

A. Colin Wright

## Bethlehem

Tom he'll wake up James.

Oh shit now she's going to fuss. Stretch your arm out from under the covers, turn the clock towards you. The phosphorescent hands have lost most of their glow and it takes a few minutes to make out the time in the darkness. Five-thirty.

What's he *doing*?

Stealthy shufflings from the hall. Peter must have snapped off his alarm instantly, but you heard it of course. They were up to something last night remember: Daddy, are you a heavy sleeper? James, not old enough to be casual about it, repeated his brother's question twice, laughing; then Peter asked about Grandma too.

Oh dear! It's too early, they know that. They'll be up late tonight too. It really is too bad of him!

Elizabeth now has raised her head from the pillow and turned towards you: what are you going to do about it? Edge one leg out of the bed and grope with your foot for your slippers.

Merry Christmas anyway.

Grunt. Merry Christmas.

Both feet out, and now the covers.

The night-light in James' room reveals a huddled form in the bed, still asleep, despite an alert silence. Bathroom, guest-room at the head of the stairs are reassuringly normal.

Peter's door, with spindly letters scotch-taped onto it PRIVATE KEEP OUT, is closed as if a secret is hidden behind it. His bed is empty.

I don't know where he is—as you get back into bed, doubting if you'll be allowed to enjoy the warmth of the covers on top of you for long.

In James' room, that's where! Did you look under the bed? Tom, if he wakes up James he'll be impossible in the evening. Why can't they just wait?

A floorboard creaks.

Peter, what's up?

Subdued silence. Then a grudging Nothing daddy.

The toilet flushes. Oh no...

A snort of disapproval from beside you, and the more distant click of the guest-room door. Is anything the matter?

Now mother's awake!

Daddy I've got a nose-bleed...

Two minutes later long complicated sentences explain a plan to take sleeping-bags downstairs and sleep there to celebrate Christmas.

Impatience stirs beside you; any moment and: *Get* back to your room Peter go to *sleep* and don't you dare wake anyone *particularly* James before seven.

Honest, dad, we weren't going to open any presents, it was going to be a surprise, just for fun, then this nose-bleed spoilt it...

Decide Tom, before Elizabeth's logic sends Peter back to his room.

I don't s'pose...

Mummy says you mustn't wake up James...

Then d'you think just I...

Then James will be disappointed. (And Elizabeth will never agree, Christmas or not.)

So *can* we?

What you knew you'd say all along: Go on then.

And can I wake up James?

I suppose so.

Enthusiastic thanks as he turns to wake his brother.

Now it comes. Tom that's not fair! James'll be so cranky tomorrow. I'll be busy, mother'll be in a bad mood, they won't sleep...

It *is* Christmas.

But you get up again to supervise, insist on sleep and no opening of presents, no getting up before seven. You consider putting a flame to the wood already laid in the huge stone hearth, but you decide they'll be warm enough until morning. Wood is short this year.

Stairs again creak underneath as you go back up.

A face peering round the guest-room door: What's the matter?

Nothing mother, just a scheme the boys had...

You prepare to placate Elizabeth, but she's already turned over in disgust and is almost asleep again. Other noises now as mother too has had to attend to calls of nature. Try Tom not to listen apprehensively for sounds from below.

You asleep James? It's so warm in my sleeping-bag like, you know, animal skins wrapped around me. Dark shapes in the living-room: awesome, a different world.

We mustn't talk, daddy said.

It's Christmas, though. Special.

Bundles under the tree: should we put its lights on, so we can see it, shining in the darkness? They'd not understand, but daddy didn't say not to. Would've though, if he'd thought of it. Still, this way I can imagine we're somewhere else, like that first Christmas. Yes this way it's more... enticing, that sounds nice. Funnier. Daddy says not to say funnier but more fun. Who cares?

A light—how come?—from the star on top of the tree. Like things that sometimes move in my bedroom, making weird noises, changing their shapes. There are people who have powers. Just your imagination, mummy would say, go to sleep...

The star's shining.

Peter, I'm scared...

It's all right James. Mustn't show that I'm frightened too.

But there's a light. The star. I thought we'd a Santa there anyway.

It's getting brighter.

Peter it's *moving*!

Off the tree now, towards the stone archway of the door.

Peter I'm *scared*!

No point being scared James, of things you don't understand...

Sitting up and watching curiously as it moves out into the dining-room with its long wooden table and benches on either side.

Come on!

Where?

We have to follow it, stupid! Look James, I don't understand anything about this either, right. I just think we should.

It's not too cold as we crawl out onto the bare wooden boards.

Peter wait for me!

Hurry up then.

Wait up!

Through the kitchen with its large earthenware pots and hanging wine-skins, sliding back the heavy bolts and out into the yard where the star's now taken its place in the sky.

It's really a supernova. That's a star that suddenly explodes and shines very brightly...

But why does it explode?

... or perhaps it's Jupiter.

The snow underfoot isn't cold at all. There's the Big Dipper overhead, and Orion and Taurus.

