

## The Christmas Box

by

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Martin opened the box for the first time on Christmas Eve.

‘Not till Christmas morning,’ his mum had said with a smile lacquered on her face as his dad backed out the drive, clipping the rhododendron because the car was so overloaded with ski gear and suitcases and laptops and pillows and carrier bags stuffed full of gift-wrapped parcels and all the crappy junk Martin’s sisters thought they needed for a week in some posh resort in Switzerland that his dad couldn’t see where he was going. Sylvia might actually ski, but Jaime would slink round in a different eyeball-roaching outfit every day and try to pull as many blokes as would have her. If they even got to Switzerland—after ten minutes on the road they’d be sniping at each other, and his dad would hit the next lay-by and do his *I’m not going anywhere till you lot quiet down and appreciate what a sacrifice your mum and I are making to take ten whole days off for a family holiday not to mention the money routine*. Christ.

Guilt had been positively oozing out of the banknotes as his mum stuffed yet another wad into Martin’s fist (his dad having done the same thing not half an hour before). But hell, let em, they couldn’t wait to be shot of him, could they? As if they really cared that he rang Aunt Susan every morning to clock in. Though his *call me Susie, you’re an adult now* aunt might just take it into her head to come round, she was about as different from her sister as you could get. Big on Social Responsibility. Best play their little game.

An hour after they’d left—he wanted to make sure they didn’t come back for some other piece of shit they’d forgotten and couldn’t possibly do without (Jaime’s vibrating condom ring and raspberry-flavoured condoms?), he lit his first spliff and laid into his pile of gifts. Usual pair of flannel pyjamas from Gran, at least it wasn’t some ruddy paisley muffler.

What was he going to do, tell his 83-year old grandma he slept starkers? Might as well say he wanked off every night, thrice on Saturdays. The new CDs were OK, he'd given his mum a list to make sure, the clothes he'd flog, the books weren't even worth burning in the fireplace. A large bottle of eau de toilette from Sylvia. *Eau de toilette*. Someone lives with a brother for almost 14 years, you'd think she'd know his style.

At least he'd got the new Ibanez guitar, he'd been afraid they might make him *work for it, son*. What he did wasn't work, apparently.

Martin carried up the loot to his room and shoved most of under the bed. Then he spent a couple of hours feeling up his new baby and working on the song that had been shadowing him for days. When he surfaced, it was dark outside. Christmas Eve.

He went downstairs, switched on some lights, and microwaved the macaroni cheese his mum had left in the fridge. Ate it standing up by the worktop. Gluey stuff, but he couldn't be bothered to break out a pizza. He looked at the clock. Just gone seven. Pete and Kevin wouldn't pitch up till after nine at the earliest, Clare maybe not at all. Family night at the arena, ringside seats, no referee. Better them than him.

Beer in hand—*of course not, Dad*—Martin wandered into the sitting room and idly flicked on the Christmas tree lights. A real Blue Spruce, no tacky plastic thing for his mum and dad, not in this neighbourhood, not with their sort of friends. *Don't forget to top up the water every second day*. Martin grinned and crept under the tree with his bottle. Great preservative, he reckoned, his dad's naff Bavarian beer. Who needs a sober tree anyway?

Right at the back under an low-hanging branch was a present he hadn't noticed first time round. He hauled it out and sat cross-legged before the tree, nipping his beer and regarding the box. Unlike the others, this one wasn't wrapped in half a metre of recycled tree, embossed with smirking golden cherubs and tied with matching ribbon. Plain wood, about the size of a little kid's shoebox. And no obvious crack to indicate a lid.

Martin shook the box, which told him nothing. Sounded empty, but maybe it was just well padded. Whatever *it* was. He ran his fingers along the smooth, slightly oily surface of the wood. Discovering no notches or depressions, no buttons or catches, he was about to toss it aside as someone's idea of a prank, when he noticed a small area on the underside that felt warmer than the rest of the wood. He rubbed his thumb over the section several times, a small circular motion, and his skin began to tingle as though the box were emitting a low-level charge of electricity. Then it sprang open in his hands.

His nose wrinkled at the tarry smell, which dissipated before he had a chance to decide what it reminded him of. Something slightly rank, though not as bad as backed-up school drains. More like one of the chem lab smells. Sulphur, maybe?

The box was empty. Clean, unvarnished, and full of nothing. *Rien. Nichts. Nada.* If his dad was trying to tell him something, a handwritten note would have done the job much better. Or an email. Very fond of emails, his dad was, even to his kids. Especially to his kids. *The Headmaster's secretary has rung me. We need to have a little chat after dinner.* Martin just loved those little chats.

