



## ***A Frosty Gift***

*'A present will arrive at 16.45 and a half on your birthday.'*

It had taken Joseph some time to read the scrawled handwriting, his efforts aggravated by the card's crinkled edges and brown age-marked corners. There was no clue as to where it had originated except that the stamp was Canadian. Eventually, Joseph made out the barely legible signature - *'Ricardo'*. Uncle Ricardo! Was he really still alive? He'd be over a hundred by now! Joseph grinned. His uncle was obviously just as eccentric as when they last met, sixty years ago. Joseph was just five years old then. A rather timid, self-conscious child, he had been frightened, mystified, enchanted all at the same time. His memory of Uncle Ricardo was a tall, wizened man in rough, untidy clothes, a long bushy beard, and a deep thunderous laugh. There was an air of magical excitement about him. It rolled around in his deep *'eat you all up'* voice. He had been in England for a few days and called to say hello to his family. Joseph had no way of knowing if the visit had been planned to coincide with his birthday, but Uncle Ricardo's presence had made the day memorable. It was still a vivid recollection for more than one reason.

Joseph remembered even now how everyone laughed when Uncle Ricardo asked him what was the one best thing he would wish for a birthday present. All those who had been there were now no longer around to remind him of his answer - or of his embarrassment over their laughter. Joseph was now living alone in the

farmhouse where he had been born, adjacent to the land he had farmed until retirement this year. Times-past were just his own personal memories now.

Half past four. Joseph paced the wide dark-timbered hall with the card in his hand again, reading its brief message. *'After all these years I have remembered our last time together and am sending you the birthday present you wanted most. She will arrive at 16.45 and a half on your birthday. She just needs company for a couple of days, no feeding necessary. She speaks your language. She's Frosty. Have fun!'* To say Joseph was as much apprehensive as bewildered would be a gross understatement. A child's embarrassing moment can be deeply embedded in the mind.

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He remembered that fifth birthday - just as calm and warm a Spring day as today. He recalled only too clearly that strange desire which had enveloped his mind for weeks and produced his spontaneous birthday wish.

In the hall his family's grandfather clock slowly ticked the minutes towards quarter to five - and thirty seconds. Joseph could not bring himself to look out of the window. Was it fear of the unknown? Disbelief? Or the fear of further embarrassment? The clock sang the three quarters. He heard a child shriek and feet running in the lane outside. I immediately the four forty-five and a half moment came and he swung the front door wide and shivered in his worst fit of fears.

*'Hello!'* It was a growl, yet Joseph heard it as distinctly as if he was listening to Ricardo's deep voice all those years ago.

*'Hello! I'm Frosty!'*

Joseph stared at the huge black nose twitching below warm friendly eyes. Was she smiling? The expression caused Joseph to wonder if he should hug her or retreat behind the front door. It was the confused reaction of a sixty year old man rediscovering his fifth birthday dream. One enormous fur covered foot and leg stepped onto the doormat.

'Frosty!' Joseph gasped as collectedly as he was able. *'How can you be frosty? I thought it would be just the opposite.'* He refrained from continuing *'and with all that blubber round your middle to keep you warm,'* but the words died on his lips.

The huge polar bear on Joseph's family doorstep roared with real bear laughter. *'No,'* she growled. It was more a happy purr than a growl. *'I'm Frosty. That's my name!'* A terrified young face had plucked up courage to peer round Joseph's front gate so he grabbed the tip of the huge paw extended towards him, winced at the gentle grip of his hand, and hurriedly ushered the bear into the hall.

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Frosty lay down, taking up three quarters of the hall's length. *'Ricardo sent me to say Happy Birthday Joseph! I can't stay long.'* Joseph felt deep relief flow through him. *'I won't be any trouble,'* Frosty assured him. *'I don't need anything. I'm happy and well fed.'* Joseph had assumed the latter from the fishy aura surrounding his visitor.

*'I want to spend the time telling you about Ricardo. That's what he asked me to do. Sit down Joseph. You're not afraid of me, are you? Sixty years ago you said you wouldn't be! We can stay here in this hall. I'm sure your rooms are too small for me. Ricardo explained all that to me and told me what to expect. The carpet's warm here and I'm not so likely to knock anything over.'* The bear had an uncanny detailed awareness of Joseph's fears!

Joseph had many questions at the front of his mind, but most of them seemed irrelevant just now as the bear questioned him about the farm and life in an English village. Suddenly it seemed quite natural to be speaking with a polar bear who had the same quaint growling drawl of Uncle Ricardo, and in very short time Joseph felt amazingly at ease with his visitor. They were well into conversation when they heard children's voices outside, followed by a loud knocking on the door.

Reluctantly Joseph got up and opened the door just a little - wide enough to see the uniformed police officer in the porch.

