

## Big Ted and the Christmas Surprise

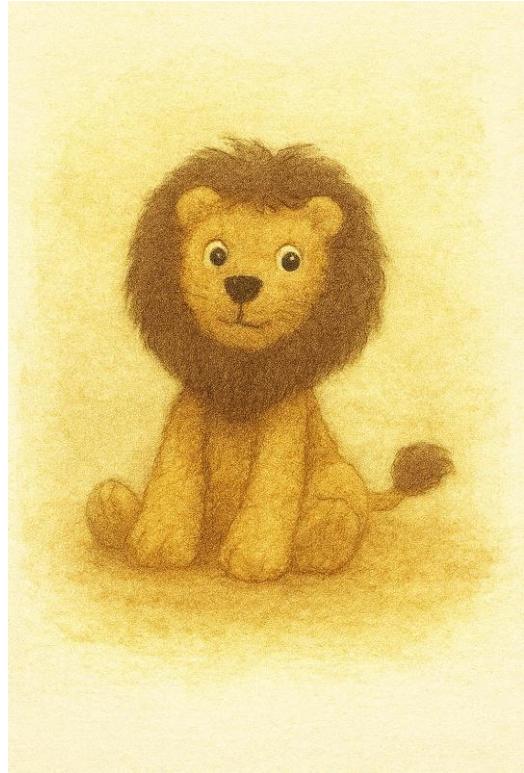


Big Ted and his friends lived in a small village in Cumbria near the city of Carlisle when Queen Elizabeth II was just approaching her Silver Jubilee.

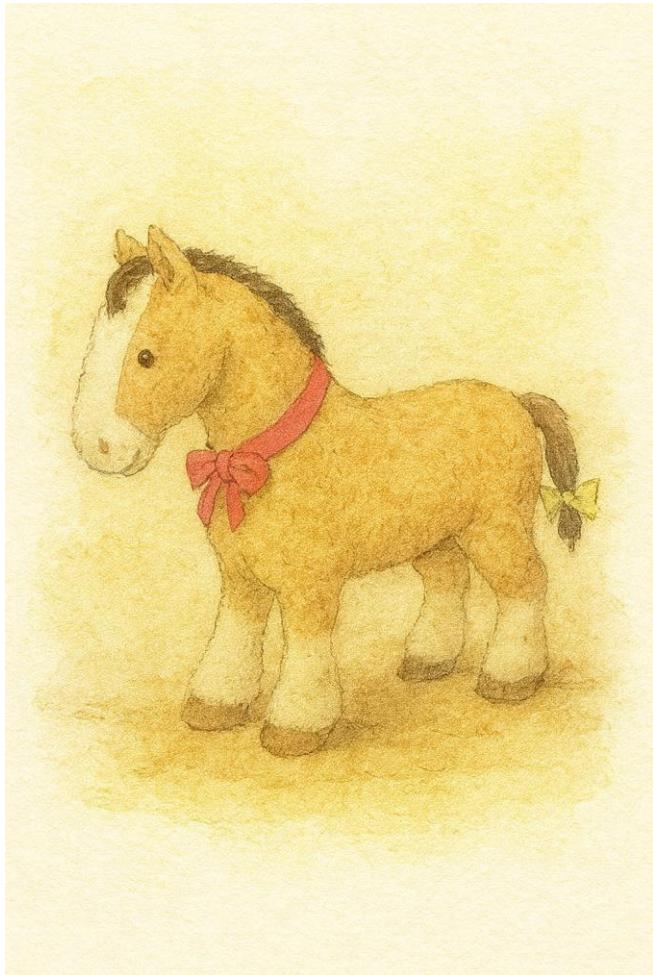
In case you have not been introduced to the animals before, the hero of this story (and many others) is Big Ted. He is a friendly and enthusiastic bear with lots of good ideas which unfortunately do not always go according to plan. Let's be honest: never go to plan.



His long suffering wife is Koala. Although she originally came from down under, she has lived in England for a long time, and you would never know from her accent, direct speech and general bossiness, that she was originally Australian. Koala is responsible for extracting Big Ted from some of the more serious of the scrapes he gets himself into, and is constantly trying, with mixed success, to cut off any future plans at the pass.

