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CASTLE



PIERS TORDAY

Quercus

QUERCUS CHILDREN'S BOOKS

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Mouse Mallory didn't like Christmas.

There, he'd said it. Or rather, *thought* it, because Mouse Mallory was more a thinker than a talker. (Or, as everyone else called him, a daydreamer.) Yes, he decided, I am eleven years old and I don't like Christmas – even if it *was* Christmas Eve. And even if his mum *was* going crazy trying to get him and his two sisters ready for their annual festive trip to her parents, over on the other side of the hills.

'Mouse!' Mrs Mallory's voice sailed down the stairs after her, along with different-coloured socks flying off the pile of laundry in her arms. 'I really hope that when I come back up you aren't just going to be standing there, and that your bag will be packed! We leave in one hour. *One* hour.'

Mouse stayed exactly where he was, on the landing,

clutching his rucksack. He peered inside. It might look unpacked to some people. But Mouse could see, right at the bottom, the only thing he ever needed to take anywhere: his toy horse, Nonky.

Even if everyone did say he was too old to be carrying toy horses around.

‘Do you really need that?’ his mum would complain. ‘I’ve washed it a thousand times and it still stinks of trainers. You’re too grown-up to be playing with a babyish toy like that.’

‘You’re such a *little* boy sometimes,’ his big sister Violet would often add.

It’s true – he was a little boy. His dad was stout, his mum wasn’t very tall and Mouse was . . . well, rather small. In fact, he was the smallest in his year. That was why Albert Thomas Mallory was known universally as Mouse.

‘So small, and so full of questions, like a curious little mouse,’ his dad used to say when he was younger. Mouse had never been short of a question, that’s for sure. Why is the sky blue? What does that button do? Will I ever get bigger? Not even his doctor could answer the last one for sure.

Maybe he would always be shorter than everyone else.

This left him with so many worries about the future.

Such as, would he ever be tall enough to go on the biggest roller coaster in the world?

But Mouse knew Violet didn't just mean that.

She meant that he acted little as well. He was eleven and apparently that meant he had to read books that had more words than pictures, or even no pictures. He was supposed to be able to sleep with the lights off, and everyone said he was too old to carry a stuffed toy around with him all the time.

Mouse didn't get what the problem was.

It wasn't as if Nonky was like the toys Esme still played with. He didn't play a lullaby if you pulled a string and he definitely didn't get chewed at night. (Any more.) Nonky had been a present from his dad – quite a long time ago, but not that long ago. Once he had been a fighting horse with a mounted knight, but his rider had since departed to the Giant Toy Crate in the Sky, and he was also missing an eye.

When his dad gave him Nonky, Mouse was too young to tell the difference between a horse and a donkey. He also couldn't pronounce 'donkey' – so 'Nonky' it had been from the get-go, and Nonky it had stayed.

Unlike Dad, Nonky hadn't run off to Florida with a software developer he met online called Carla. Mouse hoped she appreciated his terrible songs and corny jokes. He was

surprised at how much he actually missed them.

But Nonky didn't force those on him either. Nonky never yelled when he was late for school and never sulked when he didn't want to play with him. Nonky smelt of the past and the good old days. He was soft, machine washable and made Mouse feel safe.

He was special.

And what else, really, did Mouse need to take with him? (Apart from some clean pants, and his mum was bound to pack those anyway.)

'Mum's going to kill you,' said Violet – who was much taller than him, even though she was only a year and a half older – leaning against the doorway opposite.

'Why?'

'Because you're always daydreaming and never ready on time,' said Violet. 'She's going to skin you alive, and then boil you—' She swerved out of the way just in time to avoid the rucksack being swung in her direction. 'Didn't you check the weather on your phone? There's more snow coming in, and ice too . . . so she wants to make it across the hills before it gets dark.' She clapped her hands. 'It's Christmas, Mouse!'

Mouse muttered into his jumper, not looking at her. 'I hate Christmas.'

‘What? This is new. Give me one good reason to hate Christmas.’

Mouse kept his voice and words fixed on the floor. ‘Presents,’ he said.

Violet stared at him in disbelief. ‘Don’t talk rubbish! Everyone likes presents.’

He shrugged. ‘Not if they’re all stupid books.’

