

Chapter 1

In the year 0, by a remarkable coincidence, our Lord Jesus Christ was born. If that's not sufficient to shuffle your coils, his mother proclaimed herself a virgin.

People still acknowledge the anniversary of these miracles, though in recent times this has gone from a modest tipping of the cap to the commercial jamboree: Christmas. This year, as ever, the festivities will be at my – previously *our* – house, and daughter Lucy and her family will come, and then stay. I undertake this stoically, as an obligation of the season: I'm better at charity than either faith or hope, because, weirdly, charity is recommended over these other virtues.

- 1) Faith! Believe in God, he's a safe pair of hands: *very good!*
- 2) Hope! Even if you are Job or Abraham, and God is chortling and tormenting you, don't despair: *excellent!*
- 3) Charity! There's a lot of needy people out there, despite (1) and (2) above: sow your shekels: *the best!*

They were great psychologists, those old Jews; they reaped plenty in this world and presumably the next. Give a little, get a lot. I have thus resolved to make regular offerings to the good souls on every street corner, box-rattling for Macmillan Nurses or Cancer Research.

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In my own home, though, I am blessedly safe from the canvassers, beggars and importuners spreading bubonically from house to house at Yuletide. It is nigh impossible to get my attention, while I am swathed in my domestic gloom. After Suzy's searing, peaceful death, I returned from her funeral, and retired from the world as thoroughly as an urban hermit may manage: cut off my email, cancelled my phone, closed my curtains, revised my door so as to admit neither post nor invasive knocking. And so I stayed for some time, ordering deliveries of oysters and claret, estranged from self and family. How long? I hardly recall. Time disappears in a black hole. Months, many months. And when I eventually crept out, seeking reconnection with Lucy, I had cause to regret it, and did. And didn't.

My doorbell is a single, muffled chime. When I am upstairs, I hardly hear it; and when I do, I don't answer unless I am expecting someone, allow the bell to sound a couple of times, and then the ringer moves on. Nobody home.

But whoever it was kept pressing the bell, which rang and rang again, quietly but irritatingly. And when that ceased, there was a knocking, loud then louder, sustained, insistent. I stomped down the stairs in a strop and opened the door to two middle-aged men in shiny navy suits, with short hair and the erect bearing of zealots. Not sleek and smug enough to be Mormons, nor sufficiently desperate for Christian Scientists or Jehovah's Witnesses. Soiled and baggy of eye, certainly, yet they carried themselves with an authority that didn't seem to emanate from the divine.

The one slightly to the front, as if to assert seniority, had what is often (mis)described as a bullet head, more like a head for butting, was stocky and red-faced, veinous traces round his cheeks and the bridge of his nose. The other was younger and less shop-soiled, with hooded eyes and a sharp pointy nose, forbidding as a falcon with a migraine.

'Do forgive me if this is unclear,' I said firmly. 'The reason I don't answer my door is because I don't wish to be bothered ...'

‘Rather an unusual door, sir?’ Their front man interrupted me, inappropriately and rudely, looking at the door itself.

‘Surely you haven’t come to do a survey of the local doors?’ I was irritated and bemused, yet flattered that he should admire my modest contribution to the improvement of my neighbourhood.

‘I’ve never seen one without a knocker or a letterbox.’

‘Indeed. Neither have I.’

‘And the finish of the black is remarkably deep and resonant. It seems more like a fortification than an entrance.’ The accent was Edinburgh, educated and precise. He was still scanning the finish of my door, as if seeking imperfections, and returned to meet my eyes, apparently with the same goal in mind.

‘Now, see here . . .’ I began, but he held up his hand in a gesture that was not designed to placate, neither did it have a Bible in it. It had some sort of ID card, which he thrust forward.

‘I am sorry to interrupt you, sir, but we would value a few words.’

‘Go away!’ I said, without looking at the proffered identification. ‘I don’t care who you are, I’m not joining, or buying.’

