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Grumpy Old Christmas

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Extract

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Preface



If you are a Grumpy Old Man, the chances are that you have been given this book as a Christmas present.

Indeed, the likelihood is that it's Christmas morning right now, and you've received this book about ten seconds ago. In fact, I've got a strong feeling that you have just opened the wrapping paper, and are having to flick through the first couple of pages with a half-smile on your face to show that you are appreciative and can't wait to get started on reading it. Yes, I've got a clear mental image of you squinting at the irritatingly tiny type and wondering where the hell your specs are.

Whoever has given it to you – most likely your impertinent kids or lovely wife or sister-in-law – is looking at your face right at this very moment for signs of your reactions. And if that's the case, you're probably wondering how on earth you're going to show something resembling appreciation, when you've already dug deep into your reserves of dissembling to indicate pleasure at receiving a de-luxe car-care kit, a novelty tie, a CD of Santana's greatest hits that you've already got, and a bottle of red wine with 'Old Git' written on the side.

Well, you've got a couple of alternatives (and I know I can't keep

you long because you're going to have to react in the next few seconds or so). One of them is: 'Oh thanks so much. I've loved the TV series and this is by the same bloke who wrote it. I'll enjoy that.' That's got a lot to recommend it. It's polite, neutral and will allow you to move swiftly on to open the plastic wood-effect cuff-link tidy that goes next to your bed. (Good luck with showing appreciation for that one, by the way.)

Another is to tell the truth, which is more along the lines of: 'If one more person reminds me this year that I'm just like all those miserable bastards on the telly because I'm always going on and on about the same things they are going on about, I'll drill out their brain and fill the hole with snow.' Maybe that one is less warmly to be recommended; it may be seasonal, but perhaps it doesn't get Christmas off to quite the start you all want.

So how about a response which just gives everyone a good laugh because it confirms for them that you are, as they all already suspect, a Grumpy Old Man who can just about tolerate all the bollocks surrounding Christmas, but is unlikely to want to throw a party every time someone gives you a modestly amusing gift.

Something like: 'Mmm. Thanks. Just what I wanted.'

That'll give them all a little anecdote to tell about you to their friends. 'Yeah, the old man just about raised a smile when we gave him that book about the bloody stupid TV series. Yeah, right, proves he's a grumpy old bastard. Pass the alco-pops.'

OK? So, repeat after me, with feeling: 'Mmm. Thanks. Just what I wanted.'

Congratulations. You've just given purpose to our lives as Grumpies – for it is our lot to spread a little innocent amusement at our own expense to those around us, and I can almost hear the gales of laughter echoing across time and space.

And the book? Well, my advice would be to put it in the bog and read a paragraph or two when you are taking a shit. That's more or less how I wrote it. But don't worry; I always remembered to wash my hands.

SP

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'Tis the Season to be Grumpy



So … I've been trying to think what it is. You know, what it is in particular about Christmas that brings out the worst in Grumpy Old Men. Why should it be, do you suppose, that while everyone else is wishing each other a merry Christmas, sending festive greetings cards to people they scarcely see from one year to the next, thinking about goodwill to all men, why is it that this is the time of year most guaranteed to get up our snitches?

Well, I guess you can take your pick really, can't you? It's anything and everything – from the breakfast telly presenters who tell us there are now just 120 shopping days to go, to the annual festive strike by airport baggage handlers.

From office parties where drunken juniors, who have waited the whole year for the opportunity, finally tell you what 'the trouble with you is …', to parents videoing their precocious brats starring in the atrocious school nativity play when your kid is playing the part of the donkey's rear end.

From the woman next door who drops in to show your wife the diamond ring her prat of a husband has bought her, to the



150th opportunity to see *Whistle Down the Wind* on the telly.

From that very special variety of constipation you feel after eating more turkey in one meal than you eat in the whole of the rest of the year put together, to the unvarnished joy of picking Christmas tree needles out of the fibres of your car rugs right up to Easter.

Oh yes, it's all this and so very much more.

But none of that quite captures the essence of it. Sure, there is irritation in all of the above and so much more besides, but as far as the average Grumpy Old Man is concerned, it's all much of a muchness. All just variations on the general theme. None of these events on their own, nor even the whole collection, quite

accounts for the very particular brand of crabby grouchiness that pervades us at this time of the year.

Well, the good news is that I think I have the answer. I've given it an enormous amount of thought; far more, in fact, than is good for me or for those unfortunate enough to be around me. But I've got it. And now I'm going to share it with you.

Ready?

The main reason why we are at our grouchiest, grumpiest, uncontrollably mitherly worst at this time of year is that "'tis the season to be jolly'. Yes that's right, you know the sort of thing. 'Deck the halls with whatever it is of holly …' "'Tis the season to be jolly. Tra la la la la la la la la.'

Now exactly why on earth would that be? Why would this be the season to be jolly? What the hell has any of us got to be jolly about? Does anyone have any idea?

Let's face it. It's been yet another crap year, and the only thing that feels remotely worth celebrating is that, in spite of everything and to the disappointment of many of the people close to you, it looks as though you might be surviving to the end of it. Everything is worse. Yes, I mean that; everything.

I repeat the 'everything' because you may think I'm joking. Why should I say that? Well, because I've found that since I've been writing these books and TV series about the lives and loathes of Grumpy Old Men, quite a few people seem to feel the need to have a little laugh about it.

