



MR. **DIG'S**
HOLIDAY YARNS

PROSE SHORTS BY
JOHN LEES

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HOLIDAY PROSE TALES

WRITTEN BY

JOHN LEES

TILL
A Sink Tale

Christmas Eve, and it was snowing in Sinkhill. The people of Glasgow generally do not expect snow on Christmas, settling instead for more of the punishing rain that tends to fall for much of the rest of the year. But this year, it would seem a fortuitously timed touch of Christmas magic had fallen on Glasgow. Not that much of that magic made it out as far as Sinkhill.

Most of the local businesses based in Sinkhill had long been closed down and shuttered, but even the few that remained open had shut up shop, and would remain closed for Christmas Day and Boxing Day. The residents of Sinkhill had either retreated back to their homes, or scurried to one of the grimy local pubs that were always open, which would always be open, which would be open even after the nuclear apocalypse where the only survivors would be the cockroaches and the pub regulars swaying eternally from the edge of the bar. But one local business did still have the lights on this bitter cold Christmas Eve night.

Isa's Cafe was struggling, and perhaps Isa would have accepted defeat by now if she didn't have so much invested in the place. It wasn't just that her name was above the door, written on a battered, faded banner decades old. It was that she lived in the wee flat above the small cafe, that she spent all her time here. It was her life. And she made just enough to get by and keep the engines running. Enough people, mostly old pensioners like her, stopped by daily at lunchtime for tea and tattie scones to make the venture worthwhile. And Isa was thankful for that, grateful that she had a livelihood and a roof over her head that many didn't. That's why, each Christmas, she kept the doors open, and offered free meals and hot drinks to any of the area's homeless who stopped by for some shelter from the cold.

It was near 8pm, and only a handful of people were in Isa's Cafe. This made Isa concerned. There was no shortage of homeless people in Glasgow, and many found themselves gravitating to Sinkhill. The Speakeasy out on the fringes of the district drew them in like a siren call: a derelict quarry which the authorities steered clear from, which had become a sanctuary of sorts to many of the city's lost and disenfranchised. But Sinkhill was not a safe place for anyone after dark, least of all those with no doors to lock themselves behind, and things had been getting worse lately. The fact that some regulars of previous years were nowhere to be seen worried Isa deeply. But there were a couple of new faces, including a gaunt teenage boy, shivering in clothes that would be hopelessly inadequate in shielding him from the elements. Isa's heart ached as she looked at him, slumped in a chair at the corner of the cafe, eyes darting around nervously. Sighing, she spooned some hot chocolate into a cup and took it over to him.

"Have some hot chocolate son," Isa said, smiling gently, "It'll heat you up."

"Aye, thanks," the boy replied, not making eye contact as the cup was sat on the table in front of him.

It had not been Ryan's intention to be rude, or dismissive of Isa's kindness. Truth was, his mind was just occupied on other things. Chiefly, a mad bastard called Big Mark. Ryan wasn't too torn up about being away from home at Christmas, because that place had never been much of a home to him nor the people in it much of a family, so fuck them. No, it was

Big Mark that weighed on Ryan's mind, and the £100 that Ryan owed him. Or, at least, that Big Mark said Ryan owed him.

Big Mark was a Dickhead. Not just in terms of his personality. He was one of the Dickheads, the gang that ran roughshod through Sinkhill. Ryan knew to avoid them whenever he could, and had been successful in doing so for the most part, but his luck ran out the day before, when he crossed paths with Big Mark. Towering a good head taller than him and twice as wide, Big Mark had taken great delight in backing Ryan into a corner and informing him of the rent he owed. The way Big Mark saw it, the Dickheads owned the streets of Sinkhill, and that made the homeless people living their tenants, which meant Ryan owed him rent money. £100, he'd said, he didn't care how he got it. All that mattered was that Ryan had until the clock struck midnight and Christmas Day began to get it to him. If he didn't make that deadline, there would be consequences.

That's what was running through Ryan's mind as he sat in Isa's Cafe, sipping anxiously at his cup of hot chocolate. In his position, £100 might as well be £1000, £10,000. He looked out the window and thought of all the people who had casually thrown away £100 in the City Centre this past week like it was nothing, on junk to wrap up for Christmas that would be forgotten about by New Year. Then he looked across at the ticking clock hung up on the wall and realised that time was running out. He could try to run, hide, but he knew Big Mark would find him before long. Or he could just wait here for Big Mark to come for him, that way he could at least be warm for what remained of his life...

Then Ryan's eyes wandered to the front of the cafe, and to the open till.

Isa had disappeared, heading up to her flat and leaving the front of the store briefly unattended. She must not have realised that her till at the checkout had popped open, revealing a wad of £10s and £20s sitting there temptingly, announcing themselves to Ryan as the solution to all his problems. If he'd had a minute, Ryan would have been disgusted with himself at the very thought of stealing that money. Isa was a frail old lady, clearly having a tough time getting by herself, and she was going out of her way to try to help those in need. She had been nice to him, something no one else had been in quite some time. If he'd had a minute, Ryan would have pushed that horrible, selfish thought right out of his mind.

But he didn't have a minute. And so, before his brain could even really process what he was doing, his legs were carrying him up to the open till, and his hands were stuffing all the notes into his pocket. Then he was running out the door, back out into the cold, alone once more.

Running through the snow, hands stuffed in his pockets, the first feeling to hit Ryan was raw, visceral relief. A whole day thinking he was a dead man, and just in the nick of time a solution had fallen into his lap. The endorphins were coursing through him, his heart pounding in his chest. But something else was running through him, a gurgling nausea at the pit of his stomach over what he'd done. He told himself that it was the survival instinct kicking in, that having a sense of self-preservation didn't make him wicked. But that didn't make his stomach feel any better.

And with all the inner turmoil going on within him, Ryan failed to notice the figure trailing a little behind, barely visible through the snow. A man with a fox mask, following him...

...

"Here he is, dead man walking!"

Big Mark smirked as Ryan shuffled towards him. He'd stepped outside the pub for a smoke and spotted his scrawny little form approaching. He'd not told Ryan where to find him, he liked the idea of making the kid sweat trying to seek him out, running from place to place in the biting cold. Not that Big Mark expected him to have any actual money, no, he was expecting excuses, readying himself for Ryan to fall on his knees and start begging. Big Mark was looking forward to that.

