before following Ronnie through the front door. He glanced around. "Where are your decorations?"

"Decorations?"

"Christmas decorations!"

Ronnie blinked. "Dragons know about Christmas?"

"Of course we do! Dragons love Christmas!" The little dragon moved into the living room before Ronnie could say anything. "Where is your tree?"

Ronnie swallowed tears. "We don't have a tree any more."

"What happened to it?"

"Its base broke."

"Oh." The dragon's tail twitched. "May I have a look at it?"

Ronnie sighed. "Sure."

That meant lugging the darn thing out of the hallway closet, but he managed. He held up its various pieces before the dragon's eyes, starting with the heavy base branches, then the middle branches, and then the upper branches, with the space at the top where the angel always went. Lastly, he held up the plastic base, with one of its legs hanging loose. "It's broken."

"Nonsense!" The small dragon pranced toward it. "A little duct tape and it'll be good as new!"

That's not what his dad had said, but Ronnie just sighed again and fetched the tape.

The dragon unrolled a large piece, then bit it off the roll, wrapping it carefully around the broken base with his front legs while Ronnie watched, amazed.

"Now, for the branches!" The little dragon wiggled with excitement as Ronnie attached the various pieces. "Yay!" He clapped his front feet, and Ronnie felt himself smile.

But then the tree wobbled.

Before Ronnie could do anything, the tree crashed to the floor, on top of the little dragon!

"Oh, no!" Ronnie rushed over. "Are you okay?"

"Oof." The dragon peered up at him. "I think we'll need some help."

Ronnie pulled the tree off him, then, when the dragon asked him to, he opened the front door and let the little dragon out into the snow.

He didn't hear the dragon say anything, and he didn't see him do anything, but suddenly there was another, older dragon! Much bigger than Ronnie was!

"Good evening," said the big dragon, "I hear you're having tree trouble."

Ronnie could only nod and open the door wide for both dragons to enter.

"Ah, a broken base. Nothing a little duct tape won't fix." The older dragon tore off tape with his large claws and wrapped it around the base, then tore off more. "This will make your Christmas even merrier."

"I won't have a merry Christmas." The words were out before Ronnie knew it.

The big dragon's eyes widened. "Won't have a merry Christmas! Why ever not?"

Ronnie sat on the floor and told his sad story while the dragon continued to work on the tree. The little dragon flew up onto Ronnie's shoulder, stroking his hair with a wingtip while he talked.

"I don't have a family any more," Ronnie finished, "that's why."

"I'm afraid, dear child, that you are wrong twice." The older dragon set the base up, added the first branches, frowned, then wrapped more tape around the base. "You have your mother – she is your family. But Christmas was never about Earthly families."

"What do you mean?"

"Christmas was never meant to be only a family celebration, with a tree, and presents, and a nice dinner – not that there is anything wrong with those things. If you have them, they are indeed gifts. But Christmas is more than that. Christmas is the birthday of God's own Son."

Ronnie blinked. He'd never heard that before. Not even at school.

"You see, special child, long, long ago, the Creator – God – made the universe, the galaxies, the sun, the stars, the planets – this earth. He made the sea, the sky, the land, the plants, the animals, and finally, He made the first two people. The first two humans, a male and a female. God made everything good. Everything was special to Him. But He made humans even more special by giving them His image, giving them the ability to make their own choices. Choice is a good thing to have. Soon, you will use choice to put ornaments on this tree. But the first humans made the wrong choice.

"You see, God made many trees and told the humans they could eat from all but one. In fact, He warned them against eating from the one. But God's enemy, the devil Satan, who had once been one of His angels before he decided he was better than God – tricked the female into eating from the tree, and the male chose to eat from the tree. Because of the male's wilful – meaning on purpose – disobedience against God, sin, also called 'evil', entered the world."

The dragon's eyes were sad. "Because of evil, people die. People hurt. Families break apart because of family members' individual sin."

"Then – how can anything be merry?" Ronnie blinked back tears.

"Ah, that is why God's Son Jesus came to Earth. Through God Himself, Jesus became human also, and was born as a tiny baby. Angels announced His birth to shepherds, explaining that He was Christ the Saviour, who would save people from the penalty of their sin – which is endless separation from God.

"And He would – many years later, when that Baby had become a Man, Jesus died on a cross to take the punishment of sin upon Himself, and then He rose from the dead. Because Jesus died, anyone who believes in Him and wants to turn away from being sinful and be saved from the penalty of their sin can ask Him to forgive them and be their Saviour, and He will. And because Jesus rose from the dead, whoever believes in Him can also be sure that they will live forever with Him when they die."

