



JANE HILL

A Christmas Box For Sharon

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A Christmas Box For Sharon

"DANNY, are you listening?"

I tore my attention away from *The Star's* racing pages.

"Yeah, yeah," I said. I hadn't been listening, exactly, but my sister's voice can penetrate steel doors.

"What did I say, then?" Sharon demanded.

"You were talking about putting up Christmas decorations," I said evasively.

"I was talking about *you* putting them up," she snapped.

"Why *me*?"

"Danny Thompson, you're the..."

Poor old Sharon. Christmas coming up and no man around the house apart from her layabout brother.

Mind you, it was her own fault. Fancy chucking Pete out just because he'd had a couple too many down at the pub! It's a pity it was their tenth wedding anniversary, though. Pete didn't know what had hit him. Well, yes, he did. Sharon's right hook.

Still, when she told him to get out she hadn't expected him to take her so seriously. He'd been gone for over a week now and Sharon had no idea where he was. And the two lads were crying for their dad.

"...And you won't even get off your backside to help me make a bit of a Christmas for Sean and Jason!" Sis shouted. Then she burst into tears.

"All right, all right!" I said, getting to my feet. "I'll put your Christmas decorations up."

But she was well away.

"I shouldn't have been so mean to Pete," she bawled. "I hope he's all right. I bet his mates know where he is, but they won't let on."

She was right about that. But now I decided it was time to appeal to their better natures.

"Come on, Sis," I said. "If you promise to turn off the waterworks, I promise to bring Pete home for Christmas. Call it your Christmas box from me."

It was a pretty rash promise, but all that bawling was getting me down.

Sharon blew her nose. "But how will you find him?" she sniffled.

"Don't worry about that," I said, picking up my car keys.

"Where are you off to?" Sharon demanded.

"Here and there," I said. Best not to mention the pub.

* * * *

I spotted a couple of Pete's mates at the end of the bar. Nev and Jacko. I bought them a pint. Their eyes glazed over when I told them I was still trying to find Pete.

"Come on!" I urged. "I promised our Sharon I'd bring him back for Christmas."

No response. I bought them another beer.

Somebody turned on the music. The jangle of *Jingle Bells*.

"Have a heart!" I said. "You've both got kids of your own. How would they feel if their dad wasn't there when they woke up on Christmas morning?"

"I reckon that if Pete wanted go home, he would," Nev mumbled.

"Oh, I dunno," Jacko said. "Perhaps he wants to go home but he's too pig-headed."

"That's right!" I said. "I'm sure he's only waiting for Sharon to ask him."

"Reckon we should tell him, Nev," Jacko said.

And he told me his wife had seen Pete in Hicks and Barnes, a big city store, a couple of days ago. He'd been getting into a lift marked STAFF ONLY.

"Thanks!" I said, finishing my pint.

* * * *

"I can't see Pete working behind a counter," Sharon said.

Neither could I. Particularly in a posh place like Hicks and Barnes. But there were all kinds of behind-the-scenes jobs, I told her. Storemen, cleaners...

So the next day I borrowed some cash from Sharon for the train fare into the city. Those beers for Pete's mates had cleaned me out.

I sneered back at the bloke in the maroon-and-gold uniform standing in front of Hicks and Barnes's big glass doors. They slid open to let me in. The gold and silver decorations made the paper chains I'd put up for Sharon look pathetic. And posh stores made me nervous.

But I took a grip on myself, and shoved my way through the crush of Christmas shoppers towards the *Inquiries* desk.

"I'm looking for somebody who works here," I told the snooty-looking bird behind the glass.

"Try Personnel," she said distantly. "Top floor."

The lift was full of mums and kids. They jostled their way out when the lift reached the fifth floor. I got a spiky heel on my right instep and chocolate icecream on my good jeans. I limped out on the top floor.

The Personnel person – another snooty bird – said it was against store policy to divulge the names of its employees. She was unmoved by the thought of two little lads crying for their dad. I left.

But while I was waiting for the lift, wondering what to do next, I felt a touch on my arm. It was the good-looking redhead who'd come in to put some papers on the

Personnel person's desk while I was giving her my sob story.

"Excuse me," the redhead said. She had a name tag on her luscious chest. *Kelly*. "I couldn't help hearing what you were saying to Mrs Price. I don't know whether your brother-in-law's working here, but I can tell you that the only fellows we've taken on in the past three weeks are Santas."

"Santas?"

Kelly giggled. "You know – long white beard, red robes, big black boots. It's amazing how many responses we got to our ad for chaps to play Father Christmas and hand out presents to the kiddies. They're not exactly presents, of course; the mums and dads have to pay for them."

Good old Santa Claus, I thought.

But she'd said "Santas". More than one.

I frowned. "How *many* of these Santas, exactly?"

"Well, there's Santa's Grotto in the toy department – fifth floor – and there's another Santa in the basement. And..."