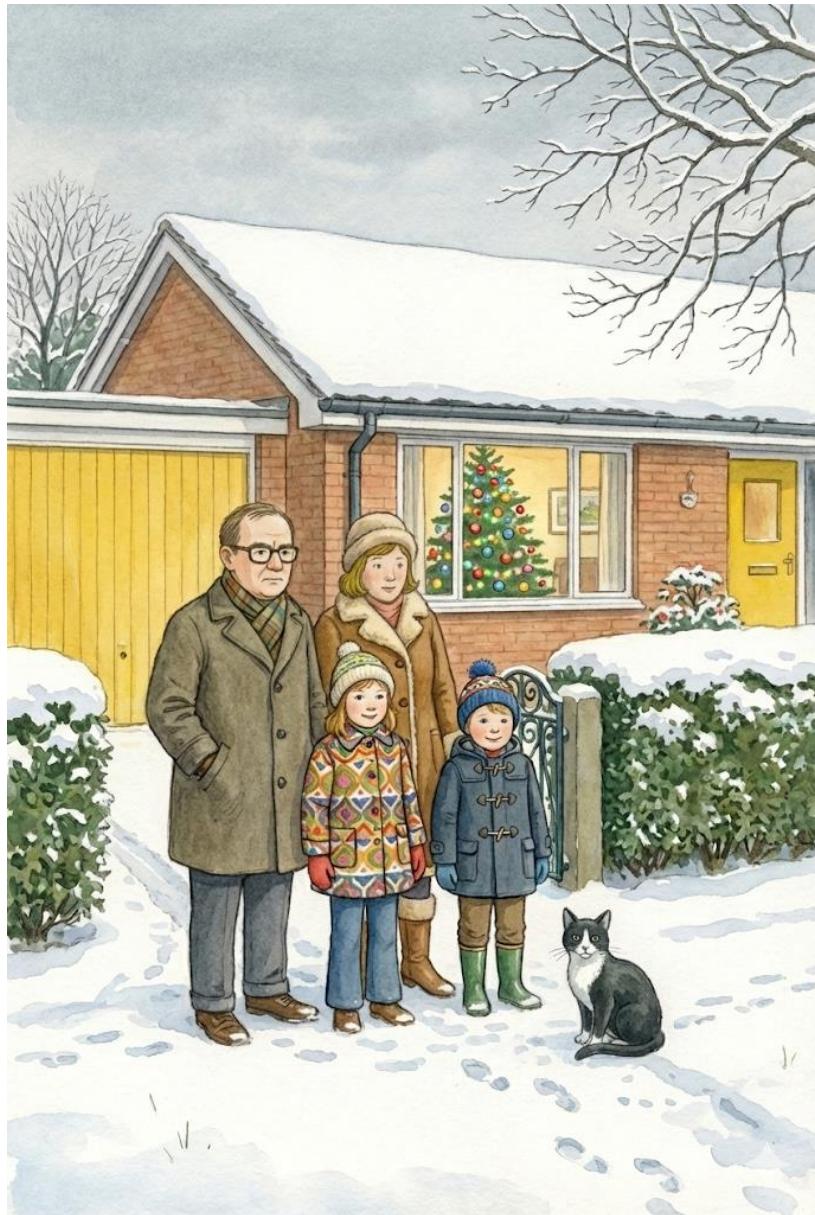


Wallace and Clarence are twin lions, identical apart from one is dark brown and the other one is light blue. They are also identical in personality apart from Wallace being a self-confident bruiser, and Clarence a diffident introvert.



We also have Dobbin, who is a shire horse who works part time for the local market garden. He likes apples, carrots and doing what he is told. Mrs Ted, Mrs Bun and their families are also close friends, although they live in a little house in the old part of the village and (in Koala's estimation) are a bit stuck up.

And then there is the human family who live with the toys. There is John who is a bad tempered civil servant, Isobel who is a put-upon housewife with aspirations to better herself, and the two children. Maz is eight when the



events of this story take place, and is a self-confident little girl with a bad temper, and Neil, her little brother is just five. He is an angelic looking little boy, whose looks conceal a strong streak of stubbornness.

Kitty is a black and white cat who adopted the family a few years previously. She doesn't have a lot of time for anyone except Isobel who she loves, and John who she loves biting.

## The Shopping Expedition

It was December 23<sup>rd</sup> in the year of 1975 by the time Koala finally got round to finalizing her Christmas shopping. She was usually very organized, but she had

had a lot on her plate recently re-organizing other peoples' lives and supervising Big Ted, so this year she had really left it until the last minute.

"Put your scarf on Big Ted" she announced at breakfast "It's freezing outside and we need to go into town on the train to get our presents". Big Ted was out of his chair and at the door in seconds "I love the train! Can I pull the cord thing again? Like when I got arrested and we had fun at the police house". Koala simply shuddered and shook her head.

The blue and yellow diesel train chugged into the city in only a few minutes, and the animals were decanted on to the busy streets. Everything was brightly decorated for Christmas; there were plenty of people and fewer cars than you would see today. Big Ted and Koala had a special destination in mind – Bullough's department store "The Harrods of the North" as their marketing department rather optimistically called them. This shop is next to the Cathedral, and Koala loved it, although it was too expensive to shop there regularly. "I'll get most of the things in Woolworths and WH Smiths" she thought "But I'll get Mrs Bun and Mrs Ted something from Bullough's' – that way we can get bags and put the rest of the presents in those as well". Koala was nothing if not ingenious.

They stopped at the Cathedral which was looking very pretty in the snow, and listened to the choir practicing inside for the service the next day.



Then they crossed the street and spent quite some time looking at the lovely displays in the windows before going inside. Koala had a little list which she consulted as she went in because she was determined not to overspend; in particular she had resolved not to let Big Ted anywhere near the big display of sweets after an unfortunate incident with a chocolate fondue a couple of years before.



They went to the Haberdashery department and bought embroidered caps for Mrs Ted and Mrs Bun. Koala made a note to herself to get her needle out and make some modifications to accommodate Mrs Bun's ears. The children got a ball each, although Koala regretted that they only came in blue and pink because it always caused a row over who got which one.