The dragon finished taping the base and added the last two sections of branches to it. "And that is what Christmas is about. The Son of God being born as a human child so that He could save every human who wants to be saved. The Son of God making it so humans can be part of God's family."

Ronnie looked up at him. "Does God want me to be part of His family?"

"He does. He wants you, and He wants your mother and father."

Ronnie stood. "I want to be part of His family."

"Then simply pray, out loud, or silently, in your mind, and ask Him."

"I don't know what to say."

"You could say something like, 'Jesus, I believe in your death and resurrection from the dead. I want to turn from my sin, and I want to be saved. Please forgive me and save me, Jesus.'"

"Okay."

Ronnie prayed.

He didn't feel any different afterwards. It didn't feel like anything had changed. He still felt sad about his family. But, come to think of it, he felt hopeful too.

Like Someone knew what he was going through and knew how he felt. Ronnie felt like part of His family.

He smiled at his dragon friends.

They smiled back, and the big one gently patted the tree. “This tree is ready for ornaments.”

“He had an ornament earlier, but he gave it away to a boy who lost his,” said the small dragon.

“Well then.” The big dragon stretched his wings. “We’ll have to help him make another, won’t we?”

“Would you?” Ronnie grinned, blinking back tears. “And will you stay? I think my mother would love to meet you.”

“Of course we’ll stay!” The big dragon patted his shoulder. “Now, let’s find some materials to make some ornaments with!”

A few minutes later, Ronnie was sitting at the kitchen table, coloured paper, string, scissors, and tape spread out before him, the dragons giving him tips on making ornaments.

Ronnie cut and taped, an excited smile on his face as he worked on his mother’s ornament and waited for her to get home.

He couldn’t wait to tell her what Christmas was really about, and how she could become part of God’s family.

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The Sad Little Star

Bobby Cohen

A little star fell down to earth
It gave a gentle sigh
It had wanted to remain up there
In the sparkling sky

Tonight you see was Christmas Eve
When Santa made his run
His sleigh was packed with all the toys
It would be jolly fun

All the twinkling stars up high
Shone bright to show the way
From house to house around the world
A guide for Santa's sleigh

But one small star had fallen down
It now lay on the ground
With light that almost flickered out
It cried without a sound

But Santa hadn't missed it
Even with his bad eyesight
He saw the little star streaking
Across the sky that night

It broke apart as it fell
With fragments oh so small
But Santa knew where they did land
The old man saw it all

It marked out all the Nice kids' homes
Like a giant map
And left the Naughty ones unlit
T'was better than an app

And so the little fading star
Achieved what it desired
To light the world on Christmas Eve
With a shining heart of fire

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Christmas Comes to Holly Street

Wendy Adams

Elf-in-Chief Celeste enters Santa's workshop and smiles. "Everything okay?''

She watches as Santa stands before the crackling fire, studying his list… for the tenth time.

"Just checking!"

He laughs, as Celeste speaks the words before he can.

"You always worry…" she begins.

"… that someone will miss out," he finishes.

Celeste pushes her snow-white hair behind her perfect elfish ears. That will never happen.

"Get some sleep. You'll need it," Santa says, turning to the map sprawling across his desk.

But as Celeste prepares to leave, she hears a sharp tap-tap-tap. Santa pokes the map with a heavy finger. She leans in, and her heart quivers. A tiny, forgotten street. In a tiny town. At the bottom of the world.

"Holly Street?" Celeste squints, deciphering the minuscule letters.

"Holly Street," confirms Santa sadly. He leans back, pushing his hands through his shock of white hair. "How could I have missed it?"

He turns to the giant hourglass suspended above the door. Golden particles slide from one orb to the other, tumbling faster than the eye can see.

"Time's running out!" His voice quivers. He turns to Celeste. "What will we do?"

Celeste's purple eyes are enormous in her elfish face. "I don't know."

Santa studies the fluttering glitters of time. With a shaking hand, he reaches out.

"You can't!" Celeste cries.

"I must! Take our fastest, fly to Holly Street and…" He swallows hard, beads of sweat peppering his brow, "… I will hold back time."

A knot forms in Celeste's throat. This isn't an undertaking for the fainthearted.

"Go! Now!"

Celeste races out of the cottage and into the quiet darkness of the night. The comforting scent of hay and reindeer hits her nostrils as she enters the stable. She passes stall after stall until she reaches the last one: Velox!

In soft, urgent tones, she explains their mission. Velox nods his shaggy head, and Celeste kisses his nose, laughing as the hairs tickle her lips.

The star-strewn sky beckons them as she climbs onto his solid back. With a final grunt, Velox leaves the earth behind and leaps into the velvety blackness. Celeste huddles over Velox's muscular neck, as they race into the night.