Ryan noted the mean-spirited grin spreading across Big Mark's face, and all of a sudden felt like a mouse approaching a cat to offer cheese in exchange for being left alone. For a fleeting moment he considered turning on his heels and running, using the money he'd grabbed to get a train to somewhere far away. But as much as Big Mark frightened him, somehow the prospect of leaving Glasgow frightened Ryan more. So, forward he went, until he was standing face-to-face with his tormentor.

Like all Dickheads, Big Mark wore a condom over his head at all times, giving his brow a greasy sheen. You might think it'd look ridiculous, but no one would dare laugh in Big Mark's face. He had a big bulbous nose and a row of crooked, yellowing teeth, and as Ryan got closer he started to get a strong whiff of B.O. rising from under his tracksuit. Even after weeks of living rough, Ryan somehow had better standards of hygiene than this guy. He was not a pleasant person to be around, and Ryan told himself that the sooner this interaction was over with, the better. £100 and it would all be done with, he'd be off the hook and Big Mark would move on to some other poor sod. And it turned out Ryan had lifted a little more than £100 out the till, so he'd been able to keep some extra money aside to get himself a nice meal or two in the week ahead. All he had to do was get this over with...

"You got my rent money?" Big Mark asked.

"Yeah," Ryan replied, "£100."

Ryan pulled the £100 out of his pocket, and handed it over to Big Mark, who looked surprised, and even a little disappointed. He stared down at the wad of notes in his greasy hand, and said nothing.

"So, that's us done, yeah?" Ryan asked, "Now you'll leave me alone?"

As he pushed the money into his pocket, a smile once again crept across Big Mark's face.

"Naw, mate," he said, "We're not done."

And out of nowhere, Big Mark whacked Ryan across the face with a stiff right hook. Ryan's legs immediately gave out from under him, and he hit the ground like a sack of potatoes. Casually tossing his cigarette aside, Big Mark gave Ryan a swift kick in the gut while he lay on the ground.

"Aye, we're square on rent," Big Mark said, "But turns out, I have another use for you. See, I'm sick of wearing this thing on my head all the time, and I'm thinking what I want for Christmas is a promotion, start getting paid to be an Enforcer or a Pusher for Si McKirdie."

And to get that, all I need to do is have a Witness record me doing something really nasty. You can help me out with that, can't you, pal? I've got some great ideas."

Ryan was crawling along the ground now, desperate to somehow get away even as he knew deep down he wasn't going anywhere. Why had he come here? Why hadn't he just stayed at Isa's?

"I'm getting a Witness now," Big Mark said with a chuckle, taking out his phone, "You just lie right there, I'll get back to you in a..."

DUUM!

Ryan was looking down at the ground. He didn't see the shovel connect with the back of Big Mark's head. All he saw was a spray of red on the white snow, closely followed by a cluster of those yellow teeth landing in an arc on the ground in front of him. Then, Big Mark collapsed forward, felled like a tree, landing on the ground next to Ryan. For a moment, Ryan was frozen with surprise as he found himself staring into the pulverised face of Big Mark, semi-conscious and baffled as blood pooled around his head at the point where he'd landed.

"Wuzzat?" Big Mark muttered incoherently, "Wuzzat fox?"

Then those survival instincts kicked in, and Ryan made to push himself up to his feet. But before he could, he felt a foot on his back, pressing his chin back down into the snow. A hand reached down over him and grabbed onto the condom on Big Mark's head, pulling it off with a little POP sound, like an elastic band snapping.

"No presents for him this Christmas," a deep, eerily cheerful voice boomed above Ryan, "He was on naughty list."

The foot came off Ryan's back, and immediately he spun around onto his back, scrambling backwards. Looming over him was a muscular man even taller than Big Mark, wielding a bloody shovel. But even more than the shovel, what Ryan found himself staring at was the man's face. He was wearing a fox mask, and behind the mask were a pair of beady, wild-looking eyes glaring out at him. Somewhat incongruously, the man was also wearing a Santa hat.

"You're on naughty list too, mate," Mr. Dig said, "I followed you from Isa's. You have something that's not yours in your pocket. Hang on, that reminds me..."

Mr. Dig turned his attention back to Big Mark, leaning over and retrieving the £100 from his pocket. Big Mark let out a feeble whimper, prompting Mr. Dig to give him an extra boot in the arse for good measure. He turned back to face Ryan.

"You gave him some, but you have rest. I saw you."

"Please," Ryan said, "He was going to kill me. I didn't have a choice..."

"You always have choice," answered Mr. Dig.

Reaching forward, Mr. Dig grabbed a handful of Ryan's jacket and hauled him up to his feet. Then he patted him on the shoulder.

"You are stupid boy," Mr. Dig said, "But it's not too late to be good. Come with me."

...

Ryan and Mr. Dig walked together through the snowy night, not encountering another soul. They didn't exchange any words, but Ryan would occasionally look up at the tank of a man walking alongside him with a mix of terror and wonder. Who was he? And why had he helped him? Or was he even helping him? Maybe his goal had been to retrieve the stolen money, or beat the snot out of Big Mark, and saving Ryan's life had been incidental.

Of course, Ryan knew where they were going. And before long, he saw the warm glow of the lights from inside Isa's Cafe. Then that nausea in his stomach started to come bubbling back. Ryan stopped walking, and Mr. Dig turned to face him.

"Move," he said.

Ryan took out the remaining money from his pocket, extending it towards Mr. Dig with a trembling hand.

"You give it to her," Ryan said, "I can't face her, after what I did."

Mr. Dig didn't take the money. Instead, he took out the £100 he'd taken back off Big Mark and slapped it down onto Ryan's open hand.

"No," Mr. Dig replied, "Your mess. You clean it up."

Ryan put the money back in his pocket, taking big gulps, trying not to cry.

"I know I messed up, and I'm sorry. I was scared, okay? I was scared and I did something stupid. And I want to fix it. But please... please don't make me go back in there and face that nice old lady. Everyone else thinks I'm garbage but her, she was nice to me. And when I tell her what I did, she's going to realise that everyone else is right and I *am* garbage. She's going to look at me like that too. I can't take it!"

Mr. Dig stared at him with those unhinged, pinpoint eyes, not saying anything for a moment. When he finally spoke, it was just to repeat one word.

