

Yet the Whos Sang Merrily

Last Christmas Eve, I was in the ER.

My husband was deployed, and I'd been fighting a nasty illness for weeks. Things took a turn for the worse on Christmas Eve, and so my dad drove me to the hospital around 11 o'clock that evening.

"This isn't how Christmas is supposed to be," I remember thinking. The whole holiday season had been full of sickness and sleepless nights, eternal work and emails, family grief and trauma. Each day seemed submerged in a cloud that I couldn't rise above. The happy moments—spent reading with my baby, baking Christmas treats, talking with old family and friends—all seemed bathed in a shadow of exhaustion and sadness.

That Christmas Eve, I felt completely empty of emotional and physical strength. But as I was tended to by the cheeriest of doctors and nurses, as well as by my kind father, I realized how deeply I'd bought into the modern lie of Christmastime: if you've been nice, not naughty, you'll have a perfect holiday season. We adults pretend not to believe in Santa Claus, but we often act as if the month of December is graced by some sort of beneficent fairy: one who will prevent plans from going askew, relationships from being dashed. Nothing bad can happen at Christmastime, we assure ourselves—subconsciously if not consciously. I'd been "[good for goodness sake](#)." So why had everything gone wrong?

The ease with which we buy into this mythical assurance has made me especially appreciative of Dr. Seuss's classic tale [How the Grinch Stole Christmas](#). The story's star is a nasty, conniving, and cartoonish Ebenezer Scrooge—one who is not content with merely avoiding Christmas cheer himself, but who instead fixates on ruining the entire day for everyone

around him. The Grinch is one of the most sinister and unlikeable villains in literature: a curmudgeonly hermit who wants to deprive the world of joy, festivity, and community. His story is a fascinating yet dark caricature of our Christmas tales: the saint of beneficent joy and giving becomes a minister of destruction and deprivation, slinking down chimneys to ransack the homes of sleeping families, emptying their living rooms and refrigerators one by one. Reading the book with my daughter this year, I appreciated anew Dr. Seuss's gift for rhyme and alliteration, the way he weaves so much color and detail into this short little book.

After the Grinch ransacks all the homes in Whoville, he drives his laden sleigh to the top of Mount Crumpit, where he intends to dump its contents. There, he waits for the sound of the traumatized, angry, distraught Whos, who are just waking up to their pillaged homes, barren of Christmas cheer.

But the Whos do not cry or bemoan their fate. They don't grab torches and pitchforks, and run after the villainous Grinch. Instead, they gather in the town square—as they do every year—and they sing. Dr. Seuss tells us:

Every Who down in Who-ville, the tall and the small,

Was singing! Without any presents at all!

He HADN'T stopped Christmas from coming!

IT CAME!

Somehow or other, it came just the same!

And the Grinch, with his Grinch-feet ice-cold in the snow,

Stood puzzling and puzzling: "How could it be so?

"It came without ribbons! It came without tags!

"It came without packages, boxes or bags!"

And he puzzled three hours, till his puzzler was sore.

Then the Grinch thought of something he hadn't before!

"Maybe Christmas," he thought, "doesn't come from a store.

"Maybe Christmas... perhaps... means a little bit more!"

We aren't told what goes through the Whos' minds when they wake up to ransacked houses on Christmas morning. Rather, the book shows us what Christmas *is* by depicting so clearly what it is *not*, hinting at the mystery behind the customs and traditions without ever fully revealing the mystery.

Despite (or perhaps because of) its omissions, *How the Grinch Stole Christmas* is one of the best Christmas fables for our time—not because we're predisposed to the Grinch's curmudgeonly and sinister loathing of the season, but because we are so unlike the Whos. Whereas we can distance ourselves from Ebenezer Scrooge, take the moral high ground over George Bailey in *It's A Wonderful Life*, and shake our heads at Charlie Brown's capering cast in *A Charlie Brown Christmas*, none of us can deny that we'd respond with anger and depression to a plundered, empty house on Christmas day. On the Grinch's trajectory toward redemption—from evil to good, shrunken heart to rebirthed soul—we often forget that it is the Whos' persistent joy, their determination to sing in the face of material disaster, that makes his redemption possible.

We expect a certain degree of joy and material comfort during the Christmas season. We've watched enough movies to know what Christmas "should" look like: perfect tree, beautiful presents, immaculate feast. Even when these things fail us, we want to be assured of cheer and good health, familial wholeness and communal peace. "It's [the] time of year when the world falls in love," croons Frank Sinatra. Death, war, pain, discomfort: their dissonance prompts us to protest during the holiday season. They don't belong.

But of course, when Joseph and Mary arrived in Bethlehem, they had no comfortable room for the night. They camped out in a barn. Mary gave birth without midwives or doctors, clean home or comforting bed. She placed her newborn baby in an animal's feeding trough; she had no cradle or bassinet. On that bleak night, who knows whether she felt confused by the adversity and pain of a moment so beautiful and sacred. But most of us probably would have felt cheated, aggrieved, and angered by the sparsity of the moment.

When we wake up to a Christmas morning devoid of the pleasures we expect—material or emotional, physical or spiritual—we are inclined to grab our pitchforks and protest the celestial unkindness that would force us to experience this adversity. We don't want to deal with a broken Christmas. We don't really believe that Christmas is meant to come without ribbons or tags, "packages, boxes, or bags."

And yet, the Whos sang merrily, despite their barren homes and hungry stomachs. I know Dr. Seuss writes colorful cartoons, as devoid of realism as your average children's book. But his stories—like most beloved fairy tales and novels—are meant to inspire, to instruct, to encourage. When Charles Dickens presents us with the meager blessings of Bob Cratchit's family in *A Christmas Carol*, we're not meant to passively applaud. We're meant to aspire. Can we sing in the face of adversity? Can we be merry despite our brokenness?

This sort of joy is unlikely—nay, I'd suggest, impossible—without divine intervention. The Grinch who puzzles for three hours in the snow is unlikely to experience exponential heart growth and transformation without some sort of providential awakening. Christmas is "more" than presents and levity because it is really about redemption: about sparse beginnings that turn into happily ever afters, death that results in resurrection, poverty that ends in fullness of joy. Christmas offers us the sort of redemption that can make you sing in an empty house, the sort of joy that can transform a

barren heart.

Last Christmas, I returned home from the ER in the wee hours of the morning, just in time for some sleep before the family festivities began. I cuddled with my daughter when she awoke, savoring her sweet and comforting touch. I realized that, despite the difficulty of the past few weeks, this was exactly how Christmas was supposed to be. My feeble, hurting heart could only receive renewal in something other than material comfort and circumstantial happiness. Stripping everything away revealed how much I needed something “a little bit more,” to quote the Grinch—something that only a Savior (one who experienced brokenness and pain himself) could offer.

I may not have all the resilient joy of the Whos. But this year—and every year after—I’ll aspire to their hope in the face of adversity. Because Christmas will come, whether our circumstances are flawless or shattered. And if we’re willing to sing with the Whos, through thick and thin, perhaps we too can help redeem the broken and heart-pinched people of the world.

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