She awakens with the sun stroking her face with warm fingers. Lifting her aching body from Velox's neck, she whispers her thanks. The city lies below, and somewhere within, is Holly Street.

Velox lands in a dark alleyway. As soon as his hooves hit the ground, he drops his head and snores. Celeste sneaks away, feeling small within the giant towers looming above her. She's not invisible, but she knows how to make herself blend into the environment so people's eyes brush over her, never lingering. If they once believed in magic, they do no longer.

Holly Street crouches in the darkest part of the city. Four houses with peeling paint and solemn windows huddle together, fending off an army of giant towers.

Celeste opens the rusty iron gate at Number 27. Tattered lacy curtains hang from the windows, but the front door is a cheerful cherry red. Celeste places her palm on the door, listens with her heart, and the story of the house unfurls. Mrs Primrose, a widow in her sixties, lives alone.

"Oh, Harry. It just doesn't feel like Christmas without you," the house whispers.

Celeste nods and soon has the perfect idea. She writes it down in her elf-on-a-mission notepad. She thanks the house, and moves on.

Next, Number 29. Toys lie forgotten in the overgrown grass, and this front door is a faded blue. Celeste closes her eyes and listens with her heart. It's the Bailey family. Dad, Fifi, and Sunny. Mum's not here. She's on deployment with the army and won't be home this Christmas.

"It won't be the same without Mum."

Celeste withdraws from the home and frowns. This is tricky. She chews on the end of her elf-on-a-mission pencil. Closing her eyes, she listens again. Maggie. What was there about Maggie? And then she has it.

Over to the next house.

Number 31. Weeds choke the grass, and heavy blinds cover the window like closed eyes. Celeste frowns. She doesn't sense anyone living in the house. Is it abandoned? She creeps closer. A flicker of life. Celeste listens with her heart. Mr Richardson is eighty years old. His body aches, but his heart hurts more. "Can't wait for this Christmas malarkey to be over with. It means nothing these days."

Celeste's brow furrows until an idea strikes. Quickly, she jots it down as an image of Santa holding back time floods her mind.

One house left. The grass is freshly mown, and the windows gleam. Celeste stops, closes her eyes, and listens with her heart. Nabi and Roya and their baby daughter, Freshta.

"It is not our tradition, but it will be interesting to experience our very first Christmas."

Christmas is a time of love and peace for all, and a gift for a family making their way in a new country had to be special. But what should it be? Ah-ha! She scribbles her idea down.

It's time to go.

Celeste and Velox race home. When they land, Celeste rushes into the workshop, throwing her notepad on the desk.

Santa's shoulders slump and his head falls back. He steps away weakly, and time flitters on. He reaches for the notebook and reads. "Most unusual requests, but Christmas magic always finds a way!"

Santa frowns, concentrating hard but soon creates each gift as Celeste described.

Glimmers flicker, and it's time to go. This time, they ride in Santa's sleigh. When the sun stretches soft, pink fingers of light into the darkness, and the sacks are almost empty, it's time to visit Holly Street.

When Nabi and Roya enter the kitchen, they stop, sniffing the air. Cardamon and cinnamon. Rosewater and almonds. And surprisingly, coconut and chocolate.

Roya's eyes widen. "It's shirpera!" she whispers. "Did you…?"

Nabi shakes his head and laughs. "And lamingtons."

Their favourite dessert from their homeland and a treat from their new. Roya cuts a slice, and bites. What a wonderful surprise on their first Christmas Day in their new home. It gives Roya an idea.

Mrs Primrose opens her eyes. What was that noise? Surely not intruders on Christmas morning? She squeezes her eyes shut, hoping it'll go away. There it is again. Mrs Primrose creeps into the front room, and her eyes widen. Marmalade fur, pink nose and bright copper eyes. He zigzags around her ankles, and she bends to scoop him up. His rumbling purr makes Mrs Primrose smile.

"Oh, your fur is just like my Harry's hair when we married." She goes to the cupboard for a tin of sardines.

Sunny and Fifi race to the lounge room. Santa has been! Dad smiles as he watches them unwrap their gifts, and he grabs his phone to record it for Maggie. Sunny says it first. "Thank you, Santa, but I wish Mum was here."

Fifi brushes her eyes. "Me too."

Before he replies, something flutters before Dad's eyes. Fifi gasps, and Sunny grabs his father's hand.

"What's happening?" he whispers, but nobody answers.

Their upturned faces watch as pink petals flutter sweetly to the floor. Peony rose petals. Mum's favourite. The scent covers them, warm as a hug.

"It's almost like she's with us," says Sunny.

Fifi holds out a hand. Petals fall onto her palm as gentle as a mother's kiss.