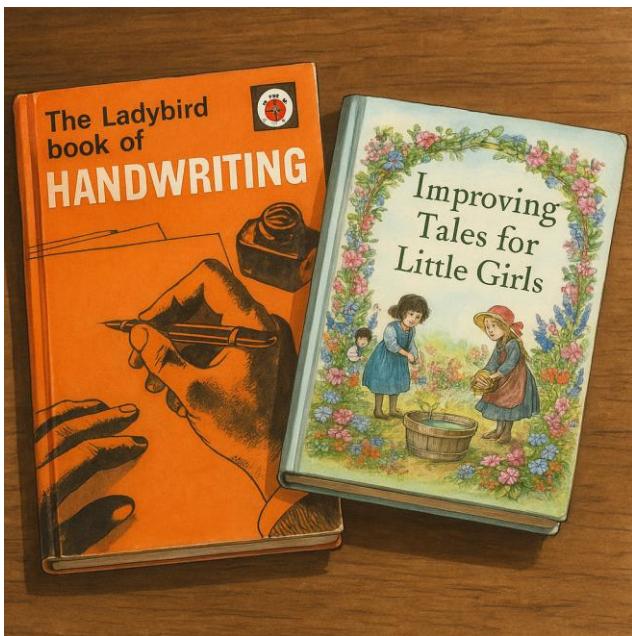
The two lions were easy; Clarence got a book on the early Christians, and Wallace a stick with a horse's head handle. For Dobbin, they wandered around the handbag department in search of something snazzy for him. But the prices were extortionate – “£5 for a stupid bag”, Big Ted muttered to himself “You could get plastic bags from Prestos and fill them full of buns for that!”.



They then had a brief debate over whether to buy a present for Kitty and decided against it. “All she really likes are mice and birds and not in a good way. Anyway, she is stuck up and keeps biting people”.

But the really important question in the animals' minds was what to buy for Maz and Neil. They both knew very well what the children wanted, but both gifts were beyond their power to get. “Maz really wants a kitten; she loves cats to bits and Kitty has no time for her. I don't know where we would get one, and even if we did, John would never let her keep it”. Big Ted nodded sadly in agreement. “And Neil would love a Hoover all of his own”. Neil had rapidly moved out of a dinosaur phase this year and was now in love with vacuum cleaners “But those cost way more money than we have”. Big Ted was struck with an idea “Why don't we take Isobel's (she doesn't like it anyway) and say it was stolen? Then we could give it to Neil and pretend it is a new one?” Koala just shook her head “It will have to be something else.”

So they went over to the book department and bought something suitable for each child. Maz got "Improving Tales for Little Girls" and Neil "The Ladybird



Book of Handwriting". Koala thought that those books would greatly benefit the children, but Big Ted insisted that they got a chocolate selection stocking each as well.

Then the animals headed home. It was getting dark as they walked through the



village, but they paused at the green grocer to buy Dobbin a bag of apples.



The snow was deep and crisp and even as they walked up the drive to thirteen Yetlands, the precious Bullough's and M&S bags in hand. Big Ted had to be physically restrained from making a snow bear then and there.

## The Christmas Presents

Then they went up to their attic. Koala was always grumbling about the ladder which was a bit awkward with her short legs, so she made the journey as infrequently as possible. Once you got up there though, the toys had made it quite cosy, and the children would often come up there to play. There was an orange carpet which had once been in the spare bedroom, a table which had been adapted from the old gramophone when the family acquired their music centre, and a Christmas tree which they had made from coat hangers and tinsel (they had been watching Blue Peter).



After they had had their tea (it was tomato sausages they had bought in Carlisle market), the toys wrapped all the presents. This was mostly done by the lions and Koala because Dobbin had hooves and Big Ted was not trusted with scissors. Or tape. Or ribbons.

When they had finished, Koala gave her instructions "You can be useful for something now Big Ted. Take the presents and put them downstairs ready for Christmas morning. They should go in the big box in the spare room" Big Ted looked a little confused "The one next to the window. Where I put the ones for John and Isobel". Koala had bought a screwdriver and a wooden spoon in

Woolworths the week before. "Right, no worries" Big Ted said in a fake Australian accent and Koala threw a cushion at him.

He climbed down the ladder with his sack on his back and went into Neil's room at the back of the house. Sure enough, there was a big box, and in fact, there



were presents in it already, all nicely wrapped just as Koala had said. Big Ted carefully put all his presents in the box.

In order to explain why the trouble which was always hovering in the area of Big Ted was about to solidify and drop on everyone in the vicinity, we have to show a brief flashback to several weeks before.

John and Isobel were standing in the kitchen surveying their handiwork with great satisfaction. Although he was a civil servant by profession, John had



always been a craftsman at heart and was particularly fond of carpentry. Isobel (amongst her many other skills) was a wonderful dressmaker. So between the two of them they had created a lovely project – it was Goldilocks and the Three Bears, with the beds for the bears made by John, with the bedding, the bears themselves and Goldilocks the rag doll sewn by Isobel (with a very little help from Maz).

“They do look nice” Isobel said “I almost wish we could keep them”.

“Certainly not” replied John “The children have more toys than

enough”.

Isobel paused to think “We could give them to charity instead – the vicar is having a tea party for disadvantaged Children in the church on Christmas day and there are leaflets all over the place about bringing donations over on Christmas Eve”

“OK” said John “But for heaven’s sake hide them away somewhere, because if Maz sees them there will be a huge row about her wanting to keep them. Put them in a box where the children won’t see them – I’ve already told them to keep out of the spare bedroom”.

Kitty came into the room just in time to hear this conversation, but as it did not involve food for her, she ignored it and stalked out again, pausing only to give John a bite as he attempted to stroke her.

So the presents for the orphans' party were in a cardboard box. And the cardboard box was on top of the ottoman in the spare room. It was this box that Big Ted had placed his presents in, and the same box which John had delivered to the church on Christmas eve.

## The Rescue Mission

Very early on Christmas morning, the toys woke up in their attic, full of excitement. They were quite looking forward to seeing what they would get in their own stockings, but more than that they were anticipating the delight the children would show when they saw their lovely books and chocolate.

