

THE PERFECT CHRISTMAS



A Short Story

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by A.A. Abbott

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

It's a day out with Alfie, my first in ages. Mum gave me money to see Santa Claus. Alfie's eyes shine when we near the grotto, a vision of holly leaves and twinkling red lights. To him, the tacky plastic is magical. I haven't seen him so excited since he was a baby, when I strung a row of beer-can ring-pulls across his cot. He loved that, the way they glittered in the morning sun and jingled when I shook them for him. Just for once, I felt I'd done something right.

I'm drawn to sparkly things too. When I'm alone in my flat, which I mostly am, I take fistfuls of jewellery out of the drawer. I stare at it, passing gold chains from hand to hand. It's as if my mind drifts into a dream where all I see is colour and light. After a few minutes, the warmth and peace wane and I put the jewels away.

Our local shopping centre has hosted St Nick every year since prehistoric times. Mum took all of us here back in the day. I suppose I enjoyed it, but I can't really remember and I daren't ask Mum. She'd say I whined. That's her standard answer: that I was a nervous child, fidgety and moany.

I grew into an anxious adult too, but I'm all right now. It's amazing what a little pill each morning can do for your confidence. I wish I'd known before I started on the drinks and drugs, but hey, that's all in the past. Mum is talking to me again. My social worker says I'm doing ever so well. As long as I hold it together today, and don't muck up Alfie's sleepover next week, he'll be allowed to stay in my flat for Christmas. It'll be perfect.

Alfie skips inside as I hand Mum's money to an elf. She gives me a blue ticket. "Follow the yellow brick road," she says. "Can you do that, little man?"

"Yes," Alfie shrieks, scampering off. Daffodil-coloured tape has been stuck on the dull grey floor, leading us to the inevitable queue. Mums and dads are trying to quiet their restive children. Even with the help of a couple of clowns, they can't win that battle.

"What's with the Wizard of Oz?" I ask the closest clown. "How festive is that?"

His eyes are blank. Ignoring me, he blurts out, "What falls at the North Pole, but never gets hurt?"

"Snow!" another child yells.

"Get it, Alfie? It's a joke," I explain.

His lower lip trembles. "I want to see Santa and the reindeers."

"Soon. He's meeting other boys and girls first. Why not play with the nice clown?"

It's the kind of thing Mum would have said when I was small. It didn't cheer me up then and doesn't appear to work on Alfie now.

He clutches my leg and tries to hide his face. As I've read Stephen King, I don't blame him for being scared of clowns.

The bad jokes keep coming.

"What do snowmen wear on their heads?" He waves a tickling stick under a little girl's nose. She sneezes. Nobody says anything.

"Ice caps," he announces.

Poor Alfie doesn't really know about snow and ice. There's hardly been any this year, and he's too young to recall last winter. He rocks on his heels. "Mum," he bellows, "Where's Santa?"

Before they gave me medication, I'd have panicked, but now I'm just thrilled he's said Mum. It doesn't stop me glaring at the clown. "Do you have any sweets?" I demand.

"On sale at the desk."

"They should be free." I give up on him when I'm met with that blank stare again. Rooting around in my handbag, I find half a chocolate bar. It's old, at that white and crumbly stage, but Alfie is satisfied with it. Afterwards, he threads his warm and sticky fingers through mine. A lump forms in my throat. I bend down to kiss the top of his curly head.

He stand peacefully then, until we're admitted through a fire door decorated with giant plastic candy canes. "Santa!" he shouts, scrambling onto the ample red lap of the gentleman within.

"Ho, ho, ho." Santa sounds the part as well as looking it in his crimson robe and white whiskers. His eyes are weary, though. Maybe he hates children, and took the job for the money. Hopefully, he's not a dirty old man like the guy who haunts the

park in the estate where I grew up. Just in case, I clutch Alfie's hand.

"What's your name?" Santa asks.

My son beams up at him. "Alfie."

"How old are you, Alfie? Let me guess. I think you're two. Am I right?"

Perhaps I'm supposed to say, 'Oh no you're not,' like a pantomime, but I shift awkwardly from foot to foot while Alfie's smile fades.

"No, I'm free," Alfie declares.

Santa harrumphs. "My elves have been telling porky pies then," he says, a comment which goes way over Alfie's head.

I realise that's the number on the ticket: two. The girl at the desk must have guessed. Still, Alfie is small for his age. I'm hardly the tallest myself. At school, they called me Bridget the Midget, along with less polite words.

"No presents for those naughty elves," Santa says, "or naughty children. Have you been a good boy, Alfie?" His baggy eyes look meaningfully in my direction.