Later, Mr Richardson wakes up. He sniffs. What's that smell? He rises gingerly, his nose twitching as memories flicker in the corner of his mind. He searches the house – the kitchen, the lounge, the bathroom but finds nothing. He lowers himself onto his favourite armchair and closes his eyes.

Instantly, he's catapulted back to his childhood. Summer Christmases at their beach shack, with the smell of roast turkey and the scent of hot seaside air filling his nostrils. He sniffs again and there it is – the spicy aroma of Granny's famous Christmas pudding with brandy custard and shiny sixpences hiding inside. Afterwards, beach cricket with his brothers and sisters, the sand burning his feet as he raced to catch the ball. The gleeful cry of "Howzat!"

Those faces, long grown old, now gone. A knot grows in his throat, and he gasps awake. He's alone. He sniffs, grabs a handkerchief from his pocket and blows his nose. Suddenly, there's a knock at the door. He freezes, mid honk. When was the last time someone appeared at his door? Cautiously, he shuffles over and opens it, just a crack.

It's the new family from next door. The woman speaks, in a soft, lilting voice. He hesitates for a heartbeat and nods.

"I'd love to," he says, surprising himself.

And so, the last inhabitants of a forgotten street, in a city at the end of the world, came together to enjoy Christmas Day. Mrs Primrose brought Harry, who made them laugh with his kitten antics. They fussed over Freshta, who smiled with her dark eyes and gummy mouth. Mr Richardson (call me Roy) told them stories of his boyhood, and they all ate shirpera and lamingtons surrounded by peony rose petals.

Far away, beyond their knowing, Santa and Celeste smiled, and Velox the fastest reindeer that ever lived, grunted a joyful reindeer laugh.

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Little Bat's Christmas

JT Brown

For the past week, Mama Bat had read Little Bat a Christmas story at bedtime. And Little Bat had gone to sleep happy with Christmas dreams filling his head, and had slept all day. But tonight was Christmas Eve and Mama Bat was reading the bedtime story at nighttime as the bat family was ready to head out for food. At the end of the story, Little Bat was more sad than excited.

"What's wrong?" Mama Bat asked. "Every time I read a Christmas story, you're excited. Now, you seem sad. Is it because I'm reading the story at night and not in the morning?"

"No," Little Bat shook his head.

"Then what's making you sad?"

"Santa."

"Santa?" Mama Bat shook her head in confusion. "Santa brings happiness. How can he make you sad?"

Litte Bat sighed. "In all the stories, Santa comes at night when the children are asleep. We sleep during the day. Does that mean Santa won't come?"

"Of course not. Santa knows bats are awake at night. Just like owls and possums and lots of other bush animals. Santa will still come. He just does it a bit differently."

"How?"

"I don't know. I'm not Santa," Mama Bat said.

"Come on." Papa Bat was standing in the hollow entrance, looking outside. "The sun is almost down and it's time we were out."

Mama Bat put the book away and put a comforting wing around Little Bat. Little Bat looked around their hollow. His stocking was hung up and the pine frond tip that Papa had dragged inside was decorated with fruits and berries. Little Bat remembered eating some of the berries while he was helping decorate it. They were delicious, but Mama Bat had sighed heavily at the half empty tree and had to go back outside to collect more. She had warned Little Bat not to eat any more until Christmas!

Little Bat had tried, and had only snuck a tiny clawful and stuffed them into his mouth before Mama caught him again.

As the bat family flew out of their hollow in the old eucalypt to join the other bats, Little Bat looked to the darkening night sky. Through the trees, the stars sparkled and the moon was yet to rise.

The bat colony had formed a cloud and had insects swarming in a circle. As they flew into the swarm, Little Bat joined in. He flew with his mouth open, gobbling up as many insects as he could.

As he reached clear air on the other side of the swarm, he saw Papa Bat enjoying a mouthful of insects.

"Delicious," Papa Bat drooled.

"They are yummy," Little Bat agreed. Then he and his papa flew back through the swarm for more.

With more and more bats joining in, the insect swarm soon thinned out, and many insects were able to escape and fly away. Little Bat didn't mind. But now that his belly was full, his little bat mind turned back to sadness.

He worried that because he wasn't asleep, Santa wouldn't come. He kept glancing to the night sky. So much so that he few straight into a tree and woke up the magpies in their nest.

A loud squawking hurt his little bat ears, and Mama Magpie cried out, "You're keeping the children awake and Santa won't come."

"Sorry," Little Bat apologised.

He flew down lower, where a mama koala was sitting in a tree fork, struggling to get her joey off her back and settled for the night.

"Go away, please," Mama Koala said. "I'm trying to get my joey asleep."

"I'm waiting for Santa," the bright eyed joey blurted out.

"You're going to sleep," his mama corrected.