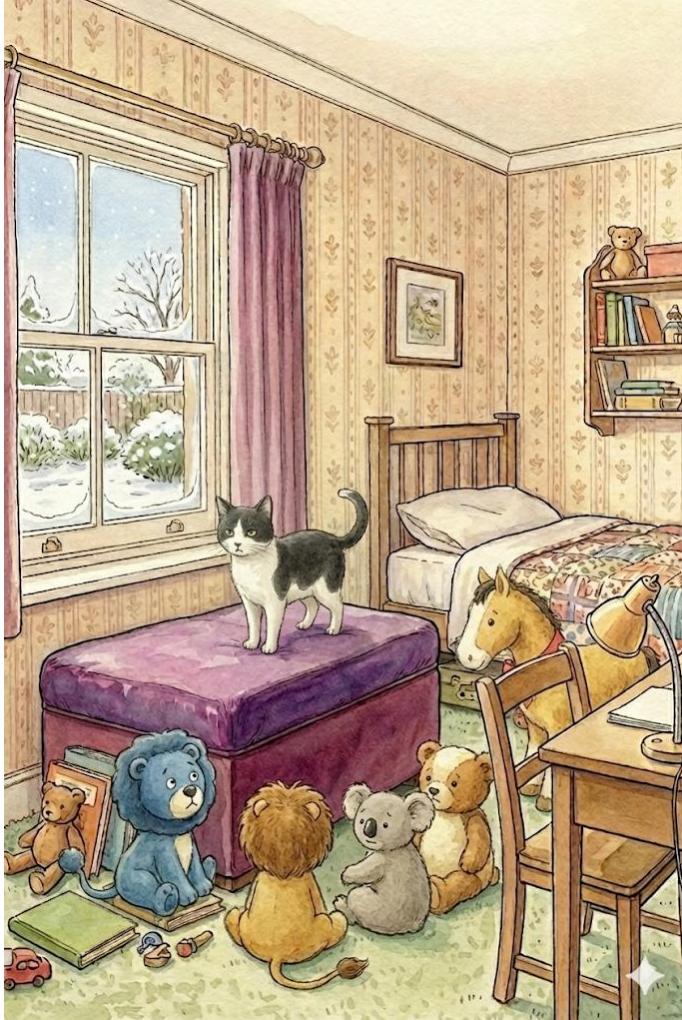
They crept into the spare room and Koala happily peered into the ottoman. All that was inside it were the two small parcels she had put there herself weeks

ago – of the presents they had bought in Carlisle there was no sign. Angrily, she turned on Big Ted, who was standing looking even more bemused than usual. “Where did you put the presents you idiot?” she whispered very loudly “Did you not put them in the box?”

“Yes Koala I did – right there. But the box has gone.”

“No it hasn’t the box is right there”

The discussion around this went on for several minutes, becoming ever more heated, but just as though violence looked likely to break out, a quiet, sibilant voice spoke, and



a black and white cat suddenly jumped onto the ottoman to address the toys. As usual, Kitty seemed to be looking down her nose at them. “He did put them in the box. Or more exactly, he put them in A box. But that box has now gone”.

Kitty briefly outlined the situation with the charity party, and when she had finished the toys stared at her in dismay.

“What are we to do?” wailed Clarence. “Those were all our presents and it is too late to get anything now”.

“And all our money that idiot bear has cost us for nothing” Wallace growled quietly.

“Right” said Koala firmly. She was not one to be easily daunted or give up in the face of adversity “We’ve lost the presents. It wasn’t really Big Ted’s fault because “perhaps” (the tone of her voice hinted that she was deliberately being magnanimous). Perhaps, I wasn’t very clear by what I meant by box. But regardless, we, all of us are going to go and get them back. It won’t be light for a few hours yet”.

“Can we take the car? Please, please, please – I’ll drive” begged Big Ted. Koala’s response to this was unrepeatable, and ten minutes later the animals had slipped out into the freezing night, removed Neil’s sledge from the garage where it lived, and harnessed Dobbin to it. John had made the sledge himself and painted it bright red. They would need the sledge for the box of presents. Koala was somewhat surprised that Kitty was ambling along beside them, her paws scarcely leaving a mark on the crisp crust of the snow. By way of explanation the cat only said. “If the children are sad, Isobel will be sad..”

Through the dark silent village they went, Dobbin’s hooves muffled by the snow. The only illumination outside the orange pools of light spilling from the streetlights were the Christmas trees twinkling from nearly every window. The sky was clear overhead and there were many stars. The toys thought it was like



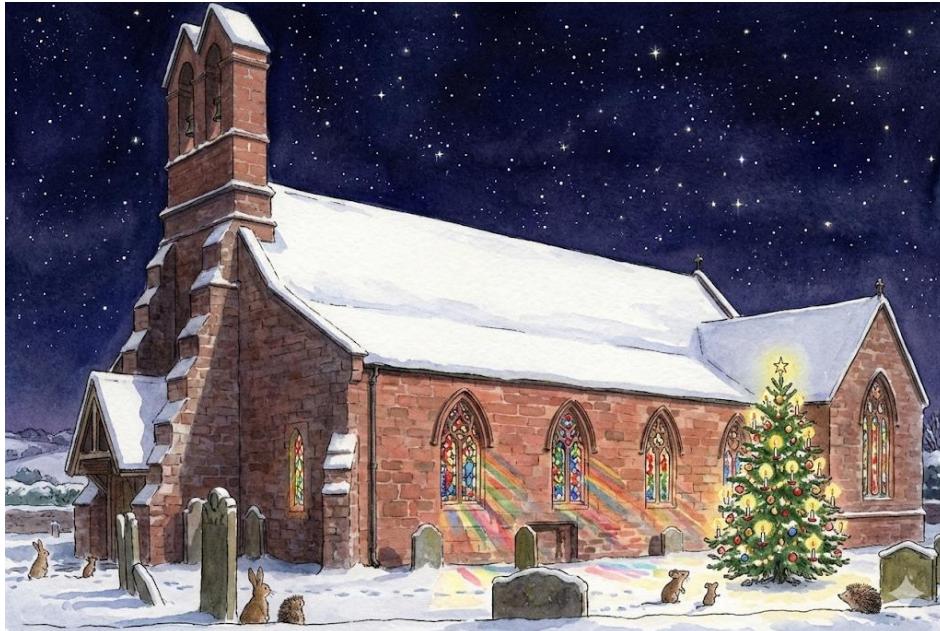
something out of "Silent Night, so they began to hum it as they went on past the school.

