

**the man who  
brought Christmas**

a short story

henry p barnes

THE MAN WHO  
BROUGHT  
CHRISTMAS

Henry P Barnes

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Season's Greetings to One and All  
from  
Henry P Barnes  
December, 2019

## ALSO BY HENRY P BARNES

### 'Pals'

Paperback and Kindle e-book

Pals is a sweeping tale starting at the turn of the 20th century and concluding in the 1920's. It tells the story of Albert Webb, a young man born into extreme poverty in an industrial town in northern England. His family live a hand to mouth existence, and young Albert is desperate to move away to find a better life. It's never that simple to leave when you have no money. As a child, he believed that the key to escape was to join the army - to see the world.

Then, his life starts to get better - he secures a good job that pays well, gets the girl of his dreams, and becomes the star player on his local football team. All is looking up for Albert.

But then, everything falls apart with the outbreak of the Great War. Cajoled by his friends, Albert joins up and finds himself in a local Pals battalion, in the thick of the Battle of the Somme. On the opening day of that battle, he's pinned down in a crater, under intense fire, and holding his best friend in his arms, watching him die an agonising death. Survival means that he must find his true strength. Unwittingly, Albert becomes a reluctant, and decorated war hero, something he struggles to come to terms with.

Pals is about making sense of the catastrophe of war. It's about a young man coming of age on the Western Front, and finding who he really is. It's about love and friendship, amid the smoke of battle. And finally it's about returning to normal at the end of four

years of destruction, with medals pinned to your chest, but no place in the world.

Despite being set in WW1, Pals has great resonance in today's world. It will take you deep into the battle, so that you can almost taste the cordite. And you will feel as though Albert is your closest friend.

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## **'Two Brothers, Together'**

Paperback and Kindle e-book

Jamal and Aziz are brothers, growing up in a prosperous middle class family in Helmand, Afghanistan. Their childhood is relatively blissful and normal, in the aftermath of a long and painful war. It all changes for them when they're forced to hide in the family's bomb shelter, when a gang of insurgents arrive at the house, aiming to press gang the boys and send them to war. Jamal and Aziz witness the brutal murder of their father, and when the gang threaten to return, there's only one thing for the boys to do. They must leave. With nowhere else to go in Afghanistan, and an estranged uncle living somewhere in England, they resolve to flee and head for the UK.

Their journey is fraught with danger. With only a few dollars to their names, they must be creative to simply survive. They are forced to beg in the streets, take menial jobs where they can, and when things get desperate they must steal.

Jamal and Aziz fall into the hands of organised criminals who promise to transport them to England, for a fee - which turns out to be their very souls.

Rob is a truck driver on a regular route to and from Germany. Unwittingly, he is also in the hands of the gangs, and unknown to him, he's been trafficking people across the North Sea for some time. When he discovers Jamal and Aziz hidden in the back of his truck, his whole world is turned upside down. What he discovers about the fate of illegal immigrants forces him to challenge his own beliefs, and he's faced with a choice - to help the boys, or turn his back on them.

"Brothers" is a book for today. It speaks to the heart of our politics in twenty-first century Europe. It's not about the rights and wrongs of immigration, it's about the plight of people. It's about discovering who you really are, and trying to maintain self-respect and dignity in the face of appalling degradation.

"Brothers" will open your eyes and it will take you on a roller coaster ride from Helmand to Manchester.

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BROUGHT  
CHRISTMAS

## Christmas Eve, 1937, Oxley, North Yorkshire, England

Peter Jepson never used to be as miserable and bad tempered as he is nowadays. As a younger man, he'd been a happy-go-lucky sort, the life and soul of any gathering. That had been what attracted Lilian to him all those years ago.

Two major events changed him, they say. The first was the Great War, in which he'd served bravely and with honour, and which saw him wounded and ultimately discharged from service on medical grounds. He'd returned to Oxley, the village of his birth, with serious leg wounds and a case of, what they called in those days, *shell* shock — although his was a relatively mild case. The second was the pit disaster of 1929, in which he'd lost his brother, Frank. His best friend, David, the man with whom he'd grown up and then served alongside in the army, had been working next to Frank when the pit ceiling caved in. Someone later told Peter that, rather than helping those miners who were trapped, David had saved his own skin and run for his life. Peter became exceptionally bitter towards his former mate, a feeling that had only fermented in the intervening years. Over that time, Peter became more and more jaded with life to the point where he was someone people went out of their way to avoid.

In any normal man, that wouldn't be so bad but in Peter's case it was disastrous as he had become the landlord of his local pub, a situation that came about through a good turn. In view of his bravery at the Front and because he could no longer work as a miner, the man who owned the pit and many of the buildings in the village offered Peter the chance to run the Collier's Arms, one of two pubs in Oxley. It must be said that it was with some reluctance that Peter took up the offer — but a man needs to work.

Over the years, Peter's negative attitude turned people

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away.

That's the reason the pub is as quiet today as it has been all year with only a few regular drinkers, sitting alone, staring at their pints. There's no conversation, no noise — no atmosphere. There's only the ticking of the clock next to the bar to break the silence, each swing of its pendulum marking a second closer to the day of days.

It shouldn't be this way. Today is Christmas Eve and the Collier's Arms used to be the centre of Oxley's social scene. Not any more. If you want to party, have fun while you drink, sing a few festive songs, then the place to go is the King's Head on the opposite side of the village, which is where the miners will go for a swift pint or two at the end of their shift before going home to help their wives get Christmas started. Some will return later that evening, with their wives, to continue the festivities. The King's Head will, tonight, be alive with revelry while the Collier's will more resemble the morgue it has become.

This year is even more miserable than usual. Peter is in the *dog house* having gambled away the family's Christmas kitty — the money Lilian has been putting aside each week to make the festive period bearable. There had been a *sure-fire* dead certainty, or so the bloke who told him about it claimed. Peter staked everything on this horse, running at Beverley, hoping to turn their meagre kitty into some serious money that would help make the special day great — for the kids. He personally didn't care much for Christmas — but he wanted it to be right for the children. Not only did the horse not win, it failed to finish and Peter lost the lot. Worse still, he didn't even tell Lilian what he'd done. She had to find out when she came to get some cash out of the tin. Peter had blamed their eldest boy, Arthur — but Lilian saw through him. She knew it was Peter. He'd done it before. A few times. And now he was in the dog house, sitting in a

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miserable run-down pub, with little to do except read the paper and watch the clock on the wall.

The pub has only been open an hour of the lunchtime session and already Peter is wishing it was closing time. Lilian appears from upstairs, her coat fastened up to the top and her hat in hand. 'And where do you think you're going?' Peter looks up from his newspaper.

'Out,' she snaps in reply.

'I can see that, but where?'

'Somebody's got to rescue this miserable Christmas,' she replies.

'I couldn't care less about that,' Peter grumbles.

'Aye, I can see that — but there's more than you in this family. We have kids and it's not right that they have to suffer because of your selfishness.' There's more she wants to say to him but holds back, not wanting to make a scene in the middle of the pub.

'So what do you intend to do? Magic up some money?' Peter sneers.

