

# Global short stories competition

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November 2009 winner

A WORD WITH THE ELF

Jonathan Elsom

Every December Edward Harbottle gave the performance of his professional life in Benhams department store at Clapham Junction. For a month he would preside over his elvish helpers in Santa's Grotto, and smile benignly as countless small children perched on his knee and described the gifts they hoped he would leave them in their Christmas stockings.

Which was surprising, as Edward Harbottle disliked children. Perhaps it would be more accurate to say that he was deeply apprehensive of them, and it was only by submerging himself in the avuncular persona of Father Christmas that he was able to give such a convincing performance. A lean slightly stooped man, he possessed none of the rotundity associated with the traditional Santa Claus, but once he had donned the heavy padding, the uncomfortable 'santa suit' and the flowing beard and moustaches, all his professionalism took over.

Like so many elderly actors his acting engagements had become increasingly infrequent and his Agent was happy, and privately relieved, for him to pursue his thespian talents in the basement of Benhams every December, even if the audiences were considerably younger than he might have wished.

Harbottle shared a small Victorian terraced house just off Lavender Hill with his treasured canine companion, Mr Punch. The pair was a familiar sight as they pottered around the tree-lined Peabody Estate, and although Mr Punch was now seventy in human years and their daily walks were becoming slower and briefer, they were still greeted warmly by their neighbours.

Most of their neighbours, that is. Next door, at number 115 Shaftesbury Road lived eight year old Sarah Jenkins, however. A solitary child doted on by her parents and consequently rather spoilt, Sarah would tease the elderly terrier at every opportunity, either by clambering on the adjoining back garden fence and lobbing pebbles onto the roof of his kennel or by pulling faces at him through the gaps in the palings.

"Little girl, will you stop annoying my dog!" Harbottle would call in his mellifluous voice as he spied the small blond head grimacing furiously through the fence at the irate Mr Punch. "I'll be round to speak to your mother if you don't behave!"

Sarah, thought herself quite a big little girl, and so she'd cross her bright blue eyes and stick out her small pink tongue and Mr Punch would become even more hysterical. Consequently, Edward Harbottle's dislike of small children grew and Sarah continued her guerrilla warfare.

Now that that the icy grip of early winter had rendered the streets more hazardous than usual Mr Punch's little walks had become even briefer.

"Come along old boy," said Harbottle to the somnolent terrier on a particularly frosty morning. "Just a little walk around the block and then you can retire to your basket while I go and earn a crust – or perhaps a bone or two."

Mr Punch cocked an eye at Harbottle and burrowed further beneath his blanket. The actor snapped on the leash, and gathering up the protesting dog and his walking stick from the hallstand, headed for the front door. Sleet was falling steadily and the sky was leaden as he shut the gate behind him and urged the terrier toward a neighbouring tree.

Sarah Jenkins, perched on the window-seat in her upstairs bedroom watched the elderly couple make their slow progress beneath her window. Although it was only nine o'clock in the morning the wintry gloom made it feel more like dusk, and were it not that she had been promised an exciting visit to see the Christmas lights in Regent Street Sarah would have happily snuggled back into her own warm bed.

She wiped the misted window with her pyjama sleeve and peered again at the odd pair below as they struck out across the slushy road. Without warning a motor scooter shot out of the swirling sleet and before she could cry out it struck the little terrier with a dull thud. The leash was whipped from Harbottle's hand and with an agonised yelp Mr Punch was flung into the air and deposited in the gutter beyond. The scooter's tyres squealed as its rider manoeuvred to correct the skidding machine,

and then with a muffled oath scooter and rider disappeared into the gloom.

A shocked Harbottle steadied himself with his walking stick and then scurried across the road as fast as he could and knelt beside his beloved Mr Punch. Even through the driving sleet Sarah could see the dog hadn't moved. She bounded down the stairs and before her mother could emerge from the kitchen she had flung open the front door and hurried across the road.

