



'twas

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'twas the month before Christmas

and all through Belfast
people stand, feet in puddles
while Metro buses speed past
packed to the gills with those lucky enough to
catch one on their way home from... where?
Not Primark
There's no Primark
A nation is on their last pair of threadbare,
greying knickers
holes in socks
last year's pair of Harry Potter pyjamas

Primark's got a whole lot of gifts for Christmas
Got a lot for the family...

It opens in two days...

Bank Buildings still dark, dominating our skyline with sadness and wherever Primark's going to be, it'll be smaller. Cardigans atop socks atop bedroom slippers, neon fishnet hair bobbles in wire mesh rummage baskets buy-two-get-a-scented-candle-free and the chaos will be multiplied because we've been cheated out of a solid three months of shopping. The smug October buyers tearing hair out because they've been deprived of the prize of shopping in relative calm, they could have gone to Abbeycentre but, dear knows, nobody goes to Abbeycentre. Our town has lost its centre and we're not sure if it'll ever regain proper balance or vertigo pinwheel, seesawing between CastleCourt and the Continental Market.

Castlecourt came along at just the right time. Everything was dying. Mickey Marley's roundabout stopped spinning, the wee train at City Hall stopped toot-tooting and LeisureWorld... wasn't what it was. Valiantly kept going but gone were the go-karts that you could sit in, hours whiled away with Tomy computers, the orange space bar and block buttons, the touch and feel and play of V-tech and Teddy Ruxpin hugs, Barbies had their own alcove, the beauty too much for the normal shop floor and give Hungry Hippos a good luck rattle rub as you walk past on your way to see Santa. Nothing bad ever happened in LeisureWorld.

Primark and Castlecourt let the real world seep in, just a little. Queue for days, it seems. 20th in the queue, 10th, 5th, 2nd, then a shrill beep, faces falling, discard your chosen items and evacuations in the cold December twilight. Primark never came to harm, not then. No-one wanted to blow it up, they bought their Christmas jumpers there from the Shankill to the Falls. *"Don't cause it any trouble, Bridie's Jimmy works there and if anything happens, I'll have you by your balls."* But you can play around with the queues on Saturday, evacuate, queue again, evacuate, queue again and sure, isn't it part of the fun? A tradition, we love our traditions, we've only just begun to trust those American import cranberries. A cold lump at the side of our steaming plate of hot and they're almost real to us now, almost.

'twas two weeks before Christmas
and all through Belfast
people are trying to relive their past.

Traditions. I've been losing them lately. Healthy as a wraith, time moves on and I can't keep up. Christmas jobs to keep your chin up when the sunlight leaves, they pile on the extra hours and I haven't had a real Christmas in around ten years. Shopping is snatched, throat on fire as you swallow and lean against the railings for support working yourself sick until your hands are too weak to write a card and you miss the last post. Fibromyalgia makes arms like unwieldy snakes, dropping Sellotape and only wrapping one present a day because of sheer lack of physical strength. I keep grabbing outwards and it slips through my fingers. I remember all the traditions. Press them like flowers in a dusty album and does it matter that they are now a ball and chain around my neck?

But... the familiarity of seeing the same house with the same lights year after year like an annual reunion with an old friend. The films! Oh, the films. The older the better. There's no such thing as an instant classic; we need something to exist for decades before we take it seriously. Old friends, bookends, Fred Savage has Christmas on Division Street, Bing and Dave have their grand meeting over the piano while the powdered snow falls and we harmonise with them. John Candy is King... Ralph, Macaulay Culkin is Crown Prince and the Queen... is the Queen... and speaks... like this... but says nothing while comedians say everything. Eric and Ernie are revived and recycled, Frankie Howerd guffaws and if you're very quiet very early in the morning you might catch a wild Bagpuss yawn and turn over. The mornings are mystical, frosty and thin. A fog drapes over everything and whichever film is special enough to you to make you set the alarm and whisper to partners while stealth-wrapping presents with a dull rustle, glancing up every now and then to see your tree lights reflected in Judy Garland's eyes as she cries with

Margaret O'Brien over the snowman and so much more.

We take the oldest decorations out of hibernation. Unwrap them from their cotton wool nests and place them oh-so-carefully because we love them best.

Because they loved us and were gifts from someone who has passed and we see the memories in their shine as long as the red and green lasts.

As long as the red and green lasts.

And it means so much to children who are bullied in school. Two whole weeks off of bliss and knowing people love you. Learning to speak, and run and sing and laugh and breathe with the knowledge that you're a whole person, a person you can be again, when you leave.

Everything closes, give yourself permission to switch off. Turn in, inward. Family-ward. Self-ward. Think about your life on the shortest day on the darkest night in the light of a solstice candle and make the change. Isn't everything possible with this magic in the air? You can feel it in your fingertips, it intermingles with your hair, with the snow, if there's snow; let it snow...

... in manageable quantities, for precisely two days and not at the times when you have to catch a bus. Let it snow when you're nearly home, loaded down with shopping you're sure is exactly right and there's a hot chocolate waiting for you at home, or maybe already in your tummy.

May you be alone, if that's what you wish, first feet on the unbroken freshness and may you grant yourself permission to smile and skip and grind your heels in extra hard to make the packed snow squeak.

