

Can We Leave This Until After Christmas ?

A short story of about 8,310 words with a seasonal feel, there's even a Santa. Maybe not the kind of Santa you'd expect, but definitely a Santa. It seems mayhem among South London gangsters, doesn't stop just because it's the season of goodwill.....

'As usual there is a PDF version in the download area.'

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~ After lunch on the 23rd December, somewhere in Deptford ~

Freddie Taylor hadn't expected trouble, it was Christmas after all, who wants mayhem and violence over Christmas ? Some of the East European gangs had been trying to grab business off him, but even they tended to call an unofficial truce for Christmas week. It was a time for being with loved ones, not being strapped into a chair while someone beat the crap out of you. He'd only taken Ginger with him, that had been a mistake. It was just that, no one did that sort of thing during Christmas week, no one.

"He's coming round." Someone said.

"Let him wake up properly this time."

Another voice he didn't recognise and Freddie prided himself on knowing everyone. He'd been the top dog in South London since his late twenties and despite now being the wrong side of middle aged, there was nothing wrong with his memory. He knew everyone and if you wanted to do anything illegal in his patch, you had to pay Freddie a fee, everyone knew that. The first thing he saw as his eyes opened was Ginger, lying on a concrete floor. His trusted second in command was dead and his death looked to have been bloody and unpleasant.

"Who the hell are you guys ?" Asked Freddie.

There were three of them in what Freddie thought was probably a lock up under a railway arch, he'd have bet money on it. The rough concrete floor, the grubby brick walls, though hearing a train go overhead every few minutes was the real giveaway. All three of his captors were wearing hockey masks, which was strange. If they didn't identify themselves, how could he give them what they wanted ? They had to want something, everyone wanted something.

"Damn dinosaur.....Why don't we just kill him."

"Shut up."

The one who'd shouted shut up came and crouched in front of him. Freddie prided himself on staying fit, but they had beaten him for quite a while the first time. He definitely wasn't feeling at his best and it looked like the violence was going to continue.

"I've been paid to work you over before killing you, nothing personal. I was told to pull out your fingernails, before extracting a few teeth with a pair of pliers. Real old school stuff.....He said you'd respect that."

"Who paid you to kill me ?" Asked Freddie.

"Knowing who won't change anything. I'm not going to torture you; it is Christmas after all. Just a nice quick bullet in the head, for you and your family. I've no idea why, but he wants your wife and daughter killed too. He must really hate you."

"Who ? Who sent you ?"

"I don't suppose telling you matters now; it was Tony Baker."

"But I heard he was dying." Said Freddie.

“He is, the final stages of pancreatic cancer. It seems he still holds a grudge about you killing his brother, Bill.”

“That was an age ago, we were barely adults.....How much is he paying you ?”

When the paid killer took a large automatic pistol out from a holster under his jacket, Freddie knew he wasn't going to get an answer. There was nothing personal involved, Freddie didn't even feel angry. It was his fault, he should have taken his usual four guys out shopping with him, but it was Christmas.

“Any last words Freddie ?”

“Yeah, can we put this off until after Christmas ?”

“Nice one.”

Why the hell were they wearing masks if they were going to kill him ? Freddie understood that everyone had their own way of working, they tried and tested modus operandi. He decided to take it as a compliment, they must have thought there was a chance he might escape. Maybe once, when he'd still been doing boxing training three times a week.

“Goodbye Freddie.”

He'd always wondered if there was time to hear the bang, before the bullet went through your head. One old time gangster, a genuine dinosaur from the mayhem of the sixties, had been shot in the head outside a night club. He's lived, though he always said he couldn't remember if he heard the bang or not. How could you not remember something like that ? Freddie heard the bang, just about. There was no pain, none at all.....Just darkness after the bang, nothing but darkness.

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There was a feeling of movement in the darkness, Freddie knew he was moving at speed. He was still aware of who he was, or had been, though he no longer had a body. He'd become a disembodied spirit of some kind, hurtling through the darkness. It would have been terrifying, if he wasn't already dead. Not that he didn't think anything worse could happen to him. There were a few rivals in cemeteries because of him and a few in the concrete flyover supports near Scratchwood services on the M1. No hurting wives and kids though, he'd never sunk that low. Freddie had never given the afterlife much thought, though he didn't think he was on his way to heaven.

“Oh no, someone has to tell him to stay away.” Said a male voice.

“Old Bob means well.....And the kids love him.” Said a female voice.

It was as if a red dot had appeared in front of him, a target to aim for. He knew it was a long way to travel, even though he was moving with some speed. The darkness began to fade too, as the shapes of buildings began to appear. Gradually, oh so gradually, the vague shapes became clearer. He was travelling through a city, literally hurtling through buildings as though they weren't there. He knew where he had to go though, the weird target was still there, in whatever remained of his mind.