Last Christmas his grandfather had given him a copy of *Alice in Wonderland* and *The Tales of King Arthur*. Boring, bound in leather and with no pictures on the cover.

‘To help you start a library,’ he had said hopefully, peering over his glasses.

But Mouse thought starting a library sounded too much like hard work. There was clearing a site and laying concrete foundations for starters, not to mention lugging heavy boxes of books about. And having to be quiet *all* the time.

He had slogged through the books from Gramps anyhow, which smelt of old furniture drawers and glue. At least the pictures inside were good, especially the ones of the strange creatures Alice met down the rabbit hole or the knights in armour fighting battles. Still, there weren’t enough of them, or any animations like in an app or a game. And what was the point of a book without pictures or animations?

‘You only don’t like books because you’re a boy,’ said

Violet. 'It's not your fault nature designed you without a reading brain, unlike girls. It does unfortunately mean that I will get to be prime minister one day while you will only be allowed to drive my car.'

Before Mouse could respond, Esme trundled across the landing in front of him on her trike. Clashed between her knees was the shredded remains of a stale chocolate egg, the rest of which was smeared over her face and hands.

'Choclit,' said Esme. 'Easta,' she added, just in case she hadn't made herself clear.

'No,' said Mouse, '*Christmas*. Christmas Eve. Look.'

He pointed to the gabled window behind them. Shimmering icicles, as sharp as prehistoric spears, twisted down from the eaves outside. From time to time a tip dropped off with an alarming crack. The fresh snow seemed to make everything quieter and louder at the same time. A robin strutted on the frosted sill beneath the icy spears, oblivious to the danger dangling above his head.

The snow carpeted the flat roof of the kitchen below, dotted the rails of the climbing frame in the garden and caked so much of the shed that it almost disappeared from view. For the rest of the year, East Burn didn't look like much: an old farmhouse on the edge of the moors. Today it looked like even less – just another block of white in a land of

white. In fact, if you had been flying overhead, you might have missed it completely.

As if it wasn't even there at all.

Mouse watched Esme look at the icicles. She looked at the snow. She looked at the robin, which made her smile. And finally she turned back to Mouse. 'Easta,' she declared, and cycled off into the next room, leaving a trail of chocolate behind her. The robin stared at the crumbs through the window and tapped his beak against the glass greedily.

Mouse shook his head at the world outside. 'Snow,' he said. 'That's another reason to hate Christmas.'

'But this is the first white Christmas in five years!' exploded Violet.

'So? It doesn't make sense. When there's no snow, everyone says it's climate change. But when there is snow, like this year, everyone says it's—'

'Climate change.'

'See? They can't have it both ways.'

'What about snowmen? Sledging?'

'I'm not like you. I'm not good at any of that stuff. Making things, sport . . . I'm only little.'

'You can't use that as an excuse for everything, Mouse Mallory. Don't you even like going for a walk in the snow?'

He snorted. 'Like the one we'll have to go on after lunch

tomorrow with Granny and Gramps? That's not a walk, that's a route march.' Mouse began a mental to-do list: 1. Find out if the United Nations has a policy on forced marches after Christmas lunch.

'You think you can get away with anything because you're so cute, don't you?' said Violet, grabbing Mouse in a headlock and mussing his hair.

'Gerroff!' he said, flushing and wriggling free. 'No, I don't.'

'Yes, you do, and one day even you are going to have to grow up,' she said, closing her door on him.

He shrugged. There were so many good reasons not to like Christmas, like the teachers at school wearing tinsel over their ties, or, even worse, Christmas jumpers. As if they were Santa's little helpers, when they were still in fact *teachers*.

It was just pretend and make-believe.

That thought made Mouse feel uncomfortable. His chest tightened, his cheeks flushed and his hands clenched into fists. Because he remembered something that made him rage inside.

The kind of rage that isn't fixed by shiny wrapping paper or a toy reindeer with a glowing nose dancing to a disco beat.

It was the real reason why he didn't like Christmas.



Belinda Mallory was not a big woman, but she was a strong one. This meant she could effortlessly uproot her small son from the landing and deposit him in the Nuclear Waste Contamination Zone, otherwise known as his bedroom.

Mouse stood there in a daze, unable to stop thinking about the thing that made him sad. His mother wasn't in the least bit sad.