"Well, I'll try the fifth floor first," I said, "and keep my fingers crossed that the Santa in the Grotto turns out to be our Pete."

"The trouble is..." she started. But just then the lift arrived.

"Look, I'd better catch this," I said quickly, stepping inside. Not that I wanted to get away from this honey, but it was already mid-afternoon.

The lift doors started to close. Kelly flapped her hands.

"The trouble is...there's actually *four* Santas!"

"*What!*" I yelled through the diminishing gap.

"Shift work," Kelly yelled back. "Two Santas on. Two off."

She was saying something else when the lift doors cut her off from view. I think it was "Good luck."

I'd need it, I thought despairingly as I pressed the button marked 5 and the lift started its descent. If Pete wasn't one of the Santas on duty, I'd have to wait until the next shift came on. Whenever! And then, after all that, Pete might not be a Santa at all! I felt like packing it in before I'd even started. But I'd promised Sharon...

Going down. The lift picked up passengers at every floor. They all pressed the button for the ground floor. *They* weren't stupid enough to be visiting Santa's Grotto. The lift stopped at the fifth floor. The doors opened. A mass of mums and kids surged forward. The kids were clutching their loot.

"Good old Santa Claus!" I muttered as I shoved my way through them.

"Pardon?" The speaker was an old bloke in overalls, pushing a trolley. When I shouted that I was looking for Santa's Grotto, he pointed wordlessly.

The grotto was grotty – a painted backdrop to Father Christmas's throne. The throne was roped off. It was empty. The kids standing behind the barrier with their disgruntled-looking mums were whining that they wanted Santa.

So did I. And I'd noticed a door in that backdrop. I climbed over the rope.

"Mummy, that man isn't waiting for his turn!" one kid whined.

"Shhh, darling," Mummy said. "He must be one of Santa's helpers."

Dead right I was. I was going to help Santa get out of here...if he turned out to be Pete, that was. The door I'd noticed was a flimsy plywood affair. When I gave it a tentative tap, it flew open.

The bulky figure in red whipped around as if he'd been shot. His white whiskers were lopsided. He was shoving his right hand up his left sleeve.

But he wasn't Pete. This bloke's fat wasn't padding.

"Sorry, chum," I said. "I'm looking for my brother-in-law. He's supposed to be in this Santa racket."

Santa mopped his face. "Blimey, I thought you was Security!" He removed his right hand from his sleeve. He unscrewed the top of the hip-flask and took a swig. Then he told me his name was Syd and offered the flask to me.

"No thanks, mate," I said.

"You wouldn't say that if you had to get out there and do the ho-ho-ho routine in five minutes," Syd groaned. It turned out that he'd just come on shift. I asked him where the outgoing Santa was.

"Gone home, lucky sod."

My heart sank into my trainers. Had I just missed Pete? But it turned out that the Santa who'd just knocked off was an old codger called Arthur.

Syd suggested I try the basement. "There's another couple of us poor buggers down there."

I asked if one of them might be Pete. I described him.

"Dunno, chum." Syd shrugged. "Haven't set eyes on either of 'em – with or without whiskers."

"But I'd have thought you'd all have been at Santa school together," I said. "Didn't you have to do a training course?"

"Gave it a miss this time," Syd belched. "I know the business inside out. This is my third year."

Some blokes were devils for punishment, I marvelled as I rode the escalator down to the basement.

* * * *

It would take me forever to find Santa in this scrum. I asked a bloke in a suit for directions.

I followed the languid wave of his hand.

"You mean behind that red curtain?" I asked. But he was already mincing away.

I fought my way over to the curtain. I shoved it aside.

Jeez, you should have heard the screams! The old girl in her corsets didn't believe me when I said I was looking for Father Christmas.

The floor security chap didn't believe me, either. So I explained about Pete. This chap had a bigger heart than that Personnel person. Santa was on his throne over there, he said, pointing. And there was another Santa, waiting to go on, in the dressing room over there. He wished me luck.

I decided to try Santa's hidey-hole first. But this one wasn't Pete, either. He was reading the paper and having a fag, and he wasn't pleased to see me (perhaps because of the NO SMOKING sign) so I took myself off.

I was running out of Santas. "Please let the one on the throne be our Pete!" I prayed.

I tracked this one down from the din. He was on a throne mounted on a platform, going through the old *ho-ho-ho* stuff. But, since the *ho-ho-hoing* was filtered through white whiskers, I couldn't make out whether it was our Pete's voice or not. And this Santa looked the same as all the others, as far as I could see. Which wasn't far. I was stuck at the back of a seething mass of mums and kids.

But then I noticed the blonde in a skimpy Santa's Helper suit. She was handing out balloons. I felt in my pockets for a pen. Then I found the dry-cleaning slip for Sharon's

jacket that I'd forgotten to pick up. I scribbled on the back of it.

When Santa's Helper got to me, I said, "No, love, I don't want a balloon. But I do need a favour."