“Crap.....Old Bob....Drunk again.”

“Leave him alone.....He makes the children smile.”

For a brief moment Freddie actually passed through two people in an office, though neither of them appeared to notice. Then he was above a river, the river, the Thames at Deptford, he knew the area like the back of his hand. Back south and into a large building with lots of beds. A hospital, a children's ward by the look of it. Happy children, all laughing and pointing at the large man in a Santa suit.

“He stinks of drink.....”

“He does this every year; the children adore him.”

Not everyone liked Santa it seemed, a man in a white coat was trying to grab hold of him, while a woman who looked like a nurse was trying to stop the drama becoming any worse. Undeterred Old Bob came along the corridor and Freddie stopped moving. He was about ten feet away from the large man dressed in red, right in the middle of someone's bed.

"Happy Christmas children." Yelled Bob.

"Happy Christmas Santa." Shouted the kids.

All Freddie could do was watch, as the scene in front of him took a turn for the worse. Bob was a large man and although it might all be padding from a fat suit, Freddie doubted it. Old Bob wasn't an ironic name either, the man in the Santa Suit looked to be a few years past his three score years and ten. Bob was having problems, he was gasping and holding his chest. He fell against the wall and slid down it, landing hard when he hit the floor.

"Bob.....I'm not getting a pulse." Said the nurse.

The man in the white coat was probably a doctor. He spent a while on his phone, barking commands at someone. He and the nurse then moved Bob so that he was flat on the floor. Children actually handle such things much better than most people think. As if they understood in some deep meaningful way, every child in the ward was silent.

Several medical people arrived with a trolley full of equipment and they worked hard to keep Bob alive. No matter what they did, it obviously wasn't enough. When the nurse shook her head, Freddie felt a slight tingle in a part of his body that didn't exist anymore. He had a target again; he was moving towards the dead body in a surprisingly smart Santa suit.

"I think he lived quite near here." Said the nurse. "No family as far as I know."

"He's been in every Christmas since I've worked here." Someone said.

Freddie entered the body and knew with certainty that Bob had moved on. He had sole residence of a body that had just died from some form of coronary event. There was a moment of darkness before he found himself looking at a nurse who'd been crying.

"Oh, fuck." He muttered.

"What ?.....I have a pulse doctor. He's back, he's alive."

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~ About 2am on the 24th December, a hospital somewhere near Deptford ~

Freddie opened his eyes and groaned, for a full two or three minutes. The doctors must have done it to save his life, or more accurately the life of Old Bob. His chest hurt like hell; they'd even shaved off the hair in places. Just two drips left in his arm and a thing on his finger connected to a screen. Crap ! His heart was beating a bit fast, or rather Old Bob's.....

"It's your body now buddy, get used to it." He muttered.

His voice sounded like a stranger's, a stranger who smoked sixty a day and gargled with vodka. Back to the screen and his blood oxygen level was a little low, but he'd live, for now. They'd given him a room on his own, there was even his own toilet. It seemed there were advantages in being the hospital's unofficial and much-loved Santa.

A look down at his new body proved that nothing about Bob had been artificial, the huge Santa belly was all too real. A little sweaty body odour, though nothing too bad. The worst thing was that Bob appeared to have entered an itchiest crotch in the world contest, and won.

His bladder was demanding to be emptied, it was probably what had woken him up. Freddie had been in hospitals quite a lot when he was younger, usually to have stitches put in wounds of one kind or another. He recognised the ring for attention button, which had been left near his right hand. The nurse who answered the call was a middle-aged lady, with a huge grin on her face.

"I'm glad you're awake Bob, you had us all worried."

"Glad to still be here.....I need to pee."

"I'll get a bed pan."

"No, I can get to the toilet. Can you do something about all the tubes and stuff ?"

"You really shouldn't be out of bed." She said.

"Please.....I just need to be back on my feet, just for a moment. I really need to pee and a quick wash in the sink. No shower or anything too strenuous.....Honest."

She liked Old Bob; he could see it in her eyes. The doctor might not have appreciated his annual Santa routine, but the nurses seemed to have liked him. Coming back as a fit twenty-year-old athlete would probably have been better, though being liked had its advantages. The nurse did something to the screen and removed the thing from his finger.

"The drips are on a moveable stand you can drag in there with you. Be careful Bob, no pulling at the tubes. I'll be back in about half an hour."

"Thank you."

Emptying his bladder was the first thing he did. Freddie sat down to pee, it meant not having to touch anything down there. He then filled the sink with water as hot as he could stand and, sort of lifted his guy bits up as best he could, before dropping them in the water. He instantly felt better, as the itching lessened. By the time he'd rubbed soap over everything down there, he felt like a new man.