Alfie answers first. "Yes," he announces.

I nod. "Yes, Alfie's always good."

Alfie cackles. What do I actually know about my son? Even if he was the spawn of the devil, I'd lie about him, though.

"Good boys get presents," Santa says. "Tell me, Alfie, what would you like for Christmas?"

"Zipper Zoomers," Alfie says.

My instinctive groan elicits a sharp glance from Santa.

“I’ll get the elves working on it,” he says smoothly, “although sometimes they’re lazy, you know? And last year, Rudolf got my sleigh stuck in a traffic jam just before we arrived at your chimney. But I’ll do my best.” He winks at me. Perhaps he understands what it’s like to have dreams bigger than your wallet. If he was rich, he wouldn’t work here, would he?

Again, I’m gripped by the notion of darker reasons for taking a job with children. I practically scoop Alfie up from Santa’s lap.

“Would you like a present today, Alfie?” Santa delves into his sack and produces an oblong package. The paper is decorated with reindeer. You can’t see through it, but I’m guessing at a colouring book.

Alfie’s cheeks dimple. He snatches the gift.

Santa stares at me. “Please,” he says.

“Fank you,” Alfie replies.

Santa claps a hand on his shoulder. “Don’t forget, Alfie. Be good and Zipper Zoomers might make it into your Christmas stocking.”

He passes me ten per cent discount vouchers for a local toy store and a pop-up ice rink. I crumple them up and shove them in my overstuffed bag.

“Bye bye, Alfie.” Santa waves. “Ho, ho, ho.”

We exit through a giant wreath of plastic mistletoe. Alfie has torn the paper off his gift already, and I’m not wrong.

Thoughtfully, Santa has included a small set of pencils.

I exhale. “Let’s go to Maccy D’s and you can colour it in,” I say, trying to copy Santa’s forced cheerfulness.

“Yes.” Alfie sighs with contentment. “Zipper Zoomers,” he repeats.

Later, I huddle on the sofa under a duvet, wondering why I want to throw up. Maybe it’s the cold. The bedsit is small and cheaper to heat than most places, but I still can’t afford it. I’m saving up to run the electric fire when Alfie stays. Meanwhile, I use a candle under a plant pot. I learned the hack from TikTok, and it takes away the chill, although Mum says it’s a fire risk.

Alfie had the best day. Even when I returned him to Celia, his foster carer, he was buzzing. He showed her his colouring art, and his bright blue tongue, stained from a slushy drink. I explained we’d shared a Happy Meal, but he didn’t have much of it. Luckily, I had enough change to buy him sweets. He loved them. When I told her, she gave me a funny look, and said bedtime would be fun. I don’t know what she meant.

That was the moment my stomach began churning, when Celia’s door closed and I walked away without him. The nausea increased as I contemplated Alfie’s request for Zipper Zoomers. Where did that come from? He must have seen them on TV or heard about them at his playgroup. Zipper Zoomers are soft and fluffy vehicles that nest inside each other like Russian dolls. You unzip the fire engine and find a dustcart, an ambulance and a police car. Each has a button to make a different sound. They cost

a fortune, and ads for them pop up as soon as you switch on your TV, even though almost every shop has sold out. Abigail says she only got one for her little girl by asking Tim to pay top dollar on a trip to New York.

Abigail and Tim. Still wrapped in the duvet, I shuffle to the window. Mum says I'm jammy to have this tiny flat above a convenience store, but Abigail is luckier. Across the road, fairy lights twinkle on the fir tree at the entrance to her drive, which sweeps up to a grand detached house. I know every room in the property, all the gables, windows and quirky corners. I've vacuumed and polished them, made the beds, and ironed Tim's shirts. Abigail's designer dresses are dry clean only.

I don't like Tim. At first, he seemed pleasant; a bit posh, that's all. A couple of times, he popped home to collect a suitcase when he was off on one of his high-flying business jaunts. He'd laugh and joke with me. Then I realised he was staring at my boobs. I let out a nervous giggle. Stupidly, I gave him the benefit of the doubt until he followed me and fondled my bum.

I should have slapped his face. But I still need this job, so I tittered, hissed that I was on my period, and resolved to avoid him in future.

I didn't tell Abigail. I can't. She'd blame me, same as she blames the girls Tim sleeps with. He's had dozens of affairs, all because women throw themselves at him. Apparently.

She turns a blind eye. This is Abigail's happy ever after, the rags to riches fairytale that began when she clawed her way out of the

estate and into university. Each time she sees me, she's reminded how far she's come. I'm sure that's why she offered me a job.

