Lonely This Christmas

Robert Edgar

A sharp spike of bile rose in his throat as a bead of sweat edged its ways down his lower back and soaked into waistband of his trousers. His anger at the unseasonably mild weather dispelled the burning nausea. Any concern he may felt about climate change was entirely due to how it affected his vision of the festive season. Hurrying around the town centre this late on Christmas Eve was bad enough without him feeling unsettled by an inappropriate aesthetic. He’d been dreaming of a white Christmas for the last forty years and with temperatures rising there was little chance of it happening now. He resentment at this was nothing compared to that he felt about shopping at this hour. If he had insisted on being solely in charge of their planning, as usual, then everything would have been completed by now and they would be settling down as a family to listen to Carols from Kings before heading out for their yearly visit to church. Despite his deep frustration he mused briefly on how the city centre looked different at night, not being able to recall visiting this row of Georgian shops before. His eyes landed on the display in a shop window, the image a soothing balm. An elegant display of glass baubles, German Christmas fare and yuletide Victoriana took his attention fully, all other irritations dispelled instantly from his mind. He patted his chest pocket with his right hand, feeling for the extensive shopping list he had been given, simultaneously hefting the plastic bags in his left, positively assessing his success. His gaze settled on a slim and delicate glass pink and sliver tree topper. The desire to return home to implement the festive plan was swiftly overtaken by his attraction to the object. Naturally a portentous tree had already taken pride of place in the bay window of his large Victorian home and this would sit atop, a perfect replacement for the shoddy crayon and crepe paper star fashioned by one of his children.

It is a well-known ploy engaged by estate agents to ask a property viewer where they would put their Christmas tree, invoking sentimental memoires, the happy family huddled together in the deep mid-winter. Estate agents had no need to pull such tricks on him; he had pictured a tree and then had found a house to go around it. The fourth move in ten years, each house grander, each more fitting to the cover of a Christmas card. There had been a whirlwind of activity since the family taken occupancy; the unpacking, decorating, choosing the right furniture and renovating the fireplace. His tired family had sat back and watched as he levelled the tree in its pot, bricks being carefully positioned to hold it in place. Remonstrated into action his children handed him the decorations one-by-one, acting on clearly provided instruction, removing each glass bauble from layers of tissue paper and carefully attaching a wire tree hanger. He had lifted the youngest of the two high to put the star on top, the child wriggling with discomfort at being gripped tightly in his hands, being now too heavy to lift. He felt the weight and struggling of the child keenly, but this was tradition and tradition was what Christmas was all about.

The shiny tree topper, glinting seductively at him from behind the window of the shop reeked of tradition; he would put it on the tree himself later that night. His family would be able to enjoy it in the morning. The perfect Christmas. Defying the weather he wrapped his scarf tightly around his neck and entered the shop, the six panelled Georgian black gloss door creaking on its hinges and a bell tinkling to herald his arrival. This was what Christmas shopping was supposed to be like. He squeezed his fingers against his hands on noticing the electric fairy lights around the edge of the shop’s counter. Their inauthenticity and the fact that they were on his tree at home was a source of mild irritation, but he had been persuaded by his wife that that they were necessary and that his children wanted them and he was willing to compromise that much. At the very least they were the same subtle plain white dots as the lights in the shop. He had watched as his wife had slowly unravelled them the wire tangled despite them being newly bought. He let her place them on the tree, deep in the branches, plugging them in to a cheer from their children before he started the real decorative work. He closed his eyes and pictured the lights glinting the tree in the window of his house, for a moment allowing himself the thought that perhaps they weren’t such a bad addition after all.

An assistant appeared from a back room of the shop and on hearing his choice of decoration congratulated him on his taste and timing as the shop was about to shut for the season. He smiled as the assistant commented that it was ‘always Christmas here’ and followed him through to the room in the back. The compliment sat well and it took him a moment to realise the different audience intended for this room. A chill hand gripped him as his eyes ranged across the plastic baubles, fake white trees and shimming, luxuriant strands of tinsel. He blinked hard against the gaudy display as if it were an hallucination; a phantasm that he could dispel by closing his eyes and willing it away, but the bright lights had burnt themselves into his retina, the outline of the room sharp and clear. He shook his head trying to dislodge the tableau, desperate to make it go. The more he screwed his eyes tightly the more the picture sharpened. As it came into clear focus, he allowed it his full attention, absorbed by a scene long distant in his past.