*'Good afternoon Sir!'* The officer was obviously suspicious of the crack-of-the-door welcome. *'We've had reports of a sighting of a wild animal in the vicinity. Have you seen anything?'* Joseph heard a low growl behind him, *'Wild animal indeed! That's insulting. I'm not wild - at least not yet unless he says worse things!'* The officer had heard the growl and tried to peer round Joseph and through the door gap. The growl behind Joseph said, *'Tell him you think the children were playing games outside pretending they'd seen a polar bear. Then invite him in. Joseph felt himself go rigid. 'Trust me! I'll be back when he's gone.'*

Joseph had no option. He repeated Frosty's words and opened the door. Turning to admit the policeman, he was amazed - the hall was empty!

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*'I'll keep an eye open officer,'* he muttered.

*'Thanks,'* replied the policeman. *'Kids have such vivid imaginations. I expect there were sheep out on the road.'* He turned to go, then turned his head and sniffed the air. *'Had a morning's fishing?'* he enquired.

When Joseph closed the door he received another of the many shocks allotted to him for his sixty-fifth birthday. The polar bear was there - exactly as he had left her.

*'How did you do that?'*

The bear grinned, her mouth wide as though it was about to eat his nose. *'Your Uncle Ricardo and I have a rather different life-style to other people and animals. Ricardo has discovered all sorts of natural gifts and secrets. I've come to tell you about him, so why not get your fish supper and I'll tell you all about him.'* She laughed - a full half chuckle - half purr.

The evening was one of those long, long, long times which pass so quickly, and are so magically enchanting that you have the impression of being outside of

time and space, living in a wonderfully full and free experience of mind and spirit. Joseph had once tried to explain this idea of there being another spiritual dimension to life when he was in a church study group. The group's response was expressed in dumfounded looks which he perceived were the same kind heretics were given when tied to burning stakes. What Frosty and Uncle Ricardo thought was very much what he had tried to explain to the church group.

At last, Joseph started to yawn. Frosty suggested it was time to rest. *'What have we planned for tomorrow morning?'* she asked. *'I shall have to leave soon after 12.31.to catch the bend in time.'*

*'Well, it's Sunday,'* Joseph hesitated. *'I usually go to Church for the morning service, but if you prefer to talk or walk round the farm....'*

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*'No. No.'* said Frosty. *'I'd love to go to your church. Ricardo suggested I should. I'll look after myself tonight and see you in the morning.* Joseph knew better now than to ask for details.

He did not sleep well. His mind was too active - too full of memories, of unanswerable questions and mysteries. He rose early, dressed, washed and shaved quickly and remembering the excitement of his fifth birthday when Uncle Ricardo was waiting for him at breakfast. Joseph was surprised - not to find Frosty of last night waiting for him at the bottom of the stairs. She was there but a much smaller polar bear this morning. Once again Frosty seemed to know what Joseph was thinking before his astonished gape could turn to speech.

*'I've not been on a crash diet,'* the bear purr-growled happily. *'I just thought it would be better for our outing this morning. Churches aren't often polar bear size!'* Joseph was relieved. He could manage a bear who was not much bigger than a St Bernard. He kept that thought to himself for fear of offending Frosty, but she would know. Uncle Ricardo had probably warned her that the church would probably not be very polar-bear-friendly. Then he remembered St. Martin's did have occasional 'Pets Services'.

Frosty may have looked as though she had been dieting but she still managed to enjoy several rashers of raw bacon before prowling around the yard until Joseph was ready. He had been planning this morning expedition but envisaged so many obstacles he gave up, assuming that Frosty would know exactly what was needed. *'I thought we should walk across the fields rather than go by the road,'* he ventured to explain. The bear grinned and growled, knowing full well what Joseph implied. Joseph accepted how simple it was to communicate without all the words - and how honest he had to be with his own thoughts. Uppermost in his mind were pictures of what would happen when they arrived at the Church, yet at the same time a feeling that Frosty probably had that all in hand. Or should that be 'in paw' he mused?

Relishing the early-frosted grass, Frosty rolled over a few times, wetting her fur and drawing inquisitive stares from a group of young heifers. The sheep in the

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field nearest the Church were more cautious though equally nosy. Frosty increased her size to near normal for a moment and the sheep moved away with speed towards the safety of the far hedge.

*'How do you do that?'* Joseph asked as Frosty just as easily slipped back to her St Bernard size.

*'With much practice and concentration.'* She replied. *'Your uncle Ricardo taught me that along with many other lost arts of the life-dimension he discovered.'*

There were only two cars in the Church car park. One was Vicar Jennifer's. The ancient Morris Minor belonged to Jack Richards the 'eternal' Church Warden. *We're often only four of us at the regular service..... No, five.* Joseph paused to correct himself and pointed to the little girl opening the gate from the road.