I was surprised she recognised me, that day when we I bumped into her in the little shop below my flat. While we'd been at school together, we weren't friends. I didn't have any. Abigail, top of the class, good at sport and pretty, was way out of my league anyhow. Yet she was so nice that it was impossible not to love her. As a teenager, I both envied her and longed to be her in equal measure.

I wouldn't want to be Abigail now, not since I've met Tim and seen how he binds her with golden chains. She doesn't have to hunt for traces of cheating, the lipstick on his collars and hotel bills that prove he wasn't where he said he was. Whenever he strays, he buys her jewellery. It's her insurance policy, she tells me. Abigail is terrified that her handsome husband and gorgeous home will slip through her fingers. She'll do anything to keep Tim sweet, and if he says the D word, she'll fight it tooth and nail. Meanwhile, she stuffs the glittering trophies in a drawer, refusing to wear or even look at them.

But I do.

I finger the diamond pendant at my neck. One day, I'll put the gems back. If Abigail finds out I borrowed them, I'll lose more than my job. They've given me an idea, though.

I wait until Christmas Eve. Alfie is sound asleep, tucked up in the sofa bed, where I'll join him in a while. The room is toasty. I make

the most of it, holding my hands in front of the electric fire and staring at my son's angelic features. Whatever else happens, Christmas will be perfect because he's here.

Celia would have liked to keep him with her. Her eyes were moist as she handed him over, swaddled in a new coat, with a backpack and a carrier bag. She gave me a letter too. I'll read it later.

Across the street, the lights go out in Abigail's house. A taxi draws up outside, waits a few minutes and drives off again.

They're out at a party tonight, a family bash at Tim's cousin's place. It sounds like a mansion the way Abigail tells it. The kids have been taken to a panto for the afternoon, then Tim is dressing up as Father Christmas to bring them presents. You don't really know what's behind a set of white whiskers, do you? He's going straight from work, or perhaps from some tart's bed, so the taxi must have whisked Abigail away.

She intends to have a drink with their hosts. If I was married to Tim, I'd be on three bottles of wine a day, but Abigail rarely indulges. Today will be different. She's been more stressed lately, and she confided that she'll need the mulled wine to get through the party. There's a new dress she's bought to impress Tim, a sexy number covered in silver sequins. Abigail brought it out of the wardrobe last week, after I'd helped her wrap the contents of Santa's sack.

"Do you think Tim'll go for it?"

I suspected Tim would go for anything female under the age of twenty-five, whatever they were wearing, but I bit my tongue. “You look great,” I told her. “And the kids will adore their little presents.”

Of course, Tim had left it to her to choose the toys, books and baubles he will dole out to the children. They were very tasteful, but nowhere as exciting as Zipper Zoomers.

Those babies are sitting, lovingly boxed and lavishly ribboned, under the tree in Abigail’s lounge. They’re ripe for the taking.

I hesitate at my threshold. Once Abigail and Tim notice the Zipper Zoomers are gone, they’ll ask themselves what else is missing. Abigail will check her jewellery drawer. Then she will remember where her spare key went, and I’ll be in a heap of trouble. Carefully so I don’t disturb Alfie, I empty the shoebox where I’ve stored her golden trinkets. One by one, I place them on a towel, fold it and put it in a carrier bag. I tiptoe out of the flat and into the night.

Oddly, Tim’s top of the range Porsche is sitting on his drive. The huge, gabled house is dark and silent though, so I guess he’s taken a cab too. I fish Abigail’s key from my pocket.

I used to know her burglar alarm code as well, until Tim had a Ring camera fitted instead. Fortunately, it has a blind spot, and I sneak carefully past and through the front door. Immediately, the scent of pine hits my nostrils. Tim insists on a real tree, despite the needles and resin that fall onto the polished floor. Beneath the woody smell, I sniff a metallic undercurrent. My first thought is

there's been an electrical malfunction. I'd better check the fairy lights haven't fused.

Pushing open the door to the lounge, I stop dead in my tracks and scream.

As the LEDs on the tree wink on and off, I see Santa standing in front of me. And he's waving a knife.

"Shut it," Tim's voice hisses. In the stroboscopic glow, he takes a juddery step closer.

"Don't touch me," I yell, throwing the heavy sack of jewellery at his stomach.

It winds him, catching him unawares. Tim falls backwards, dropping the blade. I kick it away. Only then do I notice the pale, silvery mannequin on the floor. A dark stain spreads over the parquet. In spite of the danger posed by her husband, I stagger around him and kneel by Abigail's side. It's obvious she won't be getting up again.

