

The Question

by Fiona Allan

It was Miss Roberts who asked the question. They'd gone on a school trip to the art gallery in the city centre. It was just before the Christmas holidays. They had to follow her around. Every now and then she'd turn around and raise a finger to her lips to shush them. Their feet made so much noise on the wooden floors that people were turning away from the paintings to look at them instead.

She was making them look at different pictures. Sometimes she'd stop them and they'd sit on the wooden floor cross-legged and stare up at a painting whilst she asked them questions. "Every painting tells a story," she'd say. "What do you see here?" she asked the boy, Ryan, pointing at one.

"Tits, Miss," he said. The class giggled, like he knew they would.

"Thank you Ryan, not that one," and she pointed again. "This one. It's called, 'When Did You Last See Your Father?'"

He'd felt a bit nervous the day of the class trip and bitten his nails so they'd bled. He'd never been on a coach before. He'd been on a bus, but not a coach. He'd never been inside a building that had five stone columns by the front door. He'd never been in a room where he had to tip his head back to look up at the ceiling. He'd certainly never been to an art gallery. He'd been to the cinema, but an art gallery was different. He didn't know anyone with pictures hanging on the wall. His Nan had a calendar, but looking around at the gold framed pictures with people in old fashioned clothes, he didn't think it was the same thing at all.

Paintings weren't like the telly. The people in them didn't move or speak or do anything. Everyone he knew had a television. What was the point of pictures, he wondered? His Dad would have known, but he wasn't there to ask. He wanted to ask Miss Roberts, but he didn't think that he could. He'd already been told off for sliding across the marble floor of the entrance hall. It made a

great slide. He'd never seen marble before. Miss Roberts would say he was messing around again, but he wasn't. He was just wondering.

There was a Christmas tree in the entrance hall of the gallery, next to where they left their coats. It was covered in red velvet bows and the white lights on it sparkled. He'd have liked to have taken a closer look, but there was a man in a uniform standing near it, so he thought he'd better not. Even so, he could see it was taller than his house. It was bigger than the one at the shopping precinct, definitely. That one had bare branches where the lights didn't reach. He was hoping they'd have a tree at home. It was in the loft, but his Mum hadn't got it down yet. She'd said, "What's the bloody point," when he'd asked her. He thought that she might be angry with him.

The tree in the art gallery was a real tree. He didn't know anyone who had a real tree. Most people he knew were like him and had artificial ones. One of his friends from school had had their tree up all year, so even in August when it was hot it was still in the corner behind the telly, the decorations desperate looking in the sunlight.

He'd not long found out that Father Christmas didn't exist. One of his brothers had told him. "You don't still believe in that, soft lad," the brother had said. The boy had two older brothers. Luckily he didn't see them often. He hadn't known what to make of this news. Eastenders had just been starting. The River that curled across the screen was called the Thames. Miss Roberts had told him. They didn't have a river where he lived. They had a canal, which wasn't as big as a river, but was good for chucking things into. He wished that his real brothers were more like brothers that he saw on the television, like he wished that his Dad didn't keep going away and that Father Christmas really existed.

When he went to school and told everyone about Father Christmas, it turned out that most of them knew already. He kept hoping that they were wrong. He hadn't seen anything, but he'd been woken in the night recently by noises coming from the loft. "Mice," his Mum had said when he'd asked, but he thought she was lying. The creaking and shuffling in the darkness above his head

wasn't mice. It sounded more like someone trying to be quiet - a person; someone like Father Christmas perhaps, come early to get ready for Christmas day.

"What sort of clothes are the people in the painting wearing?"

"Old fashioned, Miss."

"They're a state, Miss! Look at his shoes!"

"Shockin', Miss!" Ryan's best friend Wayne said.

"Ryan, what do you think about the boy's clothes?"

He stared at the boy. The boy in the painting looked a little younger than him. He was dressed in blue shorts with a matching jacket with a lace collar. He thought they might be knickerbockers. "Is he in his best clothes, Miss?" he asked.

He'd have liked to have worn his best clothes for the trip, but he wasn't allowed. He had to wear the school uniform of green sweatshirt and black trousers. His best clothes were his Manchester United football strip, the one that his Dad had bought him in the summer. He didn't see his Dad very often. But then, most of the children in his class didn't either. One of the boys in the other class had a father in prison. His Dad went to prison too, and sometimes his Mum would let him go with her to visit him, although they hadn't done that for a while as she said he'd been moved and it was too far away. His Dad had let him choose the shirt. He'd chosen number ten, Wayne Rooney. "Righto, kidda," his Dad had said, winking at him as he'd paid at the till. It was a bit big, but he'd grow into it.

He was waiting to grow into a lot of his clothes. "Whippet thin," was how his Nan described him. He knew that a whippet was a dog, but he'd never seen one. Everyone he knew had Staffordshire Bull Terriers, and they weren't thin. They had broad shoulders and short legs and muscles that moved under their skin as they trotted down the road. Wayne's Staffie, Tyson, had knocked him over. If his brothers ever changed into dogs, they'd be Staffies.

