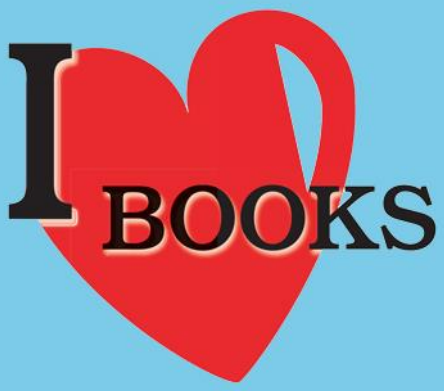


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Opening extract from

A Boy Called Christmas

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Published by

Canongate Books Ltd

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For Lucas and Pearl

This paperback edition published by Canongate Books in 2016

First published in Great Britain in 2015 by
Canongate Books Ltd, 14 High Street, Edinburgh EH1 1TE

www.canongate.tv

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British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available on
request from the British Library

ISBN 978 1 78211 826 8

Typeset in 13.25/15pt Bembo by
Palimpsest Book Production Ltd, Falkirk, Stirlingshire

Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, St Ives plc.



An Ordinary Boy

You are about to read the true story of Father Christmas.

Yes. Father Christmas.

You may wonder how I know the true story of Father Christmas, and I will tell you that you shouldn't really question such things. Not right at the start of a book. It's rude, for one thing. All you need to understand is that I do know the story of Father Christmas, or else why would I be writing it?

Maybe you don't call him Father Christmas.

Maybe you call him something else.

Santa or Saint Nick or Santa Claus or Sinterklaas or Kris Kringle or Pelznickel or Papa Noël or Strange Man With A Big Belly Who Talks To Reindeer And Gives Me Presents. Or maybe you have a name you've come up with yourself, just for fun. If you were an elf, though, you would always call him Father Christmas. It was the pixies who

started calling him Santa Claus, and spread the word, just to confuse things, in their mischievous way.

But whatever you happen to call him, you know about him, and that's the main thing.

Can you believe there was a time when no one knew about him? A time when he was just an ordinary boy called Nikolas, living in the middle of nowhere, or the middle of Finland, doing nothing with magic except believing in it? A boy who knew very little about the world except the taste of mushroom soup, the feel of a cold north wind, and the stories he was told. And who only had a doll made out of a turnip to play with.

But life was going to change for Nikolas, in ways he could never have imagined. Things were going to happen to him.

Good things.

Bad things.

Impossible things.

But if you are one of those people who believe that some things are impossible, you should put this book down right away. It is most certainly not for you.

Because this book is full of *impossible things*.



Are you still reading the book?
Good. (Elves would be proud.)
Then let us begin . . .

A Woodcutter's Son

Now, Nikolas was a happy boy.

Well, actually, no.

He would have told you he was happy, if you asked him, and he certainly *tried* to be happy, but sometimes being happy is quite tricky. I suppose, what I am saying is that Nikolas was a boy who believed in happiness, the way he believed in elves and trolls and pixies, but he had never actually seen an elf or a troll or a pixie, and he hadn't really seen proper happiness either. At least, not for a very long time. He didn't have it that easy. Take Christmas.

This is the list of every present Nikolas had received for Christmas. In his entire life.

1. A wooden sleigh.
2. A doll carved out of a turnip.

That's it.

The truth is that Nikolas's life was hard. But he made the best of it.

He had no brothers or sisters to play with, and the nearest town – Kristiinankaupunki (Kris-tee-nan-cow-punky) – was a long way away. It took even longer to get to than it did to pronounce. And anyway there wasn't much to do in Kristiinankaupunki except go to church or look in the window of the toyshop.

'Papa! Look! A wooden reindeer!' Nikolas would gasp as he pressed his nose against the glass of that toyshop.

Or,

'Look! An elf doll!'

Or,

'Look! A cuddly doll of the king!'

