

The Hat

A seasonal short story set in West London, during Christmas 2016

“They were holding hands now, never a good sign for her parents. The last time they’d held hands, was to tell her that Timmy had killed her hamster.”

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Friday the 23rd December and Colin Daker was still in the office at three pm. Everyone else had gone home, the CEO hadn’t been in at all since Wednesday. Not quite everyone had gone home, two of the controllers had volunteered to be there until Saturday night and others would cover all of Christmas. Colin was the Sales Manager for a large courier company out by the airport, Heathrow. They never closed, someone had to be there to answer the phone twenty four seven.

“Doing a late one ? There’s fresh coffee in the kitchen.”

“Only until about four, but I’ll grab some of that coffee.”

The security guy carried on with his rounds, as Colin picked up his cup and headed for the kitchen. ‘Best Dad in the World.’

It said on his cup. Officially Miranda had chosen it for him, as a birthday present in September. Really his wife must have chosen it, but he still loved that cup and carefully cleaned it in the kitchen sink. The coffee smelled wonderful as he filled his cup and then added a drop of milk. His phone buzzed in his pocket, vibrating against his hip. Janet was showing on the phone, his wife, probably wondering why he was still at work.

“Sorry ! I have a few more emails, but I’ll be leaving here by four.”

“Miranda has a new hat.”

“Oh Crap ! I hoped she’d outgrown it. It must be the first since about May.”

“April, I have it marked on the calendar. This one looks very old, almost ancient.”

That alarmed him, they’d once found her wearing an old hat, that was infested with lice. It had taken weeks to get rid of them from her hair.

“No tiny occupants I hope ?” He asked.

“Looks clean, but I rubbed in some of the insect powder, just in case. I only just found it, rolled up in her blankets. She’s not saying much, wants to ‘tell daddy.’”

“I’ll be home well before five. Give her my love.”

“I will.”

He put the phone away and sipped his coffee. If only she’d grown out of it ! Miranda was seven and had a remarkable vocabulary for her age. She lacked the ability to use those words though, often unable to communicate her thoughts. They’d had a scare about autism for a while, but all the tests had come back negative.

“You have a bright child.” The Consultant had told them. “Her mind is still forming and kids her age often do show signs of odd behaviour. Like imaginary friends and sudden tantrums. She will probably outgrow it.”

Just as they hoped she’d outgrow the hats ! Luckily Miranda seemed to intuitively know that the hats weren’t to be talked of outside of the family. Janet had worried about her starting school, but so far at least, the school hadn’t called to say their daughter was crazy.

“It can all wait until after Christmas.” He muttered.

Colin turned off his computer and picked up his jacket. He was going home, until Monday 9th January.

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Janet Daker's company had given everyone the Friday off, though she did have to go back in for a couple of mornings over the long Christmas break. She ran the invoicing department for a software company and someone had to open the post, just in case any contained cheques. They were going through a period of tight cash flow and cash was King, even over Christmas. Janet put the phone down and watched her daughter playing with their cat. She looked so normal, just an ordinary seven year old. If it wasn't for the hats.

"Daddy will be home soon." She told Miranda.

Her daughter smiled and carried on teasing Timmy, the elderly cat that had belonged to her husband. The cat had moved into the marital home and he'd grown older, getting more ill-tempered with every passing year. He growled at visitors and shredded their post, but they loved him. Timmy was only truly friends with one person in the house, Miranda. Her daughter was a very special child, in the old original meaning of that word.

"Are you hungry?"

"No mummy."

Janet went into the kitchen and grabbed a few grapes out of the fruit bowl. She was hungry, but would wait for Colin to get home and make them both a sandwich. The hat, the first for nearly eight months, was on top of the fridge. She'd already examined the hat, but picked it up again. It was heavy, the felt top looked to be supported on a circlet of gold. No hallmark though, she'd already checked.

"If you're gold." She muttered. "It's a family holiday in Bali next year, maybe the Maldives."

More of a crown than a hat, but they'd begun to call everything that Miranda acquired a hat, it made talking about it easier. Not that their daughter seemed to know how she acquired the hats. She was a daddy's girl, though Janet tried her hardest not to resent that. She might have carried her for nine months and gained some nasty stretch marks, but Miranda always chose her daddy to tell her problems to. Janet had even used that, getting Colin to talk to her after the second hat turned up in their daughter's bed one morning.