His Mum had taken him shopping too. She'd said, "You can have a dinosaur or a robot, not both." She'd walked quickly, weaving in and out of the crowds. He'd walked behind and watched her head turning between different stacks of toys. Sometimes she'd stop to examine a price tag before moving off again. She didn't hold his hand. She didn't stop to see if he was following. She hadn't warned him about stranger danger. Miss Roberts had done that. He wondered if it might be a trick question. If he said he wanted a robot, would he end up with a dinosaur? It was what his Nan called Sod's Law. She said that a lot. What he really wanted was a Vector Thrust Fast Jet. Failing that a Fast Pursuit Battle Tank, but they hadn't been mentioned, so he reckoned he didn't stand a Hope in Hell. That was another one of his Nan's sayings.

"A dinosaur," he'd said to his mother's back. He'd crossed his fingers as he said it. Then perhaps he'd get the robot.

One day, his Dad had said to him, I'll take you to a match at Old Trafford. He hadn't though, not yet. Grownups spoke like that, he'd found – one day, soon, maybe.

"What d'you think might be happening in the picture?"

"Has he been sent to the headmaster, Miss?" someone said. The boy in the painting was standing on a stool in front of a desk. A man sat on the other side, his hands clasped beneath his chin leaning in toward the boy, staring at him, which was just what the headmaster did to you if you got into trouble. The headmaster said things like, "You again," or, "What now?"

Behind him, from the gallery's entrance hall, he could hear singing. He recognised Silent Night and O Little Town of Bethlehem. They'd sung it in school assembly. He'd been in the school choir. He'd actually quite liked it. It was just like he'd seen on the telly, everyone dressed in woolly hats and scarves and holding lanterns, but then Miss Roberts had said that he was a Bad Influence and spoilt it for the others and hadn't let him be in it anymore.

“The man behind the desk is asking the boy a question. If we think about what the painting is called, can anybody guess what the question might be?”

“When he saw his Dad, Miss!” one of the girls said.

“Well done. Yes. When did you last see your Father?”

“Every other Saturday,” someone else said.

He wished that he saw his Dad that often. He thought back to the time his Dad had taken him shopping. That was the last time he’d seen him. Definitely.

He began to bite his nails. He wanted to go home. He didn’t want to look at the painting any more.

A few nights ago, he’d woken from a dream of Father Christmas and his Dad walking down his road. He’d shouted for them to wait, but they hadn’t heard him and had kept walking, and no matter how fast he ran he couldn’t catch up. He’d woken then feeling breathless and had got up and gone downstairs. As he’d pushed open the lounge door he heard a man say, “So if he does appear, Mrs Davidson, do let us know.”

Two men were in the lounge. They were in suits. He thought that only teachers wore suits. And men off the telly. No one else he knew. One man sat on the settee, his legs spread wide, his hands clasped across his belly. The other man, the man who’d spoken, was in the armchair, leaning forward with his hands clasped. His Mum was standing by the door to the kitchen, her arms folded, a cigarette smoking between her fingers. She didn’t answer.

The man who’d spoken turned to look at him in the doorway. “Hello, there,” he’d said, and smiled. “I like the pyjamas.” He had his Manchester United pyjamas on, as well as his Manchester United underpants, not that he was going to mention them. He’d felt very sleepy and wondered why teachers were in his house. “Won’t be long till Father Christmas’ll be coming down the chimney,” the man said.

“We haven’t got a chimney,” he’d replied.

“Oh, you needn’t worry about that. He’ll slide in through the gas fire, no probs.” His Mum stared at him from her position by the door, the ash growing at the end of her cigarette. The sound on the television had been turned to mute and he could see people standing in smoking rubble silently waving their arms and beating their hands against their heads and chests. He looked back to the man. “Actually,” he’d replied, “He’s early. He has a lot to do. He’s in the loft. I can hear him.”

“Is he?” said the man, and the other man on the settee looked up at the ceiling. That man was a Staffordshire Bull Terrier. The man asking the questions was a whippet.

“Go to bed,” his Mum had said. “Go to bed!” and as she’d stepped forward he’d stepped back.

The boy looked at the painting again. One of the soldiers was sitting in a way that reminded him of the Staffordshire Bull Terrier man. “They’re in uniforms, Miss, so I think those soldiers are like policemen,” one of the girls said.

He began to cry then. He thought he’d been asleep. He’d thought the noises he’d heard coming out of the darkness later that same night were in a dream, and that the glimpse of the man he’d seen being pushed across the landing toward the stairs was part of that same dream. But now he remembered a glint of metal, his father’s face as he was being dragged down the landing, the loft hatch swinging slightly. His shoulders heaved and he gasped for breath.

“Miss, he’s got snot coming out of his nose!”

“Ryan, whatever is the matter?” Miss Roberts said. “Don’t you feel well?”

Wayne pointed and laughed at him. “Ha ha ha, Ryan’s crying!” and some of the other boys laughed too.

He didn’t know what the little boy in the painting had done. He knew what he’d done though. “Nothin’s wrong Miss,” he said, and he wiped his nose on his sleeve.

He stared at Wayne who stopped laughing and looked away. He’d get him later, he thought.