And once he even asked,

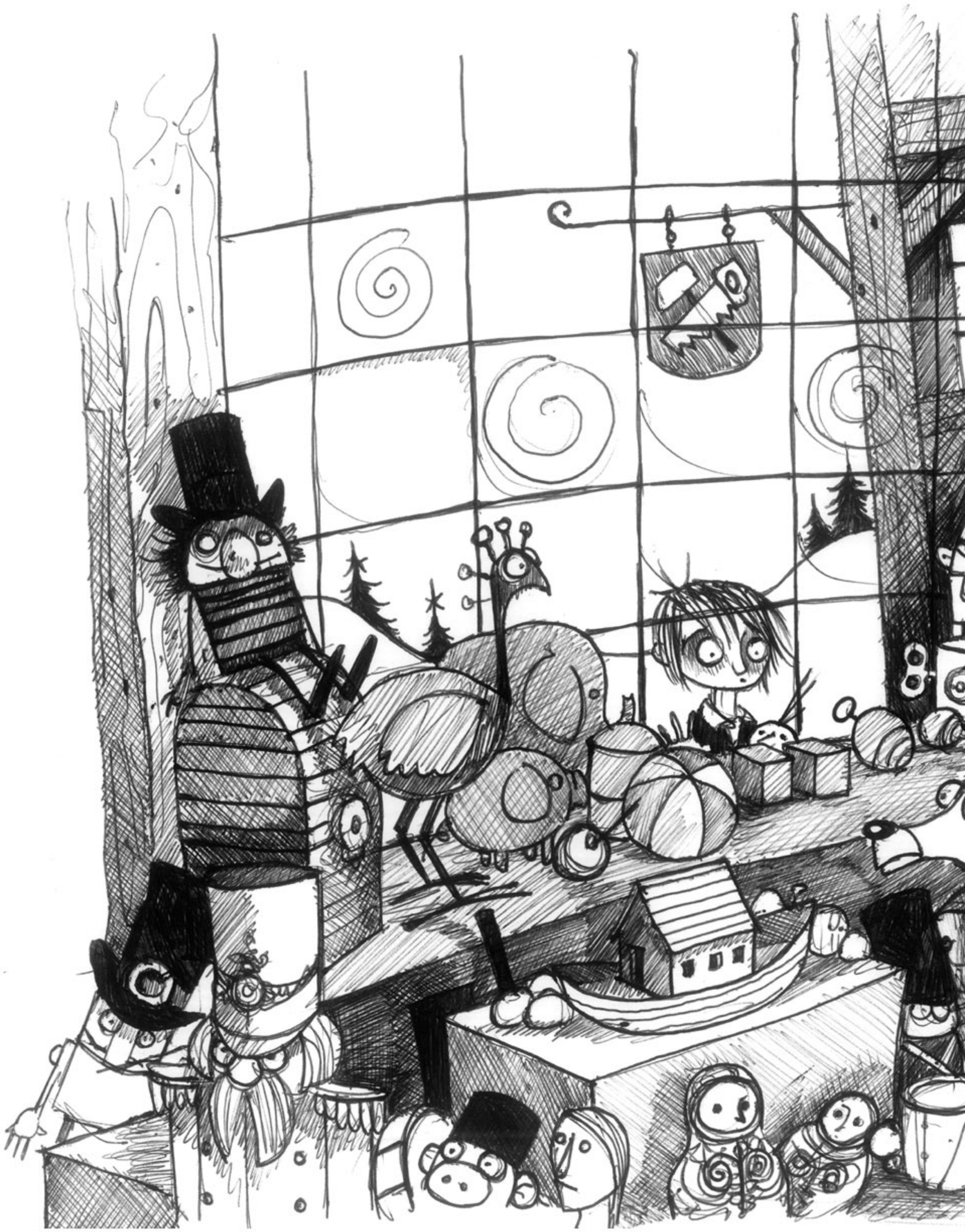
'Can I have one?'

He looked up at his father's face. A long and thin face with thick bushy eyebrows and skin rougher than old shoes in the rain.

'Do you know how much it is?' said Joel, his father.

'No,' said Nikolas.

And then his father held up his left hand, fingers stretched. He only had four and a half fingers on his left hand because of an accident with an axe. A horrible accident. Lots of





blood. And we probably shouldn't dwell on it too much, as this is a Christmas story.

'Four and a half rubles?'

His father looked cross. 'No. *No*. Five. Five rubles. And five rubles for an elf doll is too much money. You could buy a cottage for that.'

'I thought cottages cost one hundred rubles, Papa?'

'Don't try and be clever, Nikolas.'

'I thought you said I should try and be clever.'

'Not right now,' said his father. 'And anyway, why would you need an elf doll when you have that turnip-doll your mother made? Couldn't you pretend the turnip is an elf?'

'Yes, Papa, of course,' Nikolas said, because he didn't want to make his father upset.

'Don't worry, son. I'll work so hard that one day I'll be rich and you can have all the toys you want and we can have a *real* horse, with our own coach, and ride into town like a king and a prince!'

'Don't work too hard, Papa,' said Nikolas. 'You need to play sometimes too. And I *am* happy with my turnip-doll.'

But his father had to work hard. Chopping

wood all day and every day. He worked as soon as it was light to when it was dark.

'The trouble is we live in Finland,' his father explained, on the day our story starts.

'Doesn't everyone live in Finland?' asked Nikolas.

It was morning. They were heading out into the forest, passing the old stone well that they could never look at. The ground was dusted with a thin layer of snow. Joel had an axe on his back. The blade dazzled in the cold morning sun.

