

Gift Returns for Christmas, 2012

Several Christmas packages were different this year. They were still red and brown and grey and pink, but they were bigger. This Christmas they hid under live trees, not chintzy things of plastic and wire or cut trees with their briefly magnificent scent. They had metal handles and strong locks, because their content was far more precious than gold, frankincense, or myrrh.

The packages were not filled with toys and goodies for gleeful, squealing children to open Christmas morning. The gifts they contained were not being received. The gifts were being returned. Like a beloved, multi-generational teddy bear, each was slightly worn with a scuffed knee here and a missing tooth there and an occasional bullet hole, but that's why they were being returned.

It isn't that the people who originally received these gifts didn't want them anymore. No, that's not it at all. It's just that the gifts had stopped ageing and a fine-print codicil in the agreement between those who held them and loved them and treasured them and the one who gave them very clearly says that once the gifts are no longer ageing, well, they must be returned.

Returning the gifts wouldn't be quite so hard if they could be replaced. Ah, but there's the problem. Each was a unique, magnificent work. They were not stamped out like Tonka trucks or Barbie dolls. They were lovingly crafted with just the right dimple here and just the right giggle there and no two were alike. Every person in the entire world could look in every bedroom and in every cradle and in every bassinette, and none would ever find an exact duplicate. That is part of the reason they were so treasured. They were even more complexly diverse than Ukrainian Easter eggs or snowflakes.

But it's an odd truth of physics that what we may see as a great, empty hole is actually full of something. Now, we can't see that something, or touch it, but it really is there. There were many of those mysterious holes in Newtown this past Christmas, each caused by the absence of a wondrous gift. We know what is in those holes. Each is filled with tiny pieces of hearts from places so far-flung as Tirana and Delhi and Chaka and Banda Aceh, gifts of love from people who have little else to offer.

Sleep well, new angels.