'No, I'm going to do what you should have done all along — earn some money. I'll go door to door if I have to, doing odd jobs until I've made enough to get something to cook at least.'

'It's Christmas Eve unless you'd forgotten. Even if you did manage to get some cash, which you won't — there'll be nowt open.'

'So long as I can get the four o'clock bus into town, I'll be able to catch some shops — enough to get something. There'll be no presents for the kids, but at least we'll have something worth sitting around the table for.'

'You're mad,' Peter pronounces.

'I don't care. Someone's got to do something.'

'You know my views,' Peter says.

'I do, but they don't count for anything as it was you that

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got us into this mess in the first place.'

'The kids'll just have to learn that disappointment is all part of life. They'll have to learn to live with it. There's plenty of folk around here with nowt to put on their tables, and it won't do them any harm.'

'That's no reason for our kids to go without,' Lilian replied.

'And what about my dinner? You expect me to work in the pub all day and have to fend for myself?'

Lilian glances around the all but empty lounge. 'Rushed off your feet are you?' she asks, sarcastically. 'You know where the kitchen is so you can cook yourself something — only stay away from the corned beef. If things don't go to plan this afternoon, that's what we'll be having tomorrow with some potatoes.'

'Do you intend to go knocking on doors like an old tramp?' Peter asks.

'If that's what it takes. There's bound to be someone in the village who can help us out.'

'You mean you're going to beg?' Peter is horrified at the thought.

'No, I'm going to ask for help. But I'll beg if I have to.' Lilian has been doing odd jobs around the village for years, trying to help make ends meet. She has several regular clients and she's certain someone will have a quick and easy job for her to perform, enough to earn a bob or two here and there. The alternative is to go to visit her sister and ask her for a loan, but that's an option Lilian will only do as a last resort. Although it would be easier to just borrow some money and be able to spend a bit more time in town, there's bound to be a load of questions, and her sister will judge. Everyone in the village knows Peter blew the money and she'll judge — it will be something for her to hold over Lilian's head for years to come.

Lilian checks the clock on the wall. There isn't much time

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to get everything done. 'Anything else you want to say?' she asks, curtly.

'No. Just make sure you're back before we open up this evening.'

'I'll be back when I'm back,' she says and before Peter has a chance to reply, Lilian flounces out of the pub to start her quest. Peter sighs loudly and returns to his paper.

Peter has come to despise Christmas. No matter how hard he tries, he can't avoid thinking about that awful day in '29 when the colliery roof collapsed on those miners. He can never shake the image of Frank out of his mind.

He's never properly dealt with his feelings — Northern men tend not to. Consequently, he has a lot of pent up anger and frustration, and Lilian thinks this is partly why Peter goes out of his way to make everyone else miserable.

'Why do you always want to bring everyone else down to your level of misery?' Lilian has asked him a number of times. Normally, Peter responds with a grunt.

But not this morning, when she asked it again. This time he'd snapped in response, 'If you don't like it, you know what you can do.'

'Sling my hook?' she taunted him. 'One day I just might. You're going to go too far and when you do, that's when I walk out the door with the kids. Then you'll be left with nothing but self pity.'

'Fine with me!'

Something feels different this Christmas and a lot of people have noticed it. The whole village seems unusually subdued. Maybe it's the grey, cold, damp weather. Or maybe it's that the pit is on short shifts, with the men only working part time

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hours — with the inevitable drop in pay. Whatever the reason, people feel down and that somehow makes Peter feel better.

Lilian calls on three of her regular clients. Two answer and flatly refuse. 'There's nowt spare,' one says, clearly saddened at not being able to help. She knows the reason Lilian is at the door. 'Every penny's been spent. I'm sure you understand.' It's the same response at the second house and there's no reply at the third. Lilian pauses at the street corner and assesses her situation.

Rather than wasting any more time being turned down, Lilian weighs up whether to swallow her pride and go and see her sister, Betty. She knows the reaction she'll get and how Betty will go out of her way to make Lilian feel small. It's going to be hard enough. It isn't easy for a woman as proud as Lilian her to have to go cap in hand to anyone, let alone Betty, but in difficult times like this, you have to do whatever you can.

She sets off. Betty lives on a farm at the edge of the village, up Cow Lane. Twice, Lilian stops and convinces herself this is a pointless exercise and that she should go back home. Then she remembers the children and knows this is no time for pride.

She pauses at Betty's farm gate, takes a few deep breaths before gingerly heading up the path. She and Betty always used to be close, but it all changed a few years back after Peter had said something out of turn. Lilian had tried to mend the bridges between them, but things remained frosty.

Lilian has no idea how Betty will react to being asked for a loan on Christmas Eve.

'What do *you* want?' Betty grunts as she opens the front door, a grimace on her face.

'And a very happy Christmas to you,' Lilian replies, sarcastically. Her immediate instinct is to turn around and

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run away but she's doing this for the kids, so she stays. Lilian takes a deep breath. 'What's the possibility of some help?'

'What kind of help?' Betty folds her arms.

'Money.'

'You want to borrow money?'

'Aye.' Lilian looks down at the ground, not daring to make eye contact.

'I suppose this has something to do with the fact that your waste-of-space husband bet your money away,' Betty says through gritted teeth.

'You know about that?'

'The whole village knows about it.' A gleam appears in Betty's eyes. 'It was only a matter of time before he went and did something stupid like that. I'm surprised it took this long. And I'm amazed that you've put up with it as long as you have. I knew all along that he was a bad sort. I told you, the moment I clapped eyes on that man...'

'He made a mistake,' Lilian cuts in, defensively.

'Aye, a big one, too. Like I said, he's a waste of space.'

'Say what you will about Peter, but deep down he's not a bad man.'

'You're blind,' Betty continues. 'He's the most miserable, self-centred man I've ever met.'

'That doesn't make him bad.'

'In my book it does.'

Lilian feels the prospect of a loan sinking away.

'Let me get this straight,' Betty carries on. 'He throws away all your money gambling on a horse and straight away you're round here asking for a loan?'

'You're my sister,' Lilian says.

'I'm quite aware of that. And what do you think, *as your sister*, I should do?'

'I'll pay you back as soon as I can. I only need enough so I can get some nice food.'

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'And what about the children? I don't suppose you've got them any presents.'

'We had a talk about it as a family, and we agreed that we'd try to do Christmas again — on a different day — when we've saved up enough money. The children understand.'

'That sounds sensible,' Betty says. 'So why the need for a loan?'

'Because everyone else in the village is having Christmas tomorrow — all their friends. I wanted them to have something to show for the big day... something that wasn't corned beef.'

'What do you need?' Betty asks.

'Just enough so I can go into town and get something nice to cook. I'll pay you back as soon as I can.'

'And when will that be? I note the pub isn't doing too well.'

'I'd just need a couple of weeks. I do cleaning jobs for folk. I'll pay you out of that money.'

Betty rubs her chin. 'No, I'm not inclined to give you a loan,' she says. 'But I could give you some work. As you say, the children need something to mark Christmas and it's not their fault Peter is a bad father.'

'I'll take it — the work, that is.'

'Far better than a loan. This is money you know you've earned and you won't have to repay it.'