'Oh we love that series,' they'll often say. 'We agree with every word of it.' All of which is nice, and even I am not so grumpy that I don't enjoy the occasional compliment. But then they'll go ahead and spoil it. 'Of course, you're joking, right? Obviously it's not really true that most things are worse, is it?'

Usually at this point they look at me, half hopefully, as though I'm going to say something like: 'Oh yes, of course most things are better, but it's just that I think it's a jolly jape to run around

the place saying that everything is worse.' As though I'm just doing it for some sort of perverse pleasure or for the sake of my health. Yes, that's right; I jaunt around *thinking* that everything is getting so much better, but *saying* that everything is getting so much worse. For fun.

So let's be clear. I mean it. I'm not trying to be funny (which may be just as well, I hear you say). This year everything has got so much worse. I mean everything.

Don't believe me? Well, let's go through a few things, shall we? Let's start with the personal as it applies to me, but as it may also apply, at least in part, to you.

Another year has all but passed and I'm a little bit older. A little bit fatter. A little bit greyer. A little bit thinner on top, but I have a little bit more hair growing out of my ears and nose. I'm a little bit more wrinkly and a little bit stiffer in the joints. I sleep a little bit less well, my digestion plays up just a little bit more, I've got a little bit less money and my car is a little bit closer to needing to be replaced. My endowment mortgage is promising to disappoint, the PEP I was advised to start ten years ago still hasn't returned to the value it had in 1996, and the lovely Gordon has just told me that I'll probably have to work to sixty-eight if I want a pension.

My house is in a little bit worse state of repair and the decorator is a little bit less likely to come since I told him last time that Stephen Hawking could have done a better job of wallpapering the hallway. My children are just a little bit more costly and a little bit more objectionable. My wife is just a little bit more irritated with me and one of the cats has died.

Why has the cat dying made my year worse, considering that I don't like cats? That's easy; we've still got one cat left and somehow or other, inexplicably, one cat seems more of a bloody nuisance than two.

OK, OK, a little self-centred. A little egocentric. That's just me.

What about the rest of you? Even if everything is getting worse for me personally, surely it isn't doing so in the wider world? OK, where should we start? It doesn't matter; we can start anywhere.

Every time I pick up the newspapers, even the proper ones, I'm reading on page one about the impending marriage/pregnancy/divorce of celebrity airhead number one to airhead number two, while I have to wait till about page twelve to read a story about anything that actually matters. Every time I turn on the telly the news presenters are behaving as though they are my 'mate' in some way and are addressing me as though we're in a pub. Every time I turn on the radio there is some totally gibbering idiot warbling mindless vacuous rubbish in between bits and pieces of what passes for music but which is actually totally disposable bollocks that is hardly even here today before it's gone tomorrow.

There is a little bit more traffic and most of the owners of all those extra cars must live and work near me because my commute takes a little bit longer. (Sorry, that's about me again, but it could just as easily be about you.) There's a few more people who want to dig up the road, and the people who want to dig up the road are even less likely than they once were to call each other up and ask if there's anything anyone else wants to do beneath the surface while they're at it. There's a few more people putting obelisks in the road, further obstructing a journey to work which is already like a bloody commando assault course.

The price of anything I want to buy is just a little bit higher, and is now about five times what I think would be reasonable rather than four times as it was last year. There is just a bit more crime, and a bit more of whatever crime there is seems to be violent crime. The police seem less likely to catch anyone for anything as trivial as breaking into someone else's house, and when they do, a judge ticks them off. Despite that, the prisons are full and we have to build more if there is not to be a 'crisis'.

Oh, and there is, of course, a 'crisis' in the health service.

Enough already? We have hardly even started.

There is just a little bit more tension in the world and on any given day any of us seems just a little bit more likely to get blown to smithereens for some cause that we won't even get a glimpse of as our brains are flying in one direction and our feet in another. There's just a little bit more racial tension, just a little bit bigger gap between rich and poor, and we're just a little bit closer to whichever is the version of Far Eastern flu that's eventually going to wipe out the majority of us. The education system is worse, vandalism is worse, politicians are worse. Oh, and at this time of the year it's getting colder. And wetter.

So, fairly shit, huh? Not much to celebrate there, do you think? But oddly enough, none of that is really the problem. Grumpy Old Men aren't especially grumpy because everything has become worse. Good God, we're well used to that by now, or at least we should be. No, Grumpy Old Men are grumpy at this time of the year because, despite all of the above and so much more, 'Tis the season to be jolly', and so everyone around us is trying so very hard to be so.

Which would be bad enough if they just got on with trying to 'be jolly' and left us the hell alone. But they don't. It even somehow seems to be a constituent part of their jolliness, for some reason we can only guess at, that we should also 'be jolly' with them. (Some hope!)

They say things to us like: 'Cheer up, it might never happen' – which is a complete misunderstanding. We're not looking glum because we're expecting anything bad to happen; not dreading anything. We're just grumpy because of what is. Because of the human condition. Because the world is so screwed up that being grumpy is the only rational thing to be. And being surrounded by people imbued with a seasonally adjusted sense of bubbly bonhomie is not going to contribute a feline fart to cheering us up.

Quite the contrary. We're grumpy in any event, and we're grumpier than ordinarily we would be because cheerful people around us are saying things like: 'Cheer up, it'll soon be Christmas.'

As if.

So that's it then. If you are someone who wants to deck the halls with thingummys of holly, that's great for you. Enjoy it. But if you've got a Grumpy Old Man in your life, your best Christmas gift to him would be to leave him the hell alone.

Or does that seem a bit too grumpy?