"Move."

Then he turned and continued walking towards Isa's Cafe. Letting out a defeated sigh, Ryan trudged on after him.

...

The cafe had a few more people in it now, all looking grateful for the food and shelter. Isa was happy for them, but her stomach was in a knot with anxiety over the stolen money. How could she be so careless? But her eyes brightened as Mr. Dig stepped into Isa's Cafe.

"Mr. Dig!" she exclaimed with joy, not paying heed to some gasps of surprise coming from the others in the cafe, "There he is! The nice young man who helped me set up my Christmas tree! What a good boy you are, come on in."

"Thanks, Isa, think I will."

Mr. Dig gave Isa a hug and stepped inside. That's when Isa noticed the boy from earlier walking in after him, looking shamefaced.

"There you are," Isa said, "I was worried about you. What happened? Why did you run off?"

Eyes fixed down on the ground, Ryan pulled the stolen money out of his pocket and handed it over to Isa.

"I.." Ryan began, "Sorry, I..."

"He was very stupid," cut in Mr. Dig, putting a hand on his shoulder, "Dickhead came into cafe while you were upstairs, stole money from your till, and idiot here ran after him to get it back. Got punch in face for his troubles. But I helped him out and we got your money back."

"Oh, thank you so much!" Isa exclaimed, pulling in a stunned Ryan for a hug.

Isa led Ryan over to a seat, then turned to Mr. Dig.

"It's just about to turn midnight," she said, "Why don't you ring in Christmas with us, Mr. Dig? I've got Yule log."

Mr. Dig looked around at the people in the cafe. Sinkhill was a horrible place, but there were still good people and acts of kindness to be found, if you looked hard enough.

"Aye," he said, "Why not."

Sitting down his shovel next to the Christmas tree, Mr. Dig took a seat at the far corner of the cafe. He looked up at the clock. Midnight.

"Merry Christmas, Sinkhill."

MEAT FEAST: A Christmas SINK Tale

By John Lees

There was something magical about Glasgow on Christmas Eve. The time for frenzied last-minute buying hysteria in the City Centre had come and gone, with the shops now mostly closed. Perhaps there were lost souls out there still trudging around with bags in their hands and defeat in their eyes, hunting for somewhere still selling Christmas turkeys on the evening of 24th December, but they were elsewhere. For Louise, with work over, and all her shopping and prep done well in advance, now was the time to appreciate the mood. She'd walked through the German market at St. Enoch's, taking in the smells and sampling some suspect food that might play havoc on her stomach later. And now as she walked slowly past GoMa, taking in the resplendent display of shimmering lights, Glasgow felt a little less cold and dreary. Yes, magical seemed like the right word after all.

Perhaps it was the Christmas spirit giving her warm and fuzzy feelings. Or perhaps it was the company. Her little festive tour of the city had been taken arm-in-arm with Kieran, her boyfriend of the last several months. Calling him a "boyfriend" felt a little immature, given that they were both grown-ass adults in their 30s with one divorce each under their belt, and also a son, in Louise's case. And yet it felt right, as Louise had that dopey young puppy love with Kieran that she'd never had with anyone else before, not even her ex husband. It's funny how you don't even realise you've been missing out without any frame of reference of how things should be. He felt like a best friend. She was always happy to spend time in his company, even if it was just doing something mundane together, even if it was just them both doing their own individual things in the same space. She felt safe and comfortable around him, never like she had to be "on" or at guard all the time. What a revelation it was, that love didn't need to be a battleground. Yeah, love. That was another thing. Kieran had said he loved her on their third date, and she'd thought that level of openness and vulnerability in the culture of "don't call back too soon" and "treat 'em mean to keep 'em keen" was very sweet, even if she hadn't been ready then to say it back. But more and more, she was sure she *did* love him.

It had been her idea to take a walk through the City Centre tonight. The lights and decorations here were more cheerful than what was on offer in Sinkhill, and there was something nice about taking a walk out in the chilly winter that made returning home to snuggle in for the night by the tree, with all the Christmas lights on and the heating cranked up, feel all the more rewarding. And honestly, she could have used some cheering up. Jay was spending Christmas with his father this year. It was only fair, he was with her last Christmas and would be with her over New Year's. But it didn't make it hurt any less. Being with Kieran, not being alone, that made it hurt a little less.

"Do you normally go out for a Christmas Eve walk through the city like this with Jay?" Kieran asked, as if he could tell what she was thinking about just by looking at her.

"Yeah I did, but it goes back further than that," Louise replied, "My mum and dad used to do it with me and my sister when we were kids. They've always loved Christmas, and they passed that onto me."

"Let's just hope they don't see me as the Grinch coming to town tomorrow," Kieran said.

Louise was going round to her parent's house for Christmas Day tomorrow, and Kieran had been invited over, too. Though Kieran had been introduced to Jay quite quickly and the two already got on well, this would be the first time he'd met Louise's family. Considering they'd been seeing each other for months now, and now lived together, they really couldn't put it off any longer.

"No, they'll love you," Louise said, pulling him closer and wrapping an arm around his shoulders, "My family is not scary, honest. And when they see how you make me happy, that'll make *them* happy."

"We'll see," Kieran replied nervously, "Saying or doing the wrong thing in these situations is kinda my superpower."

"I think it'll be fine," continued Louise reassuringly, "Everything's usually pretty relaxed and chill over Christmas with my family. Heh, apart from the time with the Monster Max incident. Did I tell you about Monster Max?"

Kieran smiled. She had, but he was happy to let her tell him again.

"I wasn't into girl toys when I was little, so there was no Dolly Pockets for me at Christmas," Louise began, "All that I wanted this Christmas was a Monster Max playset. Monster Max was the same idea as a Dolly Pocket, with the little box you open up and there are little toys and a diorama inside, but this was for boys, so the boxes were shaped like monster heads. And the one I wanted was the zombie set. I'd seen it advertised on TV and it looked amazing, this gooey zombie head with an eyeball hanging out, and when you opened it up it was like a cemetery with hidden compartments in the graves and crypts for hiding the zombie toys. I wanted it so bad."

Louise looked ahead longingly as she recalled this long lost zombie toy, as if in this moment she was a kid again and still wanted it.