"Have you seen Santa?" the joey asked Little Bat, completely ignoring his mama in his excitement.

"Sorry," Little Bat apologised and left the koalas to themselves.

"Come back and tell me when you see Santa," the joey called after him.

Little Bat flew down lowest to where all the ground animals were settled in for the night. The kangaroo joeys were in their mama's pouches, the dingo pups were curled in fluffy balls in their mama's protective embrace, the wombat joeys were nestled underground, and the echidna puggles were snuggled in their hollow log.

It didn't look like Santa had been to any of them. That meant Santa must still be on his way.

Little Bat flew above the tree canopy, determined to find Santa. The night was clear. The bright moon hurt his little bat eyes. He looked as far as he could see but there was no sign of Santa.

He heard a flutter of flying, but it was a sugar glider not reindeer. The ring of bells was only the buzz of a swarm of mosquitoes. A shadow passing over the moon was only clouds and not Santa's sleigh.

Little Bat settled on a high branch near the top of the bush canopy to wait. But waiting was boring and tiring, and hungry work. Especially when the scents of ripe fruits and berries drifted from above. And even more especially when their juices filled the air as bats and sugar gliders and other animals flew from tree to tree feeding on them.

Little Bat decided he'd have a few. Just a clawful, and then he'd return to the canopy top to look out for Santa. But a few turned into lots, and a clawful turned into more than he could carry, and his little bat mouth dripped delicious juices. For a while, he forgot all about looking out for Santa.

When he flew back up to the canopy top, the moon had crossed half the sky. Santa could have come and gone and Little Bat wouldn't have even known!

He thought he better ask the animals if they'd seen Santa.

Little Bat saw the owls high in the treetops. "Have you seen Santa?" he asked.

"Whoo, whoo," the owls replied.

"Santa," Little Bat repeated.

"Whoo, no sign of Santa yet, whoo."

"Have you seen Santa?" Little Bat asked the possums.

"No," the possums replied. "We were hoping you'd seen him, since you fly the skies."

"Have you seen Santa?" Little Bat asked the bilby.

"No," the bilby answered as she ducked back into the scrub.

"Have you seen Santa?" Little Bat asked the croaking frogs.

"No," the frogs answered.

Little Bat felt a little better as no one had seen Santa. That meant he hadn't missed seeing Santa. But that caused another problem. No one had seen Santa. Maybe Mama was wrong and Santa wasn't coming to the bush animals. Poor Little Bat began worrying even more.

After an exhausting night, and an especially stressful night for Little Bat, the bat family returned to their hollow in the eucalypt. Little Bat's stocking was still empty and there were no presents under the pine frond tree. Santa hadn't come.

Little Bat was heartbroken. He tucked his head in, sobbing soft sighs, and closed his wings around himself, drifting off to sleep as the sounds of day animals began to fill the bush with joy.

As the night fell away and the changing light hazed throughout the bush, a soft shadow drifted into the bat's hollow, filled all the stockings and left presents under the tree. It stopped briefly at the hollow entrance on its way out and whispered, "Merry Christmas, Little Bat."

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Home for Christmas

James Jesse

My backpack was packed. I was ready to go home for Christmas. It had been a long year at boarding school and I was looking forward to seeing my parents again. Some of the other boys had already gone home.

And then the letter came:

Dear Joseph

My parents were the only ones to ever call me Joseph.

We know how much you were looking forward to coming home for Christmas, but this fab opportunity just arrived and there's no children allowed, but we'd be really silly to miss it. It'll be a great career opportunity for your dad and we really deserve a break, and Mr Holmes said you're welcome to stay at school over the holidays and we know you really won't mind. We promise we'll make it up to you.

Love Mum and Dad
PS Merry Christmas

My hand closed into a fist, crushing the letter. We know you won't mind. Like I had a say in it anyway.

"Joe?"

I lifted my head. Mr Holmes sat in his chair behind his desk. He looked concerned, but not overly surprised. Behind and to one side of him, the open fire burned in the fireplace, taking the winter chill out of the room. The flames were almost mesmerising.

"Are you all right?" he asked.

"No." I shook my head, fighting back the tears. I wasn't going to cry in front of Mr Holmes. I wasn't going to cry in front of anyone. Instead, the rage took over.

"How can they do this? I hate them. I hate this place."

Mr Holmes seemed unaffected by my words or my tone. That made me angrier and I turned my rage against him.

"I hate you. I hate all of you."

I ran from the office.

It was only when I was a good way down the corridor that I realised I'd left my Santa letter on Mr Holmes' desk. All the students had been encouraged to write letters to Santa. It was all part of the celebration of the season. We'd also decorated our dorm rooms and our classrooms. In the past week, some of the teachers had worn Santa or elf hats to class, on yard duty and even during dorm checks. Only two nights ago, I'd jumped when a shadowy silhouette of Santa had checked my dorm room after lights out.