"Is, - is he going to be alright?" she said breathlessly, completely forgetting her past animosity as she peered over Harbottle's shoulder. "I saw that man on the scooter – he hit your dog, and – oh, is Mr Punch going to be alright?"

Harbottle turned on the little girl standing awkwardly beside him.

"What's that to you, child?" he snapped. "Just go back inside and leave us alone, please."

Sarah's lower lip trembled. Flakes of snow clung to her blond curls, and for a brief moment the old actor was touched by the stricken little face.

"Your mother will be worried about you. Go back inside, child," he muttered gruffly as he dragged his scarf from his neck and attempted to wrap it round the animal's twitching body. He knew instinctively that Mr Punch was dying and he just wanted to carry his faithful companion back into the house and shut the door on the world. He also knew he was about to weep. He brushed a snowflake (or was it a tear?) from his eye as Sarah's mother appeared in the lighted hallway across the road.

"Sarah, what are you doing out here in your pyjamas? Stop worrying Mr Harbottle and come inside at once!" she called, as the snowflakes swirled around the trio.

"Mummy! A man on a scooter knocked Mr Punch down!" called Sarah. "He was going too fast, and Mr Punch is just lying here, and - and he's not moving..."

Harbottle rose shakily to his feet. The dog lead trailed uselessly from beneath the limp bundle wrapped in his scarf.

"I just want to get Mr Punch back inside, Mrs Jenkins. There's nothing anyone can do I suspect."

"I'm so sorry," said his neighbour quickly, shepherding the now weeping Sarah back across the road. "If there's anything we can do? Have you got a vet, or someone I can call for you?"

Harbottle shook his head numbly and fumbled at his key ring as he cradled the dog in his arms. Under the porch light he looked suddenly ashen and neither Sarah nor her mother could think of anything to say in comfort.

Mr Punch was dead. The scooter rider had, in one cruel moment, removed Edward Harbottle's companion of some 14 years and now he felt totally bereft.

He knew the advice was always to acquire another pet as soon as possible after such a loss, and although the Battersea Dogs Home was only a short bus ride away he couldn't face the thought of some boisterous new puppy occupying Mr Punch's basket so swiftly upon his departure. Instead, he quietly buried the dog beneath a small rose tree at the bottom of his garden and returned to his daily Santa Claus routine as quickly as possible. He sensed Sarah had watched the entire procedure from an upstairs window.

The silence which greeted him when he returned to his little house every evening was almost unbearable. He even missed Sarah's cheeky face peering through the fence and the rattle of pebbles on the roof of Mr Punch's kennel. But as the evenings drew in and the curtains of 115 were drawn at dusk, he saw little of her.

Then, one morning, at the head of a queue of small eager faces crowding round the entrance to his Grotto, he found himself looking into the bright periwinkle eyes of his young neighbour. Her blond curls bounced as she stood clutching her mother's hand and jiggling impatiently from foot to foot.

It had been a particularly trying morning, and both Harbottle and his two elfin helpers were eager for their lunch in the store cafeteria. He was pretty certain neither mother or daughter was likely to recognise him beneath the feathery beard and moustache, but he felt strangely vulnerable all the same.

"Now Mr Elf, who's this little girl in such a beautiful blue dress," he called in his most avuncular tones.

The bored elf who had just glanced pointedly at his watch and murmured to Harbottle about taking a break to feed the reindeer, led Sarah up to Santa's throne.

"Thank you, Mr Elf," said Harbottle as Sarah stepped shyly onto the dais. "And what's your name, little girl?"

"Sarah" she whispered.

“Well Sarah, come and tell me what you’d like for Christmas?”

He patted his ample lap and hoped the luxuriant silver beard would bear the scrutiny of such piercing blue eyes.

“Now,” he said, as she perched on his knee, “Santa likes good little girls. Have you been a good little girl this year?”

The blue eyes looked at him anxiously.

“I tried to be,” she said, in a small voice. “I wanted to be... but I sometimes did bad things to Mr Harbottle’s dog, and now it’s dead. And Mummy says I have to be better from now on...”