There was his father, kneeling by a small tree draping thin strands of silver tinsel over the twisted wire and green acetate branches. His dad held out a hand towards him, offering a shiny bauble from an old shoe box. The perspective suddenly shifted and he saw himself, a young boy smiling at his dad, reaching out to him his arms outstretched. He could feel their hands touching but was jerked back to the present as he felt the shop assistant placing the tree topper in his hands. The attentive retailer gave the impression of mild concerned but was given assurance he was fine, that all was well, that he was overcome by the cold outside and the heat of the shop. He paid and left hurriedly, the tinkling doorbell marking his exit. He faltered on the doorstep as, for a brief second he heard a faint but distantly familiar rasping voice loudly announcing that it was Christmas. The experience had so affected him that his only thought was to rest for a while and he looked around, the line of small shops on either side switching their lights off in sequence, funnelling him towards a building at the end of the street. He hurried towards it suddenly keen to shelter from the chill air that had arrived with night fall.

He was so distracted that he failed to notice the oddity of the flat roofed pub until he was upon it. He paused, staring at the bright pink cardboard sign in the window announcing the Christmas Eve star turn and promising a free buffet and revelry. His hand gripped the painted scaffold tube handrail that led to the doorway. He paused and breathed deep, taking in the distantly familiar odour of stale beer and cigarettes; he felt a warm glow somewhere deep in his chest and pushed open the door. It was as he imagined it would be. A large over-lit room, brown chipped Formica tables and a small stage with a frayed and taped glittery curtain behind. A handful of lone drinkers sat at individual tables, pints of flat brown beer warming in front of them. He ordered a drink and a packet of peanuts, which the barman plucked from a sheet of cardboard behind the bar further compromising a smiling young lady’s modesty. He took his place on a shiny vinyl corner bench, placing his brown beer in front of him next to a large plastic ashtray promoting a long-departed brewery. Collecting himself he looked around, impressed with the authenticity of the design, this was bound to appeal to people of a certain age looking for nostalgia or hip young things seeking a new trend to follow. The punters staring at their beer didn’t look like they were enjoying the retro experience, but no doubt their mood would pick up later.

He watched as the barman wandered to a teak encased television set high up on a plywood shelf. Balancing on a chair he reached up to twist the volume control and change the channel. As he clicked a button the images moved through a couple of early evening television programmes before settling on a seasonal music show. His eyes landed on the snow-white beard and bobble hat of a singer shouting about the bells ringing out for Christmas. He began searching the dark recesses of his memory for the name of the band as if he were hurrying to answer a question in a pub quiz. The name suddenly popped into his head and he shouted ‘Wizzard’ to the empty table, his eyes returning to the television screen in triumph only now he was met with the sight of four men in white suits sat close together as fake snow was poured over them. Looking up at the barman he mouthed the name of the band; ‘Mud’. The barman looked back at him silently. The singer grinned out pleasantly from the television screen. He had a ventriloquist’s dummy on his knee, making light of an otherwise tragic song, telling the assembled carousers and all those at home how lonely he would be this Christmas. He read the name of the singer in a brightly worded caption on the screen; Les Gray. Closing his eyes against the singer’s attempt at humour he listened to the words and with this an image of him and his father once again appeared.