After the initial surprise, I'd realised that Christmas was still a week away and I'd be home by then. I'd felt sad for those boys who weren't going home.

Now, I'd be one of those sad boys – and I wanted my Santa letter back.

I crept back to Mr Holmes' office. I'd left the door open when I ran, and I could see Mr Holmes. He was standing in front of the fireplace with his back to me. He was reading something. I could tell by the paper that it was a Santa letter.

I stood in the doorway, wondering why he would be reading the letter when he suddenly leaned down and threw it in the fire. It caught alight immediately, becoming a little fireball that lasted only seconds as sparks drifted up the chimney.

My mouth fell open and my eyes widened in horror. For a second, I was frozen to the spot. I couldn't believe what I'd just seen. Mr Holmes was reading our letters, then throwing them into the fire as if they meant nothing.

As he turned back to his desk, a sudden fear made me move. I threw myself out of the doorway, pressing my back against the wall.

"Is someone there?" Mr Holmes asked.

My heart was thumping so loud, I thought he'd hear it. I closed my mouth and held my breath.

After a few seconds, I heard the rustle of paper and assumed that he was reading another letter. I carefully peeped around the doorway just as he tossed that one into the fire.

That was it. I had to get out of there.

My letter? It didn't really matter any more. All I wanted was to spend Christmas with my parents and now they didn't want to spend it with me, and Mr Holmes was burning all the letters so mine wouldn't even get to Santa for him to make my wish come true.

As soon as the dorm check was done that night, I put on my coat and woollen beanie, grabbed my backpack and snuck out. No one would miss me until morning, and I'd be home by then. Maybe I could catch my parents before they left and plead with them not to go. But I also knew if they'd sent me the letter saying they were going away, they'd probably already gone.

I shivered in the cold winter night as I headed to the centre of the city where I hoped to catch a bus or a train. Walking through the streets, I was fascinated by all the decorations on the houses, and by the number of people who were out wandering around looking at things. I'd never seen anything like it before. There were lights – so many lights. Coloured lights, flashing lights, lights in trees, lights around houses and windows, and draped through lawns and gardens. Huge blow up figures that towered metres in the air, Santas and sleighs sitting proudly on rooftops, elves, snowmen, Christmas trees, and Nativity scenes. Some of it was accompanied by piped music or Christmas carols.

Parents and kids were rugged up against the cold. Red-cheeked and red-nosed, none of them minded. They were out celebrating with each other and that seemed to be all that mattered.

While I'd initially ducked my head when anyone looked my way, I soon decided that I didn't need to. No one knew me. I was just another kid out enjoying the decorations.

I don't know how long I wandered. I got caught up in it all and lost track of time. My only clock was when the crowds started thinning out and lights were turned off and the music went silent.

I kept on towards the city centre. Some of the shops in the main street still had their windows lit up with Christmas decorations or the latest toys or other gifts and products that they were selling. Since the shops were shut and there was no one around, I assumed they'd stay that way all night.

I reached the central train station before I found any bus depots and scanned the platform schedules for a train heading home. Platform 4, the next train was due out in about half an hour.

I didn't have money for a ticket. I spent most of my life at boarding school; I didn't need money. I'd have to jump on the train and hope I didn't get caught.

I spent the next half hour hiding in a dark corner at the far end of the platform. I didn't want any of the station security cameras seeing me and my plan was to jump on the end of the last carriage as the train was leaving and, hopefully, not be seen as it disappeared into the night.

My heart thumped again as the train pulled into the station. I checked my backpack was secure on my back and pulled my beanie down past my ears.

The train pulled out. I twitched nervously, then ran for it as the last carriage passed me. I leapt for the train grabbing onto an upright railing. I hung on for dear life as my feet dangled

below me. I hadn't thought about what might happen if I missed the train and ended up sprawled on the tracks, but I did at that moment.

I pulled myself up to stand on the narrow platform outside the rear door. I looked through the window. The carriage was empty. I opened the door, entered and flopped into the nearest window seat.

It took several minutes for my heart rate to return to normal. I kept an eye out for ticket inspectors, and was prepared to bolt back out that door at the first sign of one. Luckily, I didn't have to.

My plan for getting off the train was the same as getting on. Wait until the train had almost stopped and jump off. The landing in the dark was hard and I hurt my ankle. Home was about an hour's walk. I gritted my teeth and set off.

By the time I got home, my ankle was throbbing and swollen, and I was limping badly. The house was dark. I knew where the spare key was kept and let myself inside.

Home.