'Do you want me to do some cleaning for you?' Lilian asks.

'In a manner of speaking. I have something very festive for you to clean. The cow shed.' She giggles to herself. 'It needs mucking out.'

'I'd need to catch the four o'clock bus into town if I've any chance at all of getting to the shops.'

'Then you'd better get cracking hadn't you! I want the job finishing. If you're not done by four o'clock, you'll be coming back on Boxing Day to get the job done. Got it?'

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Lilian has no choice. 'Show me the way.'

Lilian is still out when it's time for Peter to open up again and he isn't happy. Apart from dreading the thought of being stuck in the pub for the evening shift, he's had to make sandwiches for the kids, which Peter doesn't consider to be *his* job.

He stands alone in the lounge, in front of the bar, contemplating what sort of evening it's going to be. He hopes Christmas revellers will stay away and go to the King's Head instead. For Peter, a perfect evening would be just the usual two or three drinkers and for them to go home early leaving him to close up. Inevitably, though, there will be some people in high spirits. All Peter can hope for is that they hand over their money and then respond to his dirty looks, take the hint and go elsewhere.

Right now, Peter would give almost anything to be able to fast forward to the end of the evening so he can slide into bed, switch off the light and fade into his dreams.

However, he knows he can't. All the money he lost on the horse needs to be repaid or his life will be hell come the new year, so he has to make some money tonight. Heavily, he slouches to the front door and slides back the bolt. As he heaves it open, he almost jumps out of his skin. It has been a long time since anyone has been standing out on the street waiting for him to open up, but tonight someone is there, pocket watch in hand, shaking his head. Peter strains to see who it is, with only the dim glow from the pub's interior lights to illuminate the man's face. He doesn't recognise him.

'What sort of time do you call this?' the man snaps, shoving the watch back into his pocket.

'Five,' Peter growls.

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'It's after five,' the man counters, pulling out his watch again, not that he can see its face in the gloom. He taps the face and shows it to Peter.

'It's five past,' Peter counters. 'Hardly a capital crime.'

'Five past five isn't five,' the man points out. 'Your sign says you open at five.'

'Are you coming in or not?' Peter snaps. 'I don't have the inclination to stand around here in the cold arguing with you.' Peter goes back inside and behind the bar. He doesn't care whether the man follows him in. In fact, he'd rather he went away. But he comes in and sidles up to the bar, a broad smile on his face.

'Merry Christmas,' he says, brightly.

'Is it?' Peter asks, grumpily.

'It ought to be.'

'Not here, it isn't.'

'You don't hold with the traditions of the season?' the man asks as Peter scowls at him. 'That's alright, I respect your view. Each to his own, but I'd ask you to respect mine in return.'

'Why should I do that?'

'Politeness.'

'I don't even know you,' Peter responds, curtly.

'You're meant to be the landlord.'

'I *am* the landlord.'

'Then politeness ought to be in your blood.'

'Are you trying to annoy me?' Peter asks. 'I only ask because if you are, you're doing a very good job.' He looks the stranger up and down, not liking what he sees. The man looks like a vagrant — someone who ought to be in a shelter and not a respectable village public house. The man is unkempt. From the threadbare cloth cap sitting above knotted thick grey hair in dire need of washing, to the heavily scuffed leather boots with worn down soles, and all that's in

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between — the coat with burn holes and missing buttons, held in place with a length of string tied at the waist and the trousers with stained legs.

His face looks grey and Peter can't work out if it's that colour because of a lack of exposure to the sun, insufficient vitamins or illness. He has sunken cheeks, clearly the result of malnutrition, bags under his eyes and at least three day's stubble on his chin. But those eyes — piercing green, bright and alive. His eyes are possibly the most alive part of his face.

'Are you looking for somewhere?' Peter asks.

'Come again.'

'Are you lost?'

'No.'

'You want to buy a drink?'

'Why else would I be in a pub?'

'Do you have money?'

'You *do* have a way with customers,' the man smiles, showing discoloured and uneven teeth.

'It's my natural charm,' Peter replies, sarcastically. 'Everyone talks about it. So? Do you have money or not?'

'Of course I do.'

'Only, you don't look the sort who would be spending money in a pub.'

'What does that sort look like?'

'Not you. I don't want any kind of trouble, so I'll ask you to have your drink and then leave,' Peter says, emphatically.

'What makes you think I'll be trouble? I've done nothing to you and yet you've been nothing but rude to me from the moment we met.'

'If you don't like it, the King's Head is just up the road.'

'No, I think I'll stay here. I like the look of your fire. But I might stay a bit longer than one drink,' he states.

'What would you like?' Peter tries to sound polite, but it's

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a strain.

The man rubs his stubble as he surveys the pumps on the bar — both of them. ‘What do you have?’ he asks.

‘Mild or bitter,’ Peter gruffly replies, impatiently. Then, when the man fails to respond immediately, Peter demands, ‘Well?’

‘What’s the rush?’ the man nods towards the empty room. ‘You’re not exactly busy.’

‘And I’ll be even less so if you don’t get a move on. I have better things to do than stand around here wasting my time with you.’

‘Too busy to give the time of day to a tired old man?’ The smile disappears. ‘I can see that Christmas cheer is definitely a stranger to this establishment.’

‘If it’s Christmas cheer you’re after, go to the King’s Head. They have it in abundance.’

‘Is that why your place is so empty? Is everyone there?’

‘I hope so,’ Peter replies. ‘So? Are you having a drink here or there?’

‘Here,’ the man says, brightly. ‘I’ll have a half pint of mild, please.’

‘A half? I see Christmas cheer doesn’t extend to buying a full pint.’

‘I’ll stick to halves — that way if I decide to move on to a happier place, I don’t have that long to wait before I’ve drunk up. The King’s Head you say?’

‘That’s right — it’s not far, just the other side of the church. You could go now if you like and save yourself the bother of having to be miserable here.’

‘No, fair’s fair, I said I’d have a drink here and I will.’

‘Oh joy,’ Peter exclaims, reaching for an empty glass. ‘And for the record, you’ll not find that many happy people in there either. They’ll be merry from the drink, but not exactly happy.’

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'Why's that?'

'Times are tough mate, especially in a place like this.'

'Never used to be that way,' the man observes. 'Once over, Oxley was a hive of joy.'

'Aye, well, not any more,' Peter hands him his drink and holds his hand out for the money. The man places the exact coinage in Peter's hand. Peter checks it and begrudgingly thanks him. 'I've lived here all my life, but I don't recall ever seeing you here.'

'It has been a while.' The man takes a swig from his drink and lets out a satisfied sigh. 'Nice bit of mild, that,' he observes.

I do my best,' Peter says.

'Shame the place is so dead.'

'The King's Head might be where everyone is, but they don't keep their beer as nice as mine.'

The man takes another large swig and places his half empty glass on the bar. 'John Swinney, by the way.' John introduces himself, but Peter just grunts. He isn't interested in small talk and would prefer it if John would simply go and sit down out of his way. Peter turns his attention back to his newspaper, while John downs the remaining beer. 'I needed that,' he says. 'Been looking forward to that all day. I'll take another, landlord.' He rummages in his pocket and pulls out a bunch of coins, which he slams noisily on the bar. Once again, it's exactly the right amount.