"I still think if you brought me back.....A young fit guy would have been better. Maybe a professional footballer killed in a traffic accident."

Of course, the big question was, who had brought him back and why ? Freddie wasn't sure if he believed in a personal God, some guy with a beard sat on a throne. If there was such a person, he doubted if they'd be friends. Thou shalt not kill seemed to be fairly standard for most religions and Freddie had lost count of how many were in the ground because of him. His wife Sally was a good person though and his daughter Penny had never been involved in anything illegal.

Even if he hadn't been brought back to help them, it was going to be his self-appointed goal. He just hoped the body he now inhabited was up to it. As he dried things off with a towel, something was happening to the steamed-up mirror above the sink. He could see the outline of a finger, writing on the mirror. Just a disembodied finger, writing just two lines.

'You need to leave there. Now.'

'Use the stairs.'

He hadn't forgotten about saving his family, it had just been a hell of a day. Freddie removed the drips carefully, using toilet tissue to wipe away a few drips of blood. He found Old Bob's clothes in a closet near the bed, along with a few personal items in a drawer.

"Oh shit ! At least I won't look too out of place, it is Christmas." He muttered.

Bob's Santa suit didn't look too bad, though he cringed a bit when putting on the grubby boxer shorts. At least Bob looked after his feet, the Doc Martens boots were old but comfortable. There was a wallet too, with several documents and cards, identifying Old Bob as Robert Spengler. Bob definitely hadn't been an eccentric millionaire, there was just a solitary five-pound note in the wallet.

Some good news, Bob had a driver's license, which Freddie hadn't been expecting. The address on the licence was in Deptford, hopefully somewhere he could reach on foot. As for after he got there ?.....Bob's door keys were there and a set of car keys with a fob advertising a double-glazing company. No clue as to what sort of car might be parked outside Bob's place.

"It'll be a twenty-year-old Skoda, I know it." He muttered.

It would get him around though, that was the important thing. A check to make sure he had picked up anything of Bob's that might be useful and he ventured out into the corridor. Getting out of the hospital in a bright red Santa costume, complete with beard, wasn't going to be easy. Freddie had no idea why he'd put on the beard. Crap ! It was Christmas and he loved all the traditional seasonal stuff. Pigs in blankets, sprouts cooked until they were a green mush, all topped off with an overcooked, tough as leather turkey. A huge part of the whole festive thing was Santa and he always had a beard.

"Anyway.....It suits the face." He mumbled.

He had no idea where the stairs were, though someone seemed to be helping him. The green sign above the stairs was flashing, as if showing him where to go. It meant walking close to the desk where the nurses sat. Again, luck, or something else, was on his side. The nurse who'd been in his room was on the desk, looking away from him as she spoke on the phone.

"I'm glad social services are coming to talk to him, he's a nice old guy."

It looked like he was escaping at just the right time. Through the doors to the stairs, which took him down to the ground floor without incident.

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The sun was rising when he got there, it was probably around six. Bob's place turned out to be a small one bed flat near Evelyn Street in Deptford. Not the best part of London, though far from being the worst. A tidy but dusty flat with furniture that looked like it had come from IKEA, in the late seventies. Second floor front in a small block, that was probably run by a social housing scheme. Freddie had resisted the temptation to try the car keys in a few vehicles parked in the street. It was behaviour likely to cause someone to call the police, or turn up with a few angry friends.

"Not bad Bob, I bet you've even got cable." He muttered.

The hospital staff had mentioned Bob having no family, yet there were a lot of pictures in dusty frames. Old looking pictures, some in black and white. A cheerful looking woman was in several of the pictures, actually she was in most of them. She went from being a young woman to a middle-aged lady holding a child.

"You had a family once Bob....Someone once loved you."

Next stop was the kitchen, where there was instant coffee and milk in the fridge still within its use by date. Freddie felt hungry, but mainly he craved a caffeine fix. He toasted two slices of bread to go with the coffee. He'd taken two bites out of the toast, when someone knocked on the door.

"Crap." He muttered.

"Bob.....Are you alright ? I saw you cross the street." Someone yelled.

The peephole in the door revealed an elderly lady with a determined look on her face. Definitely not the sort who'd go away if ignored. She backed up his assumption by calling out in an even louder voice.

"Bob, it's Irene.....I'm worried....Just say if you're alright."

Most of his life had been about keeping one step ahead of the law. Now it seemed he'd have to work at avoiding well meaning neighbours and social services. He opened the door, just a crack.

"I'm fine Irene, just tired. I'm going to bed for a few hours."

"Where were you all night ?"

"Please, I just want to sleep."

"Fine. Be like that."

Irene went, though he realised there were likely to be other friends in the block. It might have been a blessing if Old Bob hadn't been quite so well liked. Freddie found a message waiting for him when he returned to the kitchen. Written on the kitchen window in what looked like milk, the edges of the letters were running down the glass.