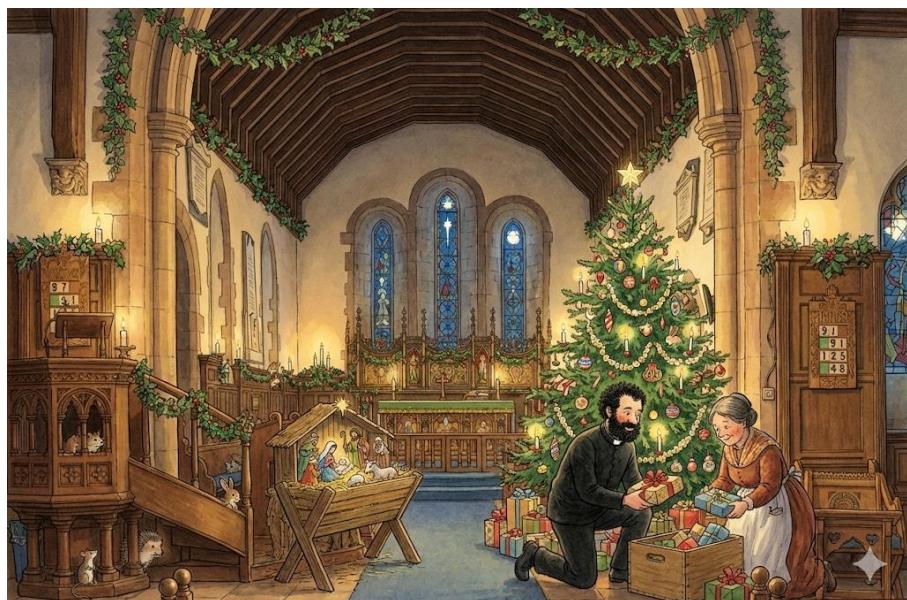
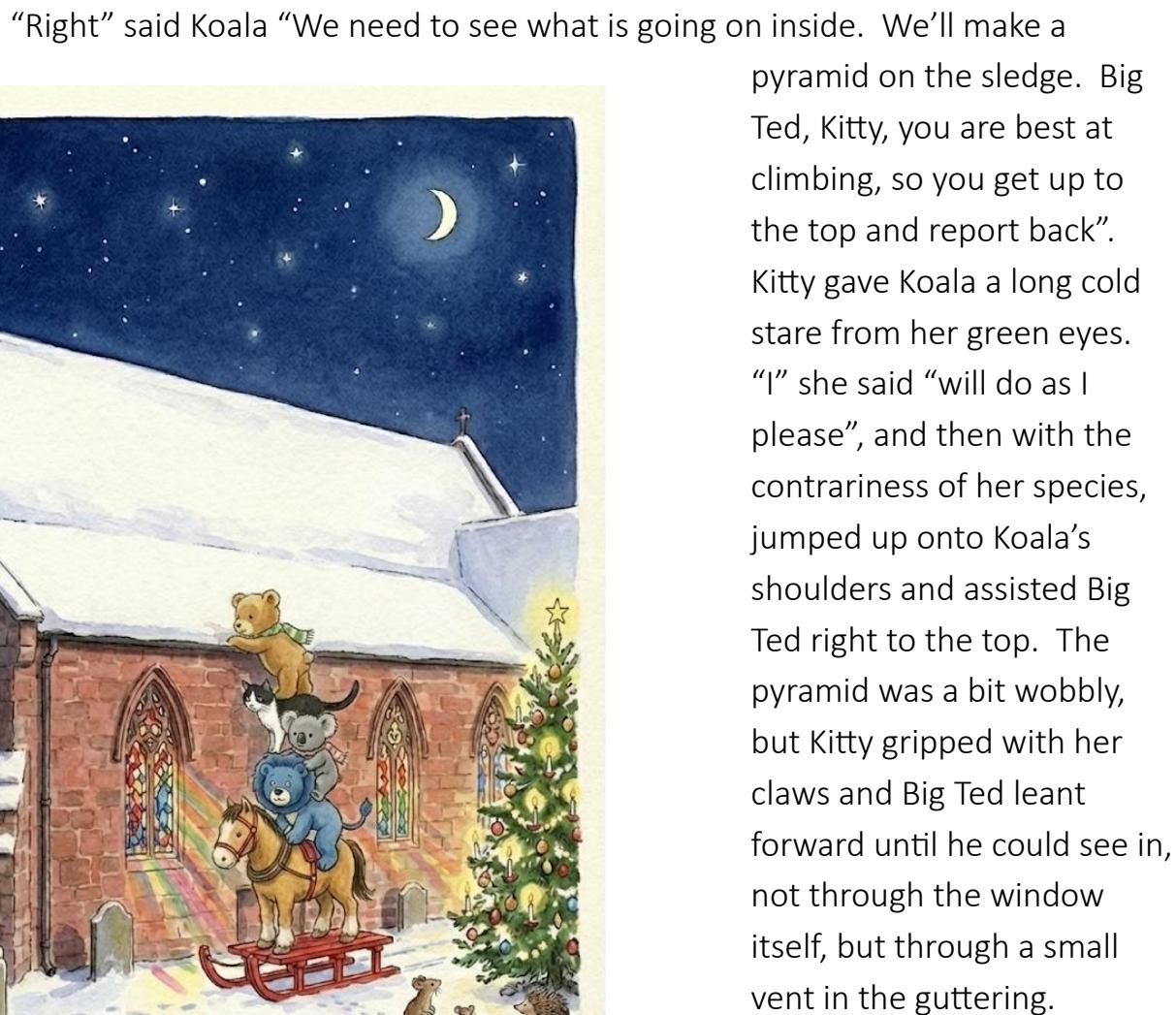
"That is the school Maz and Neil go to" Koala pointed out as they went past a large stone building "When we get their books back they will be able to spend the rest of the holiday studying them and their teachers will be really pleased". Clarence the clever lion was more than a little dubious about this statement, but as usual, he kept his opinion to himself.