Peter pours the drink into the same glass and scoops up the money. John takes the glass and this time downs the whole drink in one.

'Like your beer, do you?' Peter asks, watching him drink.

'I do, but I don't get to have it very often. Once a year to be exact, and I've been looking forward to this all year.'

'Once a year?'

'Aye, Christmas Eve. Sometimes Christmas Day too, but

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not every year.' John points to the hearth, where the fire is already crackling away. The pub's atmosphere might be frosty but they do keep a good fire. 'Is there anything finer than a nice ale enjoyed on a cold winter's evening in front of a roaring fire?'

Peter looks across at the fire. Even he would have to admit that it has its charms.

John continues, 'Only one thing missing in my opinion...'

'What?'

'Company. What's the point of a fine drink and cracking fire, if you've nobody with you to enjoy it?'

Peter leans across the bar. 'Well, like I said, if it's company you want, the place to be is the King's Head.'

Peter pretends to busy himself around the bar, but John watches him and sees that he's actually doing nothing useful at all. There's little to do in a pub with only one customer. Peter, however, is keen to avoid getting into a conversation.

John, on the other hand, has different ideas. 'This place hasn't changed much,' he says. 'Could use a lick of paint here and there, but it's good to see that everything is pretty much as I remember it.'

Peter pauses. 'When exactly were you here before?'

'Before your time, I suspect,' John says. 'Back in the day, this was my stomping ground. Some used to say that the Collier's was *my* pub. Over the years, I've put many hard earned shillings in that till — I probably paid for the last lick of paint this place had.' He points to a painting that's been hanging on the chimney breast for years. 'I remember that painting most of all. I was there when the artist did it.'

'Really?' Peter grunts. 'I don't care for it myself. I'd have chucked it out years ago but the building owner said it had to stay there at all costs... bloody ugly thing.'

Those words seem to offend John. 'I think it's quite a nice painting.'

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'Take it, then.'

'I thought it had to stay there.'

'That's what the owner says, but who's to know? He's hardly ever here.'

'I would if I could,' John says, 'but I can't, so I think it best if it stays with you.'

'I don't even know who it's meant to be of,' Peter remarks. It's a portrait of a miner. There's a name on a small brass plate on the frame, *John Sweeney*, and there are some dates — 1870 to 1900. Peter has never heard of the man. Someone once suggested that it was a local miner who'd died in a pit accident, but Peter has never given it much thought. He'd much prefer a landscape painting on the wall, but there's nothing he can do about it.

'You're not much of a conversationalist,' John observes.

'People talk too much,' Peter snaps.

'Is that a bad thing?'

'Too much noise. Folk should learn to keep themselves to themselves,' Peter says. 'I only talk when I have something to say — not for the sake of it. Too many people poke their noses into other people's business. If they stuck to their own, we'd all be a lot better off.'

'Isn't conversation part of the job of a landlord?'

'Not as far as I'm concerned. I'm not here to listen to other people complaining about their lives. I just pour the drinks and give them somewhere to sit by the fire. That's it.'

'Explains why *your* pub is empty and the King's Head is full. Doesn't it worry you that they're doing well and you're struggling?'

'Who said anything about struggling?'

'I just...'

'Well don't. Whether we're doing well or not is none of your business, and I've already made my feelings known about that,' Peter says, slamming the door on that thread of

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conversation.

John gets the message. 'I'll take my drink and sit in front of the fire.'

'You do that,' Peter returns to his newspaper.

John shuffles to a chair by the hearth and eases himself wearily into it, his old joints aching. Peter watches him from behind the bar. Much as he would like to be able to ignore this man, there's something about him that he finds fascinating. However, it doesn't do to stare so he picks up his newspaper and pretends to read.

Over the course of the next hour, a handful of regulars arrive, some with their wives. They know the drill and each take their drinks and go to their respective places in the room. One perches on a stool at the bar, placing his cloth cap next to his drink, and slowly works his way down a pint of ale. A few comments pass between him and Peter — mostly about the weather and in particular the man's prediction that there will be a hard cold snap early in the new year. Peter nods and does his best to avoid engaging in further conversation.

There are a few irregular customers tonight, people Peter knows from around the village, but who wouldn't normally come out for a drink. For some, this is much needed time away from their families who might be getting stressed about preparation for tomorrow. For others, it's a cheeky pint or two before the carol service at St James's.

Peter isn't especially welcoming to any, but neither is he rude. However, anyone daring to wish him seasonal greetings is met with a glare.

Around seven o'clock, Lilian arrives looking exhausted and somewhat upset. She pauses at the door and looks around the pub, reflecting on how quiet it is. Peter spots that she isn't carrying shopping and assumes her afternoon has been unsuccessful.

She walks up to the bar, throws her bag on a stool and sits

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on one next to it. 'You'd better pour me a drink,' she says. This is a first. Lilian isn't normally a drinker — a sherry or a port maybe on a special occasion. She'd never normally take her place on the customer's side of the bar and never on a stool.

'Shouldn't you go and see to the kids?' Peter looks uncomfortable with her in front of him.

'Not until I've had a port and lemon,' she replies, removing her hat and putting it on the bar. The man on the stool nods a greeting.

'You're not having one,' Peter says. 'It isn't right.'

'What isn't? Me sitting here, in a pub — my pub — and having a drink?'

'It's what it looks like.'

'To whom?'

'People!'

'There's nobody here,' she says, looking around at the empty tables. 'If you won't get it, I'll pour one myself.'

'You'll do no such thing,' Peter replies emphatically. 'Go and see to the kids and I'll fetch you a drink upstairs.'

'No, I want to have it here — with people,' she says.

John gets up and comes to the bar, placing his empty glass down. He looks at Lilian. 'You look like someone in need of a drink.'

'You're not wrong,' she says.

'Allow me,' he replies. 'What will you have?'

'Oi,' Peter interrupts. 'That's my wife you're talking to. Nobody apart from me buys her drinks.'

'So, get on with it then,' John tells him. 'Can't you see she looks like she *needs* one?'

'Thank you,' Lilian says, politely. 'Good to know that there are still gentlemen around. I'll have a *port and lemon* when you're ready, Peter.'

Peter shakes his head. He knows this is one argument he

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isn't going to win. He goes to get the drink while John perches on a nearby stool. 'You look to have the weight of the world on your shoulders,' he says to Lilian.

'It's nothing,' she says.

'A problem shared...' he starts.

'Not this one, I'm afraid, Mr... I'm sorry I didn't catch your name.'

'Swinney,' John replies.

'I'm sorry, Mr Swinney, but unless you can magic up a bird, all the trimmings and some gifts for my children, then there's nothing you can do to help me.'

'Have you forgotten to buy Christmas provisions?' John raises an eyebrow.

'Not exactly, Mr Swinney.' Then, before she can say anything else Peter returns with her drink, which he places heavily on the counter, all the while glaring at his wife.

'I'm sure Mr Swinney has better things to do than listen to our problems,' he hisses, and turns to address John. 'Why don't you go and sit back at the fire and I'll bring you another drink over?'