If anything, they moved slightly forward, and I sensed a foot placing itself in the path of my door.

‘Just a few questions, sir. You are Dr James Darke, are you not?’

‘I am. I don’t know where you got my name, but I am not interested in anything you have to offer. Good day.’

As I had anticipated, the foot was there, and the door would not close.

‘If you don’t go away immediately,’ I said, ‘I will call the police!’

The fatigued plasticised identity card was again thrust into my face. DS something or other Scottish? I didn’t catch the first name. Angus no doubt. The second card was produced. DC something ending in -ic. First name? Slobodan, that would be likely. A Yugoslav – what are they now? I can’t keep track of Balkan

comings and goings. I have no idea what these initials signify. DC? Dangerous Croat?

These agreeable linguistic speculations were soon cut short.

‘We *are* the police, sir. May we come in?’

‘I’m sorry, but you cannot. Please go away. I don’t want to contribute to your Benevolent Fund, or to help with a neighbourhood watch. Now if you would excuse me . . .’

McBullethead looked into a small black notebook that he had taken from his jacket pocket.

‘You are the husband, sir, of the late Suzanne Moulton, and the father—’

‘Yes, yes, I am. What’s it got to do with you?’

He was relentlessly, threateningly, polite.

‘If you’d be kind enough to invite us in, sir, and give us a few minutes, I can explain.’

‘Explain what?’

A tiny flicker of his nostrils indicated that his patience was wearing thin.

‘Just a few inquiries, it shouldn’t take long. But if you prefer, sir, we could make an appointment to talk at the local station, which is on Buckingham Palace Road.’

I had no idea what to make of this. Could it have something to do with Bronya, who came from one of Suzy’s cleaning agencies? Perhaps she was an illegal alien? Most Bulgarians are. Or might it be to do with the reams of paperwork that accompany a death? I hadn’t done any of that, left it to Lucy, who is notoriously slack about such matters. Probate, certificates, tax returns, whatever. Hardly police matters, surely, shouldn’t they be out water-boarding terrorists?

‘Tell me when I might visit your humble abode.’

‘Well, sir, it’s Christmas in a few days, things will be slowing down over the holidays. But you should hear from us within a few weeks.’

‘That will be fine,’ I said, beginning to close the door, now free of foot.

‘Thank you, sir, and do have a happy Christmas.’

I have no intention of going to their station, but the mere closing of the door, though it kept them out of sight, hardly banished them from my mind, obsessed as it has been and ever shall be with guilt, world without end, amen.

It gave me an uneasy couple of days, but by the time Lucy and the family arrived I’d almost managed to forget it, or, more properly, almost managed to convince myself to forget it. It lingered in my mind like an incipient migraine. But once the loved ones piled into the house, it was almost impossible to think of anything other than logistics: who slept where and when, what to eat, what to drink. Above all, what to do.

Lucy and Sam have apparently encouraged one or two of their friends to drop by during this period, which will wassail my soul. I do not object to their mouldy, fungal metropolitan acquaintances, I can make myself scarce. But I am already in a state about the wooing and hooing visitor whose presence will define the entire holiday period, which will be dominated by poor dear Suzy, here in spirit as the Ghost of Christmas Past.

Dickens: twice guilty. First, for this particular iniquitous spirit. And second, for all the rest of the Christmas spirits, this overblown charade that passes for religious celebration. Christmas was a muted affair until his Christmas books were published to universal acclaim. Joy be’d unconfine’d, hearts and purses opened, geese and trees were fattened and slaughtered in their millions, halls and persons were bedecked, all sang and celebrated and prayed and rejoiced. Overdid it, it’s what Victorians did best. Gorged, disgorged, laughed, wept. Pretended to be happy, and then returned to their miserable, crimped lives.

I don’t need the pretence, I’m used to misery and crimp, they suit me just fine.