“So you don’t have to bring me any presents,” Sarah went on, in a rush. “But Mummy says I can ask you to bring something for Mr Harbottle, instead.” The words tumbled out in an earnest whisper. “You see, Mr Punch got run over by a scooter, and - and he was dead in the gutter - and now Mr Harbottle is very sad – and Mummy says he’s very lonely, and she says I’m allowed to ask you to bring him a new puppy, because then he won’t be sad anymore...”

With a gulp the breathless monologue came to a halt and the little girl looked uncertainly at Harbottle. He appeared distracted and quickly blew his nose on a voluminous handkerchief.

“Well,” he said gruffly. “That’s a generous thought, and, um, I’ll certainly have a word with my elves and see what can be done.”

He trumpeted into his handkerchief again.

“Now, ah, I’m afraid it’s time I went off to feed my reindeer, so – um, Merry Christmas!”

He gently eased Sarah off his knee and the impatient elf took her hand.

“Mr Harbottle lives at 113 Shaftesbury Road,” whispered Sarah urgently to the elf as she rejoined her mother. “Please don’t let Santa forget.”

Snow had fallen silently throughout the night, and when Christmas Day dawned London lay under a sparkling white blanket. Snow clung to the gabled slate roofs of the little Peabody cottages. It carpeted the pavements and cloaked the elm trees in Shaftesbury Road.

In Edward Harbottle’s upstairs window the lights on a small Christmas tree twinkled busily, but as the elderly actor sat over his solitary breakfast the carols pouring from his radio only seemed to emphasise the inactivity in his house.

Suddenly the doorknocker was pounded sharply and gathering his dressing gown around him he cautiously opened the front door. In the porch stood Sarah and Mrs Jenkins. Cradled in his neighbour’s arms a small terrier puppy gazed inquisitively at him with boot-button eyes. Attached to its collar with a huge red bow was a label that read – FOR MR HARBOTTLE FROM FATHER CHRISTMAS.

“Merry Christmas!” said Mrs Jenkins brightly. “I’m afraid Santa seems to have delivered this little fellow to us by mistake.” And she winked slowly at the startled actor as she transferred the wriggling puppy into his arms.

Sarah looked up at him.

“I’m not surprised Santa made a mistake, Mr Harbottle,” she confided earnestly. “I don’t think that elf was listening.”

## Joint highly commended Mr Walker Tim Parson

Every morning, Mr. Walker rides his bicycle to the post office. Being a man of impeccable punctuality, he arrives at precisely eight-fifteen each morning. Amy Andrews watches him pull up on the ancient, but immaculately maintained, black vintage bicycle as she waits for her school bus. The bus arrives at eight-twenty every morning without fail, never more than a minute later or earlier. But on this particular morning, Mr. Walker fails to arrive, and five minutes later there is no sign of the bus. Amy looks anxiously down the road for the bus or Mr. Walker, but there is no sign of either.

In the post office, Mrs Malone has a feeling of unease as she sorts through the day's mail. At first she doesn't really know why, but then it dawns on her as she looks up at the clock: Mr. Walker is late. Mr. Walker is never late.

She leaves her desk and walks outside, scouring the road for the familiar bicycle approaching, but there is nothing. She looks nervously at her watch. Mr. Walker had posted a letter to the same address every day for the past ten years. After she mails his letter, it reminds her that she has to call her mother. It had become a part of her daily routine.

She is about to return to the shop, when she notices little Amy Andrews still perched on her bench. She hurries over to the child and asks her if she has missed the bus.

Across town, Margery Malone is alone and distressed. She waits by a silent phone, tense and forlorn. The clock ticks patiently on it's wall, marking each second as she waits. She knows there is something that she should be doing. It's sitting on the edge of her mind, but she can't quite reach it. She knows her daughter should have called by now. But without hearing her soothing voice and calm reasoning, she forgets to take her medication and she forgets to bring the dog in from the yard.