It should have felt like home, but it didn't. I couldn't even remember the last time I'd been here. I knew my parents weren't there because the place was icy cold, like there'd been no heating on for a week.

I hobbled up the stairs to my room, wondering if it was even my room any more. It was. My bed was made up ready to be slept in. There was a bit of joy in seeing that they had originally been expecting me.

I limped to the bathroom and took the packet of painkillers from the cabinet. I read the instructions and took two. Then I went downstairs to the kitchen to look for some food. The fridge was empty but there were some cans of food and dry noodles in the pantry. At least I knew how to use a microwave.

The painkillers kicked in and, with a stomach full of food, I felt sleepy. In a daze, I headed back upstairs to my bed. There were flashing lights and ringing noises, and I closed my eyes thinking of the Christmas houses I'd seen.

I suddenly woke to find myself in a police station with a burly police officer staring down at me demanding answers to his questions. My brain was still fuzzed out on painkillers and I really didn't fully understand where I was or what was going on.

I tried to explain to him that it was my home, but he insisted no kids lived there.

As my head cleared, I wondered if I needed a lawyer or how long he could legally keep me there. The door burst open and my parents rushed in.

"Mum? Dad?" I scrambled to my feet and fell over on my bad ankle.

"Joseph!" Mum grabbed me before I hit the floor. Was it really Mum or just another painkiller illusion? She lowered both of us down until she sat on the floor and I was in her lap.

"We found him in your house, ma'am," the police officer said. "He said he lives there."

"He's our son," Dad said.

"Joseph, what did you do?" Mum asked.

"I just wanted spend Christmas with you. That was my one wish. My only wish. I put it in my letter to Santa and Mr Holmes threw it in the fireplace."

"Of course he did," Mum smiled.

I looked up at her but I didn't know if it was still painkillers or tears but I couldn't see her face properly.

"It's an old tradition that dates back long before the postal service ever came about," she explained. "The ashes are carried by the wind, sending your wishes straight to Santa."

She hesitated.

"Which probably explains this strange desire that I had to come home."

"The strange desire both of us had," Dad added.

I was still confused.

"Santa got your letter," Mum said. "You got your Christmas wish."

"We're here and we're not going anywhere," Dad finished.

"But what about your trip?" I asked him. "For your job?"

"You're more important, Joseph. Sometimes we need to be reminded of that. I can try for another promotion next year."

"Just promise us you will never run away from school again," Mum insisted.

"I promise."

"Okay, let's go home for Christmas."

My heart lifted. Thank you, Mr Holmes. Thank you, Santa.

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About the Authors

Sandy Summons

Sandy Summons is an aspiring children's book author, but really, she is a big kid at heart! She lives near the beach with her husband, two adult children, and one mischievous dog! She loves to write stories with humour and heart, to spark children's imagination and to inspire them. Sandy enjoys writing picture books, junior fiction and middle grade stories. She has been previously long listed in the Just Write for Kids Pitch It Competition.

Sandy loved reading as a child. It was a portal to so many different worlds – many that were exciting, funny, scary, emotional. When she was 14, she wrote and illustrated her first picture book, which to this day, still sits proudly on her bookshelf!

https://www.instagram.com/sandysummons

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Jakob Hender

Jakob began writing stories at a young age. He started with fairy stories and nursery rhymes, putting his own twist on them, until he learned to properly craft a story from start to finish. His teachers said he was wasting his time and should stop daydreaming and work towards getting into university and a full-time career.
Jakob now divides his time between a career in criminal law and writing stories. He's discovered that the real monsters of this world are not necessarily in fiction.

Jakob's first children's book is *The Easter Cuckoo.*
You can find it here: https://books2read.com/u/mvVvXl

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Sam Blake

Hi, I'm Sam
I like playing cricket and football, so that keeps me busy for most of the year. When I'm not playing, I'm usually outdoors, doing something. It's much more fun than being stuck inside.
I started writing for kids because I love your sense of fun and imagination. Nothing is impossible when you're a kid. Whatever you can dream can become real.

I like to write rhyming stories and have been published in several anthologies.
My first book, *I Thought I'd Teach Myself to Shave* was a finalist in The Wishing Shelf Book Awards for 2016, and *Billy's Christmas List* was a Red Ribbon Winner in The Wishing Shelf Book Awards for 2021.
My other books include *Andrew and the Dragon*, *Sirius and the Magic Dust* and *The Christmas Fairy*.

Billy's Christmas List: https://books2read.com/u/bOqZng

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Elizabeth Klein

Elizabeth Klein grew up in a small village in New South Wales, Australia. She trained as a teacher and taught for almost thirty years. She taught writing to adults at a Community College for two years and home tutored for about five. In 2015, she and her husband left Sydney to travel in a caravan full time.
Besides having written many short stories, articles, plays and poems, she's also authored YA and junior fiction books, as well as educational books and has 100 published works to date.

