

A Christmas Present

Tom Scott

So, it's a dark December afternoon,
term ended, students all home for Christmas,
and I'm just about the only living soul
left on the campus, taking advantage
of the peace and quiet to struggle through
a stack of indifferent essays. About four,
my brain's starting to shut down and I realise
I need coffee to finish the job.

As I cross
to the canteen, a wind like a stropped razor
cuts through the concrete canyons. Inside,
it's empty – just the coffee machine and me,
and somebody reading at a table
in the far corner. He seems familiar,
though I can't quite place him. Not wanting
to be thought unsocial, and in need of talk
to wake me up, I ask if I can join him.

He looks up – a high, pale forehead, skin
stretched on it like old vellum, eyes that seem
to stare through me to some point a long way off –
and gestures what I take to be consent.

I ask how come he's still around. He says he's working on something. What's his field, I wonder? Literature, as it happens. Or, to be more specific, narratology.

I'm curious to know more. He asks me: "Have you noticed how when people tell you a story from a book, rehearse the plot for you, they always use the present tense? Not, 'Heathcliff didn't eat for four days, and then he was found dead in Cathy's room', but 'Heathcliff doesn't eat, and then he's found...?' Have you ever asked why that should be?"

"The narrative present?" I say, showing off my own command of literary technique. "It seems to have become a fad these days with novelists. I guess the idea's to lend immediacy..." I tail off, those eyes looking through me as if I'm hardly there. "No," he says, "You misunderstand. I'm not referring to the novelist's box of tricks, I'm talking about an iron rule of story. When the book's finished and the reader is retelling it, he must use the present, and no other tense. And I think I know now why that is." I ask him to go on.

“Well, it’s really very simple,” he says.

“It’s because at that point the story has become fixed for the teller. It’s there forever, unchangeable. Not like a series of events in our daily life, subject to distance and failing memory, but eternally present.”

I don’t know why, but at that point I say:

“A bit like the way ghosts seem to be condemned never to enter the past, but to be caught on an endless loop in the here and now?”

And just then I feel an icy blade of air touch the back of my neck. Looking round, I see the canteen door’s blown open. I get up to close it. When I turn back I’m alone, remembering where I’ve seen that face before.