

# THE CHRISTMAS BLUES

A short story by A.A. Abbott

*Disclaimer: this is a work of fiction. Any similarity to real people is completely coincidental and unintentional.*

"No hope job, my man done me wrong, that's why I'm singing this sad, sad song," Lara warbles. "Nowhere to live, nothing to lose, I guess I've got me the Christmas blues." Her guitar twangs soulfully.

The room erupts into applause. At least, her audience of one, Cindy, claps and whistles as loud as she can.

Lara bows and blows kisses. "Thank you. Thank you. I love you all."

"That was great," Cindy says.

Lara blushes. "Did you like it, Mum?"

"Like it? It's fabulous. Darling." Cindy exaggerates each syllable.

"Can you video me? I'll post it on YouTube." She offers Cindy her iPhone.

"When we're done, I think we should celebrate with a glass of champagne on ice. Or, perhaps Lidl's sparkling perry." After all, there is no champagne in the fridge, or indeed, anywhere else in the tiny flat.

"None for me, with the baby on the way."

Cindy opens a bottle anyway. She thinks she deserves it once she has worked out how to use her daughter's iPhone, especially as Lara looks like an angel in the video. The pregnancy bump is artfully hidden with a loose top and trailing scarves. Lara tunes up the guitar again. They celebrate the Christmas blues with another song.

It does not take much to give Cindy a hangover now. Her head is pounding the next morning as the warehouse loudspeakers echo goodwill to all. "Frosty the snowman," they bellow.

Cindy remembers the lighting factory, where music only played two hours a day. "That's all the union will allow," she was told. "They're convinced it makes us work harder, and that's bad, isn't it? A man needs to pace himself." The line worker grinned at her.

She smiled back, taking care to move just out of his reach. The wandering hands of the production men were a legend in the typing pool. Inwardly, she shook her head at the stupidity of the union. She heard a lot about it, back then. "Those unions are going too far," her father would say. Like her, he had a white collar job at the plant, considered himself above the factory floor. It mattered not a jot that those who populated it probably earned more than him and definitely more than her, with their shift allowance, overtime and double time. "Maggie Thatcher will sort them out," her father said.

Mrs Thatcher certainly had. The lighting factory is long gone, and with it the other union citadels of Cindy's youth: red brick buildings where metal was bashed, beer brewed, paper pulped. There is no room at MegaCorp for trade unions; no demand for them, the local freesheet implies, from the shifting, shiftless workforce.

Her shift has started. Scanner bleeping, she scurries around gathering toasters, teapots, trivets from the endless shelves. Everything that everyone could ever want, MegaCorp sells. Her head throbs, her feet blister, her back aches, yet there is no respite from the bleeps, as the scanner counts the seconds she has to collect each item of treasure.

I will get used to it, she thinks. The aches and pains are bound to ease. Still, she regrets the perry, wishing most of all for earplugs to blank out the loudspeakers. At last, it is the morning break. Just enough time to gulp a glass of water and a paracetamol, then back to work. A packed lunch and more paracetamol. The pills help. In the afternoon, she gathers speed, keeping time to the relentlessly cheerful music.

Lara has cooked a lentil curry by the time Cindy is home.

"Smells tempting," Cindy says. She is no longer surprised by Lara's culinary prowess, which far surpasses her own. Lara must have been watching the cook in Dubai, she muses. The curry tastes as delicious as its fragrance suggests. Cindy realises they have eaten no meat since Sunday, and she does not miss it.

"I think we should buy our Christmas presents online tonight," Lara says.

"Who for?"

"Daddy. Wayne. Uncle Jim and Auntie Pauline. Each other."

"OK," Cindy says slowly, drawing out the word. She agrees with the last couple of suggestions. Cindy's brother has been kind, giving them accommodation in this tiny granny annexe and inviting them to lunch with his family every Sunday. It was embarrassing for both of them at first, but they are over that. Of course he and Pauline deserve a small gift. If only it could be a large one. Nostalgia is gripping her throat. She recalls chauffeur driven trips to the shopping mall to choose beautiful things, wrapped extravagantly for her and despatched by plane to loved ones in the UK. She had no idea, in that charmed existence, that money could be so hard to earn.

