

**Start here****O****TABLEAUX  
by Philip Purser-Hallard**

The details change – that’s essential.

Some children rifle their stockings the instant they get up, others face the agonising wait until after breakfast. Some households open presents in strict turns; for some it’s a free-for-all. Some families attend church, others plan their day around *EastEnders*.

The rituals vary, but it’s the same festival for everyone, year to year, generation to generation. Whatever order events follow, the day’s essence remains.

Here’s one Christmas tableau: a small boy snatches at his sister’s presents; a mother enjoys a break from the kitchen, wine-glass in hand; a father pokes at some new gadget, supervising the chaos; in the armchair in the corner, his mother smiles indulgently at her grandchildren.

What follows is incidental, really.

**Now pick a card.***Christmas 2013***@**

Seven hours later everyone’s watching *Doctor Who*, just like every year since the dawn of time. The children sit enthralled; the adults, remembering the programme’s role in their own childhoods, marvel at its implausible longevity.

‘Were you alive then, grandma?’ the girl asks (meaning the mid-1970s, where the latest Doctor’s battling a malevolent glitter-monster with David Bowie). There’s a snort from the corner.

‘When will it be Christmas again?’ asks the youngest child.

‘This time next year,’ their mother replies, gazing ruefully at the Christmas tree. ‘And then the next year, and again the year after.’ She drains her wine.

**If there are cards left, pick another. If this is the end, Merry Christmas.***Christmas 2013***φ**

Seven minutes later, the tree creaks and begins to list alarmingly. The children disagree about who tried to climb it, but settle on blaming the cat, who’s somewhere else entirely.

Their father tries to right it, but only succeeds in adjusting the direction of lean. He rescues some low-hanging chocolates, which he thoughtfully puts out of harm’s way in his mouth.

‘Are you eating those now?’ his other half demands from the kitchen. He starts guiltily, knocking down a Christmas tableau. Stepping back sharply, he slips on some discarded wrapping-paper and tumbles, colliding with the tree and effectively demolishing Christmas.

**If there are cards left, pick another. If this is the end, Merry Christmas.***Christmas 2013***⊙**

Seven seconds later, the traditional family row’s in full swing.

‘Santa *is* real! He *is!*’

‘I’m saying, if you’d just relax and enjoy yourself at Christmas...’

‘Oi, that’s mine! Dad, he’s got my new –’

‘Oh, because the food cooks itself? I see. Have you even –’

‘Children, play nicely please! Christmas is a time for sharing!’

‘Excuse me, that’s *my* wine.’

You could rearrange the dialogue any way you like, and it would make about as much sense.

‘It’s not too late to take away your presents!’

‘That’s not fair! I hate you!’

‘I feel sick!’

‘Happy bloody Christmas.’

**If there are cards left, pick another. If this is the end, Merry Christmas.***Christmas 2013*

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Seven years later, there's another small child, this one with a big brother and a big sister.

For his sake, the parents maintain the traditional gospel of Santa Claus, with their teenage daughter as their willing, though unbelieving, acolyte. The little boy accepts their declarations with wide-eyed wonder.

The middle child's the family apostate: full of his own cleverness in exploding his parents' dogma, he sees it as his duty to enlighten the credulous.

'If Santa's real,' he asks, 'why did houses stop having chimneys? Didn't people want him visiting them?'

His little brother plays on, happily untroubled by logic.

***If there are cards left, pick another. If this is the end, Merry Christmas.***

*Christmas 2013*



Seven centuries later, the individuals we've met are long gone, but the family persists. As chance would have it the current iteration comprises one girl, one boy, one male and one female parent.

Their home's part of a biome built into an asteroid, tethered at one of Earth's orbital Lagrange points. The Christmas sapling's grown from habitat biomass, reconfigured for the festivities using a mountain-pine genome.

The discreet processing medium in the corner manifests the persona of a much-beloved ancestor, who uploaded before anyone here was born.

'Well, this is nice,' the Christmas ghost says, beaming at the assembled company.

***If there are cards left, pick another. If this is the end, Merry Christmas.***

*Christmas 2013*



Seven decades later, the young girl's become an older citizen, sitting in an oddly shaped chair in the corner of a futuristic apartment, enjoying watching her own grandson and granddaughter playing, cheerfully ignoring the President's Christmas Speech.

She's led a full life, its traumas and tragedies balanced by an appropriate share of joys, involving a pleasing variety of jobs, homes and lovers, and forever punctuated by these family Christmases. The festive traditions may slowly evolve, the dramatis personae leave and enter, but the fundamentals never change.

The old woman smiles. Her son and his partner start arguing about the washing-up.

***If there are cards left, pick another. If this is the end, Merry Christmas.***

*Christmas 2013*