## A meeting in the Church

Soon they entered the older part of the village, and there was St Michael's church. The lights were on inside, and their illumination was spilling out through the stained glass windows in vivid splashes of colour on the snow. It was so very beautiful that as the toys crept through the lich gate, they noticed

that some of the wild creatures had come in from the fields and woods to gaze on admiringly.





After a moment, he realized that the people in the church were the Vicar and his wife. Maz was friends with their daughter, and the two of them sometimes played in the Church with their toys (probably strictly

against the Church rules). It must have been the good acoustics of the building, but Big Ted could hear them quite well.

“Isn’t it wonderful how generous everyone has been this year. Look at the wonderful things we have for the party tomorrow” Rev Brooksbank said. “I’m really quite touched – people have obviously gone to a lot of trouble and put a great deal of effort into it. When we think of how much our villagers have, and how little these poor inner city children get”.

“Some people particularly, look at what the Ellis family have done, and they are not even members of the church”.

Right at this moment, Big Ted lost his hold on the gutter, stepped backwards, nearly fell and was grabbed by Koala and bitten by Kitty. It took a few moments to correct this situation, and by the time he had regained his footing, the humans had left, so he did not hear the final part of their conversation.

“Yes they left us some splendid gifts, Goldilocks and the Three Bears, bonnets, beach balls and all that chocolate. But I don’t think the orphans would be thrilled with handwriting books, and moral tales would not go down well for Christmas presents – we’ll save those for the next jumble sale”.