At the other end of the street, Kylie Lewis is waiting by her front door. She paces fretfully back and forth, the cordless phone in her hand. She puts it down and peers through the curtains. She scans up and down the street, but he's not there. She resumes her pacing, while continually checking her watch. Simon the postman would usually call in and visit her around this time. He would get through the first part of his round in record time so he could pop in and see her. She looks outside again, hoping to see him riding down her path, hastily unclipping his helmet and dismounting the bike while still in motion as he usually did. She sighs and goes back to her pacing. She becomes so flustered that she forgets to call her husband as she always does around that time. He leaves early for work and doesn't like to wake her. She appreciates the sleep-in, but always makes sure she calls a few hours later to wish him a good day. Or recently she has called him just before Simon arrives.

Simon would usually be visiting Kylie at this time; he wouldn't miss it for anything. However, he is somewhat preoccupied by Margery Malone's enormous Doberman bounding after him down the road. The beast chases him in the opposite direction of her house, panting and growling as it gallops tirelessly at his heels. He can't remember how many times he has asked that foolish old woman to keep that hell-hound of hers inside for the morning. How such a sweet old woman can keep such a ferocious beast as a pet is beyond him. Now it is ruining his day again. He curses it as he peddles for his life.

Henry Lewis sits in the bus staring at his phone, lost in thought. The kids have become rowdy and restless behind him, but he pays them no attention. He had stopped the bus after becoming worried when his wife hadn't called. Now he sits clutching his phone in a trance-like state. He wills it to buzz into life as his mind races to all the worst case scenarios that could be preventing her from calling. In the two years they have been married, she has called every morning without fail. He knows that when he starts the hill climb towards the post office, the phone will ring and they have a brief chat as he drives. It always brightens his day, hearing her voice.

Still he sits, but the phone remains silent. The kids are starting to become agitated. He ignores the bedlam going on behind him and continues his vigil beside the phone. He is about to dial his home

number, when the phone suddenly bursts into life. He answers it in a second. It's her.

The kids cheer as Henry finally puts down the phone and the bus's old diesel engine roars into life. He is about resume the slow ascent up the hill, when someone knocks on the bus door.

Mrs Malone and Amy Andrews sit on the bench outside the post office as the old bus finally comes chugging over the hill. It comes to a graunching stop and the doors hiss open. They are both surprised when Mr Walker is the first to get off the bus. Henry helps to pass the old bike down after him. Amy notices the front tyre squashes flat to the rim as it hit's the pavement. Mr. Walker wheels the bike over and leans it against the building as he always does, then takes an envelope from his pouch and goes inside. Mrs Malone sees Amy onto the bus then goes inside to see to Mr. Walker.

As she sits in her usual seat on the bus, Amy wonders to herself how faithful old Mr Walker, and the always reliable Henry, could possibly both be late for the first time ever on the same day. She supposes it will always be a mystery.

Joint highly commended  
The Last Gift  
Joyce Slobogian

Nobody asked Alice. She would rather have spent the day before Christmas in her warm room at home.

Instead, she clung to her mom's hand, as they walked down the road in the cemetery. She was scared. Everybody seemed so sad and her mom was crying.

Snow crunched under her boots, the new ones with the fur edge that had been the best present for her sixth birthday. It made her feel better to think of the pretty boots; how nice the white fur looked and how cosy it felt against her legs. Daddy always gave the best gifts.

The wind bit into her face and snow flakes landed on her lashes and covered her locks with a bride's veil. She was glad that the procession stopped. Maybe it was over now and they could go home. Daddy might be there and have hot chocolate ready.

Alice loved drinking chocolate with her dad and listening to his stories. He told great stories. He probably had a surprise for her, as he always had when he came back from the hospital. He had been there often in the last year, but never as long as this time.

The men lifted the box from their shoulders and put it on the ground. Alice was worried. She had been told that her dad was in there - she didn't understand what he would be doing in that box. She had asked her Auntie Rosie, who cried and said: "He's never coming back."