"Then Christmas morning came, and I had a Monster Max playset sure enough... but it was a ghost head! My parents had tried their best, but couldn't find the zombie anywhere, and had opted for the next best thing. Now, at this point I'd figured out Santa wasn't real, but I didn't let my mum and dad know I knew as I didn't want to hurt their feelings. So, I'm complaining that this wasn't the Monster Max I wanted and I wanted them to change it. And they're saying, 'Oh, but Santa's already back in the North Pole and the reindeers are asleep, we can't get him all the way back out here just for one little girl's Monster Max zombie playset.' And I lose all my patience and start screaming, 'Santa's not real, okay!? You got me this, not Santa, and you got me the wrong one, so go back to the shop you got it from and change it!' Of course I didn't know that my wee sister Kelly, who *did* really still believe Santa was real, happened to overhear! None of them have ever let me forget *that*!"

They both let out a laugh.

"I never did get that Monster Max," Louise added, flashing a dramatic pout.

"Well, now you've got the best Christmas present of all... me!" deadpanned Kieran in response, winking and giving his arm muscle a little flex.

"Ooft, do you come with a gift receipt?" chuckled Louise, giving him a playful slap on the arm.

They smiled at one another, nuzzling up closer in the cold as they walked towards the tube station to head home. Louise would have liked so much to know what Kieran was thinking. Was he as happy as she was? Was he thinking about what the future held for the two of them, about starting their own traditions?

That was not, in fact, what Kieran was thinking about. Kieran was thinking about the massive, thick, 12-inch dildo he'd gotten Louise for Christmas. It was shaded in an angry deep red hue, but aside from that was eerily realistic, rendered with veins running up the shaft and a pair of plump balls at the base. It had a suction cup at the base for attaching to surfaces, or it could be attached to a strap-on harness, one of which was also included in the box. On the packaging, it was referred to as The Meat Feast.

The traumatic events of their infamous first date had encouraged them to remain adventurous in their kinks - after an hour-long midnight run through the city in the pouring rain dressed in nothing but BDSM gear, it seemed like the time for playing coy or taking it slow had passed - but for understandable reasons Kieran had been initially gun-shy around the butt stuff. But Louise had been keen and they'd been working back round to it, and this gift would be his way of saying he was ready for them to dive headlong in. Or balls deep, in Louise's case.

This gift was going to be a fun surprise for Christmas morning, and Kieran had taken thorough measures to ensure that surprise was preserved. He'd arranged for the package to be sent to the post office for pick-up instead of their flat, to make sure she wasn't the one who had to sign for it. Kieran didn't think he'd ever feel fear again after the Bedbug fiasco, but he felt a fluttering going to the post office that day, worried that they'd slam this hunk of silicone the size of a yule log down on the counter. *Is this yours, Sir?* Thankfully, it was discretely packed, though Kieran had unfastened much of that packaging for ease of access on the big day. And now it sat under the tree, wrapped up and nestled innocuously among the other gifts, with a final clever flourish to misdirect Louise from being tempted to take a sneaky peek. He couldn't wait to see the look on her face on Christmas morning!

After a short tube ride and another brief walk, Kieran and Louise found themselves back in Sinkhill, and back at their new home: the Graphite Green estate. Obviously, even with as well as they were getting on, they hadn't planned on moving in together quite so soon. That came out of necessity. Following them taking out a cluster of Dickheads there, Louise had been reluctant to return to her flat, and so she'd just taken to staying at Kieran's place. The story she'd given to her ex and to her family was that there'd been a break-in there and she no longer felt safe. The new living arrangement worked out okay for a little while, but it was only ever meant to be temporary, and honestly, Kieran was acutely aware that if any Dickheads made their way outside of Sinkhill looking for retribution, his flat wouldn't offer all that much protection. But then they'd heard about this place, Graphite Green, how the property was collectively owned by the residents, how despite having deluxe facilities and state-of-the-art security there was no cost to living there beyond contributing to the upkeep of the building. There were plenty of rooms vacant (for unspecified reasons, neither of them asked), and they were going on a first-come-first-serve basis. Kieran and Louise got in just in time. They'd been made to feel welcome, part of the community. Rojan from the top floor even went with Louise to her old flat while she collected some possessions she'd had to leave behind.

Kieran and Louise entered their flat, relishing the wave of hot air that hit them as they opened the door. A welcome contrast to the cold outside! They'd really made an effort to make their first Christmas feel special, getting a new tree and lots of nice lights and decorations, making the living room feel like a cosy Christmas hub. They snuggled next to each other on the couch, Louise resting her head on Kieran's shoulder. Then, after a few quiet moments, Louise looked up at Kieran with a coy smile.

"You wanna?"

Kieran rolled his eyes, letting out a deep sigh.

"I don't know, I mean, it's been a long day, and we'll be getting up early tomorrow, so I was thinking I'd just whoa m! kidding of course I wanna!"

The pair leapt up from the couch and dashed towards the bedroom, casting off clothes as they ran. The Christmas gifts were wrapped up under the tree, but they had also got themselves some more presents for some early festive fun. And so Kieran found himself kitted out in a sexy elf costume, with Louise donning a sexy Santa costume which she'd quite surprisingly decided to accessorise with a fluffy white beard.

"Ho! Ho! Ho!" Louise said in an unnervingly good Santa voice, sitting down on the bed, "Why don't you come sit on Santa's lap and tell me what you want for Christmas?"

Kieran obliged, perching gingerly on her knee, smiling at her sheepishly.

"Tell me," Louise whispered in his ear, trailing her fingers down the back of his neck, "Have you been good this year? Or have you been a naughty boy?"

"Oh, very naughty," Kieran replied.

"I see," Louise said, then swung him off her knee and onto the bed. Bending him forward and using a pair of cuffs to secure his hands to the foot of the bedframe, she pulled up his little elf tunic to expose his little elf butt. Then Louise drew out their other seasonal purchase, a hefty paddle with a candy cane and gingerbread pattern, with the cheerful message of "MERRY CHRISTM-ASS!" emblazoned on its surface in white faux icing.

"I don't have any lumps of coal, so I'll have to make do with this instead," Louise purred, "So, are you going to be good next year?"

"I... I'm afraid I can't make any promises," Kieran stammered.

THWAK!

Kieran let out a small yelp as the paddle got brought down on his behind.