At the bottom of the yard where the star's shining there's a whole crowd of people. Undesirables Grandma would call them, far too rough to live on... what is it?... Chipwood Park Crescent. And animals, all kinds, and old Tobias oddly quiet, not even growling at the sheep and the cows, although normally a squirrel's enough to make him take a fit.

A light inside the shed.

It's the baby Jesus isn't it Peter?

No... (I know more than you, James.) It's just the people who came to stay last night, and the girl who was... pregnant?... has had her baby. Oh but perhaps... (Don't spoil it for him) I don't know. We'll see.

It's difficult to explain.

Disbelief: Now tell me again about your dream.

We started following the star you see...

And it led you... ?

It moved across the sky through Orion.

To the north-west then?

But you must have seen it too...

Obviously they haven't. They don't believe us, shake their heads, exchanging glances. And yet if he'd at least looked... Thinks perhaps we made it all up. Or is there anxiety in his eyes as well?

What time was it when you first saw it?

We tell him.

Decision. Go then to Bethlehem. And when you've found him, come back and tell me about it so I may come and worship him too.

Oh little town of Bethlehem, how still we see thee lie. Above thy deep and dreamless sleep the silent stars...

You pronounce the words clearly, looking down so that James can try to follow. Six years ago you used to sing it to him to send him to sleep, often to all three of its tunes. Peter sings loudly on the other side of you, holding his hymn-book high in front. Elizabeth and her mother, in fur coats, sing with respectable moderation.

Yet in thy dark streets shineth the everlasting light; the hopes and fears of all the years are met...

Fears?

Grandma this morning looked on with benevolent satisfaction as the ritual stripping of wrappings began. All *right!* from Peter as he opened the first parcel. James wanted to open all his presents at once, tearing paper furiously, while Peter examined more carefully, taking his time. Beginning to show a measure of adult restraint about his enthusiasms.

Oh-h-h! Do we *have* to go to church? (James.)

That's what Christmas is all about (Grandma): we have to go and worship the baby Jesus don't we?

Can I take something with me?

*May I.*

As long as it doesn't make a noise.

But the cows were making a noise last night and the sheep and the angels, they made a noise. What had Peter meant by that?

While mortals sleep, the angels keep their watch of wondering love...

Were you Peter's age when you once crept into your parent's room at night trying not to wake them? It was to be a surprise: you'd written Christ is Born on your blackboard and wanted to take it in so they'd see it in the morning. So black and cold when you edged out of bed, took it with its easel and moved with creaking slowness down the hall and into their room. One step at a time through the darkness, mysterious like another world, taking an age to get to the bottom of the bed.

Suddenly a gasp, your mother was awake. Stand still, hold your breath.

An urgent whisper: Jim! Jim wake up, there's someone in the room!

It's all right, it's only me...

Embarrassment, disappointment, shame at failure. It wasn't the same after stumbling explanations.

In the morning your father, pulling on socks to go downstairs and make up the fire, barely commented. Your mother, later, hugged you: thankyou for your little announcement.

And praises sing to God the king...

She'd been frightened at first.

Don't be afraid that you're pregnant. Being alive and bearing life is God's gift. Your child will be great and holy.

But I don't know who it was...

It's God's will just the same, for God in his omnipotence wills everything to be.

I thank the Lord for all he has done for me, his poor servant. How strong he is, wiser than the coteries of men, looking after those who hunger for understanding and turning away whose minds are blocked with inherited prejudices.

Evening now. A commercial on the radio says all that's necessary: Don't be a scrooge this Christmas; do your bit for the economy and buy. A man was arrested for denouncing the Santa in a large department store and causing a disturbance. The children appeared to have enjoyed the ensuing fight...

You've played with the kids most of the day, put toys together, made repairs. Grandma squints, trying to thread a needle only somehow the

thread won't go through the eye. She and Elizabeth have worked to make sure everything's as it should be, and now sit in tired gratification. Only once: What can Tom have been thinking of to let them get up and come down at five o'clock? (Five-thirty, Grandma, you always get it wrong!) Then she'd left in the middle of a long joke Peter wanted everyone to hear, because the turkey had to be seen to.

Why are you so depressed? In your own childhood, with happy unawareness of what rents and mortgages really meant, your one joy was to play Monopoly with everyone. Remember how they always had to be cajoled? It takes so long. Well for an hour perhaps, all right two, you have to have a time limit. We'll stop for the King's speech (Queen's now). Or, worst of all: all right but we'll shuffle the property cards and deal them out, that's quicker. But not playing properly, less fun. In real life they never deal the property cards...

And now: What do you want to do that for, dear?

Grandma, I asked mummy not you!

Don't be rude Peter. Grandma's right anyway, why do you want to go outside now?

I want to see if I can find Jupiter. I'm reading about it in the book daddy gave me, he said I could see it tonight.

What I meant was it's visible tonight, not necessarily that you could go out and look for it. I doubt...

But I want to show it to James!