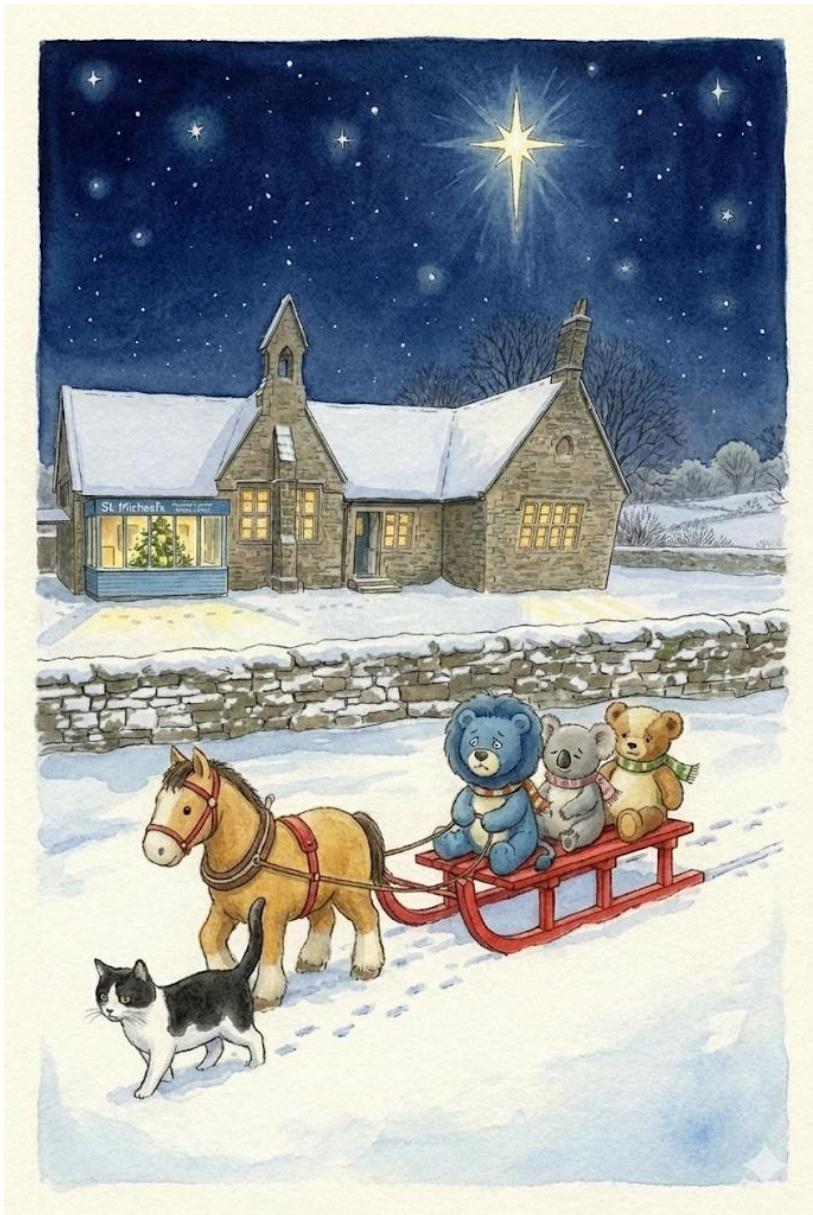


Big Ted got back into position in time to see the full beauty of the tree. Their presents were in pride of place, and many of the woodland creatures had been invited inside by the resident church mice to take a look.

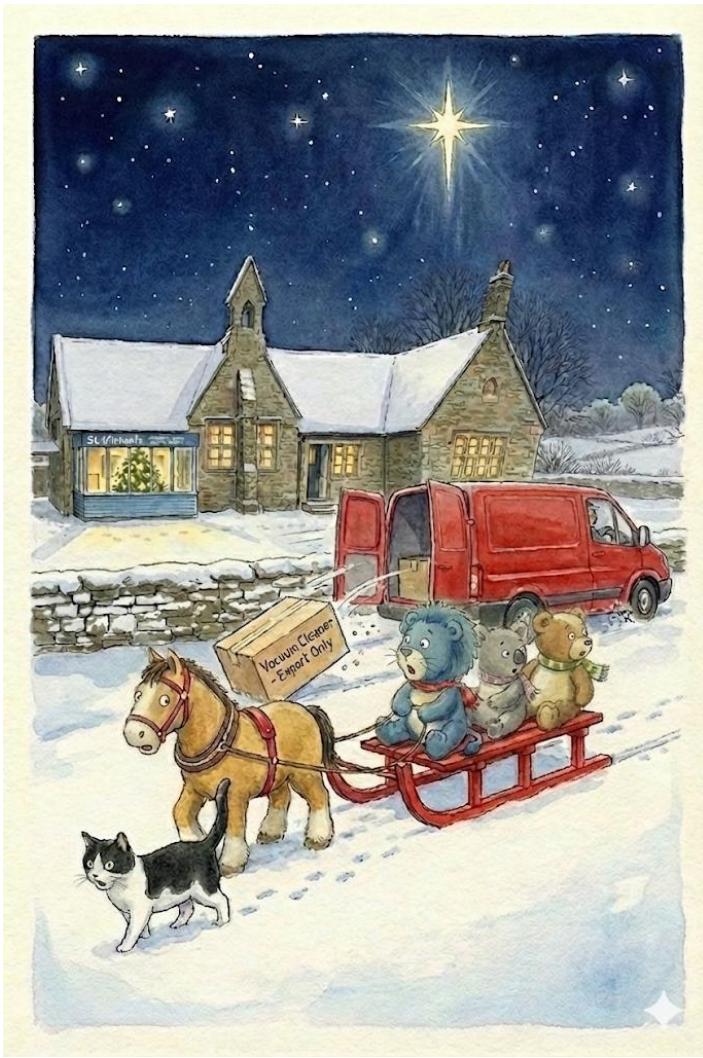
Very sadly, Big Ted came down

the ladder. As he saw his face, they knew what he was about to say. All the toys knew that they couldn't take the presents away from the orphans (Kitty was not quite so convinced but wisely chose this moment to shut up).

"It doesn't matter about us." Koala said. "But what about Maz and Neil? They won't have any presents from us – not even chocolates.... And the lovely books". A large hot tear trickled down Dobbin's long nose and dripped disconsolately into the snow.



The animals trudged slowly homeward. It seemed a very long way, the sledge was heavy, and all the excitement of Christmas had quite evaporated. As they passed the school, they did not notice that a single large star had come out and was hanging like a brilliant lantern lighting their path.



All of a sudden there was an almighty noise in the stillness of the night. Without warning, and certainly without due care and attention, a battered red van came shooting round the corner and past the sledge and its occupants. As it passed them at speed, they could see that its back doors were hanging open, and flapping ominously on every bump in the road.