"We live in a fourth floor flat." She'd said. "It can't have been pushed through her bedroom window. You need to talk to her, she'll tell you!"

Miranda had been three when the hats began appearing, young but still able to use some fairly advanced words, when she wanted to. The vocabulary was another strange thing, where was she learning words that even they needed to look up on Google?

"Maybe she's finding the hats in the street." He'd said.

"And hiding them where? She's three years old! You need to ask her and let her know it's serious."

It was serious, other children didn't pull hats out of nowhere, like some kind of magic trick. They'd sat their daughter down and Colin had given her his serious look.

"Did I do something bad Daddy?"

"No, we just need to know where you found this."

It had been a simple cloth cap the first time, Janet had been curious about it, but had simply thrown it out. The second hat was a pretty bonnet, like something out of period costume drama. Miranda had just shrugged.

"I didn't steal it."

“Of course you didn’t.” Colin had told her. “We just need to know where it came from. It’s important, can you think hard for me ?”

A three year old concentrating had involved a lot of furrowed brow, clenched jaws and eyes shut tight. Eventually Miranda shrugged once more.

“I have no idea how it got into my bed daddy, it’s..... inexplicable.”

Miranda usually spent her days at a local nursery, but there was no education involved. She was not only learning an advanced vocabulary somewhere, she was using the words correctly.

“Who taught you to say inexplicable ?” Janet had asked.

Their daughter looked guilty, the same look she had on her face after breaking something.

“The people.”

“What people ?” Colin had asked.

Their daughter began to cry and that day set the pattern for the next two years. Their daughter had learned enough words to fill a thesaurus and the hats turned up with frightening regularity. They’d kept them, filling three bin liners that lived in what had been a storage cupboard. It became the hat cupboard, as a new one arrived every couple of weeks. Some modern, some looking old and battered. They hadn’t put any more pressure on Miranda for an explanation until she was five. Then the policeman’s hat had arrived, complete with a fresh bloodstain.

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Colin Daker liked their flat, the block it was in and the neighbourhood. Best of all he liked the fact that it was quite close to where they both worked. Ideally they’d both wanted a house and garden, but that would be their next home. He’d even become used to the constant noise of jet engines overhead that close to the airport. His mind shut them out and they barely registered anymore. He got out of the lift and used his key on their front door.

“I’m home !” He yelled.

“In the kitchen.”

Tea was waiting for him, the heavy hat placed next to his cup. He picked it up, prodding at the metal with his fingernail.

“This looks like gold.”

“No hallmark, I looked. But we could pay to get it tested and marked.” Said Janet.

The felt looked new and there were no precious stones, but it looked like a crown of some kind. He dug the kitchen scales out of the cupboard. The digital screen showed just two ounces short of three pounds.

“About two and half pounds, allowing for the felt top and fur lining.” Said Janet. “I already weighed it and looked up the current price of gold on the net. It’s well over a thousand pounds an ounce.”

“Phew, then that makes this.....”

“A holiday in the Maldives.” She said. “Two new cars and maybe even a move and room for another child.”

A brother or sister for Miranda, they’d been thinking about it. He bounced the hat up and down in his hands. All that money, if it was gold. He dug his nail in again and the metal was yellow and soft and had that certain look. It was pure gold, no doubt about it.

“Tempting, but this has to belong to a museum or something.” He said. “It’s too valuable not to be missed.”

“No one had ever looked for any of the others.”

“Oh come on, who would know our daughter has them ? We agreed to never investigate any of the hats, in case it led the authorities back to Miranda.”

His wife was looking at him intently.

“Still, we currently have saving of a few hundred.” She said. “And you’re holding at least forty five grand in your hands.”

It was tempting, so damn tempting.

“We’ll see what Miranda says about the hat.” He said. “Get an idea of who it might belong to. We have never taken any risks about exposing our daughter’s ability though, even when she found the policeman’s helmet.”