He bent forward, then swore. A branch of the tree had caught in his dreds. He tried to pull free, but the tree began to tilt alarmingly. 'Fuck this,' he muttered, 'Bloody tree belongs in the dump.' Reaching behind himself, he planted one hand round the offending bough, and with the other, yanked hard. He could imagine Sylvia's prissy comment. *Disgusting rat's nest. I bet you've got bugs in there. I bet you've got bubonic plague germs.*

How had he ended up with such a family? As a little kid he used to wonder if he was adopted. Now he reckoned there must have been a rogue gene in his DNA. He sighed, flipped shut the lid on the box, finished his beer. Still a bit curious, he picked up the box once more, but this time no matter how hard he rubbed, he couldn't get the damned thing to open. Block of wood, like Jaime's head.

Bored now, Martin fetched another beer and settled down before the TV. He channel-surfed for a while, but most of the stuff was pissier than his mum's idea of party punch. He went in search of some DVDs. In Jaime's room he dug through her secret hoard of porn films, found a couple of new ones he hadn't seen.

When he went downstairs, the Christmas tree had disappeared.

'Just go back upstairs and start again, Marty,' he muttered. 'You fell asleep after all that practising.'

But a thorough search of the house, garage and garden shed included, turned up nothing remotely resembling a Christmas tree or parts thereof. Not even a lone pine needle. Nor was there any sign of a break-in, though only a loony would walk off with a fucking Christmas tree from a house full of hi-tech goodies. And what would a thief do, drag it over the sill and tie it onto the roof of his van with all the glass baubles bouncing along behind him like pingpong balls?

Oh fuck. All his mum's antique crystal ornaments. She wouldn't let anybody else touch them. Ever. When not hanging on the tree, they were wrapped individually in cotton bunting like newborns and packed away in made-to-order storage cots.

'What did you do with your mum's tree?' Pete asked a few hours later. 'Toss it out already?'

Martin inhaled, held his breath, let out the smoke in a long thin stream.

'No idea,' he said.

Pete and Kevin exchanged glances. Marty had a Reputation, even among his mates.

'What do you mean, no idea? Where'd it go?' Kevin asked, taking his turn with the spliff.

'On walkabout.'

'You pop something brain-mashing?' Kevin asked.

‘I wish. My mum’s going to mince mine for paté in her food processor when she comes home and finds all her ornaments gone.’

‘Come off it, what happened? Parents piss you off so much that you axed it?’ Pete garbled, his mouth full of pizza.

‘Yeah.’ Martin shrugged. What the hell, he couldn’t be bothered.

‘Nice piece of ash,’ Kevin said, picking up the box from the couch table and fondling it. He knew something about wood, his dad was a cabinet maker. ‘What’s it for?’ Then he gawked when the lid opened. ‘Hey, look at that. Some sort of hidden release button. I bet my dad would like to get a look at it.’

‘Funny smell in here,’ Pete said. ‘Someone fart?’

‘It’s nothing special. Just an empty box,’ Martin said, ignoring Pete. They ignored Pete a lot. Played a mean set of drums, though.

‘It’s not empty,’ Kevin said.

‘What?’ Martin asked.

‘Have a look,’ Kevin said, passing him the box.

There was a small piece of paper at the bottom. Martin lifted it out. A postage stamp, one of those special issues with a picture of a Christmas tree on it. He looked at it for a moment, then dropped it back into the box.

‘I’ll fetch some more beer,’ he said, getting to his feet.

‘Not for me, got to shove off,’ Kevin said. ‘Carol service with my parents. I promised them I’d be back in time. Their car’s acting up.’

‘You’re not driving them to church on Christmas Eve in that heap of rusting scrap metal and flaking paint you call a car?’ Martin asked.

‘Hey, it’s more wheels than you’ve got. Wish it would self-destruct, though, maybe then my dad would fork out for a decent bit of tin.’

Kevin closed the box, set it back on table, rose and stretched. ‘Lift?’ he asked Pete.

‘Yeah, guess so. Too friggin cold to walk.’

But when they opened the front door, Kevin let out a bellow that ripped through the quiet neighbourhood like their hottest hurtin’ chords.

‘WHERE THE FUCK IS MY CAR?’

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The police had plenty to do on Christmas Eve, and Kevin never made it to church. By the time they’d established his car hadn’t been towed but nicked, and rung his parents and the insurance hotline, and filed the police report, and waited for someone to call back with the crime number, and salvaged the ornaments that were still whole from the compost heap, the man in red had done most of his rounds.

Next morning Martin was roused about eleven by the phone. He fumbled for it blearily, knocking something off the bedside table, followed by the handset. His oath was perfunctory, it was too early even to breathe. With one hand he groped about on the floor, demucking his eyes with the other. He came up with the wooden box, which he couldn’t remember having brought upstairs. The phone continued to squawk.

‘Yeah?’ he was finally able to say.

‘Martin? Is that you?’

*Aunt Call Me Susie.*

‘Uh, yeah, Aunt Susan.’

‘Happy Christmas, Martin.’

‘Same to you.’

Martin worked himself upright against the pillows. The wooden box felt heavier than yesterday, and his fingers played over its surface as he listened to his aunt’s questions. To give her credit, she didn’t complain that he hadn’t rung.

‘Heard from your parents yet?’ she asked.