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Since my grandson Rudy's birth, seven or eight years previous, we have celebrated Christmas in London. Lucy is no cook, and her Sam no host, while Suzy revelled in it all, never missed a trimming. Two years ago, she'd left it to the last minute and begged me to accompany her shopping in the West End, promising a good lunch at the end of the ordeal. In the kiddie section of John Lewis there was a foul-smelling clamorous scrum of mums and children, you had to barge your way to the counter, like entering the Tube at rush hour. Not that I do.

I'd made the mistake of dressing in an elegant graphite-grey finely ribbed corduroy suit, with a white cotton shirt and muted Armani tie in light violet. Within the first few minutes a weeping chocolatey toddler had wiped its hand on my trousers. I looked down and gave it a petite whack, quickly turning the other way innocently to peruse the ceiling while humming the 'Ode to Joy'. Its poor, harassed mother was pulling the child, who might have been three, or five, whatever, by the arm, while it – who might have been a boy or a girl, who cares? – howled and remonstrated inconsolably.

I left before I started to cry too, and promised to meet Suzy at the Wolseley. By the time she arrived, exhausted and be-packaged, I'd made a manly start on a bottle of Meursault. She looked shaken by the experience, good thing I'd saved a bit for her.

I have ordered this year's provisions on time and online, being both unwilling and unable to withstand the noisome crush of my fellows in food halls and stalls. I first suggested a goose, but got a 'Yuck', so have researched turkeys. If we have to consume one of the noxious feathered beasts, please God it shall not taste like blotting paper soaked with gravy. Sam buys his frozen, from Tesco's, and pronounces them top class. Lucy will eat a bit. I have no idea what Rudy eats other than pizza and ice-cream.

I soon located an organic, free-range small turkey producer. It

is semantically unclear if the turkeys are small or the producer is, but I suspect they mean the farm itself, though 'farm' is the wrong word – their turkey-raising facility sounds more like a boutique hotel. Prospective buyers are put on a waiting list for a bird, and if you are offered one, you get full disclosure. After a few days I was offered Chanticleer IV, who will weigh in at around 11 pounds. His parents were Miranda and Chanticleer III. I was sent pictures of them all, with their dates of birth, and a price tag that makes my chequebook's eyes water.

I agree to buy Chanticleer IV, though I inform his owners that I am already so attached to him that I am considering putting him up in the guest bedroom, and inviting him to Christmas dinner. They reply suggesting that I eat him. They will do the necessary disembowelling, and when he arrives he will be fit for the oven, and I for the poorhouse.

What to drink? I once allowed Sam to bring the wine, as I had nothing bad enough to offer. He proudly produced two bottles of New Zealand Sauvignon Blanc stinking of grapefruit, so acidic that I could feel the enamel being stripped from my teeth as I drank. At the table he lifted his glass to his nose, sniffed deeply, as if at a toddler's nappy, gargled a bit as he took a first sip, a look of intense concentration upon his features.

'Smooth,' he intoned sagaciously. 'Very smooth.' It is his sole term of approbation when drinking wine: Pinot Gris is smooth, so is claret, so is port. Port? He knows just enough to propose a toast, but not when or how. Last year he sprang up, glass in hand, before I could stifle him. 'Good health,' he said, raising his glass. Suzy was having her chemotherapy and was neither allowed nor able to drink. She didn't eat much either, though she'd cooked all of it.

I wish they'd come for Easter instead. I prefer pop-up Jesus to his new-born incarnation, with all that mewling and puking in the cradle, itinerant sheep herders, and beardy wise men. We could celebrate it with my excellent *lapin au vin*.

The only respite from the unremitting, claustrophobic nightmare lies in Rudy's horse-riding lessons, my Christmas gift to him since he was four. We take a proper black taxi to the stables in Bathurst Mews, near Hyde Park, a cobbled but excavated and newly basemented terrace of some sixty bijoux residences, purpose-built for horses, now inhabited by small businessmen (large ones wouldn't fit), lawyers, bankers and trust-fund beneficiaries. The stables take up three of these petite homes, which I make out to be a value of £250,000 per stabled horse. As befits residents of such swanky premises, the horses are well behaved, impeccably docile, and suffer the pawings and pokings of small children philosophically. The only miscreant is a grey who is wont to nibble the blooms growing in pots outside a number of the houses, to the consternation of the owners. A sign hangs over the stable office, in full admonitory view:

DO NOT LET ENIGMA EAT THE FLOWERS!