"Such a naughty boy," Louise said in her Santa voice.

THWAK!

Kieran couldn't suppress his chuckle of delight. He was sure that would get him another paddling, but he didn't mind that at all...

BZZZZZZT!

They both froze, exchanging worried glances. Both getting instant flashbacks to another time when they were interrupted by a doorbell.

"That's the intercom," Louise said, "Should I leave you here while I go check who it--"

"No fuck that, uncuff me," Kieran promptly interjected.

She did so, then headed out of the bedroom to answer the intercom. Kieran paced anxiously back and forth, waiting for her to come back and tell him whoever was outside had gone away. Louise did come back, but not with the news he wanted.

"It's my parents, they're coming up," she said grimly, "Get your clothes on."

Kieran moved with superhuman speed, pulling on his regular clothes over his skimpy elven attire and tidying the toys away with seconds to spare before there was a knock on the door. Louise grabbed his hand, giving him a reassuring smile.

"We'll be fine," she said, "Don't worry."

Then Louise opened the door. Her Mum and Dad walked into their apartment, along with her younger sister, Kelly. They all smiled cheerfully, each hauling a heavy bag with them. Before Kieran could utter a word, Louise's mother had dropped her bag and enveloped him in a hug.

"You must be Kieran!" she exclaimed, "Louise has told us all about you!"

"Not *all* about me, I hope!" Kieran replied.

There were handshakes and introductions all around, and then they all headed into the living room.

"Why are you here?" Louise asked, "We were supposed to be coming to you tomorrow."

"Yeah, about that," her dad answered, "Kelly's been hit with the bad news she has to work Christmas Day."

"Sorry," Kelly added, "Believe me, if I could get out of it I would."

"You're both still invited over for dinner tomorrow," her mum said, "But I thought it would be nice to have us all together, and for us to finally see your lovely new flat. *And...*"

They opened up their bags, and started emptying out an array of wrapped gifts around the tree.

"...I figured we could just open all our presents here, tonight."

Kieran felt his stomach take a leap up to his throat. *All our presents!?* Including one wrapped up and nestled innocently among the other gifts?

"How about I get us all some hot chocolate on?" he said cheerfully, "Louise, want to come help me?"

Louise followed Kieran into the kitchen, giving his buttocks a light slap once she was sure they were out of sight.

"See? Nothing to worry about," she said, "It's a bit different than what we expected, but it should work out okay..."

"No, this is bad," Kieran sputtered, "Look, I wanted this to be a surprise, but I guess I'm going to have to tell you about something I bought you for Christmas."

And so he did.

"*The Meat Feast!?*" Louise exclaimed, "You got me a *giant dildo* for Christmas? What would possess you to do that!?"

"Come on," Kieran replied, grinning nervously, "It's not that crazy, is it? I'm sure you got me a saucy gift or two as well."

"I got you a goofy Christmas jumper and some DVDs and a *fucking Kaiju plushie!*" Louise seethed, before taking a breath to compose herself, "Okay, okay, there's no need to panic. I'll just not open the big dong-shaped parcel. Say I'm saving one present for Christmas morning, leave it at that. Done, sorted."

Kieran started to nod, then faltered, then let out a pained wince.

"What?" Louise asked warily.

He was cursing himself. That final clever flourish. He had to try and be fucking clever, didn't he?

"I thought you might try to peek, so I came up with a trick to misdirect you," Kieran replied, shamefaced, "I didn't think it would matter, I mean you were supposed to open it tomorrow morning and she'd never actually see it..."

"See what? Just say it."

"I... I wrote on the parcel that it was for your mum."

Louise just stared for a moment, aghast.

"You... accidentally gifted my mother a foot-long butt-fucker!?" she hissed, somehow managing to scream while never raising her voice above a whisper, "You fucking... shitting... bastard... *cock!* What are we going to do if she opens it?"

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry," pleaded Kieran, "I'll... I'll just explain..."

"Explain what exactly?" Louise demanded, "Because if you think you're going to out me to my gathered family, then the only thing getting rammed up your arse will be my fucking boot!"

Kieran tentatively placed his hands on Louise's shoulders.

"Calm down, we've got through worse than this," he said, "We just need to think on our feet. We'll find a way to distract your family, and I'll sneak the Meat Feast out of the room. In the meantime, let's make some fucking hot chocolate."

Louise stared back at him, angry and mortified. But then she nodded, gave him a kiss on the cheek, and they made the fucking hot chocolate.

They returned to the living room with mugs on trays and deer-in-the-headlights grins affixed to their faces. Kieran strategically placed himself at the edge of the sofa, in the seat nearest the tree. The small talk was washing over him like a wave, his eyes straying in a sideways glance towards the piled presents around the tree. It was now partially buried under the heap of new gifts from Louise's family, but the huge package still shot upwards, standing up defiantly in its brightly coloured paper, as if inviting any eyes surveying the gifts with a message of, *come on, open me first...*

"What about you, Kieran?"

Kieran was snapped back into the conversation, looking across at Louise's father.

"Huh?" he let out lamely.

"You were divorced as well, weren't you?" her dad asked, "How did that end? You didn't cheat on her or anything, did you?"

"Dad!" snapped Louise, "That's totally out of order."

"No, it's fine," Kieran said with a rueful smile, "I didn't cheat on her. It wasn't anything dramatic like that. People can just... fall out of love. And I could see she'd done that with me, that maybe she'd never really loved me at all. I think I knew it even before she did, and I'd like to say I had some pride and left. But I waited, hoped things would become like they were again... and when she told me she wanted to end things, I was the one begging her to stay. I got my heart broken, and I honestly thought I wouldn't love anyone ever again."

Kieran looked across at Louise, smiling warmly.

"But then I met your daughter, and I realised my heart could be mended, I just needed to meet the right person. She's the best thing that ever happened to me."

"Aaaw, that's lovely," Louise's mum beamed.

"Say, did you see this Nativity set we got?" Louise said, standing up and walking towards a set of little statuettes in the far corner of the room, "It has some lovely lights, too, but you need to turn off the rest of the lights to really appreciate it."