Well, that was nonsense. Her dad would always come back. Wasn't she his treasure, as he told her many times? People don't leave treasurers behind.

The men lowered the box in a hole in the ground. Alice tugged on her mother's hand. She was really frightened now and wanted to scream: "No, no, he can't go in there; it's too cold there!" But there was something hard in her throat and the sound did not come out. She watched, as the men covered the hole with chunks of earth. Every shovelful made her shiver and she turned and hid her face in her mother's skirt.

"It's all right, Alice," her mom whispered and put both arms around her shoulders. Alice took no comfort from them. She knew now that her aunt had been right: He was never coming back.

The house was full of people when they returned. Auntie Rosie bustled around serving lunch. Her face showed signs of recent tears. She hugged Mom and urged her to sit down and eat something. Mom smiled a little and sat obediently at the table. People came up and talked to her; she thanked them all with the same look in her eyes; as if she wasn't really there.

Alice would have liked to go to her room, but she was taught to be polite and knew that one does not walk out when people come to visit. She sat beside her mom and chewed on a coconut macaroon. It didn't taste right and had a hard time going down her throat because of the tight spot there. She reached for her glass of milk in a sudden panic.

Just then Mrs. King, the old lady who lived above the General Store, came up and hugged Mom.

"Ellen, I'm sorry - what will you do, left alone with a small child?"

Mom smiled her absentminded smile: "Alice and I'll help each other, Mary. Thank you for your kindness."

The old lady turned to Alice and the child noticed with dread a drop of moisture hanging on her nose, threatening to fall any minute. This was too much. She jumped up from the table, knocking over her milk, as she ducked away from Mrs. King and ran out and up the stairs. All she wanted was some peace and quiet in her own room, away from all these people.

Her room wasn't quiet at all. Lori and Bonnie, her cousins, were unpacking. Lori was laughing at some joke of Bonnie's, who was the family clown. Both girls were a few years older than Alice and usually paid no attention to her.

"What are you doing in my room?", she asked.

"Hi there, squirt," Bonnie grinned, "Lori and I are camping out here tonight. See the cot? That's going to be your bed, so the two of us can share the bigger bed."

For a minute Alice stared at her cousins. Then she grabbed Lori's bag from her bed and fired it towards the far corner.

"No way are you two going to sleep in my bed", she yelled.

"What's going on in here?" Auntie Fran was standing in the doorway.

Alice hardly knew this aunt. She lived in the city and didn't come to visit very often.

"Can't you behave yourself, Alice? Your poor mother has enough on her plate without your tantrums."

"I want my room to myself." Alice was trembling and her voice sounded strange to her.

"You just have to share tonight. You've been spoiled too long; it's high time that - Alice, come back this minute!"

Alice was already down the stairs and out the back door. In her haste she had forgotten her coat and she shivered in the December wind. She would have liked to get it, but she couldn't go back in there. Nobody wanted her anyway. Her bed was given away to her cousins and strange aunts were yelling at her.

"Miaow!" Minnie, the tabby cat, was eager to get into the house. She looked hopefully up at her best pal, and scratched at the door to make sure there was no doubt about her wishes. Alice wasn't sure if Minnie would be welcomed in a house full of guests.

"Serves them right if Minnie eats up the food or scratches somebody." She eased open the door just enough for her furry friend to slip inside and quickly closed it again.

She wondered about taking shelter in the barn. It would be warm there. But then she thought of another place and knew right away it was where she wanted to be.

The door to her dad's workshop was hard to open. Nobody had been there in the last few weeks and snow had blown against the bottom. Alice scratched away the snow with her boots and pushed the door open.

The shop was cosy; the heat had been left on at low temperature to keep the wood from warping. A half-finished dining table was in the middle of the room. The odour of wood shavings and paint hung in the air.

Alice sat down in the big armchair beside the workbench. This was her favourite spot, where she sat to watch her dad work. Mom was always complaining that she could never find Alice when it was time to do her chores.