I have adopted this sentiment as my philosophy of life. Enigma is a perfect name for a horse, a being at once so dignified and so subservient. Rudy loves him, and the clapped-out nag has a presence that moves me. No fawning, as a dog might.

From the first ride it has been Enigma or nothing, not because Rudy is aware of the vast philosophical implications of the name but because he thinks it 'so cool' that a horse eats flowers. I point out that since they eat hay, carrots and oats there is no reason not to munch the odd daff. He sees the point of this, but still thinks it's 'silly', which is his favourite critical term. Enigma is silly. So am I.

For the week(s) before Christmases past, Lucy and Suzy would be on the phone daily, making 'arrangements' so extensive that they might have been travel agents constructing itineraries for Ulaanbaatar. They would spend hour after hour yakking away, covering the entire range of viands and victuals, as if scripted by that rancid

sweetmeat Dickens himself. This year, in dear Suzy's absence, it has fallen on poor me to field these enquiries.

An unexpected and thoroughly disagreeable conundrum occurred only last week. When you're only four at table, you're hardly in need of *placement*, are you? Of course, I almost forgot. *Five*, not five actually sitting at the table, still five. Baby Amelie is coming for her first Christmas. Start them young like Baby Jesus. She's only a couple of months old. Sam could tell you how many days too. Amelie *Parkin*. The name hardly trips off the tongue, unless you add *-lot* at the end.

I was admonished to keep away at the time of the birth, but grudgingly allowed to visit three weeks later, when I took refuge in the junior suite in my Oxford hotel, though Lucy said there was 'plenty of room' for me in their Abingdon semi. She was relieved when I declined, still sore and exhausted by the birth of the new arrival, and by the demands of breastfeeding. I had no desire to watch my daughter lug her dugs out to pacify the greedy newcomer. Lucy will not remove herself to a private space for these intimacies. *It's natural!* So are murder and incest.

I spent two days failing to find any attractions in the new arrival, made no attempt to hold, to cuddle, to make goo-goo: 'to bond', as Sam calls it. Peered into the crib, bent over stiffly, looked the sprog in the eye, ready to lift up quickly to avoid imminent projectiles. Mostly it slept, guzzled, and slept again. Now and again it made a noise, or a smell, often together. Lucy had some doubts whether Amelie was ready for her first trip to Gampy's, worried about pollution in 'the Smoke', as I cannot get her to stop calling it, as if she were from bloody Sheffield.

I've made a space for the baby's crib in Suzy's old bedroom, where her parents will be sleeping – not that they get much of that – and Rudy can hunker down on the divan in my study. Everything is in order. I have a list. I cross things off. Simple, right?

Wrong. I should have foreseen it. I had given Suzy's clothes, shoes

and paraphernalia to charity shops, changed two of the pictures on the walls, put a muted Kashmiri carpet on the floorboards. But Suzy lurked, the room was inhabited by her, the emanations of her long presence penetrated the air, which seemed to breathe her breath, and to shorten mine. I sat with her for the long months of her final illness, listened to her cries for release, mopped and cleaned, and vomited with her. And then both of us had had enough, and one night I gave her a soothing drink to carry her away.

Since the debacle when the pregnant Lucy came to look despondently through her mother's closets, she hadn't entered the room, and was anxious at the prospect. I offered to vacate my own bedroom, but she wouldn't hear of it.