May you find stillness in the quietness of your heart as you tell yourself you're doing all right.

May you have enough Sellotape.

May your potatoes not fall to mush and may your cat not find the defrosting turkey.

May all your personal favourites be on TV and may you let yourself have a little cry, if that's what you need.

May you hear from someone you miss and may they stay in touch throughout the year.

May you reminisce about the Christmas morning you got the bicycle and you weren't even expecting a bicycle, may you once again get something you weren't expecting.

May you make plans and may they all happen.

May you walk when the shops are shut, just for the joy of movement.

May you enter North Belfast for no other reason than to admire their decorations.

May you choose gifts carefully and receive them
with abandon.

May you find the second-hand first edition she'll
love.

May there be "more of gravy than of grave about
you."

May your season be what you want it to be
May you shyly creep into a church carol service
you saw advertised on a newsagent noticeboard,
not knowing any of the congregation but wanting
to sing

May Jesus be there, if you welcome Him in
May you wind twine and holly wreaths to
honour the goddess.

May you make your own cards, may you paint,
lino cut.

May you write someone a poem, may you stop
saying no, but
I can't!

May you walk past a chugger, or carol singers,
turn around, give what you can and make your
heart proud.

May you give your old gloves to someone on the
street.

May you be Scrooge 2.0 to the people you meet.

May you not need four ghosts to convince you of
this

But if they do visit, may they treat you with
kindness

Kindness

That's the first time this word's in this poem
And it's everything really, bring it into your
home

Bring it into your work, lure it in with mince pies
If you have to and you'll see it in your
workmates' eyes

Write a couple of cards, buy a few bags of sweets
Share them out giddily with the people you meet
Stick Santa stickers on your envelopes
Wrap your hair up in tinsel, fairy lights, and
hope

Have hope and be kind
Have love and you'll shine
You don't need to rhyme
Just be you.

And I'm writing this from a place of loneliness. It's not privilege that's talking here. I'm outside, and it's a mess.

And that's how I know. If someone else does everything for you, you learn by rote and not by need.

Christmas has always been for the people who need it most. Who study the shining, gleaming made-for-TV movies on Channel 5 and recreate for themselves what they see inside. Without the Canadian accent. Timidly tie a candy cane to a tree and sing a carol while waiting for the photocopier to produce the documents they're working on during their overtime and not at a party because... there aren't any parties. Nobody mentioned any parties.

So you value each person. Each shop assistant's smile. The roast turkey sandwich in the diner with the one person you want a sandwich with. Placing their gift to you under tree with the memories of all their gifts to you in the past. You have managed to build memories with this person, let this be the time you don't worry about sabotaging it and let it warm your heart.

Let each single, solitary person warm your heart and when you've counted all of them there may be only three and two may be related to you but that's okay by me.

May that be okay by you and may you make this time of year as special for them as only they can do for you.

They say the sense of hearing starts to develop in the womb

so if you find it overwhelming, find yourself a quiet room.

Turn the lights off, lock the door, get a blanket, close your eyes and lose yourself in neural pathways only trodden once a year.

The best of the songs tend to start off soft and
slow
and take you to the place you were before you
were the you you know
and there's an avalanche of images hits right
between the eyes
of hats and scarves and gloves long gone,
the scarf you used to nibble on
and soaking gloves from snowball fights
and wrestling tangled Christmas lights
and... dancing round the lamppost to the
Christmas number 1
when Whitney Houston always loved you [we
don't talk about the Mr. Blobby one]

It's older than that though, it's timeless.
It's when Cliff Richard had musical worth,
we still believed in peace on Earth.
Phil Spector's *A Christmas Gift For You*
It's counting how many beats to the bar Noddy
Holder's '*It's Christmas!*' scream lasts for.
It's miming the saxophone solo as Wizzard's
royalties reach more and more
and you started by lying in bed but the blanket's
on the floor
and you're having a private party with the tree
lights set to blink to a four-four rhythm and,
"It's Christmas time, there's no need to be afraid,"
Paul Young begins.

Please don't be afraid

I can see what you're doing, I can see that you're
trying

You're building a bridge

Don't be afraid

There is Shloer in the fridge.

Don't be afraid

"We'll protect you from the hooded claw

Keep the vampires from your door"

As long as the red and green lasts

so don't be afraid

As long as the red and green lasts

'twas two weeks before Christmas and all
through Belfast
department store Santas are getting' sassed,
work Christmas parties are having a blast
and people everywhere are making every

single

second

last.

Elizabeth McGeown is based in Belfast and came to poetry from a background of singing, sometimes using snippets of song in her pieces. She is a two time *All-Ulster Poetry Slam Champion* and a finalist in the 2016, '17 and '18 All-Ireland Slams. Elizabeth was chosen by judges from Dublin: UNESCO City of Literature to take part in the *Lingo Festival Slam* 2015, placing third in the same competition in 2016.

Festival performances include *Body & Soul*, *Lingo*, *Sunflowerfest*, and the *C.S. Lewis Festival*. At the Edinburgh Fringe Festival she is a regular 'Cast Member' for Allographic's *Other Voices Spoken Word Cabaret*. Someday, she plans to write a full-length spoken word show.