Lara deserves the best too, and Cindy will work every last minute and find every last coin to make sure she is happy. Wayne, Lara's fly-by-night boyfriend, she is not so sure about. He is too selfish to leave his luxury lifestyle in Dubai to visit the mother of his unborn child, let alone join her. Cindy is even less ready to spend on John. He may never receive the gift; stuck in a debtor's prison in Arabia, his health, dreams, business, family all shattered. She shivers, wishing they were together once more. She would be content with him here, even in this cramped flat in a damp wintry town.

Lara is punching numbers into her iPhone. "Oh look, MegaCorp is much cheaper than everywhere else."

That's because we're paid so little to work so hard, harder than I ever imagined possible, Cindy thinks. She struggles to feel grateful still to MegaCorp for giving her a job. Anyone with two arms, two legs and a head can work there; even women who have been full-time mothers in another land and who have found, to their amazement, that factories and typing pools no longer exist. Nor do obsolete word processing programmes like Displaywrite. Offices want Microsoft skills now. Cindy does not possess them, and Lara, who does, has no experience and is heavily pregnant anyway.

Lara orders a few bits, and then she is tired, with the baby nearly due, so they have an early night. I could be picking Lara's orders tomorrow, Cindy thinks dreamily. She feels suddenly anxious. MegaCorp will need fewer pickers after Christmas and her contract is temporary, rolling over week by week. She drifts to sleep on the couch as fatigue overcomes her worries.

The baby is due a week before Christmas, but he is late. "A typical male," Cindy jokes. She is relieved. MegaCorp wants her to work every day until Christmas Eve. Her supervisor makes it clear the overtime is an expectation, not an offer. It means she will save a little to tide them over when the job disappears. She

prays the boy will wait. She would like to be with Lara for the birth, although Pauline has volunteered to go instead.

By Christmas Eve, Cindy is aching all over. Her temperature has risen, and she lies on the couch, sneezing. Is this a hallucination, she wonders, when the doorbell rings and Lara ushers Wayne into the room.

"What are you doing here?" Cindy asks.

"I came to see my baby," he says, simply.

Lara is clinging to his right shoulder. "His contract in Dubai has finished, Mum."

Cindy raises an eyebrow. There is nothing for you here, she wants to say.

"I start in London in the New Year," Wayne says. "Got the job offer yesterday, found a flat, bought a car."

He points out of the window, and Cindy sees only evidence of the old Wayne: a red sports car is sitting on Jim's drive. She would like to ask him how two adults and a baby would fit into that, but then Lara's contractions start, Wayne escorts them both to the car, and she realises it does have four seats, albeit those at the rear are tiny.

Cindy really is feeling unwell. They take one look at her at the hospital and send her back home.

She dozes through most of Christmas Day, waking to shiver and sneeze and stagger a few yards to Jim's front door with a box of Lidl chocolates. "You shouldn't have," Pauline says, handing her a package. The thin wrapping paper is red, decorated with reindeer wearing bright green scarves. Inside is a bottle of cheap perfume and a cosmetics set. Jim and Pauline are hardly flush with cash themselves.

They do everything they can to help. They bring her the plate of turkey and trimmings she was supposed to be eating with them. Jim even drives her to the hospital, but she is coughing fit to burst. Again, she cannot gain entry to the maternity ward.

"Never mind," Jim says. "They say the baby hasn't popped his head out yet." Later, he returns to the hospital. He persuades Lara to use his phone, quietly, because it is against the rules.

"You have a gorgeous little grandson," Lara whispers. She sounds exhausted, but excited. "The midwife said he's the longest baby she's seen, and he'll be tall like Wayne."

"And good looking like you," Cindy hears Wayne say.

"He's talking to Lara, not me," Jim murmurs in the background.

"What's his name?" It has been a secret throughout Lara's pregnancy. Cindy cannot resist posing the question, although she knows she should tell Lara to rest.

"Wayne and I want to call him Jacob John. Jake for short."

Satisfied, Cindy suggests Lara tries to sleep now.