She cast a meaningful glance in Kieran's direction. He nodded, and then leant over and flicked the switch, turning off the plug socket to which the various other lights in the room were connected, momentarily casting the room into blackness. Then the Nativity lit up, a beautiful, shimmering display which subtly shifted to different shades. It drew some appropriate ooohs and aaahs, and while Louise (very slowly) related the story of how they got it, Kieran seized his opportunity. He got his hands around the big meaty dick and, as quietly as he could, hauled it free from the gift pile and, in cover of near total darkness, started to sneak towards the open room door. He'd slip out the living room, and hide this somewhere in the bedroom until after the family was gone. And then him and Louise could laugh about it. *Phew, a near miss...*

Then the room light switched on. Louise's mother was standing by the door, her hand on the switch.

"I can't see where I sat down my hot chocolate mug," she said, looking around, "Oh, it's on the floor over there."

Then Louise's mum looked up and saw Kieran standing right in front of her, frozen in the spot, a massive present clutched to his chest with both hands.

"Oh? Are we opening presents now?" she asked, peering at the label on this one, "And that one's from you to me, Kieran? How nice of you! It's so big!"

Kieran let out a high-pitched, slightly manic laugh, fighting to hold back the panic.

"What is it?" she asked, "Is it a Toblerone? No, no, looks too big for that. Is it a *giant* Toblerone? I really love Toblerones."

"I'm thinking maybe a Toblerone would have been a better choice," Kieran sputtered out.

"Okay, I can't take the suspense anymore," she said with a laugh, "Let me see."

She grabbed onto the present. Kieran kept grinning at her, but didn't let go.

"Actually, I was just putting this present away, as I don't think it's suitable," he said, "There's another present in the pile over there for you, from me, that I think you'll like better."

"Don't be silly," Louise's mum said, tugging lightly at the present, "If you went to the effort to get me a thoughtful present, I'm sure I'll appreciate it whatever it is."

Kieran tugged lightly back at the present.

"I'd really rather not."

Louise's mum's smile faded a little. She tugged again, harder this time. Kieran was aware of Louise squirming in her seat just at the periphery of his vision. Sadly, he was unaware of any hole in the floor readying to open up and swallow him.

"Come on now, let me have my present," she said in what now felt like forced joviality.

"Mum, just leave it," an exasperated Kelly said.

"No, now I want to see what it is," she shot back.

"Please, please just let me take it away," pleaded Kieran, desperation in his eyes.

They stood there in a surreal tableau, this big chubby guy and this petite little lady in her 60s, pulling back and forth in a tug of war over this bulbous, oversized gift. Louise was rooted to the spot, her panicking mind rushing over scenarios and ways she could possibly intervene, and yet unable to will herself to move, instead able to only watch on, helpless.

Kieran let out a little squeak of terror as the wrapping paper started to tear. With one last mighty yank, he pulled the gift out of the hands of Louise's mother. But he overshot it, losing his balance and stumbling as he spun round, and the box shot out of the torn wrapping paper. What happened next seemed to unfold in nightmarish slow motion. The box swung in a graceful arc across the room, clattered off the floor. Normally, it would have held up, but of course he'd had to unfasten most of the packaging for ease of access, hadn't he? And so, instead, as the box toppled onto its side, the flaps unhinged, and the crimson cock slithered out, flopping down on the floor with a dull *SSSLLUPP*.

Kelly let out a scream, a sharp, shrill, "WAAAAAAAH!" Then a stunned silence fell across the room. It was Louise's mother who finally broke it.

"Kieran," she said in a hushed tone, "Is that a boaby?"

Louise's dad stood rigidly upright, pointing down at the offending appendage with a trembling finger.

"Margaret! That *is* a boaby!"

Then her dad's head snapped up to look at Kieran with a furious scowl.

"You dirty bastard! Why'd you give something like this to my wife? To your girlfriend's mother?"

"I...I..." Kieran stammered, eyes wide with horror.

"It wasn't for Mum," Louise spoke up, "It was mislabelled. It was for me."

As Louise stood up, Kieran paced towards her. He tried to shake his head at her, not wanting her to be forced into this position by his own stupidity.

"Sorry, I mean... it... it was just a silly joke..." he began.

"No, no point lying," Louise said, clutching his hand tight, and turning to face her family, "The truth is, Kieran and I... well, we're into BDSM."

Her mum, dad and sister stared at them, dumbfounded.

"I'm a domme, and he's a sub," she continued, "No one's hurting each other, it's all consensual. But sometimes I'll tie him up, or slap him about a wee bit, or...ahem... put stuff up his bum."

"So much stuff," Kieran added.

"Shut up, Kieran," Louise said, "And that's our business. You can think what you want, because the truth is I don't care. Kieran's a good person. He's kind to me, and to Jay. He cooks, and he get me flowers, and he watches bad movies with me. He's never hurt me, or talked down to me, or made me feel small. He's never said I'm fat, or ugly, or stupid. He's never put me down in front of his friends, or mine. On my bad days when I don't want to leave the house or do anything and I'm crying and I don't know why, he doesn't ignore me, or tell me to get a grip. He stays with me until I'm through it, and tells me that everything will be okay, and when he says it I believe him. He knows me, all of me, the good and bad, better than anybody, and he accepts it all without judgement. I love him."

When Louise was finished, a silence fell on the room once more. Everyone exchanged uncertain glances. And Louise realised she was still holding onto Kieran's hand, gripping it tight enough that it surely had to hurt. But Kieran let her hold on just the same.

"Well then," Louise's dad finally spoke up, "You could have done without being so specific."

"I might not approve, dear," chimed in her mother, "But you're an adult and can make your own decisions. And if this man makes you happy, then I can live with what you get up to in the bedroom. I suppose we all get up to all sorts behind closed doors. Your father and I have gone dogging a few times."

"*What!?*" Louise exclaimed, "Eew! Not in the Volvo?"

Her father nodded solemnly.

"I think I might be a furry," Kelly blurted out.

They all looked at one another, bewildered. Then they started laughing. With their most embarrassing secrets shared, a weight was lifted, and somehow they managed to recover the evening and have a good time. It was another couple of hours before Louise's family got ready to leave.

"It was lovely meeting you," Louise's mum said as she hugged Kieran, "We'll see you tomorrow for Christmas Dinner. I'll make sure your seat has extra cushions."

Kieran could only chuckle awkwardly. Louise, meanwhile, was embracing her sister.

"He seems okay," Kelly said softly to her, "You two are good together."