She was *furious*.

'Do you have any concept of what the word *help* means, Mouse?' she said, as she located the only known pair of clean pants in existence at that moment and stuffed them into his rucksack.

Mouse knew full well what help meant. Sometimes he would haul bags of shopping in from the car. 'Thanks, Mouse,

that's very helpful,' his mother would say. Although sometimes being helpful was not a good thing. Like when he had given Esme too many sweets on Halloween and she had made an orangey pool of sick all over the lounge carpet. 'Thanks, Mouse, that was really helpful,' his mother had sighed, scrubbing hard at the floor. It was funny how 'really' helpful seemed to be less appreciated than 'very'.

'Mum! It's snowing again!' said a voice from the landing.

Mouse's mother glanced up at the small window in his bedroom, at the soft white splodges falling against the glass, and pursed her lips. 'Thank you, Violet, I can see that!' she muttered, zipping up the bag and thrusting it into her son's arms. 'Downstairs. Five minutes. Final warning.'

Five minutes later, Mouse was still standing among the debris of his bedroom, staring into space. His mind was far away, as ever. He wasn't quite sure what he was thinking of, but it was something to do with the meaning of help, the pointlessness of Christmas and what it would feel like to be eaten by a polar bear.

Approximately seven minutes later, Mouse was shivering on the steps outside East Burn, his ears ringing from his mother's latest outburst – delivered at very close range.

'I hate having to shout like that,' she said, struggling past him with a bin liner crammed with hastily wrapped

presents. 'Must you be in your own world *all* the time?'

'No,' he lied.

'In our class, Miss Wilkinson gives us five minutes each morning for daydreaming,' said Violet, standing next to him, her favourite camouflage holdall in her hand. 'She says we all need to find our creative inner voice, which is more important than any exam.'

'Yes, well, Miss Wilkinson doesn't have to drive three children and a carful of presents across the moors by teatime in a blizzard, does she? I know it's not ideal, but we did promise Granny and Gramps we'd be there for tea.' Mrs Mallory slammed the boot of their SUV shut and dusted her hands dry of snow. 'We haven't got far to go, but I will need to concentrate in this weather. So if everyone could keep all outer and inner voices to themselves till we get there, I'd be most grateful.'

'But my inner voice today is Gráinne O'Malley,' said Violet.

'Whitty who-whatty?'

'Gráinne O'Malley, the pirate queen, Mum! We did her for a special library project. She was the terror of the seas nearly five hundred years ago.'

Mrs Mallory glanced at Violet and gave a low groan. 'Oh no, Vi, not today. Seriously. I'm not in the mood.'

You'll freeze to death in that.'

Mouse took a closer look at his sister. She was wearing a floppy black pirate hat, one of her dad's old dressing gowns and had a plastic lightsaber tucked into her belt. She pulled the weapon out and pressed it up against her brother's nose. 'Give me the gold, traitor, or I'll pillage your castle and steal all your bacon. Or . . . you could just let me sit in the front.'

'Hey, that's mine!' said Mouse, grabbing at the lightsaber.

'Pirates take what they want. That's why they're pirates,' Violet said with a grin, snatching it back.

'No one is sitting in the front, or being a pirate, till we get there,' said Mrs Mallory, plucking the plastic weapon from their grasp in a single, practised, swooping move worthy of any Jedi. 'The Christmas cake we all made together is going on the front seat, as I've already told you.' And with that she tossed the lightsaber into the footwell.

'Prepare to repel boarders!' said Violet, sweeping past her brother with a flick of her dressing gown.

His mum let out a short scream, nearly making Esme jump out of her arms.

'Mouse! *What* were you thinking?'

He frowned and looked down.

Somewhere in between breakfast, thinking about Christmas and being carried down here, he had forgotten to

change out of his pyjamas. They were his favourite pyjamas too, featuring robots of all kinds. There were robots dancing and robots firing lasers. Robots covered in egg marks and robots covered in juice stains. He was, at least, wearing his wellies, even if the one on the left foot was a different colour to the one on the right.

‘Oh, I give up,’ she said. ‘Just get in. You’ve got Nonky, haven’t you?’

He sort of nodded. At least, he thought he nodded.