'You need to hurry.'

"Alright.....But a shower and a change of clothes would have been nice."

Getting grouchy with an unseen entity who wrote on windows, he was definitely going a little crazy. Nothing was going to stop him having his coffee though and he finished off the toast. If he was being rushed out of the door by unseen forces, he was determined to go prepared. He munched a pasty from the fridge, while quickly going through every cupboard and set of drawers in the place.

"Wow, a Carlos chair.....You were a real fan of IKEA Bob."

Once he had a few essential items he needed a bag and luckily, Bob had a cricket bag on top of the wardrobe. A dusty cricket bag, though Freddie was getting used to the obligatory coating of dust over everything. A drawer in the bedroom had an insurance certificate for a Volvo Estate, which he shoved into a pocket. There was a mobile phone in there too, though the battery was completely flat. The small tidy flat was a lot less tidy when he was ready to leave.

"Sorry Bob, but it's all in a good cause."

He might have missed it, tucked behind a pile of umbrellas in a tub behind the front door. Bob was ready for torrential rain; he owned a surprising number of ancient looking umbrellas. Among them was a baseball bat, far from uncommon these days. Like condoms, people like to have one and not need it, rather than needing one and not having it. Bob had probably never played baseball of course; the bat was a kind of nuclear deterrent. There in case anyone unpleasant was ever at his front door.

"Hmmm....Nice Bob, just what I might need."

The bat went into the bag and Freddie used the stairs to get down to the ground floor. He found the twelve-year-old Volvo parked quite close. It was the sort of grubby beige colour that someone in the Volvo design department must have thought suited their cars to perfection.

"I just hope it runs." He mumbled.

The old estate car started first time, the engine running nice and smoothly. Freddie didn't have that far to go, not to begin with. He needed a few things that could be hard to acquire, even for a guy in a Santa costume on Christmas Eve.

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There were a lot of railway lines crisscrossing Deptford, which meant a lot of railway arches, a hell of a lot. Yet, Freddie knew where to go, he felt drawn to where he'd been killed. No one was working in any of the arches, or at least there were no cars parked outside any of them. Hardly surprising during the festive season. He parked the Volvo in front of Arch 23, which had 'Gem Autos' painted above the door. The paint looked old; the doors looked grubby. Freddie thought Gem had more than likely moved out a decade before. Freddie pulled at the doors and one opened.

"Oh crap, no one should ever have to see that." He muttered.

They'd simply left the arch after killing him, nothing had been moved or changed. Seeing his own body still strapped into the chair, his head blown apart. It affected him far more than he'd thought it would. Ginger was still there too; his broken and tortured body was lying where he remembered seeing it. The hired killers had simply closed the doors behind them and gone, relying on the bodies not being discovered for days, perhaps even weeks or months. He'd hoped to find a few things on his body, perhaps a wallet still in pocket, maybe his house keys. Instead, he'd found a treasure trove,

starting with the 9mm automatic Ginger carried everywhere, it was rumoured he slept with it. They'd left the loaded gun on a bench, complete with two spare clips.

"First things first, on with the gloves." He mumbled.

Old Bob might have been well liked, but he seemed the sort to have a criminal record, even if it was all for minor offences. The last thing Freddie wanted was to leave fingerprints everywhere, as it looked like Bob's hands would be his hands for the foreseeable future. He'd found a pair of rubber gloves in Bob's flat. A bit thick to do anything fiddly, but he didn't intend to do anything fiddly. Ginger's gun went in the cricket bag, with a claw hammer that was also on the bench. For a moment Freddie enjoyed an image of using the claw end on the face of Tony Baker.

"I don't give a shit about your cancer old buddy; you're going to suffer."

Freddie liked getting close up and physical, hammers and meat cleavers had become his weapons of choice. Just the mention of Freddie Taylor coming over for a chat, had caused a few of his competitors to flee the country. He especially liked claw hammers and to be honest, he'd never been that good with a gun. He caught another glimpse of his body in the chair and nearly threw up.

"I'm going to hurt you Tony, and the bastards you hired."

Ginger's jacket went over the bloody remains in the chair, his remains. Going through the pockets of his blood-stained suit would have been horrific, but luckily the killers had done that for him. His wallet was on the ground a few feet in front of the chair, along with his house keys. There was still a wedge of cash in the wallet, Freddie liked to pay for things with cash, it didn't leave a trail the way plastic did.

"Six hundred quid, that'll come in handy." He muttered.

Someone had hit his mobile phone with something heavy, over and over again. It was useless, as were the keys to his top of the range Mercedes. From memory his car was likely to still be parked outside Helen's place, right over the other side of London. Helen was a friend with benefits who didn't mind him turning up for sex in the early hours, as long as he took her to nice places and paid the rent on her flat in Hadley Wood.