*'There's little Lisa. She lives close by here and comes to sit with her grandmother.'* Half way across the car park Lisa stopped short, staring wide-eyed at Frosty. Assured by *'Uncle' Joseph's* presence she ran across. *'Is he real? Can I stroke him?'* Frosty gave a low growl and Joseph explained diplomatically. *'It's not him. It's her. Her name is Frosty.'* Lisa giggled and gingerly stroked Frosty's paw. To her excited surprise Frosty responded by

rubbing Lisa's hand in such a way as made her feel the bear was actually holding her hand.

Jennifer met them at the door, in her well-filled voluminous grey cassock. Poor-sighted, she squinted through her bottle-bottom glasses and, assuming Frosty must be Lisa's toy, declared, *'You can't bring that thing in here!'* *'Thing!'*, exclaimed Frosty. *'Thing! I'm not a thing!'* Jennifer turned her head, thinking the low growl was a rumble of indigestion. She had enjoyed a good cooked breakfast this morning. Beyond embarrassment she rolled away down the aisle to begin the service. Joseph looked at Lisa, thinking she would only hear a growl, but Lisa spoke to Frosty. *'Of course you're not a thing, you're a beautiful polar bear.* She snuggled her face against Frosty's side. Joseph suddenly realised that like him, little Lisa could understand Frosty. She too knew that communication beyond words. Sure enough, once again Frosty knew their thoughts. *'Love doesn't need many words,'* she purred softly. *'Uncle Ricardo discovered that. He thought it was like that when the Holy Spirit was*

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*given to the first Christians. It was how God's word is shared. He said the language of love could change the world'.* Frosty gave a longing sigh.

Jack appeared. It was time to ring the church bell. A couple of pulls was enough these days. The village didn't want to be called to worship but the service could not start without the customary bell! He had always tolled the bell. Jack nodded the same welcoming nod to Frosty which he gave to all visitors to the services. He knew Joseph well enough not to ask many questions. He knew of his love of animals and how he had asked many times for a lambing service or pets service in the Church. *'It would bring villagers in. Like the Harvest Thanksgiving does,'* he had argued with the vicar. Jennifer was not convinced. She was not an animal lover and was more concerned about keeping the church clean, especially following the incident with the Palm Sunday donkey two years ago.

*'You go on in,'* said Frosty. *'I'll be all right here.'*

*'And so will I,'* Joseph told her. *'We can close the outside door and leave the inner one open. We'll still be part of the service.'*

*'Me too!'* exclaimed Lisa excitedly. She rushed up the aisle to inform Gran and managed to collide with Jack on the way back. He had rung the 'last post' for sleeping non-church-goers. Gran had no choice in the matter but was happy to trust Lisa to 'uncle' Joseph's care. The service proceeded. It was short with an even briefer sermon on Jesus' words *'unless you become as little children'* Jennifer spoke about the simplicity of faith being like a child's trusting handhold. Lisa stroked Frosty's fur. Joseph thought about the vicar's words. There was something calmly gentle and graceful about the moment. They were like three naughty children sitting outside for the service and it seemed right. Joseph was to say later how he sensed the presence of Jesus there with them - sitting between him and Frosty. Frosty gave a contented purr cum growl which Joseph heard clearly through that other love-dimension of uncle Ricardo - *'Yes he's here with us in the porch.'* she said. *'Christ of the children! Christ of the polar bear!'*

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While the congregation struggled with a final hymn Joseph whispered to Lisa, *'Frosty and I have to go now, Lisa. You go and join your grandma now.'*

*'But .... I don't want her to go .....*' Lisa's happy smile slid off her chin to make way for tears but Frosty quickly caressed the child's hand. *'Don't be sad, Lisa,'* she said. *'I'll not forget you, and you will always remember me. I'll be close to you whenever you do, but I have to go back to uncle Ricardo now. He needs me to go on lots more journeys for him.'* She scratched one paw with the claws of the other, pulling out a small tuft of fur which still had a faint whiff of fish about it. She gave the fur to Lisa .. *'Keep it,'* she said, *'to remember me.'* Lisa walked slowly into the church looking back as Joseph and Frosty left the porch. *'Just in time,'* said Frosty. *'There's a journeying wave just coming. I must go now.'* Before Joseph could say, *'Thank uncle Ricardo for me'.* Frosty had vanished.

She had gone but that warm love-glow of the Church porch never left Joseph. He returned to the church regularly. Jack, Jennifer, nor the others ever



mentioned that morning service when a small polar bear attended. It was as though it had never happened. Lisa still had her tuft of memory fur. Years later she still said she felt Frosty was near when she held it in her hand. She and Joseph guarded their secret and often spoke of the polar bear's visit. They established a lasting friendship through which Joseph for the rest of his birthdays watched and helped Lisa grow into a wonderful young woman, following Jesus with his gentleness of a loving child.