He was sat near the small deep green Christmas tree, only now it was fully decorated, the gaudy coloured lights casting a magical glow around the room. It was on top of a television set very similar to the one in the pub, a light entertainment programme played the same music, only the performers were taking their job more seriously. He looked down to see thin and shiny sheets of wrapping paper across the floor. His father knelt, wrapping presents for his mother, telling him everything would be okay, that this would make it right, that this would show her that he cared. He felt the heat of the gas fire searing into his side and looked up into his dad’s eyes and saw they were brimming with tears. He reached up and stroked the side of his father’s head, his unkempt hair hanging over his ears. He looked again, this time in to tinted glasses as his father carried on singing about how lonely he would be this Christmas. As his father further morphed into Les Gray. He strained trying to retune the image, trying desperately to remember what his father looked like when he heard the rasping voice once again, now complete with the pulsing beat that heralded the start of festivities. His heart skipped a beat and he fitfully opened one eye to look at the television set, but he already knew what was about to happen, just as it happened years ago. The sprite was upon him, not fixed behind the thick glass of the television set but stood there in front of him, manifest in flesh, platform boots and silver spandex. It looked at him with its buck toothed grin set below a high fringe before stomping, dancing, haunting him as it had done when he was a child. The other patrons carried on staring at their beer impervious to the presence that had come amongst them as the entity moved from the stage, making its way inexorably towards him, before turning and stamping its platform soled boot in time with the beat of the music.

Taking advantage of the moment when the spirit looked away he grabbed his bags and backed out of the building, daring not to run in case the imp noticed him and followed. In the now cold darkness of the street he started to half run and half walk his way to the main shopping street and to safety. As he looked back the lights in the pub blinked out, it too was now cold and empty. Taking a deep breath, he steadied himself and started to move slowly through the early evening revellers. They were falling in and out of the fashionable bars that had taken over from the shops of his youth. He walked slowly and carefully, like a drunk trying to give the appearance of being able to walk in a straight line. His concentration on his gait had no effect. He battled with his own rationality, telling himself over and over that it wasn’t real, but he couldn’t convince himself, stumbling forward unable to collect himself. He knew it would be there again before he saw it. It had been the same for most of his childhood, but he thought he had dispelled it forever.

As a child and in the lead up to Christmas the figure would appear to him at night as he huddled in bed, dancing, taunting, getting ever closer each day so by Christmas Eve so it could feel its breath on his neck. The memory was starting to form clearly now, something he had suppressed, something he had hidden from himself. He could hear the arguing, he could hear his dad pleading, his mother yelling, the sound of doors slamming above the sound of the record player, of Slade starting the Christmas season; merry Christmas everybody. He could feel the rough blanket scrape his ear as he pulled it up against the sound of the argument below. He heard his father pleading for quiet, that their son would hear. Then the needle being put on the record again, and again, and again. Laying under the covers screwing his eyes tight as the cry of ‘Its Christmas’ echoed round the house. He saw himself watching the band on Top of the Pops, focussing on the otherworldly figure of Dave Hill prancing round the studio, the audience dancing under the bright lights, batting away balloons, smiling. Happy.

He stopped dead at the sound of the gentle grating of broken glass and remembered his recent purchase. In his hurry to get away his must have caught it against the wall. It lay there broken. His pause had cost him dearly and he looked up again to see the image of Dave Hill in front of him grinning, his head swaying as he started to dance once again, stomping round clad in silver lurex, the Superyob guitar clutched in his fists. He heard the sound of ‘Merry Christmas, Everybody’ playing from a passing car. As he started to run he remembered Christmas Eve from years past, excitedly listening to the sound of a car pulling up outside, waiting for his dad to come home from work. He remembered his mum switching off the fairy lights, picking him, struggling against her firm grip being too big to be lifted. He remembered kicking the tree and the glass tree topper falling to the floor breaking. Most clearly he remembered his dad running after the taxi shouting for them to stop, shouting for them to wait. Shouting for him. He could see the outline of his father stopping, bent over straining for breath as the taxi picked up speed. His dad’s face indistinct against the streetlamps and early evening gloom.

He rounded the corner of the Victorian muse and stumbled towards his house, his chest heaving. He stopped, bent over, straining for breath. Pushing the door handle he found it was locked. Dropping his bags he scrabbled in his pockets for his keys in desperation, but he already knew what he would find. He’d seen a taxi driving down the street, away from the house. He’d clearly seen through the otherwise well-appointed picture window from the street. All the lights on the Christmas tree had been snuffed out.