'I have to come to terms with this some day, Dad,' she said, a little less than firmly, 'your room is yours. Mum is gone, so I should be happy to be in her room, and feel a little bit closer to her. But my mind fills with images, and I get frightened.' I listened sympathetically, but couldn't suppress the thought *fills with images!* She didn't know the half of it, was hardly there during that slow descent into helplessness and death, for Suzy kept her at a distance to the very end. *Lest her mind fill with images.* As mine did, and will continue to do, ineradicably.

Her mother's *deathbed*. The transformation of the room itself was complete, but the prospect of sleeping in it was, Lucy confided tearfully, as daunting as spending a night in a cemetery. Without consulting her, I toddled off to the local furniture shop and purchased a new double bed with a brass bedstead, made for a few rupees by impoverished Indians, who will no doubt be grateful for my patronage. At least Suzy hadn't died in this one. Nobody had, as far as I know, though Indians die so quickly and copiously that they hardly know where to do it. One of them might have snuck into this very bed, to have a quick perish. Or a shag. They do a lot of both.

And then Rudy rang to announce that he wants an extra chair at the Christmas dinner table for Granny, with a plate and cutlery and glasses and *everything!*

‘Can we, Gampy, *please?*’ he pleaded, sensing some lack of enthusiasm on my part. ‘Then she’ll be with us!’

‘No, darling, we can’t do that. She is *not* with us any more, except in our hearts, she always will be there. But if we have an empty seat at table it will only make us even sadder.’

‘But Gampy, she wants to come too! She could sit next to me!’

‘I’m sorry, darling, but the answer is no.’ My voice – I could hear it – had sharpened. I was about to continue and to apologise, to explain further, when Lucy took the phone.

‘Honestly, Dad . . .’ she began.

‘Yes,’ I said, more sharply than before. ‘Yes. Honestly. Very.’

There was a silence, which I interpreted liberally as leave to hang up.

There remained the contentious issue of the Christmas tree. As ever, we must have one. I have grudgingly agreed to this exception to my general rule: nature must be kept in its place, and me in mine. I abhor potted plants, which should go back where they came from. And trees, I have observed, have been created to stay outside, that’s why they have roots.

Once a year I gave way and allowed one into the house at Yuletide. It was, at my insistence, *tasteful*. The predominant decorating colour was white, with sparkling tiny bulbs (I reluctantly allowed yellow or gold), shimmering metallic *objets* and mock snowflakes. Suzy spent hours during the week before Christmas, putting them up, then rearranging and reordering them to her satisfaction. Little Lucy loved helping with the task, and was biddable enough with regard to the predominant aesthetic.

Rudy is not. He has been exposed to too many heavily be-tinselled dying conifers, covered with alternating twinkling lights in green and red and yellow and orange, overburdened until

the branches droop with hideous hanging Father Christmases, reindeer, baby Jesuses, angels, wise men and magi, shiny bulbs and candy canes – all the effluvia that a modern Christmas generates, and to his mind requires. In his Abingdon home there will be a tree that he is allowed to decorate on his own, and his predominant desire is that no green shows through, as if the decorations were the tree itself.

He and I have discussed this. My view is simple: you in your way, and me in mine. That is eminently reasonable – it's my bloody house, isn't it? – but does not appeal to him. Why shouldn't Gampy have the benefits of his expertise? For the last few years Suzy acceded to Rudy's aesthetic interventions with good grace. I remained largely silent, merely scowling and muttering under my breath; I once described his efforts to him as 'rather vulgar', which pleased him – he thought it meant colourful – and now he is campaigning to be allowed, once again this year, to vulgarise the tree. He has numerous plastic Tesco bags full of ornaments, and enough strings of lights to illuminate the Blackwall Tunnel. He will bring them, he says cheerfully, and he and I can have fun together.

He is not a well-brought-up child. Though he is bright, engaged and inquisitive, and knows a startling amount about a variety of subjects that his iPad has taught him, he has been indulged by his relentlessly modern parents. He lacks the one quality necessary to a well-regulated childhood: the ability to take NO for an answer. He states his case, he argues, he sulks, he argues some more, he gets his way. Though he has moments, many moments, in which you might mistake him for a sentient being, informed, articulate and thoughtful, he regresses too easily, and it would not surprise me, at such times, if he started to suck his thumb. Lucy pacifies him, and claims it makes for an easier life. Not for me, it doesn't.