"Oh Helen, I wonder what you'd think of Old Bob and his killer jock itch." He muttered.

He wasn't worried about Helen; she was young and very pretty. She'd soon find another generous male friend and protector. Freddie used an old oily rag to wipe the door handles as he left the lock up. How long until someone investigated the nasty smell?

"Knowing this part of Deptford, it might be sometime in August." He muttered.

Freddie expected another message in the old Volvo, maybe something scrawled over the inside of the windscreen, with the contents of the over full ashtray. A message telling him to ignore revenge and go straight home to save his family. There was no message, just the usually grubby glass. He banged the steering wheel, hurting his hand in the process.

"I know what needs to be done." He shouted.

The Volvo started first time, again. Freddie drove east, he had to cross a lot of South London and quite a bit of Kent to reach Meopham village.

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Freddie had known Meopham well in his twenties. There was a really boring pub which they'd christened Meopham Disco for a joke. He remembered taking Sally there for their second date, or it might have been the third. Oh, her face when she'd realised Meopham Disco was really a one room pub full of old guys. He and Tony Baker had been friends then, the kind of friend you'd go through hell for. Then Freddie had killed Tony's brother and the friendship had come to an end.

"Tony always loved Meopham." He muttered.

Tony had loved the village so much, that he'd bought a huge place there when the big money had begun to roll in. A huge mansion of a place, his Ponderosa, as he called it.

"Past Meopham Disco, then second on the left."

It had been a while, but he still knew the way. He'd heard memories made when you were young stayed with you forever. It seemed they even survived being killed and claiming another body.

Freddie had decided to kill Tony before going home, justifying it by being able to find out who the hired killers were. He'd probably need to torture Tony of course, which wasn't going to be a chore. The more he'd thought about it during the drive, the more certain he was that getting some information out of Tony was essential. With luck, the hired killers might be there, at the house with the man who'd hired them. He parked a little way down the road, a few yards up a narrow lane he remembered.

"So old buddy, having a Christmas Eve party are you ?"

Every light was on in every window, and there were a lot of windows. Tony's Ponderosa had been added to since Freddie had last been there, a whole new wing had been built where an old stables had been. It was a cold night and few were wandering about outside, though he could see a lot of people through the windows. Lots of people dressed to kill, lots of expensive cars parked outside. The place was throbbing with techno music.

"I know you Tony, a born introvert. You'll be at the back of the house somewhere, watching something dreadful on streaming TV. Probably while eating supper off a tray."

Who was the party for ? Tony had always hated gatherings full of strangers, he hadn't even liked family get togethers that much. The old gang had really only got on with one another. Nothing bonds people quite like a bit of mayhem and kicking the crap out your rivals. Was Tony married now ? Had children arrived in the years since they'd stopped being friends ? It struck Freddie that he knew little about his old friend now, other than him being about to die from a dreadful illness. Oh, and that he'd hired some people to kill him and his family.

"I could probably get away with using the front door."

He was in a Santa Suit after all and it was Christmas Eve. He was a bit overdressed though. He might have been able to hide the gun and the hammer, but not the baseball bat in his right hand. Freddie decided discretion was called for and headed towards the back of the house on foot. Dark and cold, he began to appreciate the thick material of the Santa costume. He kept close enough to the outside lighting to see where he was going without, hopefully, being seen by the guards. There would be guards, he knew how Tony's mind worked.

"One inside, a really experienced man." He mumbled. "Two outside in the cold, just in case there are bad guys in the rose garden."

Tony wasn't the sort to have a dozen guys surrounding him, all talking about last night's game and the size of their girl friend's tits. That wasn't Tony, that'd drive him nuts. He'd just have one guard in the room with him, a really tough guy. Freddie had an advantage though, no one knew he was now in the body of an elderly Santa impersonator.

"I see you." He mumbled.

The cold was on his side, the guard wasn't moving around, as he should have been. The vapour from his breath in the lights gave him away, before Freddie saw the bulky outline sat on a wall. There was no Geneva convention for gang warfare, no Marquis of Queensbury rules. Freddie walked up to the guard, weaving about a little.

"Hey, shouldn't you be inside ? Don't let the boss see you're drunk."

Freddie knew how to use a baseball bat in a fight and that skill appeared to have transferred with the rest of his memories. Often the best part of a bat to hit someone with is the end. He rammed the end of the bat hard into the guy's nose, hard into the nasolabial triangle of death. He'd heard of big strong men being killed by such a blow, felled like a tree. The guard was hurt, though obviously still alive.

"Fuck.....You broke my....."

Freddie swung the bat for the second blow, catching the man across his left temple. He went down, there was a reassuring thud as he hit the ground. He didn't care if the man lived or died, though he did check for a pulse. There was a lot of blood, his skull was probably fractured, but there was still a strong pulse.