She marvels when Jim shows her pictures on his phone. Jake is perfect. Proud parents Lara and Wayne smile out of the tiny screen, the baby in Lara's arms. It could be a traditional nativity scene. Cindy imagines a shining halo around Jake's head, and Lara's. There is no halo for Wayne, although Cindy recognises he is redeeming himself by his presence at the birth.

"He's a fine lad," Jim says. "You must be so pleased."

"Yes, I can't wait to see him."

Jim gives her a sharp look. "I meant Wayne, the boyfriend," he says. "He has it all planned: a flat for them to live in, a good job, that car. He must have earned a pretty penny in Dubai."

Cindy gives in gracefully. "Yes, John did too, before it all went pear-shaped." Before she and Lara crammed what they could into two cases, took their passports for fear they too would be seized, and fled on the day's last flight from the airport.

Jim sighs. "Wayne says that's his only regret about leaving, that he can't visit your John any more. At least he's found John a good lawyer, tried pestering the embassy to help."

"Really?" She looks again at Jim's phone, to see if Wayne's head is shimmering.

Last year, they had champagne and smoked salmon for breakfast on Boxing Day, looking forward to a desert safari with their friends later. The friends and fun have melted away like dreams. This year, Boxing Day dawns with a sore throat, aching limbs and a head full of noise. Who is shouting? She lifts a curtain to peep out of the window.

There are probably a dozen people outside, men and women, with microphones and cameras. Jim is addressing them. "Lara is not here," he is saying. "She is with her new baby and boyfriend at the hospital."

"Has he done her wrong?" a woman demands. The others laugh.

Cindy dresses in a hurry and opens the door. "I'm Lara's mother," she says. "And you are?"

"Angie Andrews, United Press," says the woman, thrusting a microphone in her face. "Can you give us your views on Lara's Christmas Blues going viral on YouTube?"

What is she talking about? "I'm delighted," says Cindy. "I think you should leave us alone now, because as Jim says, Lara is not here. She just had a baby yesterday."

"On Christmas Day? What a great story."

"Yes, we can pay her well for that," one of the men interjects. "Let me in that door, darling, we'll have a cuppa and I'll make it worth your while too."

Angie Andrews gives him a filthy look.

"I've got another story for you," Cindy says. "My husband's business was defrauded of cash, he couldn't pay our credit card bill and he's in prison in Dubai."

"Really?" Angie Andrews says, her eyes widening. "What's the Foreign Office doing about that?"

"You tell me," Cindy says.

"I'll ask them," Angie Andrews says.

Cindy hopes the cameras have filmed every word. Someone, somewhere, will help John, surely?

The man who called her darling has his elbow in Angie Andrews' face, his foot in the door and a fistful of notes in his hand.

"I'm gasping for that cup of tea."

"I'd better make you one." Cindy ushers him into the flat and relieves him of the notes. There must be about £200 there. With her pre-Christmas overtime, that will see her through January. It could last even longer if Wayne is serious about supporting Lara. Cindy can teach herself Microsoft Office, free herself of MegaCorp's yoke.

She puts the kettle on for "Bob Lewis, darling." The noise levels outside are rising.

A key turns in the lock. Wayne has one arm around Lara's shoulder and a carrycot in his other hand. The baby's all-in-one, blankets and carrycot are smart and new, Cindy notices. The infant's wide blue eyes stare at her. He blinks.

"What's going on here?" Wayne demands.

"I think we could do an interview now," Bob Lewis says.

Wayne's eyes rest on him for a split second. "Later. Send me a contract in the post," he says.

Cindy thinks Bob Lewis looks ready to argue, but the man glances at her, then at Wayne's bulk, and nods his head. "Here's my card. I'll be in touch," he mutters, shuffling out.

Cindy's phone is ringing. It's her supervisor. "You're late for your shift," he whines.

MegaCorp wants everyone in the warehouse for their Boxing Day clearance. How could she have forgotten?

"Listen, get here in the next thirty minutes and I'll put in a good word for you. There's still every chance we can keep you on here into the New Year."

The dread in her stomach, the aches and pains, have vanished. "I'm not coming back," Cindy says. She picks up the baby, enjoying his snuggly warmth as she holds him tight to her chest. She does not recall smiling so much ever before in her life.

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