He remembered that helmet, with blood on it, so fresh that it had stained his daughter’s bed sheets. “I’ve never been angry with you.” He’d told Miranda. “And I’m not now. You’ve done nothing wrong, but you need to tell us where this helmet came from !”

That shrug again, it had become infuriating. Colin had struggled to control his anger and frustration.

“Shrugging won’t do darling.” Janet had told her. “Someone might have been hurt, badly hurt.”

“No mummy ! There was a fight, but the policeman won.”

Their daughter became quite animated, actually jumping for joy.

“He even caught the robber !”

“How do you know that ?” He’d asked.

“I see things when I first touch the hats.” She’d replied. “Like being there, but they can’t see me. I saw the policeman shove the robber into the back of a van. The robber said some very bad words.” Very bad words ! Their daughter seemed to be learning a very advance vocabulary for a child. None of it made sense, but he’d remembered the stored hats. Only one bag full then and two loose ones on the floor. He’d emptied them all onto the lounge floor. Miranda just shook her head, guessing his idea.

“I only see things the first time I pick them up.”

“But you must remember something about them ?” He’d asked.

“Yes, I do.”

Miranda had looked happy, like any other five year old, playing a game. Colin chose the ladies bonnet, which looked quite old fashioned. Its origin had always interested him. He gave it to his daughter, watching her move it about as she remembered.

“A lady who seemed drunk.” Said Miranda. “There were lots of ladies wearing only their underwear.”

Their daughter had actually smirked at them.

“The lady was in charge, bossing the girls about. She was nasty to them, but she was nice to the men who came.”

Their five year old had described the manager of a Victorian bawdy house, though she was too young to understand what had been going on. To her it had been a party, where everyone seemed under dressed and intoxicated. Colin had found another hat.

“How about this one ?”

He held up a cycle helmet, the size indicated that it had belonged to an adult. Colin had wanted something modern to ask her about, something she might understand better. The cycle helmet looked new, modern and quite expensive.

“Oh yes Daddy, Harry lost that.”

“Do you know Harry ?” Asked Janet

Their daughter shook her head and looked at them as though they were fools.

“Of course not, Harry lives in America. He left his hat on a seat in the park and didn’t remember where. I think Harry is a bit silly !”

She had laughed for some time about silly Harry and they had joined in. A simple story about a man in America losing his cycle helmet. Colin looked inside the helmet and found a sticker on it, for a cycle store in San Francisco. He was digging around in the pile of hats, when Janet had touched his arm.

“She’s five dear and probable tired. Leave it for another time.”

It took over a month to get a brief history of each hat. A few at a time, their daughter talked of times and places she had no way of experiencing or understanding. There was no huge event marked by any of the hats, no epic sign sent from some sort of supernatural being. The hats just gave their daughter a glimpse, a slice in time of fairly ordinary places. One night, when Miranda was six and had just told them about an hour in the life of a nurse in Cardiff, Janet said something they’d both been thinking.

“She knows where the hats are coming from. She always looks so guilty when we ask.”

“Of course she knows. She’s just not going to tell us.”

Janet had been rolling her fingers over her thumb, pin rolling they call it, a sure sign of stress.

“Maybe she needs to see someone ?” She’d said. “I know she’s not delusional, the hats are real enough. But why is she hiding things from us ?”

“Could open up a huge can of worms dear. Are we admitting to the world that our daughter can pull hats from anywhere, maybe even through time. You can see how it will sound. We might end up as the ones in therapy.”

“So we do nothing ?”

“Yes, unless her school work suffers.”

It didn’t, Miranda made a good start to her schooling, getting good reports from her primary school teachers. As for English ?! An excited headmaster was already using the words ‘child prodigy.’ She was even writing fiction, about faraway places and people. It wasn’t fiction of course, they knew that.

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Janet let her husband finish his sandwich, before putting the heavy gold crown in front of him.

“Come on,” she said, “I’m curious to hear about this one.”

“I bet a museum creator lost it. Someone boring called Kevin, who owns a Skoda.”

