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But Have You Seen it In the Snow?

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The worst thing about Christmas was that my brother came home.

'This is not for discussion,' Mum said. She didn't fight to win but hers was the final word. We made her pay anyway, every year. We gave her different silences, mine from my room, on my bed with my Walkman on, making her yell three times before I came for tea. My Dad took his elsewhere, his tread in the hall heavier in December, back from the Social late and to the point. Once school broke up he'd take me too, sometimes. He played pool with the other men and made his pints last. I watched and ate salt and vinegar crisps.

The Social's too big for the people in it, and the walls are covered in photos of nearly famous Yorkshire people to fill the empty space. And there's a plaque up for the kids who died in another village scavenging coal for their families. It is bronze and polished, the only thing never allowed to get dusty. But it's up by the toilets which I don't feel is the most respectful place.

'She's a good one,' he would say to them, nodding proudly at me each time, like the men hadn't known me forever.

It wasn't up for discussion but it was Mum herself who raised it. It happened on the Sunday before Christmas when my Gran was over for tea. We'd turned the telly off because my Gran liked us to chat 'like a family', as if she didn't know what a family was.

There was cake; we were at the table in the kitchen, and the tablecloth was on.

'Move your feet,' Mum nagged Dad, to show she loved him. He pounded both soles down hard on the linoleum. To show he didn't care.

'God's sake, Jim, he's family, he's our son, and he only comes back once a year… and it's Christmas.' She faltered and it was only the second time ever I'd seen her nearly cry. Although my Gran says when the strike broke Mum was red eyed afterward for a year, like nothing would be all right again.

We went a bit sheepish then. And my Gran – bit rich coming from her who won't ever come over for tea when he's here – frowned at us over her reading glasses and started talking loudly about something she half remembered from the radio, that I half remembered her telling us before.

Mark drove up from London on Christmas Eve, later in hours every year. Now he arrives in the dark, stealthy and secret as if the village won't notice. He parks his car outside our house though, bold as brass, and if my Mum and Dad weren't who they were it would have got keyed each time. Or more. Traditions are built like this.

Me and Dad were out at the Social when Mark arrived. This time it was packed and full of ancient tinsel sellotaped to its square magnolia walls, smelling of fresh wet dog. It was the only pub left in town so there wasn't exactly anywhere else for the men and kids to go to get away from the frantic last minute cooking and wrapping, and it was pissing down outside.

I hung out with some other girls from my class and we talked about boys and music and I pretended to know more of both than I did. The Dads were pretending too, looking away when we sipped their beers. Mostly it was men and kids, but there was also a table of widows in the corner, being the loudest drunks of all.

'Will I buy her a cider, Jim?' My Dad's friend said, shooting a pound out his pocket like a magic trick. I perked up and my Dad shrugged. The girls looked envious. He got me half a cider and set it down carefully on the round brown table in front of me, with a Foster's coaster stuck to the glass bottom and a wink.

'There you go, love. Start young, nowt else to do but drink round here. It's good your Dad has you. At least.'

My Dad went rigid and silent which is something to be afraid

of. It isn't just me who knows that, and everyone went a bit quiet except the drunk, deaf widows. He bent down slowly and pocketed the black ball in one. Then placed the cue on the table as if putting his fork on a licked-clean plate. He swallowed down the rest of his pint in one gulp.

'I'm taking you home.' He says to me, as if it were me that mentioned Mark. I knew not to give out like I give to my Mum though. We were wrapped up and heading out when the door opens and in burst the Warringtons. They're all covered in white, not water, and the eldest one, from in Mark's school year way before me, shouts 'Happy Christmas! It's snowing!' And nearly falls over because he's half cut.

The pub cheers and I cheer too and imagine if I had a brother like that all handsome and happy and here.

I'm sad we're not staying some more but once we get outside it's just me and Dad and the snow and I'm glad. I say I'm cold and he puts his arm around me to keep me upright in my inappropriate slippery shoes. The snow is coming down fast and hard, already on the tops it looks lethal and good for sledging, if I'm not a bit old for all that.

He's chatting to show he's not cross with me. 'There is Venus. You can just make her out, but it's hard, in this.' He brushes the snow away from his eyes while we rush along, me skiing in my plastic flats, looking at the sky to please him although it's the worst night this week for him to point out stars I already know.