'It wasn't my intention to offend.'

'Keep your nose out and you haven't offended,' Peter snaps.

'Peter!' Lilian barks. 'He was only making conversation, leave him be. Let him have his drink in peace.' She turns to John. 'Go on. Peter will fetch your drink over.'

'As you insist.' John withdraws to his place by the fire. It feels good to warm his aching bones, making him feel vaguely human again. The worst part of these long winter nights is the way the cold gets right into your joints.

Peter draws another half pint and places it on the bar. 'Take that over to your man,' Peter orders.

'What did your last slave die of?'

'She hasn't!'

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She shakes her head and takes John his drink. When she returns to her stool, she finds Peter in a more consolatory frame of mind. 'I take it the afternoon didn't go quite as planned.'

'You could say that.' She takes a sip.

'Go on then, tell me,' Peter sighs.

'Betty!'

'I might have known that dragon would have had something to do with it!'

'I went and asked if I could borrow from her,' Lillian starts.

'You went to borrow from *that* woman?' Peter is alarmed. 'What were you thinking? She'll hold that over us for years.'

'You can relax, she wouldn't lend me anything,' Lillian points out.

'That's a relief.'

'She'd only let me have money if I worked for it.'

'That's not so bad,' Peter says.

'I said that I needed the money so I could buy things for Christmas. I said I needed to be on the four o'clock bus if I was to stand any chance at all of catching any of the shops open. Betty gave me a job to do and said everything would be alright. She had me mucking out the barn.'

Peter tries to stifle a giggle.

'You think that's funny?'

'A bit.'

'Well, I don't know why' Lillian scorns. 'It was a really messy job. She told me that if I wasn't finished by the end of this afternoon, that I'd have to come back on Boxing Day.'

'What did you do?' Peter asks, now feeling guilty.

'It got to quarter to four and it didn't even feel like I'd broken the back of it. I needed to go for the bus, but Betty wasn't happy — said she'd prefer it if I stayed — but I said I had to go. The whole reason for me doing the work was to make some money to go into town. Anyway, she relented

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but said I couldn't go anywhere stinking of cow shit so she made me go upstairs and have a wash. Then she only gave me half the money.'

'Half?' Peter exclaims. 'The tight fisted...'

'She said the job was only half done.... I didn't have enough money to do anything meaningful with and I'd have missed the bus anyway...'

'So, what did you do?'

'There was only one thing I could do... I stayed and finished the job. At least this way I got all the money and I don't have to go back on Boxing Day.'

'Why did you go to Betty for the money? I thought you said there were people in the village who would give you some work.'

'So I thought... Peter, I had no idea how much we've become outcasts in the village.'

'What do you mean?'

'Nobody had any work for me. Nobody.'

'It's the day before Christmas, love... maybe people just don't have the money to spare. Don't feel downhearted about it.'

'All those folk you've turfed out of here over the last few years... it's coming back to bite us now.'

Peter doesn't want to get into a row about that. Not today. He reaches across the bar and places his hand on hers. 'So, no Christmas for the Jepsens,' he sighs. 'You did your best, love. That's all that matters.'

'No, Peter. What matters is for our kids to have a nice day tomorrow, and we can't even do that.'

'Why don't we do like we've talked about and have Christmas on a different day? We have the money from Betty and things will be cheaper in a week. We could do it then.'

'Aye, but what do we do tomorrow?' Lilian asks.

'Corned beef, like you said. We'll make the best of it, like

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we always do.'

'One year, I'd like to do more than make the best of it,' Lilian says. 'The last thing Betty said to me really hurt. As she handed me my wage, she told me we deserved to have a cold empty Christmas and that we'd brought everything on ourselves. I asked if we could come over to visit during the day and she said *no*. She said they already had a house full and that there wouldn't be room for us. When I asked if we could come over a different day she said the same thing. Said we weren't welcome. My own sister!'

'That's no hardship, love,' Peter says, softly. 'We'll be better off without her.'

'She did say that I'd be welcome anytime to go and shovel more shit. I feel she's humiliated me and I've had a completely wasted afternoon. I failed to bring Christmas to our family.'

Peter softens his tone, 'We'll be alright. Tomorrow we'll do what we can and we'll sort everything out for Christmas in a few days. I reckon the kids will love still having Christmas to look forward to after it's over and done with for everyone else.'

'I should have stopped you,' Lilian's eyes narrow. 'I should have known you'd do something stupid with the money. You always do.'

'I said I'm sorry about the money...,' Peter says, defensively.

'Are you? Really?'

'Yes, and I will do something about it in the new year.'

'Like what?'

'I'll try and get help. But for now, all we can do is try to make the best of things.' He draws himself a pint of ale as Lilian casts him a glare. 'Well, if you can have a drink, so can I. It is Christmas Eve after all.'

'What are we going to do?' Lilian asks. 'All we have is

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corned beef.'

'Whatever you decide to do with it, I'm sure it'll be lovely. You could make it into a pie.'

'Corned beef pie? Are you mad?'

'Do you have any better suggestions?'

'No.'

'Well, there you go then. Corned beef pie it is.'

John looks across at them from his place by the fire. He gets up and returns to the bar. 'I don't mean to intrude, but I couldn't help hearing. Is there anything I can do to help?'

John's intrusion is more than Peter can bear. 'What did I tell you about minding your own business?' he snarls.

But Lilian takes a more conciliatory tone, 'Mr Swinney, thanks but as I said before, unless you know a way to magic up everything we need for Christmas in the next few hours, there's nothing you or anyone else can do to help.'

'Why don't you bring Christmas to the pub yourself?' John asks.

'Do what?' Peter asks, aghast.

'Bring the party here.'

'You obviously need your ears cleaning out, mate. We don't have anything to eat and all the shops are shut. We can't even manage our own Christmas, let alone anyone else's.'

'And,' Lilian adds, 'we're not exactly popular in the village.'

Peter points to John's place by the fire. 'Why don't you go back to your drink and let us work this out for ourselves.'

### **Christmas Day, Early**

One good thing about this year's Christmas, in Peter's mind at least, is the fact that it will be a relatively lazy day. He

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doesn't have to open the pub, and there's no big meal to prepare. The idea of celebrating on a different day is growing on him and he hopes that a simplified day might enable him to focus more on making amends with his family without distractions. Most of all, he's relishing the prospect of a lie in.

Peter and Lilian are asleep in bed when loud banging starts up at the front door — urgent thumping, enough to wake up the entire household. It wakes Lilian first and she digs Peter. 'What's that?' she asks, still half asleep. 'Who could be at the door this early? They know we're closed, right?'

'Ignore them, they'll soon go away,' Peter grunts, turning over to try to get back to sleep.

'What time is it?'

Peter reaches for his wristwatch on the bedside cabinet. He squints to read the dial, but it's still dark. 'It isn't even eight o'clock. Whoever it is can sod off.'

'Hadn't you better go and see who it is?' Lilian asks. 'It could be something important. It sounds urgent.'

'Are you serious? It's freezing out there.'

'Go and see,' she orders.