She laughed with him, their daughter’s hats did seem to come from oddly mundane places. The bloody police helmet had been the high point, or low, depending on how you viewed it. Their daughter wasn’t like the mediums who give performances in the back rooms of pubs. There was no claim that every word came from a Red-Indian chief or Joan of Arc. The fact that their daughter saw events in the lives of ordinary people, was what gave her stories a ring of truth. Janet picked up a small packet of M&Ms, the usual reward for Miranda. There had to be something to make it more like a family chat and less like a police interview. Colin put the crown on the floor near their daughter.

“This has to be the best yet princess !” He said.

Their daughter sat cross legged on the floor, balancing the heavy crown on her lap.

“They say you can sell it if you want.” Said Miranda. “The man who owned it is long dead.”

“Who owned it ?” Asked Colin.

“A wise man, but also the ruler of his people. He inhabited a land far to the south of where Jesus was born, but he saw the signs and came to witness the event.”

Alarm bells were ringing in Janet's head. A wise man from the south and at Christmas. Plus something else was worrying her. They'd ruled out some paedophile filling Miranda's head with rubbish, but someone was talking to her.

"Who told you we could sell it?" She asked.

Again the familiar look of guilt.

"He said you wouldn't believe me!"

In a way, Janet had viewed the time since the first hat arrived, as a trip in an out of control elevator. Now that elevator was gaining speed and hurtling past the lower floors. Colin looked no better than her. Who the hell was this he, who Miranda had been keeping secret?

"We will believe you." Said Colin. "You can tell us anything."

"He's an Angel!"

The lift slammed into her emotional basement and kept on going. It was the look of love on her daughter's face, for whoever the angel was. Janet had dreaded the police and her daughter being examined for abuse, but it seemed likely to happen.

"Who dear?" She asked. "Who is this angel?"

"Not a person silly! A real angel with wings, beautiful wings."

She actually felt relieved. A seven year old with an imaginary angel as a friend was far better than the obvious alternative. There was still the fact though; that they had about three bags of hats and they'd arrived from somewhere.

"Sorry honey, daddy is being dense today." Said Colin. "Why does this angel give you hats?"

"He takes them from the people, to make them better of course."

"To cure an illness you mean?" Asked Janet.

Miranda was looking at them both with the long suffering look she was becoming so good at it.

"No mummy! Better people. I can explain it, if you like?"

"I think you need to." Said Colin.

"The angels don't boss people about. What would be the point of an angel waving a big sword and telling people what to do? They wouldn't be good people, just scared of the big sword."

Colin was looking at her. Their daughter of seven had just seen through the basis of much of Christian morality for the last few hundred years. Janet had to ask;

"So, this angel has a sword?"

"Of course he does. All angels carry terrible weapons, everyone knows that."

Everyone apart from her and Colin, who was shrugging at her. Janet's emotional elevator had hit bedrock, but she was now actually believing in angels with swords. It did fit the available evidence.

"They influence subtly." Continued Miranda. "A whisper here, a nudge there. Not a big budge of course just the slightest nudge in the right direction. Not all of them take hats, some take shoes and others just whisper in people's dreams."

Janet was beginning to understand.

"And losing a hat changes their direction, ever so slightly." She said.

"Yes Mummy. The lady with the bonnet thought she left it at her sister's house. She went to see her and found her to be sick and stayed to look after her. She never went back to..... That place."

Her daughter actually blushed slightly. Somewhere from being three to seven, she'd obviously realised what went on at a bawdy house. Miranda was seeing too much for a seven year old, far too much.

"What about the policeman's hat?" Asked Colin.

“Complicated.” Answered Miranda. “The helmet was important evidence, but the bad man was still sent to prison. The policeman wrongly accused a colleague of losing the helmet and eventually realised he was wrong. It was all about him learning just a little humility.”

“And the nurses hat ?”

For the first time their daughter looked awkward again.

“Each hat is someone else’s story daddy. Often a very personal and intimate part of their life. It would be wrong to tell you about some of them. The nurse’s hat marked a very bad part of her life.” Miranda opened the bag of M&Ms, obviously thinking that she’d earned her treat.

“Which brings us back to the crown and wise men with their gold, frankincense and myrrh.” Said Janet. “Are you saying that the nativity really happened ?”

Miranda laughed and kept on munching at her treats. It was as if she was using chewing as thinking time.