"Yeah, I know," Louise said back.

Then final goodbyes were made, and Louise's family were gone. Kieran crumpled onto the floor, rolling up into a ball.

"Get up," Louise said, leaning down to tug at his arm, "Stop being a drama queen."

"Nooooo I'm just going to stay here forever," Kieran cringed, "Now when your mum stuffs the turkey she's going to think of me!"

"We're all leaving tonight with mental images of our family members having sex," Louise replied, "So I'm sure there's plenty of therapy that will be needed all round. In the meantime, get up!"

With another tug, Kieran allowed himself to be pulled to his feet. Then him and Louise kissed, drawing one another close.

"Okay, okay," Kieran said, finally pulling away, "You shared one of your Christmas traditions with the walk tonight, so I guess I should share one of mine."

"What would that be?" Louise asked.

Kieran reached down and retrieved the Meat Feast, lifting it out from the box to which it had been returned.

"We each get to open one present on Christmas Eve."

Louise smiled, and took the giant dildo out of his hands, and into hers. Then she noticed something taped to the eerily realistic balls at the base. It was a... little monster head? It was a zombie.

ROBINS: A Christmas SINK Tale

By John Lees

*When robins appear,
Loved ones are near.*

So read the declaration, carved in a delicate, ornate font onto the wooden base of the globe. It was a Christmas decoration, one which Stephen had gotten for his mother many years earlier. It was a globe of marbled glass, about the size of a small melon, with the aforementioned base. And on the glass was printed a lovely winter tableau, a snaking network of tree branches upon which several robins rested.

Stephen could still remember when he gave it to Mum. It had been a last-minute addition to his roster of gifts, something cute and seasonal he'd thrown in on the spur of the moment. But when she opened it, she'd had tears in her eyes, and she whispered, "It's beautiful," in that light, airy voice she got when she was emotional. He'd just been a kid then, barely left home, and he'd been a bit embarrassed by the reaction, thinking it was daft to get so wound up about a bit of tat. It was one of many little things she did that used to wind him up. He'd give anything to be able to be wound up by them again.

This was the last of the Christmas decorations. He'd found it tucked into the small box in which he'd originally gifted it to her, nestled way back in the far corner of the cupboard where all this stuff was stored. Honestly, given all the bad memories associated with this stuff, he hadn't been going to bother at all with any of it this year. Then by the time the 21st of December had rolled around and this was the one house with nothing on display, he got hit with the painful pang of just how much getting into the spirit of Christmas meant to Mum, and so for the past two days, he'd been feverishly hanging lights and putting up trees and overhauling the house in a last gasp blast of holiday cheer.

Of course, the house was still done up for Christmas when Mum disappeared. It was in that twilight time between Christmas Day and New Year's, and he'd actually only been back at his flat for a couple of days when he got the call from the police in the middle of the night. And so, he'd returned to that same house in Sinkhill where he'd spent Christmas Day, only now lit up not by twinkling fairy lights but by the blue and red of police cars. The front door was kicked open, the hinges burst. There were signs of a struggle. And Anne Willow, his mother, was gone. There had been searches. There had been appeals. But days turned to weeks turned to months, and there was no sign. At some point in that process, he came to accept that his mother was dead even before people started telling him this was the likely scenario.

As soon as the police were done with it, Stephen moved back into the family home. It was his now. And it had been March before he finally found it in him to take the decorations down. Them being there had been a taunting reminder of her absence. For as long as Stephen could remember, it had only been the two of them. There was no father in the picture, and they weren't close to any of the extended family. And even once he'd left for school and eventually moved out on his own, got focused on living his own life, he never missed coming back home for Christmas. That was their time to spend together. Not that it was all sunshine and roses. He recalled there was times that he dreaded that week spent sleeping in his childhood room, getting hassled over when he was going to get a better job or meet a nice girl. But there were laughs too, and just the comfort of being with someone who cared about him, unconditionally, perhaps the only person. And he'd gone home that year taking for granted that there would be more Christmases, that the one they just had wouldn't be the last. No,

putting those decorations away wasn't easy. It was like putting *her* away, conceding that she was really gone.

But life goes on, and as the year progressed, Stephen began getting on with his life again. That's all he could do, really. It was only in December, as Christmas once again approached, that the pain once again hit him with full intensity. And that's why he resisted the decorations until he could do so no more.

And now here he was, the house all lit up and covered in tinsel and ornaments. This had been Mum's job for years. All things considered, he thought he did okay with it. And now, here was the last grace note: the globe, which he'd sit on the living room coffee table. He pressed the button on the side of the wooden base, and a light switched on, dazzlingly bright, ice-white. Through the marbled glass, it created a shimmering effect, reflecting off the ceiling and making it look like the room was underwater. It was quite peaceful. And the light shone through the carved lettering of the inscription, illuminating the message even in the dark:

*When robins appear,
Loved ones are near.*

He sat the globe down on the table and admired it. As he reflected on the message, he felt tears welling up in his eyes. That made him laugh a little. Maybe Mum wasn't so daft after all.

...

Stephen wasn't sure at what point exactly he became aware of the light. He didn't sleep well in his old room anymore. His larger bed from his flat didn't fit right in the space, felt too big, and just gave the whole room a stifling vibe. But this was still preferable to moving into the larger main bedroom. He couldn't do that. That was Mum's room.

As a result, he was already sleeping lightly and restlessly, drifting in and out of dream state. And so, he only gradually became aware of the glowing light coming from beyond the threshold of the open bedroom door, and even then, it was a little longer before he was coherent enough to make himself get up out of bed and look into it. He padded out of the room and into the hallway in his pyjamas, hugging himself with the cold. He didn't know what time it was. It must have been middle of the night. He'd thought maybe the glow was coming from something out in the street, but no, it appeared to be coming from inside the living room. The light was icy-white, and shimmering.

Cautiously, Stephen entered the living room. Sure enough, the globe had switched on, filling the room with the light filtered through its marbled glass, the robins brightly illuminated.

*When robins appear,
Loved ones are near.*

The phrase came to Stephen's head uninvited, and made him shudder. He stood rigidly still, looking around. It was still pitch-black outside, and the window blinds were shut, but still, the light from the globe was bright enough that the whole room was now visible, no dark, hidden corners remaining in full shadow. And yet still, Stephen swore he could feel a presence here with him, watching him. His

throat was bone dry, and he had to gulp heavily before he could speak. Once he finally broke his silence, a single word emerged tremulously from his lips.