"You shouldn't let her stay here if she hasn't done what she was supposed to do", she'd say, but Dad would smile: "She helps me, Ellen."

The child shivered; she reached for her dad's bulky jacket that was draped over the back of the chair. Wrapping it around her, she put her hands in the pockets. There was a parcel in one of them; she removed it and stared at the Christmas wrapping and the label with her name on it. "To Alice. Love, Daddy", it said.

A Christmas gift! A gift from Daddy! Would it be all right to open it? After all, her name was on it and it was Christmas Eve. The family had always opened one gift each the night before Christmas. She was sure that Mom wouldn't mind if she opened this one.

She carefully undid the ribbon and folded the paper before she opened the box. Inside was a figure of a cat, the spitting image of Minnie. Her dad must have spent many hours carving and polishing it. It was shiny and smooth and more beautiful than anything in a store.

Alice ran her fingers over the gift and held it up to her cheek, thinking how her dad's hands had worked on it in secret to give her a surprise.

Suddenly the room was a lonely place. Everything was just as before - except her Daddy wasn't here anymore. And he never would be again.

Cold misery engulfed the little girl. She folded both hands around her dad's last gift and - huddled into his coat - she surrendered to her heartbreak and let the tears flow.

The guests had finally drifted away and Ellen went looking for her daughter. She had been worried about her ever since her flight from the table, but she hoped that Alice had been distracted by the company of her cousins.

"Where's Alice?", she asked Bonnie and Lori, who were playing in her daughter's room.

"She was mad when she found us here and then she ran outside", Lori said.

"Outside? When did that happen?"

"About an hour ago, I think."

"She was rude to the girls and to me, too." Fran was coming up the stairs. "Ran outside without even apologizing. If she was mine -"

"I apologize for her, Fran." Ellen said. "Right now you must excuse me. I have to find her".

Knowing her Alice, she had a good idea where to look. The footprints in the snow confirmed her suspicion. She pushed open the door to the workshop and when she saw the pitiful bundle curled

up in an old coat in the armchair, she thought her heart would break.

Ellen knelt by the chair and folded her arms around the little girl.

"Mommy's here, lovey."

"I want Daddy, Mommy. Why did he go away?" A big tear rolled down Alice's cheek.

Ellen gently wiped it away. "Daddy was very sick, Alice", she said with difficulty, "he was not strong enough to get better. He has gone to a good place, where there's no pain and from there he will watch over us."

"But I can't talk to him anymore. I want him to be with me here."

"I know, sweetie, so do I. But, you know, he isn't gone from us. He's in our hearts, Alice, because we love him and he loves us. You can still tell him everything, just as before. And if you listen very carefully, you can hear his answers. All you have to do is reach into your mind. The long talks you had with your dad are stored there and you can pull them out anytime you want."

Alice was silent for a minute. Then she reached inside the coat and showed her mother the carved figure.

"Daddy made that for me. I found it here tonight. It was my Christmas present. You're not mad that I opened it, are you, Mom?"

"No, Honey. That's your Christmas Eve early present." Ellen knew about the gift, but recent events had caused her to forget about it.

"Let's go back to the house, Alice", she said. "It's getting dark soon and you know we put up the tree when we see the first star."

"I don't want to go in. There're all these strangers there."

"Everybody has gone now. Only Auntie Rose and Uncle Fred, Bonnie, Lori and Auntie Fran are staying over night."

"Auntie Fran was mean to me. And Lori and Bonnie have taken my bed. I've nowhere to sleep."

"Tell you what, honey", Ellen said, as she helped Alice off the armchair, "you sleep with me tonight. And Auntie Fran isn't really mean. You must remember that Daddy is her brother and she misses him too."

It was getting late as they closed the shop door behind them. The little girl pointed to the sky: "Mommy, the star! I see the star! Let's go quickly and put up the tree!"

Ellen smiled at her daughter and they started back towards the house. Christmas had arrived. There would be an empty place at the table, but not in their hearts.