‘Mouse! I’m not getting halfway across the moors in this weather and then turning around because you’ve forgotten that stupid toy. Have you got Nonky? Look me in the eyes, please.’

‘Yes,’ said Mouse. ‘You packed him on top of my Minecraft pants. Mum, why does looking someone in the eyes make what you say truer?’

‘I’ll tell you later,’ muttered his mum, not looking him in the eye. Then Mouse and Violet – now wearing warm coats at least – a baby sister still smeared in Easter egg and a Tupperware box of homemade Christmas cake were loaded into the car at great speed.

Mrs Mallory reversed down the short drive and out on to the empty road. Snow slapped against the windows, and before anyone could make a sound their mum had the

Christmas-songs album on shuffle. In her car seat next to Mouse, Esme rocked back and forth to the music, drawing pictures in the condensation on the glass with a toothbrush. 'Easta!' she said, as the car echoed with the sound of angels hallooing and bells ding-donging.

On his other side, Violet was reading a book. It was the kind Violet liked and he found boring. They never seemed to be about anything, just endless non-stories of children her age, at school, and whether or not they got on with each other. There were no dinosaurs or baddies. Nobody got killed. And what was the point of a story where that didn't happen?

'You'll understand one day,' said Violet, rolling her eyes and turning another page.

'Vi!' called her mum from the front, doing that thing only mums can do, half looking in the rear-view mirror, half looking at the road, one hand on the steering wheel, the other stopping the Christmas cake from sliding off the passenger seat. 'Don't read in the car, please; you know it makes you sick. Remember how wiggly the road gets.'

As if to prove her point, the car swerved on a patch of ice and the cake tin nearly tipped on the floor.

'No need to make it more wiggly than it is already,' said Violet.

‘Again, not helpful,’ said Mrs Mallory, eyeing the teetering Christmas cake with deep mistrust, but gripping the wheel firmly with both hands.

Mouse stared out of the window. Everything he recognised was disappearing in front of his eyes, blanked out by the blizzard. It was as if they were driving through nothing. And in a rush it came back to him. A thought, as clear and cold as the white drifts of snow that carpeted the valleys, as hard to the touch as the car floor beneath his toes.

Breaking the daydream, Violet nudged him. ‘Go on, Mouse, tell Esme what Father Christmas is going to bring. She wants to know.’ And she whispered in his ear, ‘Dream something up. You’re good at that.’

Mouse blinked. He was back in the car. The snow was getting thicker. Everything was white and soft. The angels were singing about stars or mangers. Esme was still shouting, ‘Easta!’ at the blotchy, melting flakes on the window.

‘Nothing,’ he said in a dull voice.

The baby girl stopped, and blinked.

‘Nothink?’ she said.

‘Yes, Esme,’ said Mouse, his eyes fierce. His baby sister flinched. To his surprise, a voice suddenly came up from Mouse’s belly, like a fiery serpent, spitting out of his mouth. He might be small, but one day he would be a man, like his

dad, except he wouldn't run away when things got difficult. More than anything else, he wanted to be bigger and a grown-up, and decided now would be a good time to start. 'Nothing. Father Christmas isn't real. Christmas isn't real. It's all stupid.'

He sat back and folded his arms, ignoring Esme's wails, Violet's punches and his mother's anger from the front of the car.

He didn't care any more.

Because he finally knew why he didn't like Christmas. It was like the world outside the windows, which was hidden under layers of snow. Everything looked blank and unreal. No more real, in fact, than the daydreams in which he spent most of his waking hours, living in a pretend world where he was bigger or older.

And daydreams were a complete waste of time, as everyone from his teacher Mr Stanmore to his mother kept telling him. He wasn't supposed to waste precious school time making stuff up; he was meant to learn actual facts and figures so he could get a proper job when he was older.

But if making stuff up was a waste of time, what was the point of Christmas? Magical stars in the sky, a baby born in a manger, a man who didn't even exist riding a

theoretical sleigh across the sky to not drop presents down your chimney.

Christmas was the biggest annual collection of made-up daydreams in the whole world. You couldn't touch it, you couldn't count it, and you certainly couldn't explain it in a multiple-choice-exam answer.

Which officially, one hundred per cent, made it the most pointless thing ever.