Aside from his constant use of the term 'silly', which I find especially irritating when applied to myself, his other recurrent

working category concerns fairness. 'It's not fair' means that he not only should get his way, but that it is in accord with the dictates of past experience, reasonableness and natural justice. And it is absolutely and comprehensively 'not fair' that our Christmas tree is not going to be decked with his usual flotsam and jetsam.

'Granny loved it. Granny wants it to be like this every year!'

'But darling,' I near as damnit snarled, 'Granny is gone now, and I like it the way I like it. You know, before you were born, Granny and I ...'

'I don't care. It's not fair!'

When I reluctantly came to consider the matter, it was sadly apparent that Rudy was right. It wasn't fair. I gave in. On Christmas Eve Lucy and Rudy could commandeer the tree, set up shop in the drawing room with their Tesco bags, and get to work.

I went upstairs to my study to smoke, to drink, and to consult my Penguin copy of *A Christmas Carol*. I do not regret the sale of my first edition of it, or any of my other Dickens rarities, transformed by Sotheby's into a trust fund for Rudy. I will be gone by the time he comes into the proceeds, thank God, for I would disapprove of almost any way in which he might spend the windfall. Travelling to Australia? Buying a sports car? Getting entangled with a grasping girl? Supporting dubious political causes?

What to spend it on? Bricks and mortar. A small, elegant flat in a good part of London. That and nothing else. Perhaps I ought to buy one such now, give it to an agent to rent out, and leave it to Rudy when he comes of age? Why should he make his own decisions when I can make them for him?

I half fill a whisky glass with Glenmorangie – no water, no ice – and open my book. I cannot bear to reread the whole sappy thing, I am in search only of the Ghost of Christmas Past. Foolish me. I'm sufficiently haunted by my own. By day and most poignantly by night, my dear Suzy occurs and recurs in incarnations

both young and old, in health and in sickness, till death did us part. My attachment to my wife, and hers to me, is unrelenting, a constant reminder that it is no attachment at all, save that provided by the persistence of memory. And of love.

Yes, as Sam observed to me only last week, I have re-entered the world, gained weight, and seem to be scratching myself less. He puts this down to the passage of time, and to ‘recovery’ from the trauma of (he does not say so, but *excessive*) grief. I must allow time to pass. Get out more.

Sam and I have never, quite, fit, or perhaps he would say ‘bonded’. When Lucy first brought him home, in her final year at university (Sheffield, alas), he was deeply uneasy, and had stuffed his stocky frame into an ill-fitting suit, with his unnecessary tie at half-mast. Suzy carried the ball – the metaphor appeals, her beau was a rugby player – during the uneasy getting-to-know-you rituals, and though I am usually adept, not exactly at putting people at their ease, but at the social niceties of meeting strangers – a necessary skill for a schoolmaster – I couldn’t find any common ground with this social worker in the making. Both of us tried, for a short time, and then left it to the ladies to get on with things.

When they left, blessedly and at long last, Suzy and I had a long drink and a short chat. I knew better than to express disappointment at Lucy’s choice – she had form in choosing the wrong sort of chap – and let Suzy do it for me.

‘Well,’ she said, ‘best leave them to it. She’ll outgrow him.’

‘I hope so. I couldn’t find any common ground with him at all.’

Suzy snorted. ‘Too much, not too little!’

‘I have no idea what you’re talking about.’

She offered that superior Dorset county laugh that she’d inherited from her parents.

‘It comes down to class. Most things do, and . . .’

‘I know, I know, not much in common there.’

‘Dear James, you are funny. Look at it closely – you’re both

Northern boys from modest backgrounds, only you've gone all posh, and he's so close to his roots that they stick out above ground.'