“They’re just symbolic mummy.” She replied. “Like old, new, borrowed and blue at weddings. Gold was just a wish for a comfortable life. Frankincense was used in funerals, a wish in a way for a long life and a reminder that we’re all mortal. As for myrrh ? It’s the present no one wants to get.”

She was laughing and they laughed with her. Miranda looked tired and it was long past their normal time to eat.

“Come on.” Said Janet. “Time we ate and as we’re all home tomorrow, you can tell us the rest then.” She put Miranda to bed at her usual time and went to join her husband on the sofa. Watching a movie on Netflix had become part of their evening ritual.

“What did you think of all that ?” She asked. “Stealing hats to nudge people into being better people, it’s all a bit.....”

“Like a Disney movie.” Said Colin. “I agree, but I also believe her. Have you ever known Miranda to lie ?”

“Tiny lies, all kids lie. But nothing as complex as this. I believe her too.”

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Christmas Eve was an exciting whirl for Miranda. She invited herself to join her dad, as he drove to a nearby butcher’s shop to pick up a fresh turkey. The man behind the counter wrapped the bird in paper and then put it in the large bag they’d brought with them.

“Nice bird.” Said the man. “All cleaned and ready to go in the oven tomorrow.”

Then they’d gone to buy fruit. Oranges which she hated, but lots of satsumas, which were her favourite. Back home and her mother had a cook book out and was baking homemade mince pies. Everything was different from a normal Saturday, everything was exciting. They ate together at lunchtime and then a few of the neighbours came in to see her parents. After the third time of having her cheek pinched by an old lady, Miranda had gone to her room.

“Oh, hasn’t she grown !”

Smiling and pretending to enjoy being pinched and prodded had been too much. She read and played with Timmy until the visitors had all gone home. Something told her it was time for her to finish the story of the golden crown. Perhaps a sixth sense, or it might have been Timmy, running off as he heard the sound of his food bowl being rattled. It was that time again, between late afternoon and the time they ate.

“I was just going to call you.” Said her mum.

There was coffee for them and juice for her, they’d obviously decided to make an event out of it. Even Timmy had joined them, still licking his lips as he climbed into her lap. A family event, maybe

that was how it was supposed to be. Her parents were patiently sat on the couch, while she sat on the floor, trying to get the words right in her head.

“So, the nativity never really happened?” Asked her dad.

For a split second she hated him, her neatly rehearsed opening was ruined. Nothing else for it, wing it!

“Easier to get through the list of things that didn’t happen.” She said. “For a start, the Romans never did have that census. Dragging people all over the empire to their places of birth is nonsense.”

“So why did they put in in the story?” Asked her mum.

“Politics of the day. If we had a second coming, the Russians would claim he was born in Moscow and the Americans would claim New York was his birthplace. Bethlehem was close to Jerusalem, the New York of its day. They just needed a way of getting Joseph and Mary to that part of the world.” Her parents were looking at each other and shrugging. That usually meant they’d heard her, but hadn’t really taken it all in. Miranda decided to push on with her story.

“Next, no single woman would go off with a man, her neighbours would have more than likely, stoned her to death. Mary and Joseph would have been a married couple and the birth would have been wherever they were living.”

“So no stable?” Asked her mum.

“No stable, no livestock watching, all that was made up years later. Jesus was born in a bedroom, probably with the help of a local midwife. Even the date is wrong, he was born around the middle of what we’d have called April.”

“What is true?” Asked her dad. “Did any of it really happen?”

Finally they were back to the section she’d spent hours rehearsing in her mind.

“The most important thing is that it did happen.” She said. “Jesus was the son of Joseph and Mary, but he was also something far more than that. There were no throngs of villagers or animals, but there were angels to witness his birth and the three wise men. All of them rulers of their own kingdoms. They’d seen the star in the sky and knew how to calculate its meaning.”

“And you saw all this?” Asked her mum.

“Yes mummy, I saw him and the angels with their beautiful wings.”

They were holding hands now, never a good sign for her parents. The last time they’d held hands, was to tell her that Timmy had killed her hamster.

“Don’t worry.” Said Miranda. “They did say that if you’re too freaked out, the hats can stop arriving. The crown can be the last. If you want that?”

“The angel told you that?” Asked her dad.