"You little thief." Tim scrambles to his feet, eyes flicking to the floor, seeking out the knife.

I stand in his way, "I only borrowed them," I stammer. "I was putting them back, but you... you've killed her."

Looming over me, brows knitted beneath fake white hair, he spits, "She should have signed the divorce papers."

Alfie's cute and trusting face flashes into my mind. I almost throw up as I imagine him waking up on Christmas Day, terrified and. Desperately, I look for a weapon. My hand fumbles for the

Zipper Zoomers box, until I come to my senses. A soft toy is no match for this psycho.

Tim laughs, which is nearly as scary as the scowl he displayed earlier. “You know what?” he says, “I’m going to let you go.”

“Thank you.” My words wobble.

“You won’t tell anyone about me, and I won’t tell them about you.” He glares at the gold chains spilling from my carrier bag.

I nod. Before he has a chance to change his mind, I sprint past him. Gulping cold, fresh air, I don’t stop running until I reach my flat. My momentum almost slams me into the front door. Bolting it behind me, I race upstairs. My heart pounds as I dive through a second door giving entrance to the bedsit and another layer of security. That gets bolted too.

Alfie is standing by the window, looking out. “Are the reindeers ill?” he asks.

I exhale a long, quivering breath. Somehow, my medication isn’t calming me down right now. “I don’t think so,” I say.

“I saw Santa, but no reindeers,” he says.

It must have been Tim making good his escape. I’d better not tell Alfie he spied a crazed killer. Really, it’s lucky Alfie is too excited to notice my chest rising and falling, my clammy skin and messy hair.

“Did you see him too, Mummy?”

“No,” I lie. “Now, you should go back to sleep, or he won’t bring you a present.”

Poor Alfie. I've returned empty-handed, and all he's getting is a bumper pack of jelly babies. At least he likes them. You can't go wrong with sweets.

He sparks out as soon as I lay him on the bed. I snuggle in next to him. Tears moisten my cheeks and I realise I'm crying silently for Abigail. Tim is going to get away with murder. Why didn't I call the cops? They'd find my fingerprints on her belongings, but as her cleaner, I've got a reason to handle items in her home. There's the carrier bag, though. That's harder to explain. If I go to prison, I will never see Alfie again. I spoon against his warm body, and drift into sleep.

Alfie shakes me awake on Christmas morning. "Mum! Want my presents."

"Happy Christmas to you, too," I mumble, stumbling out of bed and switching on the fire. Celia's letter is still on the tiny table, my handwritten name staring at me reproachfully. I tear it open.

'I've packed two pieces of Christmas cake for you and Alfie,' I read, 'and the box in penguin paper is Zipper Zoomers for him. I really hope you don't mind, but it's all he's talked about for months, and...'

I put the piece of holly-decorated paper down, unable to focus through a haze of tears. Celia just wants the same as me: for Alfie to believe the world is a nice place. In the shopping bag she handed over, I find the present and the cake.

"This is for you, Alfie," I say. "And would you like fruit cake for breakfast?"

His eyes light up. “Zipper Zoomers,” he shouts, almost dropping the box. With trembling hands, he removes paper, cardboard and plastic. He presses a button, and a fire siren sounds. It’s weedier than the full-blown wail you hear in the TV ads, but it doesn’t take much noise to fill my flat.

Alfie hardly touches his cake, or the jelly babies. The Zipper Zoomers hold his full attention. Ironically, he’s playing with the police car when a pair of genuine coppers visit.

There has been a murder locally. Did I see anything out of the ordinary last night, they ask.

“No,” I say. I can’t afford to open a can of worms. If I said what really happened, why would they believe me? Tim is too slippery; if I know how to evade the Ring camera, you can be sure Tim does too. No-one but me saw him back home. As far as the world is aware, he left work dressed as Father Christmas, went straight to the party and waited in vain there for his wife. He has an alibi.

“We think there may have been a burglary,” one of the duo says.

Then Alfie smiles up at the other cop, a lad even younger than me. The lad grins back. Alfie has that effect on everyone. Sometimes, it seems strange that we’re related. I suppose charm can skip a generation.

“I saw Santa last night,” Alfie says. “I’ll show you.”

The policeman follows him to the window.

Alfie points at Abigail’s house. Lights still flash on the fir tree, but now the Porsche on the drive has been joined by a squad car.

“There,” he says, wide-eyed. “Santa ran out of the door. But Rudolf wasn’t waiting.” Alfie pauses, and giggles. “Santa drove that car!”

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