‘No.’

There was an awkward silence.

‘I really wish you’d agree to come for Christmas dinner. Sam’s volunteered to pick you up and drive you back again afterwards.’ Sam was her partner, though they lived in separate homes. ‘Two writers? We’re far too idiosyncratic to live together,’ she’d once explained when Jaime asked. Martin had looked the word up in the dictionary (took a while to figure out the spelling).

‘I’m OK, Mum’s left plenty of food.’

‘That’s not the point.’

‘Some mates are dropping by later.’

‘Well, if you change your mind, just ring back. We’re only eight to dinner, and not as stuffy a lot as you probably imagine.’

After he’d rung off, Martin remembered that he’d forgotten to thank his aunt for her gift. He searched his memory. Just what had she given him anyway? He was beginning to wonder whether someone had fouled his last batch of ganja.

Martin glanced towards the window. He hadn’t bothered to close the curtains, but the sky was so dark with rain that it made little difference. Normally he’d burrow back under the duvet, but he wanted to have another look at those presents. Aunt Susan *always* gave him something.

He sniffed. There it was again—that noxious smell. He saw that the wooden box had popped open once more. Now two stamps lay at the bottom, side by side. Martin stared at them for a long time.

The wind splatted a bladder of rain against the glass. Sounds like an old drunk, Martin thought glumly. Even the weather’s pissing on me.

‘Aunt Susie,’ he said into the phone ten minutes later, ‘maybe I’d like to come after all.’

‘Wonderful. Sam could be there in twenty minutes. Is that all right?’

‘Can you make it half an hour? I want to have a quick shower.’

‘No problem. See you just now, the soup needs stirring.’

‘Wait, just one question. Did you, uh, give me a wooden box for Christmas? I seem to have lost the card.’

Martin heard her delighted chuckle.

‘Found a way to open it yet?’

‘Yeah.’

‘Clever lad. A Hungarian friend of mine makes them. I’ve also got one, in rosewood.

Each one’s unique, with a secret mechanism. No two open the same way.’

‘Thanks.’

‘Glad you like it. I thought a lad your age needed somewhere to stow his, how shall I put it, recreational commodities.’

While drinking a strong cup of coffee in the kitchen, Martin considered how little he really knew about his aunt’s life.

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The dinner was delicious, and to his surprise Martin found himself seated next to a freelance journalist who covered the indie rock scene. After the meal, Martin went into the kitchen to load the coffee tray while his aunt filled plates with biscuits and luscious-looking chocolates.

‘Aunt Susie,’ he said, ‘I was wondering.’

‘Is it so hard to leave off the *Aunt*?’ she asked. ‘You make me feel ancient.’

Martin released his exasperated sigh inside the fridge, while he searched for cream. Christ. Just like their vicar, always trying to prove he was *cool*. Even the word had gone out with the Beatles.

‘What would happen if my parents died?’ he asked.

His aunt set the coffee pot she was holding down on the worktop.



‘Haven’t they rung yet?’

He shook his head. He caught her frown, though she smoothed it out straightaway.

‘Don’t worry, I’m sure they’re fine,’ she said.

‘Still,’ he persisted, ‘what would happen to me?’

‘You’re old enough for some sort of independent accommodation, but I’d always be happy for you to make your home with me.’ She grinned. ‘At least till you’ve finished school.’

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Around noon on Boxing Day his mum finally rang.

‘Everything OK, Marty?’

‘Fine, Mum.’

‘Like your gifts?’

‘Great.’

‘Susan said you went round for Christmas dinner.’

‘You rang her?’

‘No, she phoned us. Here’s your dad now, he wants to have a word.’

*Have a word.* Yeah right, more like a couple of hundred. They must issue the same phrasebook to everyone along with their first payslip. ‘Martin, I’d like to have a word afterwards,’ Pike had said with his usual sneer, that time he caught Martin eyeballing Zoe’s tits and stretching his denim while the fat sod droned on and on about the French bloody Revolution.

‘Hi, Dad. Good skiing?’

‘Terrific.’ His dad cleared his throat. ‘Martin, I hope you’re not going to disappoint us again.’

‘I don’t know what you mean.’

‘Your mother and I don’t want you getting into any trouble while we’re gone.’

‘I gave you my word—’

‘Now don’t take this the wrong way,’ his dad cut in, ‘but Sylvia thought it advisable to tell us a bit more about your activities lately.’

A cow. Thirteen, and already a sodding cow. Who grassed on her own brother. He shuddered to think what she’d be like in a few years’ time. Somebody ought to put her out to pasture.

Martin looked down at the wooden box, which he’d taken to carrying round the house with him. He no longer found the smell unpleasant. He could hear his dad gibbering away from the handset, which he replaced in its cradle. The sudden quiet reminded him of the sweet expectant hush at a gig before he detonated his first chord.

Martin formulated his words carefully. Then he shut the lid and carried his aunt’s gift to the fireplace, where it made a very satisfying blaze.