Peter grumbles and gets out of bed. His dressing gown is strewn over a chair on the other side of the cold bedroom. It will be faster to go to the window in his pyjamas than fetch the gown. As soon as he reaches the window the banging stops. He pulls back the curtains and strains to see the street below, but can't see anyone. Reluctantly, he opens the window and bristles at the freezing cold air.

'Who is it?' Lilian asks.

Peter quickly checks below and pulls his head inside, slamming the window shut. 'There's no-one there.' He draws the curtains tight and hops back into bed. 'It'll be pranksters. Probably drunks still out from last night.' He pulls the covers tight over him to warm up and snuggles up to Lilian. 'I don't say this often enough,' he whispers, 'but I do love you.'

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'You're still in the dog house,' she replies, trying to push him away, but he fights back and pulls her close. 'Stop it — you'll wake the kids.'

'So? Let them wake. I love you.'

'I told you — I'm not happy with you.'

'Let me make it up to you. We have all morning. We can do a lot of making up.'

'You think that will make everything right, do you?'

'It's a start. Come on, you know you want to...'

She does, but wonders if giving in to him might send the wrong signal that forgiveness can be won so easily. Lilian, though, has never been able to stay annoyed at Peter for too long. He might be an idiot at times but he's still the same big bear she fell in love with all those years ago. But he *has* to understand what his behaviour has done to the family.

Peter doesn't wait for an answer. He pulls her tight and kisses her gently on the neck. It does the trick and Lilian's resistance evaporates.

The banging starts again, now more urgent than before and louder too.

'Go away!' Peter hisses, annoyed.

'It must be something bad,' Lilian says, pushing him away. 'Go and see.'

'There's nobody there.'

'Obviously there is...'

'It'll be drunks.'

'Then tell them to go away and leave us in peace.'

Peter sighs loudly and gets out of bed once again to go to the window. Once more the banging stops. He still can't see anyone on the street outside. He keeps his head out, figuring that whoever it is will give themselves up sooner or later, but nobody does. 'Whoever's down there, you're not funny! We're closed! Go home!' He waits for an answer, expecting some drunk villager to shout some abuse back at him. But

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there's only silence. The only sound is the wind blowing through trees opposite the pub. The village appears to be still — asleep.

Peter shivers and closes the window and curtains. He's desperate to get back to Lilian but the romantic mood is fast ebbing away. Peter jumps back into bed. The banging starts up again and this time it almost sounds like the door might burst from its hinges. For the third time he opens the window. Again the banging stops immediately and still there's nobody out on the street. 'It's those damned Smith kids,' Peter rages.

'Can you see them?'

'No, but it's always them. I've a mind to go round there and wake *their* house up.' He strains to see up and down the street.

'Come back to bed.'

'No, I've had enough of this. Where's my old hunting rifle?'

'What?'

'My rifle. Where is it?'

'No, Peter, don't even think it.'

'I'm just going to put the fear of God into them. I'll give them a Christmas morning they'll not forget in a hurry — coming round here in the middle of the night, frightening folk.'

Lilian sits up in bed, 'And you think that'll help, do you? You want to go out there in the dark, wandering round with a rifle...'

'An unloaded rifle,' Peter corrects her.

'Doesn't matter. They'll bang you up in the nick and then where will we be?'

'Do you have any better ideas?'

'Yes, come back to bed and they'll soon give up — it's too cold out there for pranks.'

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The banging starts up again. Peter slams his head into the pillow in despair.

'Where's the rifle?'

'It's long gone and good riddance too.'

'Where's it gone?' Peter demands.

'I don't know — it hasn't been around for years.' She's lying. She disposed of the gun just after Arthur was born. Peter hadn't been hunting since returning from the war, saying that he'd had enough of guns to last him a lifetime and Lilian didn't want it in the house near children, especially when Peter had such a volatile temper. Who knows what could happen in a moment of madness...?

'No matter,' Peter puts on his dressing gown. 'There's a cricket bat in the downstairs store room. I'll use that.'

'Don't do anything stupid,' Lilian pleads.

The banging continues. Peter storms out of the bedroom and down the stairs, raging. He stops off at the store cupboard to retrieve the bat and rushes to the front door. Whoever it is had better have a bloody good excuse or they're about to get a face full of cricket bat.

Peter unlocks the door and yanks it open. He's about to lash out when he sees John Swinney standing there, still in the same shabby clothes he wore last night. Now, though, he has a hessian sack over his shoulder.

'Good, you're up!' he grins. 'What's the bat for?'

'What the hell do you want?' Peter growls. 'Was that you banging away earlier?'

'It was.'

'It's a wonder I have any door left. I came to the window but you weren't there. Where were you?'

'No you didn't,' John protests.

'I did! I came to that window — three times,' Peter points up to the bedroom.

'I beg to differ.'

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'It doesn't matter — do you have any idea what day it is and what time it is? What the hell do you want?'

'In reverse order, I do and I do,' John replies, brightly. 'And as for what I want... I want to talk to you.'

'Then come back when we're open.'

'When's that?'

'Tomorrow.'

'But I want to talk today.'

'Tough!'

'I'm a customer.'

'Not today! I don't get many days off away from customers, and this is one of them. I don't care what you want, come back when we're open, which will be five o'clock tomorrow evening. If you need a drink before then, I suggest you go and bang on the door of the King's Head. They're more welcoming to waifs and strays like you.'

'But I have an idea,' John says, ignoring Peter's barbs.

'I don't care.'

'Are you going to church this morning?' John asks.

'I wasn't planning to. Why?'

'This is a holy day.'

'Let's just say that me and God don't exactly see eye to eye on things.'

'But you *must* attend on Christmas morning,' John tells him. 'That's what people do.'

'Did you wake me up to tell me that?' Peter demands.

'No, I was just pointing out...'

'It's cold out here, and I want to get back to my bed,' Peter says.

'You're not going back to sleep?' John asks, although it sounds more like a statement. 'You can't sleep a day like today away.'

'I wasn't planning to go to sleep...'

John understands the message. 'I see. That can wait. Let

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me in.'

'Go home,' Peter insists.

'I have an idea that I think you're going to like,' John says.

'I very much doubt it,' Peter's patience is wearing thin.

Lilian appears at the door, her dressing gown pulled tight. 'What on earth is all the racket about?'

'Mrs Jepson,' John greets her warmly. 'Looking as radiant as ever.'

'I thought you said it was kids', Lilian turns to Peter.

'Aye, well it turned out to be this joker.'

'And what does he want?' Lilian demands.

John responds before Peter can even form his words. 'I was telling your husband, I have a wonderful idea...'

'And so have I,' Lilian replies. 'Go away and leave us in peace.'

'You haven't heard what it is yet.'

'And I don't care.'

'Peter was just about to let me in so he could hear all about it.'

'I was not,' Peter interjects.

John steps into the pub, pushing between husband and wife, and goes straight into the snug, stopping in front of the hearth. 'Brrr,' he folds his arms. 'You could have lit the fire.'

'It's the middle of the night,' Peter grumbles. 'We don't keep the fire lit overnight.'

'It's actually seven forty five,' John states. 'Hardly the middle of the night. The farmers have been out and about for hours and you should always expect visitors on Christmas morning.'