Mark's car is outside when we arrive. A red mini, cleaned up for Christmas, a hat of snow on its roof. It looks like Santa come early.

'Well.' Dad says, stiff again like in the pub. 'Let's hope he's got us some good presents, eh?'

The door sticks a bit in the cold, but Dad boots it at the dodgy point and we're in. The kitchen smells good already and the fairy lights are bright like in the Social and the fire is warming up the lounge. But Mark is here, tucked in a corner of the kitchen with Mum solidly between him and the whole village.

'Let's raid your Mum's sherry,' Dad says, kicking his boots off on the mat, steering us both into the other room where the Christmas drinks are. He doesn't shut the door, doesn't go that far. He pours us three drinks and pokes the fire. Mark hovers in the doorway, like he's not welcome.

'Hi Dad.' He says. 'Hi small fry.' To me.

'Mark.' Dad replies. I don't turn for him.

Mum moves in, leading Mark by the hand and sitting him like royalty on the sofa. She reopens the sherry and gives him a glass too. His glass is chipped, so she turns it in her hand so he won't see the imperfection, like he's a guest. Then she stands in front of her only son, her face to the fire.

'It's snowing out.' She says, queen of the obvious. 'Lovely fire.'

'Good coal.' Says Dad and looks straight at Mark.

Mark swigs the sweet red liquor like it's lager. 'The people round here have memories like elephants.' I can't believe he's saying that, going into battle, against my Dad, against me, against us.

'That's long, is it?' Dad bites back.

'Jim.' That's the voice, that one, when you don't argue.

'I left something at the Social,' fibs Dad, and he's off out again, without me, not daring to slam the door.

'Pies!' Mum shrieks moving fast back to the kitchen, and we all sniff to smell if they are burning.

'Don't you get bored living here?' Mark says quietly, so she can't hear. I scan the drinks cupboard, there's a bit of Baileys, some gin down from yesterday, and some minty green one I can't pronounce. I'm allowed what I want on Christmas Eve and sherry is the best worst option. I pour it up to the top of the glass. Mine's not chipped. I'm feeling a bit drunk now like I'm wrapped in cotton wool. Some of the older kids say heroin feels like cotton wool, that everything is safe and soft again. There's a few at our school on that now.

'But have you seen it in the snow?' I finally say.

She's back with a plate out before he can answer. 'Mince pie?'

We take one each, they're just a bit overdone on the edges. Mum opens the curtains, to look out at the weather across the village. The back to backs are all lit up and the snow keeps coming. Relentless.

'Will he ever shut up about it?' Mark says, and that's the wrong thing to say.

'You crossed the line, Mark! You crossed the bloody line!'

'I *never* crossed a picket line.' He answers glibly. I'm so glad my Dad isn't here.

'There's more than one way to cross a picket line.

'Mum, I needed out of here, look at it – there's nothing, no jobs,

no hope, there's nothing, and all that other stuff was years ago. She,' he points, dragging me into it, 'was just a toddler! Tell him to stop sulking and get over it.'

My Mum won't look at him, she is just looking at what's left of our village, it is white as a bride left alone at the altar.

'There's you men with your hurt feelings,' she says, 'and then there's dead children.' She pauses and stares out. 'And they are not at all the same.'

Her hand is on her belly, as if she is touching a memory.

We're so quiet now we can hear everyone at the Social singing, not the words or the tune but distantly as if it were a time ago rather than a couple of streets away. Mum is smiling, but her face is still sad.

'I'll wash up.' She's back to the kitchen, one room to another like she doesn't know where to be when he's here. Above the distant chorus I hear the tap running failing to get hot enough. I am eyeing my presents from Mark under the tree, three of them in gold paper. I want them, even though it's dirty money, with his job at the Met.

'Mum, I don't think I'll come back next year.' Mark calls through, his voice higher, like it's breaking all over again.

There's a pause before she replies, she stands there watching the soft fat snow laying itself like hope over our town, her hands in soap suds like a cheap imitation of it.

'Suit yourself.' She answers at last, intricate and cold as a snowflake.

I look out the window and wonder if it will settle.