

## The Dispirit of Christmas

The night was so incredibly beautiful, but all I saw were the ruby drops in the snow and the broken wings of the murdered angel. The Grimble's had outdone themselves.

A grimacing snowman dangled from the tree, hanged on a string of fairy lights. The reindeer balancing on the roof were within range of the sinister model of a huntsman taking aim from the chimney-top. The centrepiece was the charred guy from the village's bonfire night, dressed in a white nightie and daubed with red paint, carefully placed to look as though it had fallen backwards down the stone steps leading up to the front door. The wings, soggy from the recent snow, were ripped. A makeshift halo was smashed on the lawn and pieces of it sparkled in the light from the unfortunate snowman's noose.

Inky tugged on his lead. We progressed up the street, away from the Grimble's. Their house aside, the village felt blessed with tranquillity. The snow had muffled all sound. A glittery white frosting had the power to make the most pathetic tree and the least promising house look stunning. The only shame was that the snow had leant an ideal canvas to the theatrical gore of the Grimble's front garden.

Still, nothing could destroy the flutter of Christmas excitement. My family were arriving in the morning and the village bazaar would bring our collective festive fever to a triumphant conclusion on Christmas Eve. I could smell cinnamon in the air just thinking about it all.

I hoped the snow would last until my relatives arrived, so that my cousins and I could have snowball fights and take long walks with the adults across the frozen farmland. I savoured the imagined sound of our boots crunching the frost, as we chattered about what had changed during the year.

The first carload of relatives arrived in such aggrieved moods from having been stuck on the congested motorways with sub-standard car heating and then thrown all over the icy village roads that I soon began wishing for rays of winter sun. The second carload arrived in a tow-

truck after breaking down on the hard shoulder and were colder and grouchier still. My parents failed to transform themselves into gracious hosts upon sight of slushy footprints on the rose-blush carpet.

As the eldest, it fell to me to entertain the younger ones. It was a task I usually planned for with glee, but this year none of them felt like taking part in my studiously constructed gaieties. The last thing they wanted to endure was my snowball fight, since they had had enough of being cold, wet and stuck outdoors for one day. By the time I had wasted my energy enthusing them about snowman building and icicle finding, they were gathered around the playstation.

The adults didn't suffer that for long and, after a couple of hours, ejected their offspring into the cold evening to help me walk Inky. The Christmas tree on the village green failed to impress; my promises of festive amusements at the bazaar met with the despondency of kids who are too old to believe in Santa. The only thing that made them gape and grin was the Grimble's front lawn. They cackled at the garrotted snowman, sniggered at a decapitated paper maché robin perched on the gate and thought the ruby paint trickling down the snowy path from the murdered angel was the funniest thing they'd ever seen.

Why couldn't they get excited about Christmas like they had last year, when it had some magic for them? Was I the only one who thought the season was enchanted? And why did the Grimbles hate Christmas so much anyway?

It was this question that interested my cousins.

"Well..." I began, "it's just a rumour, but people say the Grimbles hate Christmas because their children died on Christmas Eve."

"Wow! Really?" My eight-year-old cousin Hayley's eyes rounded into shiny wells of horror.

"Were they murdered?" ten-year-old Jonathan enthused.

I glimpsed half a dozen pairs of expectant eyes and thought of Mary and Sonny Grimble, the two teenagers who lived in the macabre house with their parents.

“Well, maybe just *one* of their kids...the youngest one,” I modified, “but, yes, she was murdered!”

My morbid cousins begged for details until I found myself leading them round the dimly lit lanes of the village, unfolding an invented story which accumulated further ghoulish details the more they gasped and shivered with childish fear. The murderer was Mr Grimble, who had spared his wife and teenage children’s lives because they were vampires and, therefore, technically incapable of dying. The murdered younger daughter had been a model of virtue and brimming with joyful Christmas spirit – a living angel, in fact, which was why Mr Grimble made a blood-spattered fake angel each year and put it outside his house: it was to remind other children that he hated Christmas and the happiness it brought people. It was to ward off carol singers, who might call at the Grimble’s front door and end up butchered by the evil man and fed on by his undead family.

I got into trouble when the more imaginative children were afraid to sleep that night and the rest could talk of nothing but blood-sucking vampires and butchered angels at the dinner table. At least I had drummed up a little nervous enthusiasm for the village Christmas bazaar, even if it was for the wrong reasons.

“Do you think the Grimble’s’ll be there?” Hayley asked.

“Well, if they are, you must keep away from them and none of you must say anything about the murdered angel,” I explained carefully.

“What about the vampires?” Jonathan checked.

“Or those. Not a word,” I warned.

The church hall had been decorated so thoroughly that virtually none of its woodworm was visible, and the tree was so copiously laden with baubles that its branches sagged. For the kids there was a lucky dip as well as pin the tail on Little Donkey, while the adults passed the afternoon around the mulled wine stall.

Later, when I had lost control of the excitable cousins who were now running around the graveyard playing vampires, I went to sift through the bric-a-brac stalls. Aimlessly turning over paperbacks, I glanced up and saw Mary Grimble at the next table browsing through magazines. Her brother wasn't far behind, stuffing a wedge of Christmas cake into his mouth. I stared at them: what were *they*, the Christmas-haters, doing here? I couldn't see their parents. They had come alone and seemed at ease among the tinsel trimmings.

Mary was slightly younger than me; Sonny a year older. They attended a private school so they caught a different bus. I rarely saw them around the village. Both had inherited the broomstick physique of Mrs Grimble and dark hair with rather pallid skin from Mr Grimble. As Mary neared the bookstall where I was pretending to inspect volumes, I discerned how bewitching her eyes were: the orbs of pale hazel framed by a mass of ebony lashes gave beauty to her thin face. She caught me scrutinising and smiled generously.

"They never did anything like this where we lived in London," she commented, as she reached my side.

"Oh," I said.

"Did they, Sonny?" she said to her brother, who looked up and shook his head. "It's quite good, isn't it?"

"I thought you hated Christmas," I blurted out, in an accusatory tone.

Mary and her brother started laughing. I blushed.

"Oh, don't worry about our garden," Mary giggled, "We just do that for a laugh. Takes the piss out of people who turn their house into an airport landing strip every year."

"So...you don't hate Christmas, then?" I probed.

"Well, maybe the commercialism of it all," Mary replied airily. "People forget what it's really about."

I wanted to ask Mary what she thought Christmas *was* about, but I was intimidated by her confidence. I left suspecting that she might be as keen on the atmosphere of Christmas as I was, for I didn't care much for brats thinking it was about getting the latest toys either.

Christmas Day in my own house found Hayley and Jonathan fighting; he'd run her gameboy over with his remote control tank. Adults who were vaguely conscious tried to remedy the situation, using neither skill nor judgement. Another cousin was rollerblading through the hallway. Bulging sacks of discarded wrapping paper sat sadly in the doorway; a stack of leftovers towered from the table. The television provided a monotonous lullaby, over which my parents could be heard rowing in the kitchen.

Inky and I escaped outdoors into the cool evening air. The last of the snow was melting. The road outside the Grimble's house was empty: no carloads of relatives had descended upon *them*. There were no lights on. Perhaps they'd gone away. But then I looked harder and saw, through a window not cluttered by a gaudy tree, the four of them sitting around a table lit by candles. It looked so civilised compared to my own Christmas.

I shuddered. The charred angel on the steps looked chillingly corporeal in the dying light.