'The farmers weren't working until gone midnight last night.'

'And nor were you,' John points out. 'As I recall it, you chucked everyone out at ten thirty.'

'Would you please leave?' Peter demands.

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'Not until I tell you my idea.'

'If we listen do you promise you'll get out?' Lilian cuts in. 'I also want to go back to bed for a few hours. What's your idea about?'

'Christmas.'

'Are you still drunk from last night?' Lilian asks.

'I'm as sober as a judge,' John says, 'I want to bring Christmas to your pub.'

Peter laughs, 'Wouldn't we all? You obviously weren't listening when I told you Christmas is off — at least as far as this family's concerned.'

'I was listening and that's why I've come. This is the most important time of the year.'

'Not for us, mate. At least not this year,' Peter replies, sadly.

'Hear me out,' John says. 'You have children right?'

'Four.'

'How disappointed will they be with nothing to celebrate?'

'Our children know the situation,' Lilian interjects.

'About Peter and the three-legged nag?' John teases.

Peter has a sudden urge to put John's lights out. 'How do you know about that?'

'It's hardly a secret,' John replies in a matter-of-fact kind of way. 'You're the tall of the village. Is that the reason? Or is it because Lilian wasn't able to make enough money yesterday? Or is it a combination?'

'You have ten seconds to get the hell out of my pub, or I swear to God, I'll club you with this bat.'

'No you won't,' John says — sure of himself. 'You wouldn't dare.'

'Try me.'

John puts his sack carefully on the ground.

'What's in that?'

'Take a look.'

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'I'd rather not.'

'Go on,' John says. Lilian and Peter look warily at the sack but don't move. John finds their nervousness amusing. 'Lilian, you went round the village yesterday, trying to get someone to help you save Christmas, right?'

'You know I did.'

'And?'

'I got some potatoes and carrots,' Lilian says. 'Hardly enough to make Christmas. On the plus side, I did get a lot of both.'

'From people without much to spare, too,' John observes. 'Quite generous, considering.'

'Considering what?' Peter demands, defensively.

'Times are tough. Folk don't have a lot of money. Why? What did you think I meant?' John's deep green eyes bore directly into Peter's, momentarily transfixing him to the spot in a way that makes Peter feel queasy. 'Did you think I was referring to your unpopularity around the village?' John knows he's hit the nail on the head. 'Did I touch a nerve?'

'No — I just...'

'You know, none of that matters — not in the long run,' John says.

'You say that, but you're not the one everyone thinks is a miserable old sod.'

'Maybe they have good reason to think that,' John says.

'Maybe.'

'Would you like that to change?' John asks.

'It's not that simple,' Peter suggests.

'Maybe it is,' John replies. 'People are a lot more forgiving than you think, but they need a reason to forgive you.'

'Aye, well, it's not easy to undo years of...'

'You'd be surprised,' John cuts him off. 'What better time for healing than Christmas? Do you want things to be different?'

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'Of course I do,' Peter says.

His words come as a surprise to Lilian, who can't believe her ears. 'Like Peter says, there's a lot of ill feeling in this village,' she cuts in. 'A lot of water has passed under the bridge. And folk around here aren't the most forgiving.'

'The important thing is that Peter would like things to change.'

'Aye, but it's one thing saying it here on a cold Friday morning... it's quite another making it happen.'

'Then that's what we must do,' John replies, brightly. 'And there's no time like the present.'

Lilian shakes her head. 'It's obvious you've been away from here a long time,' she says.

'Take a look in the bag,' John tells Lilian. She hesitates, unsure of what to do. 'Go on,' John encourages her.

She opens the sack and peers inside. 'Where the hell did you get these?' Lilian looks up, her face rouging. She pulls out a plucked turkey. 'There's more in the sack,' she tells Peter. 'Are these stolen? I'll not have stolen goods in my pub.'

'Take it easy, they're not stolen,' John smiles. 'They're a gift.'

'From who?' Lilian demands.

'Me.'

'How many turkeys are there in here?' Lilian rummages in the sack.

'Four in total,' John tells her.

'What the hell do we need with four large turkeys?' Lilian demands.

'I thought you said Christmas was cancelled for the lack of festive food,' John says.

'I know, but... it's one extreme to the other... four birds? That's nearly a bird each!'

'I wasn't thinking that you'd have them all to yourselves,'

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John says.

'Then what *were* you thinking?' Peter asks.

'I thought you could cook them and then invite people to join you — us — for Christmas dinner.'

'Who?' Peter asks, curtly.

'I thought we could start with the hungry people of the village and maybe the lonely. It's a terrible day to be on your own. And it's no fun when your belly is empty and all around you folk are tucking into nice Christmas goodies,' John says.

'It's already Christmas morning,' Lilian says.

'I know,' John replies.

'Don't you think this is a conversation we ought to have had yesterday? I could have got organised if this was suggested yesterday.'

'I didn't know about your situation yesterday.'

'What am I meant to do with four birds? I don't have an oven big enough. And what about the vegetables?' She shakes her head. 'No, this is too much. It can't be done.'

'You have an oven big enough for one bird,' John says. 'I'm sure I can find three other ovens in the village to take the rest. And as for the vegetables, didn't you say you got plenty on your rounds yesterday?' Peter and Lilian stare at each other in disbelief. John continues, 'Didn't you say you wanted the village to forgive you? Start here, doing this, today.'

'Am I supposed to go knocking on doors to ask people if they're too poor for Christmas and then invite them?' Peter asks. 'Oh and by the way, can you whack a turkey in your oven?'

'Leave the guest list to me,' John says. 'I have a good idea who to invite. And I'll sort out the ovens while I'm at it. Who knows, I might even be able to get us a pudding, too. I think I know where there's one going spare.'

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'I suppose we could...' Peter starts. 'It would mean all hands to the pump.' He looks at Lilian for approval but all she can do is shrug. 'What do we have to lose? And it isn't like we had anything else planned,' Peter adds.

'I suppose it's better than corned beef pie.'

John looks around. 'Do you have decorations? Can you make this place look more welcoming and festive?'

'I think we might have some somewhere,' Peter says.

'Great,' John claps his hands. 'We don't have a moment to spare. Let's get cracking.'

'It isn't even eight o'clock yet,' Lilian says.

'And if we want to eat early afternoon, we need to get started,' John tells her.

Peter has a thought. 'Wouldn't it make more sense to take your birds to four different families instead of going to all the trouble of having one big meal here?'

'Perhaps,' John replies. 'But that would only feed four families. If we all come together, we could feed more. And I always think that Christmas ought to be about fellowship and sharing. It would be far better to bring people together and where better than your pub? This always used to be the centre of village life.... Maybe it could be again? And you did say you wanted people to forgive you...'

'Alright, but who exactly are you planning to invite?'

'I told you — the struggling...'

'I know,' Peter cuts him off. 'You already said that. It's just that there are certain people who wouldn't be welcome.'

'Not very Christian, Peter,' John says. 'Not very — festive. Who are you thinking of?'

'Certain people, let's leave it at that.'

'If you don't tell me, how do I know not to invite them?'