“Mum?”

Nothing but silence in response.

“Mum? Are you here?”

Stephen’s voice started to break as he spoke, and he felt his eyes stinging with tears. He shook his head, disgusted at himself. He must have just not turned it off properly. He picked up the globe, pressed the button to turn it off, and sat it back down on the table. Now in complete darkness, the shadows claiming the space all around him once again, Stephen stood in the middle of the room, staring intently at the spot where he’d sat the globe. He wanted to make sure the globe would stay switched off, that the robins would not appear to him anymore. After about a minute, the globe remained lightless. Letting out a sigh, Stephen turned on his heel and returned to bed, closing the living room door behind him.

...

December 23rd went by in a malaise. With the decorating all done, and work finished until the New Year, Stephen just sat alone amid the sea of decorations, his festive shrine, staring into the middle distance as his mind worked over Christmases past. Thoughts of the misbehaving robin globe light had faded over the course of the day, but as he turned in for an early night and went through the weary ritual of switching off the various garlands and light-up snowmen, he did find himself pausing and making double-sure the globe was turned off properly before heading to bed.

And then, the same thing happened again. Stephen was woken up in the middle of the night by the glow from the living room, and he tentatively ventured out to discover the globe light had switched on once again.

“Mum?”

Stephen once more spoke out into the shimmering light. His heart was pounding in his chest, his legs weak. Unsteadily, he sat himself down on the couch. What exactly was he giving voice to by speaking out? That he truly believes his mother is dead? That he believes she died here, in this house, rather than in any other location? And that some part of her has lingered on here, sharing the house with him, lying dormant until he brought out all her favourite decorations? These thoughts made him afraid. But on some level, there was also something reassuring about the idea, something that brought him comfort. Perhaps he wasn’t truly alone after all.

Stephen just about jumped out of his seat when he heard a rustling sound coming from outside, just behind the window.

*When robins appear,
Loved ones are near.*

Pushing himself to his feet, Stephen inched his way towards the window, the blinds still closed. It was only once he started to get light-headed that he realised he was holding his breath. With a trembling hand, he reached for the chord to pull open the blinds.

Mum was on the other side of the window, waiting for him. She had her face and hands pressed against the glass, staring into the room with wide, mournful eyes. She was wearing her fleecy reindeer-patterned pyjamas, another gift from her son from years back, but they were now caked in dirt, as if she'd just climbed out from a hole in the ground. And for all Stephen knew, she had. Her hair was similarly caked with filth, and her face had deep crevices, like she'd aged a decade in the year since he'd last seen her.

Upon seeing this apparition, Stephen began screaming. He snapped himself backwards and tripped over his own feet, tumbling back and falling into the coffee table, knocking it over and spilling its contents onto the floor. The globe rolled along the carpet, causing the shimmering lights to swirl and heighten the effect of the room spinning that Stephen was already feeling in his head. Propping himself up on his elbows, he looked back over at the window. The apparition was gone.

It wasn't just in his head. He'd seen her with his own eyes. His mother's ghost. He sat there on the floor of the living room, not daring to move, waiting for her to reappear. But she never came back. It was only when the sun started to rise and daylight once again inched into the room that Stephen finally moved himself.

Obviously, he could tell no one about this. They'd think he was crazy. He had to deal with this himself. He didn't have the first clue about how to deal with a ghost, but he figured the first step was to take down the Christmas decorations. That's what seems to have brought her back, and if she was here, looking the way she did last night, obviously her spirit wasn't at peace. He needed to let her go, to let her rest.

Stephen picked up the globe from the floor, and walked towards the cupboard with it. He fished out its box, and as he went to replace it, an instruction manual fluttered out from the open box, falling to the floor. Stephen picked it up, giving it a cursory glance, and he saw something that made his eyes widen.

CONTENTS:

- 1x globe light.
- 3x AA batteries.
- 1x remote control.

He dug inside the box, shook it up and down. There was no remote control inside. He then spent an inordinate amount of time hunting all through the cupboard, confirming there was no remote control to be found anywhere here. The remote control was gone.

And in that moment, Stephen came to the conclusion that he hadn't seen a ghost after all. And tonight, this Christmas Eve, he was going to get to the bottom of this.

...

There would be no early night for Stephen this time. He camped himself out in the living room, watched every Christmas special and festive trash he could find on the TV to pass the time, and as the hour drew close to midnight, all the lights were switched off and he sat in the dark, waiting to see the moment when the globe light switched on for himself.

That moment came at the stroke of midnight, the moment Christmas Eve gave way to Christmas Day. There was a faint, barely audible click coming from outside, and the globe switched on, the bright light shimmering. This time, Stephen didn't go to the window. Moving quickly, he headed straight for the front door, swinging it open.

Sure enough, out in the garden, he saw Mum once again standing pressed against the window. From this angle, she looked less like an apparition than a person, cold and lonely, tightly clutching a small remote control. Whatever had happened to her, wherever she'd been, she'd come back, and she'd done what she could to convey one simple message to her son.

When robins appear,

Loved ones are near.

Anne turned to look at her son for but a moment, then turned away and began walking briskly towards the front gate. Hesitantly, feeling like he was in some kind of cruel dream and that any second now he'd wake up and ponder the symbolism of all this, Stephen began walking after her. She stepped out of the gate and onto the street, Stephen following close behind, and she began walking towards a blue van parked a little further down the street.

"Mum!"

Stephen shouted after her, desperate. Mum stopped, rooted to the spot for a moment. She turned to face him. And then she smiled. In this moment, Stephen realised the deep crevices in her face weren't wrinkles, they were scars, slits running up from the edges of her mouth that opened as her smile turned into a hideous grin, her eyes widening and taking on a crazed quality. Stephen was dumbstruck, transfixed in terror by this monstrosity that was somehow worse than when he'd thought his mother was a ghost.

Mum took a few steps towards him. Then she extended her hand out towards him. Stephen looked down at the hand. Then, he reached out his own hand and took hold of hers, letting her slowly guide him towards the blue van. It was Christmas Day. Stephen couldn't bear to spend it alone.