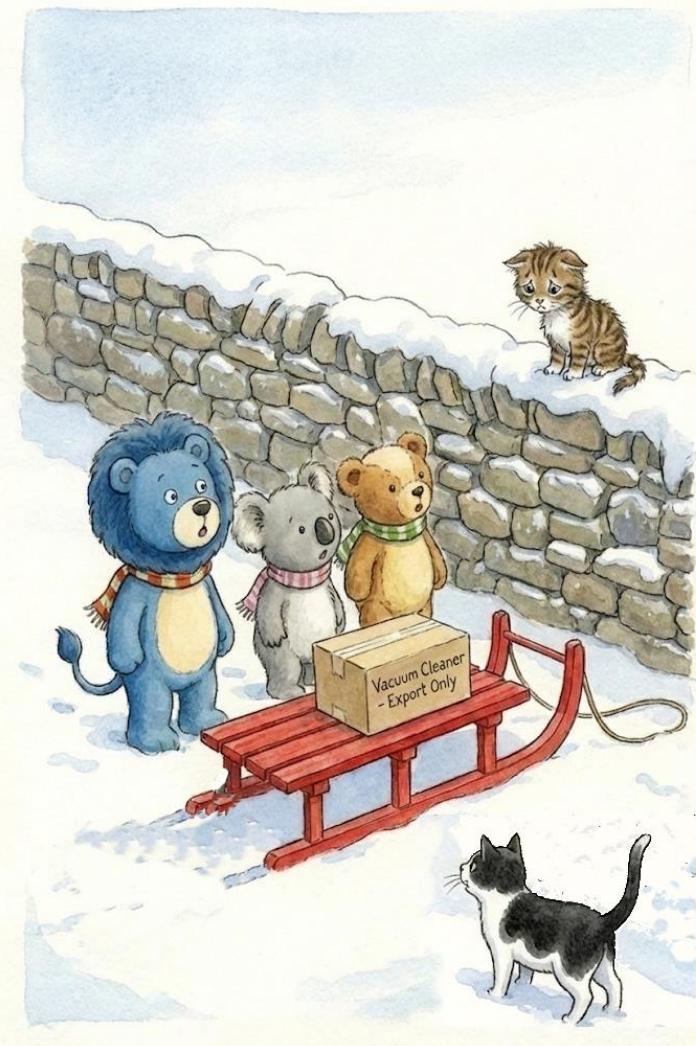
Suddenly the van hit a particularly large snow drift. For a moment it seemed about to get stuck, but freed itself with a jolt and shot on at an even greater speed. As it did so, a large box was ejected

into the snow, fell by the school wall, and was immediately covered by the snow disturbed by its impact. As the animals stood still stunned and attempting to recover their breath, a second vehicle shot past them. This time it was a car with blue and orange stripes and a flashing blue light on the top. The sound of engines and sirens faded into silence, leaving the bemused animals alone.

Slowly, they uncovered the box. "Vacuum Cleaner – Export only" it said on the side. The animals looked at each other. "Wouldn't it be stealing?" Dobbin said uncertainly. Koala's eyes met those of Kitty. They had never liked each other much, but at that moment they suddenly felt themselves in agreement. "Certainly not" said Koala "Because...". She had no idea of what she had been going to say next when the cat interrupted her "Treasure trove", the cat said very firmly. "Covers silver, gold and electrical appliances which fall out of transit vans. "I'll report it to the Crown for us, but in the meantime it's ours for the

taking". With relief at having this point of law clarified, the animals loaded the bulky box onto the sledge and set off once more.

But they did not get far. All at once, there was a disturbance in a pile of snow,



and a small creature emerged from it. First only its ears and the tip of its tail, and then the whole animal emerged. It was a small bedraggled tabby kitten with a white chin.

"Hello" said Big Ted "Where on earth did you spring from?"

"I was hiding behind the wall trying to keep warm" the little cat replied "I was in a cage and some horrid humans were going to do things to me. But then some other humans came and opened the cages and

there was a load of noise and shouting and I hid in a car and then I got out and then I ran and I ran and then...". The kitten's voice tailed off, "And then I was here. I hid in case the bad people came back, but I'm cold and hungry..."

The toys did not know what to do. They longed to take the kitten home; but what would the humans say? Most particularly – what would John say?

And then help came from an unexpected source. Kitty jumped effortless onto the wall beside the kitten "You can come with us? We have food and a lovely warm home, and I know a little girl who wants you and will love you and care for you."

Koala jumped in at this point. "That's all very well for you to say cat. But what about John – he won't let Maz have a kitten. In fact he didn't even want..." Her voice tailed off as it suddenly occurred to her that it would be insensitive to say that he had never wanted a cat at all.



"That will all be fine – believe me. When I first came to the house John said "We are not having a cat" so I moved into the garage. Then he said "The cat can't come into the house", so I moved into the kitchen. Then he said "The cat can't come in the bedrooms". Now I sleep on their bed every night, and when he tries to put me out of the room I bite him. So I know all about John and his little ways".



So the animals set off home again with the new kitten perched on the cardboard box beside Big Ted. By the time they reached the house, dawn was breaking pale and cold and every piece of snow sparkled with a

new frost. It was the perfect Christmas morning for everyone except all the children who had been given bicycles by Santa.

### Christmas Morning

The toys knew that the children would be up early that morning, so they had to be quick.

They crept into the lounge and rapidly positioned the Hoover by the side of the tree. It was a full sized state of the art affair one with 10 speeds. Clarence carefully put his own cushion on the centre of the rug, and the tiny kitten climbed on to it. All the animals looked at the scene with great satisfaction. What a night they had had, what a night! It was only as they left the room to the sound of the humans waking up, that they realized that they had not given the kitten a name.



It was only a few minutes later that Maz and Neil burst into the room, accompanied by their slightly less enthusiastic parent. What joy was on Neil's face when he saw his very own hoover, but even more so when they saw the kitten. John and Isobel did not know what had happened, but they knew without speaking a word that they could never take these Christmas presents away.

“I don’t know where they came from” Isobel said “And I don’t suppose that I ever will for sure, but I am not convinced that a certain teddy bear did not have a paw in the whole affair”.

“Yes” said John “And a certain black and white cat too”.

All Maz said was “I am going to call my cat Snookie”.





In the attic, the toys had their own Christmas party.

They had no proper Christmas presents for each other, but they pulled their crackers and sang carols

together. Koala had only one doubt in her heart. "I should not be surprised if without those books, Maz never does learn to be a model little girl, and Neil is never able to do joined up handwriting."

Outside, the sun shone on a perfect snowy morning and the church bells rang out in the distance. The star which had lit up the night and brought the Christmas surprises, was gone from the sky, but it was still shining in the hearts of all to whom it had brought joy.

The End