"Let's see what you're carrying."

The guard had been carrying a large automatic with a silencer attached. Freddie had never been into silencers, there was something far too swanky and American about them, and they were said to ruin accuracy. Still, a gun he could use without alarming the guests at the party might be useful. He picked the gun up and transferred the bat to his left hand. He managed to get to the rear of the house without seeing another living soul.

There was a window with a tiny gap in the curtains, just enough of a gap to show him his old friend, sat on a sofa. Freddie wasn't in a mood to be subtle, or care any longer about stealth. Old Bob hadn't been fit, but his body was still strong. He picked up a stone planter holding a small shrub, before spinning around twice and throwing it through the window. Silenced gun in one hand, baseball bat in the other, Freddie Taylor strode into the room.

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He may not have thought it over for long, but the move was far from suicidal or stupid. Anyone is going to be shocked by seeing Santa Claus follow a stone planter through a window, even a famous hard man like Tony Baker. There he was, complete with a meal on a tray, watching TV from a comfortable looking sofa. Freddie hadn't thought of saying something cool, or in fact saying anything at all. The words seemed to arrive in his throat unbidden.

"Ho.....Ho.....Ho." He shouted.

Tony's huge, well-muscled guard, was so surprised that he wasn't reaching for the gun he had to have tucked somewhere. There was no code of chivalry to follow, it was about being the only one to leave the room alive. Freddie never had been a good shot, but at a range of no more than eight feet.....He fired three times into the guard's chest. The gun made three popping sounds and the guard hit the floor. They say you can't teach an old dog new tricks, but Freddie was an instant convert to silencers.

"Wow, these things are incredible." He said.

Tony had regained his composure a little, seeing his guard killed had probably helped. He was leaning forward, putting his hand under the coffee table where his meal on a tray waited to be eaten. A gun under there maybe, or a large knife, Tony had been good with knives.

"No, you don't." Shouted Freddie.

Difficult with the bat in his left hand, he still seemed to be right-handed in Bob's body. No chance of hitting the hand as it reached out, he had to make do with landing the baseball bat as hard as he could on Tony's left knee. It produced the desired effect.

"Crap.....What the hell.....Who the hell are you ?"

Tony wasn't long for this world, would aiming a gun at him have any effect ? He was right back in the sofa though, rubbing his injured knee. He definitely wasn't going to be able to get up and run out of the room.

"You paid someone to kill me you bastard. My wife and daughter too. Sit still, or I'll happily break every bone in your body."

"Freddie.....Is that you ? Great Santa outfit, the padding and beard....I didn't recognise you."

He's been so caught up in it all, the red mist had come down too, as he'd come through the window. Freddie had forgotten he was in Bob's body, with Bob's gravelly voice that sounded like Rod Stewart after a hard night's drinking. At least there wasn't going to be a lot of lies and denials. By knowing who he was, Tony had as good as confessed.

"Of course it's me you idiot." Said Freddie.

"Voice too....Is it some kind of device ?"

Freddie wasn't in the mood for a chat about his voice, or anything else for that matter. He'd come to kill Tony, though only after he'd found out about the hired killers. And their intentions of course, how and when they intended to kill his wife and daughter. Out of annoyance he used the bat again, hitting Tony hard on his left shoulder.

"Christ.....Alright, I'll keep still."

Freddie felt a twinge in his chest, though he had no idea if it was just a bit of hypertension, or Bob's heart about to stop beating again. He sat on the edge of the coffee table. The smell from Tony's meal was wonderful and he remembered it had been a while since he'd eaten anything.

"Why Tony ? After all these years. I can barely remember killing Bill now, it feels like someone else's memories. I was drunk and he was even drunker. You must remember how Bill never backed off. I cut him so many times and he cut me. Do you want to see the scars right across my side ? If I hadn't killed him, he'd have killed me."

"I know what he was like Freddie....He was my brother though; you killed my brother. I've nothing to lose, the consultant gave me two months, three if I'm lucky. So, I hired people to make you suffer, before killing you. You'd have done the same if I'd killed your brother."

"Yeah, I'll give you that.....Sally and Penny though ? Families are out of bounds, you know that."

"Alright, I'll admit I was going over the top. Anyway, you'll have moved them out of the house by now. I knew that bastard Kershaw hadn't killed you, not when all three of them were still alive. You'd have killed at least one of them. I knew he had to be lying, you'd never be that easy to kill. Paid him a small fortune too.....The lying bastard."

It was all falling into place. Freddie knew Kershaw, he'd been a fairly low-level drug dealer, the sort just about big enough to run supplies in a couple of postcodes. There'd always been a certain darkness about Kershaw, he seemed to enjoy hurting people. He'd joined the army at some point and they'd trained him up and driven the darkness in deep. If Kershaw was running with two other guys, they were probably ex-army too. Well trained and likely to be well armed.