She gave me a dirty look, so I gabbled, "I'm not making a pass, honest! I think that bloke in the Santa suit is my brother-in-law, and I need to contact him urgently. Family emergency." (Well, it was) "Can you give him this note?"

Pete. Come home. Sharon sent me. I'm at the back of the crowd. Danny.

She read what I'd written

"Glad to help, Danny," she smiled. Crikey, any other time...

I watched as she wriggled her way to the front of the crowd. The mums and kids made away for her like the parting of the Red Sea. She handed the note to Santa, who had a fat kid on his lap.

Then things happened so fast that I'm not sure what happened exactly. Being clouted on the head with that woman's handbag didn't help. But I do remember a great shout – "Wait for me, Danny, I'm coming!" – and Santa shoving the fat kid off his lap, ripping off his whiskers, and leaping from his throne. And I remember him falling off the platform, right into the mass of mums and kids, and the cries of "Look, he's not real!" and "Let's get him!"... and me thinking "Jeez, it's like the French Revolution!"

* * * *

Pete reckoned it was the bravest thing he'd ever seen – me diving into that mob of howling kids to rescue him.

"Well," I said. "I promised our Sharon I'd take you home for Christmas, and I didn't say 'Dead or Alive'. And I reckon those kids would've slaughtered you!"

Pete shuddered and took a long pull at his pint. It wasn't until he'd downed it that he felt fit enough to tell me why he'd taken on the Santa job.

It was mainly on account of Sharon's right hook. He couldn't face having to explain that black eye to his mates, so he'd caught a train to the city.

"Thought I'd doss down in the YMCA 'til Sharon had cooled off," he said.

Then he'd seen that ad for Santas.

"I thought it'd be money for jam." He shuddered again.

He was pleased to hear that Sharon had been worried. I agreed that it served her right, but hadn't he thought about young Sean and Jason at all?

"Oh, I *had!*" he said fervently. "And I'd thought of coming home for Christmas. But then I got cold feet. Sharon might've thrown me out again." He patted me on the shoulder.

"Thanks for coming, mate. Now I know it's safe."

It looked liked being a Merry Christmas after all.

* * * *

On the way home in the train Pete made me swear not to tell a soul what he'd been doing. I said we'd tell folks he'd been working in Hicks and Barnes's packing department. It'd explain how he got those bruises and scratches.

"A packing case fell on you, right?"

"Right!" said Pete.

We decided to call in at The Royal before we went home, just to get that straight. Pete's mates called for a celebratory round.

"Just one beer, then," I said. "I have to get Pete home to Sharon. He's her Christmas box."

* * * *

"I was ready to go, anyway," Pete said as we stepped out into the night air. "That bloody *Jingle Bells* was getting right up me nose."

The kids were in bed when we arrived home, but Sharon was just as chuffed as I'd expected. What's that word? Yeah, *ecstatic*.

"Sis," I grinned, "here's a Christmas box for you!"

Then I left them to it. I'd go back to the pub until they were in bed. Which would probably be pretty soon, I thought.

As I was closing the front door, I heard Sharon say, "Oh, Pete, you're my best Christmas present *ever*! Wasn't it

clever of Danny to track you down in H and B's packing department!"

I stopped to listen.

"Mmmm!" That was Pete...sticking to the story we'd told in the pub.

"And now that you're back, he won't have to play Santa," said Sis.

"What d'you mean?" Pete's voice sounded strained.

"Well, I hadn't actually told him, but Marj Roberts gave me the Santa outfit her husband used to wear for the club Christmas parties. With you away, it looked as if I'd have to get Danny to put it on."

I sucked in my breath. I had the nasty feeling I knew what was coming next.

"But now he doesn't have to, does he, hon?" Sharon cooed. "Daddy's the proper person to be Father Christmas!"

"*Father Christmas?*" Pete yelled. "You expect me to wear a bloody Santa suit? Are you crazy?"

That did it! It was on for young and old. (Well, all the noise had woken the kids, hadn't it?)

Time for me to make a quick getaway. As I headed for my car, I heard Sharon chucking Pete out again.

Well, that's the last Christmas box our Sharon gets from *me*.

THE END

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The Prayer Tree

THIS is a collection of short stories I've written over the years. The first story sets the theme, and is the only one in the collection which is not fiction. In the other six stories: a retired spinster schoolteacher goes in search of flowers for an old friend's funeral; a widow visits a flamboyant fortune-teller; a wife takes revenge for her husband's infidelity; an elderly woman, lonely following the death of her husband and the estrangement from her granddaughter, finds herself in hospital; a migraine forces a young woman to visit a doctor in an unfamiliar town; an encounter on a lonely beach is unnerving for a young divorcee. Yes, the leading players in all seven stories are women Enjoy! Jane Hill

A Christmas Box For Sharon – Jane Hill

Saturday Night Date

Free Read.