You can find out more about her books here: https://www.elizabethklein.author.com

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Li Mitchell

Li Mitchell writes character-driven stories that remind readers they matter. Having personally found escape from the darkness of life in books, Li seeks to offer readers that same escape into fictional worlds where outcasts, misfits, and otherwise "worthless" people breathe, find themselves, find their families, and find their happy endings.
Inspired by many authors across multiple genres and reading age ranges, Li also loves to write in different genres to readers of different ages. And, of course, Li loves recommending other authors.

Li publishes adventure stories for the young and young at heart and shares book recommendations through the Substack publication *Spacetastic Stories*.
You can read them here: https://spacetasticstories.substack.com

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Bobby Cohen

Bobby lives in Adelaide, South Australia. He joined a garage band in high school, playing bass and keyboard. After high school finished, everyone went on different paths and the band eventually broke up. Bobby kept writing and singing songs, gigging of an evening and weekend while maintaining a day job.
Finding it hard to break into the music industry, Bobby branched out and tried some different things. He saw that his song lyrics didn't always make a song, and let his imagination take them elsewhere. Sometimes they turned into nothing. Sometimes they turned into a simple or silly story or poem. This poem *The Sad Little Star* is one of them.

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Wendy Adams

Wendy Adams lives in Lutruwita (Tasmania) and is a writer of middle-grade novels and short stories. Wendy has a passion for her island home – the timelessness of the rainforests, the majesty of the mountains, and the irresistible song of the ocean.
When she's not writing, she's running, surfing, working out at the gym or walking with her writing buddy, Mackenzie, the border collie.

You can visit Wendy at: https://www.wendyadamsbooks.com

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JT Brown

JT Brown grew up in Gippsland, Australia. He enjoys writing animal stories, especially Australian animals.
His stories have been published in magazines and anthologies in Australia and overseas. He is currently working on adapting some of them into novellas.

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James Jesse

I've spent most of my life telling people my name is James Jesse, not Jesse James like that infamous (that means bad – very bad!) outlaw of the Wild West.
One thing that did happen because of it is that I developed an interest in history. I like writing stories based on real people, events or situations. It's like breathing life back into those who have been forgotten over time.

I've had short stories published in *The School Magazine* and some of the *Short Tales* and *Christmas Tales* anthologies.
My first book *Legends of Saint Nicholas* was published in 2018.

I'm currently working on a series of junior novels set in Ancient Egypt. They were originally going to be a collection of short stories, but they grew.
The Stonecutter's Apprentice and *The Dyemaker's Son* are the first two books in the series (called *Sands of the Nile).* They were published in 2023.

Universal Book Link for *Legends of Saint Nicholas*: https://books2read.com/u/4EvMNg

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Storm Cloud ebooks

Picture books
Who's Scared of the Dark? – for 18 months upwards
Grandpa's Hat – for non or beginning readers
Meg Helps Out – for beginning readers
Billy's Christmas List – for readers 6 years upwards
– **(Red Ribbon winner in The Wishing Shelf Book Awards, 2021)**
The Christmas Fairy – for readers 6 years upwards

Rhyming stories
I Thought I'd Teach Myself to Shave – for readers 6 years upwards
– (Finalist in The Wishing Shelf Book Awards, 2016)
Scully the Cat – for readers 6 years upwards
Andrew and the Dragon – for readers 8 years upwards

Short Story Collections
Carole's Reading Corner – for readers 7-12 years
Legends of Saint Nicholas – for readers 8-12 years

Short Tales (Books 1-11) – short story collections for readers 8-12 years
Christmas Tales (Books 1-10) – Christmas themed short story collections for readers 8-12 years
– (The "Tales" collections are available FREE)

Junior novels
The Great Tadpole Hunt – for readers 6 years upwards
The Easter Cuckoo – for readers 7 years upwards
Sirius and the Magic Dust – for readers 7 years upwards
Under the Bridge – for readers 8 years upwards
Girls Can't Play – for readers 8 years upwards
Slimming Down Santa – for readers 8 years upwards
It's Not Easy Being Undead – for readers 8 years upwards

Junior Series

Sands of the Nile:
- The Stonecutter's Apprentice
- The Dyemaker's Son

The Virtues of Drac:
- Into the Land of Clubs
- Through the Land of Diamonds
- Fallen Virtues
- The Virtues of Drac (complete edition

For readers 15 years to adult
By Any Other Name
Shoulder of the Giant
When the Dust Settled

UnderGrounded
A Fly in the Ointment
Open House short story collections (1-9

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