Well I don't think they should go out Tom, Elizabeth. They'll both freeze to death. There's always another night, the stars are always there.

Jupiter's not a star, it's a planet and it's not always there! And sometimes it's cloudy.

(And sometimes a star explodes. And me and James—oh James and I—weren't cold in the yard this morning.)

No Peter not tonight.

But it's Christmas. And if you can't look at Jupiter on Christmas Day if you want, what's the point of being alive at all?

Such a shame for the children...

Spoiling their fun like that, I just don't understand it.

This isn't the true meaning of Christmas! It's only a way to make a profit. Santa doesn't exist, children, it's all lies...

We can't have that kind of thing going on here, someone fetch the police!

Oh I know none of you will listen, I'm just a voice crying out in the wilderness...

You're in the Bay mate, that's where you are.

It used to be Simpsons-Sears.

He's crazy. Just look at him. Rags, not even dressed properly.

Commercialism, hypocrisy all around you...

Spoiling Christmas for us all, it shouldn't be allowed...

It's been a big day. Goodnight James, Peter. Lights out.

James, you asleep?

No, Peter.

Should we go and say goodnight to... ?

Yeh!

Mummy and daddy won't like it. But you can't always do what other people tell you to. They ought to know we have other business sometimes.

Creep slowly downstairs, hold our breaths each time a board creaks. I can hear their voices in the living-room.

You'd think they'd at least get married for the child's sake. But no, the old, tried ways aren't good enough for them...

We mustn't giggle or they'll hear us. Exciting, awesome. They never understand things like that.

I can't think why you allowed them to stay in the shed. What will the neighbours think?

Sh! Out into the yard, where the star's still in its place over the shed they're talking about.

Adults are so stupid!

You shouldn't say that, Peter.

Perhaps we'll be like that someday too.

I wish *I* was grown-up.

The star shines more brightly as we approach.

Not everyone thinks it's a supernova.

Pulling the curtains you're puzzled by what seems to be a star out of place. Could it be the reflection from the kitchen light on the shed window? Or perhaps it's only Jupiter low in the sky. No reason to go out and investigate. Oh morning stars together proclaim the holy birth...

...about to give birth. Not even married. And he's no more than a common carpenter.

They say he's not the father, mother. Apparently it was some god or other.

Well dear, that's the kind of nonsense the Romans might believe in with all their gods, not us. And did you see the broken down old jeep they came in? Oh I know they have to come here to be taxed, but there's certainly no room for them here. Why doesn't Caesar Augustus do

something about it? What do we pay our taxes for anyway? And how you allowed them to stay there...

I felt sorry for them.

Well they shouldn't be staying in this household. You have to be so careful nowadays. Do you know what one of the servant girls told me? One of those ruffians was here again early this morning, you know that agitator they've just arrested?: one of his crowd. Wants to change everything like they all do. Only this one must have been scared, pretended not to know him.

You almost open the curtains again.

What are you doing, Tom?

Nothing...

There probably wouldn't be much to see really. If you looked, really looked, out of the window perhaps you could manage to see Jupiter. But the lights in the living-room, the reflections from the tinsel-covered Christmas tree with a Santa on top, the plush carpet still littered with gift-wrappings, the comfortable furniture and blazing fireplace, the merriment of Christmas: all this makes it difficult to see out of the window anyway.

For goodness sake come and sit down instead of dancing about.

The flaming torches in the palace, the sumptuous gold and silver dishes covered with victuals, the rushes strewn profusely over the floor, the dazzling young breasts of the serving-girls who are yours to command: all this makes it difficult to see beyond your own power and glory.

My lord?

All the male children, under—oh, let's say two years old. Order your men to seize them and kill them. Be sure you don't miss a single one, I don't trust what the strangers said, perhaps there's a threat somewhere to our life-style.

James and Peter lie dying. John's head lies in the platter while a potentate's eyes cannot leave it despite the dancing girl he desires. Birth in Bethlehem, what sufferings will you cause us? A lot of good-for-nothings challenging the accepted order. Show no mercy on them. If they can't show respect for the authorities, cause trouble, rock the boat, they've got what's coming to them.

That's another Christmas come and gone. I've always loved Christmas. The old, eternal tradition. It's too bad some people don't celebrate it in the way they used to.

I know, mother, And it's getting so expensive any more...

Are the children asleep?

I think so, they were tired out.



You wonder whether, outside, the stars really do still speak of the wonder of the universe. One brighter than all the others, supernova, Jupiter or whatever, perhaps still shines for anyone looking that way. Might others even, in different galaxies, perceive it too? It's unlikely, though, that there are others in the universe besides ourselves.

A creak on the staircase.

Peter, what's the matter?

Nothing, daddy—as they creep back up.

Not another nose-bleed, I hope?

Oh dear, when *are* those children going to grow up?

You hear a giggle: They'll never believe us.

Evidently they've reached the head of the stairs.

Let's not tell them then!

How silently, how silently the wondrous gift is given. You smile as James starts to laugh hilariously: with his child's ability to forget everything except what, to him, is important.