"You don't owe them anything Tony. Tell me.....When were they planning to attack my house ?"

"Will you make it quick ? The gun rather than the claw hammer ?"

"Of course I will....We were good friends once." Said Freddie.

"Alright.....Kershaw did lie to me. They're going to kill everyone in your house just as the Queen gives her speech on Christmas Day. It seemed to amuse him, wiping out everyone in the place, as the Queen mutters about yet another annus horribilis, or some other crap."

Freddie prided himself on his memory, but it had been a hell of a couple of days. He hadn't so much as forgotten the second outside guard, as put a pin in his existence. With luck he'd have remained

outside, freezing his nuts off. Luck wasn't with Freddie at that moment. He felt something sharp in his left shoulder, followed by a hefty kick that sent him sprawling.

"Don't shoot him Gunther, use your knife." Yelled Tony. "Really fuck him up.....Kill him slowly."

Freddie's gun had gone somewhere as he'd been kicked, as had his beard. Instead of a nice white Santa beard, he now had Old Bob's grubby grey stubble. Luckily the claw hammer was still with him, he'd landed on top of it. As he turned his head, he saw a huge angry guy walking towards him, who had to be Gunther. He had a knife in his right hand, which was already red from stabbing him in the shoulder.

"Stop pissing about." Shouted Tony. "Gut the bastard and there's big bonus coming your way."

The twinges in his chest were back and his shoulder hurt like fuck. Freddie knew he wasn't finished though; he still had a job to do. Sally and Penny were probably wondering where the hell he was, but they'd still be sitting down to some sort of Christmas dinner. Sally loved watching the Queen doing her royal thing, she always timed dinner so she could watch it. As he turned Tony must have seen his face.

"Christ ! That's not Freddie.....He's not Freddie...."

Too late for Gunther to use his gun, he was just close enough for Freddie to kneecap him with the claw hammer. Down went the big guy and Freddie finished him off with a few merciless blows to the head. There was no code of honour for such fights. Freddie had done all that was required, he'd survived, leaving a dead opponent on the ground.

"What the hell have you got under there ?" Yelled Freddie.

Freddie had given up being reasonable, or at least what he considered reasonable. He picked up the gun with the silencer and fired at the hand Tony had under the coffee table. He missed, though he was becoming fond of the gentle pop the gun made, as opposed to the usual loud boom. The bullet tore up that corner of the coffee table, which made Tony jump back. Freddie felt under the table and found another gun with a silencer attached.

"Thanks Tony, I came here with one gun and will leave with no less than five. I promise to put them all to good use."

Tony Baker was giving him a weird look, of course he was.

"You're not Freddie."

Freddie Taylor was tired and ached all over. His shoulder was beginning to burn where he'd been stabbed and he was hungry. He was in no mood for a long conversation about the transference of souls. It was easier to use the claw side of the hammer on Tony's face. Yes, he'd promised not to, but that had been before Tony had told Gunther to fuck him up and kill him slowly.

"I am Freddie.....It's complicated."

He said, though he'd already hit Tony four or five times by then and he was probably already dead. He'd probably done his old friend a favour, a claw hammer was a faster death than the final stages of cancer. Freddie found the Santa beard, it might well be useful, despite having a little blood on it. The guns went in a pile with the dagger that had almost been his undoing. It all went in a bin liner he'd shoved in a pocket, in the hope of finding a few useful things.

So tempting to sleep, but he might well wake up surrounded by armed police. Eventually someone was going to come and collect the tray for Tony's meal. The food still looked good; the aroma amazing. Some sort of vegetable tagine, it looked delicious. He used a spoon to taste it, before deciding to finish it all. It had been a while since he'd eaten and it might be a while until he ate again. As for sleep.....He'd park the car a few miles away and grab a few hours there. Somewhere off the beaten track. Somewhere heading for home, his house.

~ ~

Freddie had been born in South London and he'd died in South London, sort of. Like taxis late at night, he didn't like to go north of the river. Some of his friends had moved to North London, a few had headed for Essex. Not Freddie though, his upmarket move had been to Dulwich. Surrounded by Peckham, Brixton and Camberwell, he'd managed to find a really nice house, plus hang onto his street cred.

"Sally loves this house; I hope she doesn't move." He muttered.

He'd arrived hours before, parking the Volvo far enough away from his house to see what was going on, without being seen. A couple of his people had been to the house, probably reporting in to Sally, letting her know they hadn't found him yet. No one would expect him to be dead, he had a reputation for being unstoppable.

"Well done Martin and Helen, I knew you'd look after her. She won't want them there for Christmas dinner though."