This was rather hurtful. I had made a sustained effort, once away at school and in Oxford, to knock my rough edges into shape, whereas Sam seemed only to have sharpened his.

'I have no idea what you're talking about . . .' I began.

'I know,' she said, 'shall we go out for lunch?'

Everyone has an opinion on what will be good for me. A recent suggestion from Dorothea Thornton, a long-time literary acquaintance of Suzy's, formerly a regularly reviewed novelist, now in the process of being justly forgotten, is that I join her monthly poetry group. Of course I declined. Such meetings are for ladies with not enough to do, who read in the most desultory manner the fashionable works of the day, and then fail to discuss them while drinking and gossiping. Suzy was frequently asked to join such gatherings – until now I never have been – but always sent her regrets, sometimes acerbically. After she gave up writing fiction – though the phrase suggests something chosen, it would be more accurate to say fiction gave up writing her – she read novels omnivorously, and rarely discussed them with anyone. Certainly not with me, I had enough such discussions with my students, I was heartily sick of them. The discussions, I mean. Or do I mean the students? Or the books we discussed?

All of the above. It is impossible to be a schoolmaster over a long period of years without being pulverised by the experience, and spending one's declining years, like a veteran home from the Somme. The prospect of doing some mandatory reading, to prepare for a seminar-like discussion over drinks with a huddle of strangers, is more than unattractive. I hate groups, and I have come to dislike poetry, which bores me.

This response, which I made firmly, did not deter Dorothea. She wrote again, reiterating the invitation, saying that both human

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company (what other sort is there?) and literature would do me 'the world of good'. The curious thing, the utterly humiliating and unexpected thing about this unwonted and impertinent intrusion, is that I am actually considering joining her and her biblio-fellows, if only for an exploratory session.

Each of the members hosts the group in turn, provides drinks and nibbles, and chooses a poem, which they distribute via email a couple of days before. The others are asked to read the poem in advance, but enjoined not to 'research them', for in their first sessions one of the members showed up with notes so comprehensive as to throttle conversation. He almost ended up throttled himself.

At least reading a short poem only takes a short time. I would find it intolerable to read a novel at someone else's suggestion. Anyway, I don't read them any more. They do go on and on. Yack yack bloody yack. But I can make my way through a poem, as long as it is short (the rule is that it has to fit on a single page: A4 is allowed, six-point type is forbidden). There may be some obverse pleasure in this; I'm tired of my usual detestations, exhausted not by hating things, which I find animating, but by the fact and strain of being. Of being, without. Of being without my Suzy, whose words still echo in the canals of my ears and the arteries of my heart, with whose presence I am filled, and by whose absence I am haunted. Especially now, especially at Christmas, the family gathered like a herd lacking its leader, aimless, disjunct, organically lost . . .

Might the old Christmas slobberer have anything useful to say about being haunted and eviscerated by love? To be visited, nightly, by a ghost?

It wore a tunic of the purest white, and round its waist was bound a lustrous belt, the sheen of which was beautiful. It held a branch of fresh green holly in its hand; and, in singular contradiction of that wintry

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emblem, had its dress trimmed with summer flowers. But the strangest thing about it was, that from the crown of its head there sprung a bright clear jet of light, by which all this was visible . . .

I suppressed a BAH, and squashed a HUMBUG. Such a visitation is not unusual, I have similar experiences most nights, visited by a spirit both spectral and spectacularly, but unreliably, corporeal. By my Suzy, calling and recalling. I never get used to it, dread each instance as fervently as I fear there will never be another.

For as its belt sparkled and glittered now in one part and now in another, and what was light one instant, at another time was dark, so the figure itself fluctuated in its distinctness: being now a thing with one arm, now with one leg, now with twenty legs, now a pair of legs without a head, now a head without a body: of which dissolving parts, no outline would be visible in the dense gloom wherein they melted away. And in the very wonder of this, it would be itself again; distinct and clear as ever.

Distinct. And clear as ever.