



Author

Santa's *little helper*

In a special festive short story written by Carmel Harrington, we discover the real meaning of Christmas

Maisie

"What's that boy?" A flash of aquamarine catches my attention. I take a closer look through my kitchen window, something, I can't quite work out what, is pendulous from a branch of the old willow tree.

Much like me, it's withered with age. A memory of Pat and I planting it, as newlyweds, crushes me. Time heals they say. Well they know nothing, because five years later, I still feel the loss of my husband, as acutely I did the moment he exhaled his last breath.

Jesse, my labrador barks in approval when I open the back door.

"Go on then, boy," I say, smiling as he takes off, giddy with the unexpected jaunt outside. Cold wind blasts my face, and I consider ignoring my inquisitiveness and retreating inside. But a frenzied Jesse is already circling the foot of the tree.

"Alright boy." I take care as I walk. Last week, I managed to rear end myself, a casualty of wet leaves. Aside from the damage to my now purple and gold backside, the indignity of being unable to get back up, lingers. Old age is a plague. Lying there, shaking and cold, I never missed Pat so acutely.

"It's just a balloon," I tell Jesse, disappointed. I reach up, clasp it between my arthritic hands and Jesse barks his approval.

Hang on, there's a plastic sandwich bag tied to the end of the balloon. How curious. A shiver of excitement runs down my spine when I discover a note.

Dear Santa,

"This letter is from me and my little sister Rachel, who is seven. She is good, most of the time. Mammy says that this year you won't be able to bring us very much, but that's okay. We know that there is a session on. I'm

not sure what a session is, but it sure makes mammy sad and I don't like it.

"Can you help her not to be so sad? I will be so good, you won't believe it.

Love Annabel O'Grady, eight-years-old."

Jesse's brown eyes glisten with sorrowful knowledge as I read the words out loud. His eyes tell me, 'You have to help them.' Yes. I do.

For the first time since Pat died, I feel necessary. It took some doing, but I found them! The winds were that strong the balloon could have originated anywhere, so I spent days emailing schools nationwide, asking them did they have the girls enrolled.

I Googled. I phoned. And I despaired ever finding them, when all I got back was lengthy excuses about privacy laws.

I pick up the local newspaper and look at the photograph once more. Two girls, captured unawares, prettily bundled against the cold December night with winter woolies.

The caption, 'Annabel and Rachel O'Grady, The Ballagh, Co Wexford, watch the official lights switched on by Wexford Ambassador Anne Doyle.'

A phone call to a friend who lives in the area confirms that I've found them. Family struggling financially, low income, decent, but in need of a helping hand.

"Well now, Jesse. Let's have some fun."

Marian

"Not pasta again!" Rachel complains. And before I have a chance to answer, Annabel, my little aide, states, "It's cheap and cheerful, more than most get."

Hearing my overused catchphrase, about all dinners I prepare these days, shames me. I vow to myself that somehow I'll make Christmas dinner special. Roast chicken, all the trimmings.

"Mammy, there's someone at the door!"

Rachel shouts as the bell rings. I turn the heat off the tomato sauce and wearily walk down our hall.

"Marian O'Grady?" A driver asks, clad in a grey Tesco jacket. When I nod, he starts to bring in crates of shopping.

Rachel and Annabel jump up and down, peering inside the colourful trays that appear, resplendent with treats we've not bought for a long time. Christmas cake, puddings, mince pies, Turkey and Ham, pates, cheeses, chutneys, tins of sweets and biscuits, jars with cherry red lids.

"There must be some mistake."

The driver hands me a red envelope. "I'm to give you this."

I open it, with trembling hands, a cheque for €1,000 enclosed between a Christmas card, with Santa's face twinkling at me.

"Dear O'Grady family, Santa sent me Annabel and Rachel's balloon message. Have yourselves a Merry little Christmas, with love from Santa's little helper."

Annabel takes the letter from me, reading it out loud, tears splashing down her cheeks.

"I told you he'd find it," she tells Rachel, who is halfway through a Penguin bar.

I don't believe it's really ours until the driver is gone, the street empty but for a little old lady, walking a black labrador.

"Merry Christmas," she shouts, stopping for a moment, smiling.

The dog barks and then they move on.

"Merry Christmas," I reply, pulling my girls in close. **WW**



Every Time a Bell Rings by Carmel Harrington (HarperImpulse, €9.99) is out now online and in bookshops