He knew Sally, they'd been married since Moses had been a lad. There had been a few rough patches, but he still loved her as much as the day they'd been married. Maybe more, they'd had long enough to know each other's foibles and yet.....They still loved one another. Whatever happened though, he'd decided that Freddie Taylor had to stay dead. No rushing up to her, no trying to explain. She'd never understand. He wasn't sure if he understood it himself. He had cash hidden in a few places and if he survived, Old Bob would start a new life somewhere.

"I've always fancied Bermuda. Somewhere in Tuckers Town." He mumbled.

Half an hour before the Queen was due to give her annual speech to the nation, he got out of the Volvo. The Santa costume was quite loose on him, more than enough space to hide a few guns, a dagger and his favourite of course, the claw hammer. No silencers on the guns, the time for being quiet and covert had passed.

To anyone watching he'd look like a Santa impersonator on the way to a kid's party. There was a small triangle of grass near his house. Just grass and a few bulbs in the spring, looked after by the local council. There was also a bench where teenagers tended to gather in packs on summer evenings. Freddie claimed the bench and waited.

"Kershaw will be early, he's the type to always be early." He muttered.

Would he know Tony was dead? It hadn't been on the radio news; Freddie had flicked through a few stations on the car's radio. Tony Baker had probably dropped below the radar as he'd grown older. No longer referred to on the news as a Crime Baron, he'd probably get a brief mention on the late news.

"Oh, how you'd hate that Tony."

Freddie knew it was them when he saw the Lexus enter the street, he'd always had a kind of sixth sense about such things. Being able to read the street and the people in it, was probably how he'd survived so long. Until he'd died in a grubby Deptford lockup.

"Alright.....Let's do it." He said.

Kershaw was army trained and it was likely the other two were. Local gangsters might leap out of a car as it pulled up, guns blazing. Kershaw and his boys would check their weapons, they'd probably then buddy check each other's guns. Freddie knew it was definitely them when he saw they were wearing the same hockey masks they'd worn in the lockup.

They looked up, who wouldn't look at a guy in a Santa costume? He looked straight ahead and they ignored him. Just another guy on his way to a party, or to give out presents at a homeless shelter. Freddie stopped right next to the Lexus and the three guys inside were still doing something to the

shotguns each of them were carrying. Freddie reached inside the bright red suit and brought out two guns, one for each hand. He had to say it again, yell it as loud as he could.

Ho.....Ho.....Ho!!”

Freddie knew the whole thing about car glass being bulletproof was a myth. There might be a little bit of a problem with bullets bouncing off a windscreen, when fired from a distance. He was on top of the Lexus, firing two large automatics. He was quickly surrounded by cubes of shattered glass. He thought Kershaw would be next to the driver, with the third guy in the back. He felt something hit his shoulder as the guns ran out of bullets. Someone was still moving inside the Lexus.

“Fuck you Kershaw, why won’t you die ?”

Bullet proof vests maybe, though he was so close and some of his rounds should have found a head or a neck. Freddie took another two guns out of his belt and began firing again. The noise was deafening, his ears were ringing. There was the smell too, the aroma of cordite, which was almost addictive. Something hit his stomach, as though held been punched. Freddie kept firing though, into the back of the Lexus and into the front. After those guns ran out of bullets, he dopped them. He was down to his last gun.

“I got you a present Kershaw.” He yelled.

Freddie wasn’t feeling too good, though he managed to lean through the passenger side window. They were dead, all three of them. He’d seen a lot of dead guys killed by bullet wounds and they were definitely dead. There could be no chance of them hurting his family, so he shot them all in the head, twice.

“Fuck.....That hurts.”

He began to feel the pain, one of them had shot him in the guts. The shotgun peppering that had caught his shoulder wasn’t too bad, but what looked like a large calibre bullet just above his belt.....That was going to kill him. As he looked down, he realised the pool of red at his feet, was his own blood. Freddie staggered backwards, ending up leaning on someone’s garden wall. It seemed an age until he heard the sound of sirens. Someone was walking towards him.

“Oh mum, it’s a poor old guy in a Santa costume.” Said Penny.

“Be careful.” Said Sally.

“Someone shot him mum.”

Freddie recognised their voices, Penny even knelt next to him as the darkness began to take him. No matter what might happen to him, his wife and daughter were safe. Sally came and stood at his feet, looking down at him.

“He must have been on his way to a party.” She said. “I called for an ambulance.”

An ambulance wasn’t going to save him. Freddie Taylor had already died once, he recognised the darkness closing in. He wondered where he’d be going this time, accepting that it probably wouldn’t be somewhere nice. He didn’t really deserve anything better, but it was Christmas after all. Anything could happen at Christmas.

~ ~

~ The End ~

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***** Happy Christmas Everyone!! *****