

Christmas is Cancelled

Of course she was scared, it was Christmas Eve for goodness sake and the first time she'd ever seen Geraldine without her headphones. The two of them probably would have been exchanging some sort of neighbourly Christmas greeting had it not been for the dead look in Geraldine's eyes.

She stood on our doorstep and said to Angela: "I've cancelled the duck."

My wife looked at her, dumbfounded. "What?"

"I've cancelled the presents, and Auntie Flo and cousin Dylan. I've cancelled the trip to Ellie's. I've cancelled Christmas."

I told the kids to stay in the front room and came up behind Angela to see what was going on.

"Are you alright?" Angela asked Geraldine.

Geraldine, our new neighbour of the past two weeks, who never left the house without being plugged into her iPod and had therefore never responded to our attempts to introduce ourselves, was clearly not attempting to make friends now. Her young face looked as set and pale as a mask. The words she spoke sounded as though they were coming from somewhere deep in her innards, and yet as though they weren't coming from her at all.

"What's going on?" I asked, trying to sound commanding.

"I've cancelled Christmas," Geraldine repeated.

Angela reached for my hand and squeezed it, not taking her eyes off Geraldine.

"Will, she mentioned Flo and Dylan, and Ellie. And the duck. How does she know?" Angela asked, the fear making her voice tremble.

"I don't know, honey," I said. The kids had opened the door to the front room and were trying to get a look. I waved them back inside.

"How do you know our family's names?" Angela asked Geraldine.

"They're not coming. Christmas is cancelled," Geraldine said.

"Oh my god, Will, what's wrong with her?" Angela cried.

"Geraldine, what are you talking about?" I said.

"Robbie and Natasha will be so disappointed," said Geraldine.

That was it. I was just as scared as Angela now. "How do you know our kids' names?" I said.

I moved Angela out of the way and grasped Geraldine by the shoulder. I intended to give her a shake, see if I could rouse her to some sense. But the moment I touched her she screamed. She screamed so loud I felt my ears ring. Angela gasped. Lights went on in a house across the road. I heard Natasha cry for her Daddy inside the front room.

As soon as I withdrew my hand Geraldine looked at me and, although her eyes betrayed alarm, she seemed normal again. She stared at us both.

"Where am I?" she asked.

"On our doorstep – we're your neighbours. What's going on?" I asked. My heart was still drumming.

"I – I don't know," Geraldine said.

"Will, bring her inside. I don't think she's well," said Angela.

I put my hand on her shoulder and guided her over the threshold – she felt thin and cold, but she didn't resist. The poor thing just looked confused. Angela got her a glass of water and sat her in the front room, in the armchair next to the twinkling Christmas tree. I assured our wide-eyed kids that there was nothing to worry about and packed them off upstairs to brush their teeth before bed.

"You were saying that Christmas is cancelled," Angela was telling Geraldine when I walked back into the room, "and you mentioned all the names of our relatives."

"I'm sorry, I don't remember," Geraldine said, shaking her head, "I don't even know *your* names, never mind those of your relatives."

"Perhaps it was just a strange coincidence," I said, but I didn't believe it.

"It's funny, you even knew I was roasting a duck and not a turkey," Angela said to Geraldine.

There was a knock on the front door and we all jumped. I went to answer it. Another strange neighbour on the doorstep – just what we didn't need.

"You don't know me, I'm Sheila Thorpe," the old lady said, "but I heard a scream and I thought I'd better come and see that you're alright."

The comedy of this frail old lady asking me – six foot two and a keen rugby player in my spare time – didn't go over my head.

"Thanks, Sheila, but everything's fine," I replied, about to bid her goodnight and close the door. Let her get back to her curtain-twitching, I thought.

"It's just that something happened in that house last year," Sheila added quickly, "when the house was built."

I raised my eyebrows at her. Truthfully, I just wanted to get back into the house and check that Angela was okay and see if I could walk Geraldine back to her front door.

"Did you know about it?" Sheila persisted. "It's rather important. I think I should tell you."

Angela insisted on fetching us all a glass of mulled wine – she'd been making it just before Geraldine knocked on the door, and it was Christmas Eve, after all. Sheila looked grimly delighted at her audience as she said "I suppose no one warned you when you bought the house?"

Geraldine stared at the old woman and I exchanged looks with Angela. Geraldine and her husband Steven, who seemed just as unsociable as his wife, had taken first ownership of the house nextdoor. We had only moved into ours three months previously. The whole estate was brand new. They were still landscaping it and sorting out the potholes in the access road.

"Well, Christmas Eve last year, this estate was still being built of course," Sheila said, "and since the first houses had been promised to buyers for February, they were working like mad on it. Even right up to Christmas Eve. I live in one of the council houses over there, just across the road. I was watching them. Waiting for them to stop, actually. They were making such a noise, and I was waiting for my daughter and her children to arrive for Christmas. I was worried I wouldn't hear them knocking at the door. We used to look out onto fields, you know."

I rolled my eyes at Angela, who concealed a smile.

"Well, anyway, these chaps were working away until it got dark, and I remember thinking to myself at the time they shouldn't be up on the roof in such bad light. Someone was bound to have an accident. It was me who called the ambulance when I saw him fall – a youngster he was, so tragic – but of course an ambulance was no good to someone falling from that height onto concrete."

"Was this...at our house?" Geraldine asked.

"Yes, dear, it was. But he fell into what became the front garden of this place, I suppose."

I felt a chill shoot down my back, though I willed it away.

"How terribly sad," Angela said.

"But that wasn't the end of the story," Sheila said, "because when they told his wife, she went round to her neighbours and told them Christmas was cancelled – and then she threw herself off the bridge over the bypass. Awful. She left two children. Can you imagine?"

The three of us couldn't summon words. We stared at Sheila, who must have thought her ghastly story had been even more successful than she'd hoped at extinguishing our festive spirit. She sipped her wine.

"I don't know if you believe in ghosts, but I have always been sensitive to the paranormal myself," she went on. "Sometimes I glance out of my window as it's getting dark and I see that young man on the roof, fixing the tiles. Just for a second. Usually by the time I get my glasses on for a better view he's gone."

"Well, it's enough to make you wonder if you might need an eye test," I said. Angela kicked me.

"No, there must be some truth in it," Geraldine said, "or how did I know to tell you Christmas was cancelled? Didn't I use the same words that man's wife used?"

"Yes, you did," Angela said. "That is very chilling."

"Before you heard me scream, I had knocked on their door and told them Christmas was cancelled," Geraldine explained to Sheila, who nodded and peered hard at her. "And the weirdest thing is, I don't remember saying it, and I used all their relatives names even though I don't know them, and I mentioned that they wouldn't be having a duck for their Christmas dinner, even though I couldn't have known they were planning to have a duck this year instead of a turkey."
"Hey, calm down," I said to Geraldine. "Don't upset yourself again."
"I'm sure there's an explanation," Angela added.

Sheila's gaze remained fixed on Geraldine. She wasn't about to quell anyone's fear of ghosts.
"But if I don't remember coming over to your door, and I don't remember anything I said until Will shook me, then why did I come over here in the first place?" Geraldine said.
Angela and I looked at each other, and then at Geraldine. She stood up, almost spilling her wine.
"Oh my god...what if...Steven!"

She dashed to the door and Angela and I leapt up to follow her.
"I think Christmas really is cancelled," Sheila said.