“He didn’t say freaked, but yes, the angel said it.”

More looking at each other and shrugging. Her parents were smart people, but suddenly learning that angels really existed was quite a bit to take in. Add that fact that Jesus was real and she could understand why they looked a little traumatised. Her dad brought the conversation back to earth.

“But, we can sell the crown?”

“Yes, if you want. Think of it as a Christmas present.”

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Colin Daker tried to get out of bed quietly, the digital bedside clock was showing three thirty three am. Christmas morning and he was getting up to put Miranda’s presents in her room. He could see the irony of pretending to be Santa for a child who’d seen the birth of Christ, but it was tradition. Normally he’d have spread her presents round her room earlier, but Miranda had been unsettled by the crown and he wanted to make sure she was sound asleep.

“Oh, why didn’t you do it earlier.”

“She might have been awake.”

Janet gave a huge sigh and rolled over. He found the bag full of presents, a huge green bag for garden refuse. It was only bag they had big enough, to hold the dozen assorted boxes that they’d been slowly buying since about May.

“Sorry Timmy.” He whispered.

The cat had been asleep on his dressing gown, obviously thinking it was his for the night. Timmy growled, but allowed himself to be moved to the chair beside the bed. Colin stood up and gave himself a few seconds to properly wake up.

Sack held carefully in front of him, Colin walked along the short corridor and gently opened his daughter’s bedroom door. She was awake and talking to someone. It all happened so fast, the hint of a glow and the sound of rushing wind. Miranda was alone, sat up in bed and smiling at him.

“That was him, wasn’t it ?” He asked. “The angel ?”

“One of them, there are quite a few of them.”

He looked at the bag of presents, that little bit of Christmas magic was well and truly killed off.

“I’ll just leave the bag by your dressing table.” He said.

“No daddy ! Put them out for me. I always look forward to that.”

He placed the various boxes around her room, as though Santa’s elves had spread them about.

“There’s even milk and biscuits for you.” Said Miranda.

“That’s been there for hours, the milk will be halfway to being cheese by now. I’ll share the biscuits with you though.”

He scrunched up the now empty bag and sat on her bed, helping himself to a biscuit from the saucer left for Santa. There was something obvious about his daughter, something that had been worrying him.

“Are we going to lose you ?” He asked.

She was examining him, but not looking startled by the question. It was fairly obvious that the angels weren’t bringing her the hats out of some kind of eccentricity.

“All those hats, all those lessons in nudges.” He continued. “I’m guessing that you’re destined to be more than our little girl, much more.”

She had the crown in her hands, but it wasn’t really in her hands. There was just the dull glow from a Finding Nemo night light, but his eyes were becoming used to the gloom. The crown hovered a few inches above his daughter’s hand and that didn’t surprise or shock him.

“Cursed by prophecy, some would say.” She said. “I will always be your little girl though. I need to go to school, get an education and begin a career. Then it will be time for it all to start again.”

“Can you tell me about it ?”

“What I know daddy, plans aren’t precise yet. Last time it was the Roman world with nice straight roads and travellers spreading news. Now there is the internet, things should be easier.”

“So, a woman this time.”

“Yes, they thought it appropriate to the current time.”

His daughter ! Colin was proud and scared in about equal measure. He just hoped it didn’t mean her being nailed to anything. It was the twenty first century, the establishment were more likely to invent a reason to have her locked up. Anyone trying to do good and get people to be nice for a change, usually ended up being arrested for something.

“We’ll talk to your mother, but perhaps you need to keep receiving the hats.”

Miranda laughed and the crown was suddenly in his lap. Colin picked it up and spun it about, watching the gold glint in the glow from the night light.

“This really belonged to one of the wise men ?”

“Yes, called Herod. There were a lot of men called Herod then and he tried to rebel against the Roman Empire. He lost of course.”

“And I can really sell it ?”

“Yes, you’ll need the money to move house.”

No more questions, he could tell by her expression that she was dying to tell him something.

“Mum will be pregnant again soon, a little sister. This time, there will be two of us.”

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~The End ~

© Ed Cowling – Christmas 2016

“I will honour Christmas in my heart, and try to keep it all the year.”

— Charles Dickens