'Give me the list and I'll approve them.'

'No,' John says, emphatically.

'What? This is my place and I decide who comes in and

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who doesn't.'

'It's my food we're cooking and it was my idea. I'll decide who comes.'

Lilian steps in. 'Alright, we'll trust you Mr Swinney — this once. But we won't be responsible if the wrong people come and bad words are said.'

'Let's just see what happens,' John grins.

'So much for a quiet Christmas,' Lilian sighs.

'Quiet? That's what Boxing Day is for!' John picks up his sack and strides out.

By late morning, the pub is a hive of activity. The whole Jepson family are hard at it preparing the place. Both Peter and Lilian are as nervous as hell about what the day will bring — and top of their list of worries is who exactly will come and what the atmosphere will be like.

For Peter in particular, this day is tuning into some kind of personal hell. He prays that none of the Smith family are invited. That would be the end of it for him. Peter couldn't stand to be forced to welcome David Smith under his roof — not after what he did to his brother in that pit disaster. It would be a struggle to even ignore that man. Peter would happily punch his lights out — Christmas or no Christmas.

The only way he knows to be able to cope with this level of stress is to roll up his sleeves and get on with it — take his mind off everything and hope the day passes smoothly and quickly. He longs for the moment he can shut the door later that evening, with the last of his guests gone.

Lilian doesn't have time to think about it. She's hard at work in the kitchen trying not to panic, never before having had to cook a meal on this scale. The largest of the four turkeys is already in the oven and John has reported that the other three are also cooking. Now she's busy chopping

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vegetables.

John has flitted in and out all morning, checking on progress. 'Who have you invited?' Peter demands each time.

'All in good time!' John responds, cryptically.

All morning he's been seeking out the poor, vulnerable and lonely. It wasn't difficult.

First to receive a knock at the door was Mrs Evelyn Connolly, a widowed elderly woman, who lives alone in a cottage next to the church. This is the fifth Christmas she's been on her own after losing her husband. Her son had emigrated to Australia some years before. Although she puts a brave face on it, and does what she can to support the various festivities across the village, she dreads Christmas Day itself. Nobody ever visits, and all she has for company is the wireless. It can be a lonely time of year. This year, determined to fend off the dark feelings, she went overboard in supporting various local groups in the lead up to Christmas. She had volunteered to make a pudding for the church Christmas fete, but hadn't managed to finish it in time — she was so busy. *No matter, she thought, stoically, I'm sure someone will find a good use for it in the new year.*

She wasn't expecting anyone to call and was initially quite frightened to find John Swinney standing outside her house. 'Who are you and what do you want?' she snapped at him. Then, for good measure she added. 'I have my son here, and he's a hefty sod.'

John simply looked at her and smiled. He didn't have to say anything. His look simply calmed her down. Then, 'I've come to invite you to dinner,' he spoke softly. 'We're inviting a few people to the Collier's Arms...'

'I can't,' she said emphatically. 'I have my son here and we're all sorted.'

'No you don't,' John said. 'Michael is in Perth.'

'How do you know that?' A cold shiver ran down her

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spine.

He read her face, 'There's nothing to fear. I know you think I'm here to rob you, but I'm not. I know you're on your own and I thought you'd like some company.'

'In a pub? On Christmas?' she shrieked. 'And *that* pub especially? Do you think it appropriate for an elderly woman to go to a pub on her own?'

'You wouldn't be on your own. You'd be with us.' John told her.

'Who else is going?'

'So far it's the Jepson family... and you if you agree. There will be others, though.'

'The Jepsens? No, I don't think so.'

'Why?'

'I don't know who you are, you've come to my door out of the blue, and the Jepsens are hardly what you'd think of as... welcoming.'

She's about to shut the door in John's face when he stops her. 'Are you a Christian, Mrs Connolly?'

'What a silly question, of course I am.'

'Where do you stand on forgiveness and second chances?'

'Well...'

'Your son deserved a second chance, didn't he? And he got one.'

'That was a misunderstanding.'

'Of course it was.'

Evelyn didn't know how this stranger knew about her son's brush with the law when he was accused of stealing money from the church offertory. Everyone had condemned him and when the money mysteriously reappeared in the vestry, everyone still assumed it was Michael. He protested his innocence but people muttered sentences like *there's no smoke without fire....* Eventually, someone gave him the benefit of the doubt. Years later, it emerged that a homeless

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man had snuck in and taken the money and only repaid it when he was able.

'Who are you?' Evelyn asked.

'The name's John Swinney and don't be alarmed by my modest appearance. I don't mean trouble — only to spread a little joy into the lives of those who need it on this special day. Your husband Eric has long since passed to the other side, where incidentally he's doing well and sends his love, and Michael is on the other side of the world. Eric would want you to have a nice time today wouldn't he?'

'You say that as though you knew Eric, but you don't.'

'How do you know? He sends his love to you. He watches over you every day.'

'I think you should leave now.'

'Eric says *hang the mistletoe in the alcove.*'

Another chill spun down Evelyn's back. That was a phrase she hadn't heard in years. Eric said it every year — always hang the mistletoe in the alcove. It's where they'd sneak, when Michael wasn't around, and enjoy a cuddle and kiss. Nobody apart from Eric knew about the alcove — nobody. 'When did he say that to you?' she asks, nervously.

'Come to the Collier's, Mrs Connolly and let your hair down. You'll be with nice people, and I promise you, it will be fun. You'll have a nice time.'

There was something about John that made Evelyn want to trust him. 'Just tell me when you heard Eric talk about mistletoe and I'll come.'

'Alright,' John said. 'Just now. He's standing right behind you.'

She spun around to look, but her hallway was empty, just like normal.

'Bring that nice pudding you made for the fete... that will go nicely with the turkey.' And with that, John left, to go in search of his next target. Evelyn watched him walk up the

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street, pulling his coat tight against the biting wind. She rubbed her eyes briefly and when she re-opened them, he was gone — nowhere to be seen. She stepped out of the house and down her short path, straining to see up the street but there was nothing to be seen. The strange thing was that there were no places for him to turn off. At least not so quickly.

Bill and Marjorie Swift were next. Their little cottage is set on a narrow street just off the village square. Old friends of Peter and Lilian, they've become somewhat distant of late. Bill used to work alongside Peter in the mine, back in the day, and they served in the trenches together. But Peter pushed Bill away straight after the pit disaster. Although he's never said as much, Bill suspects that Peter partly blames him for what happened to Frank. Times have been tough throughout the village these past few years and few have felt it quite as badly as Bill and Marjorie. He's on reduced hours and she can barely work because of her chest condition. It has been a struggle of late putting food on the table. Marjorie shuffles up the lane to Dowry Head Farm each day to help with the milking and that's about as much as she can manage. It just about keeps the wolves from the door.

This Christmas the choice facing Bill and Marjorie was a stark one — rent or presents for the children. They chose rent and just like Lilian had done with her kids, they sat their children down and explained the situation. The reaction was stoical disappointment, with the kids simply accepting that there was nothing they could do, and that it was happening all over. Their reaction hurt Marjorie so much. Kids, she felt, shouldn't have to accept the reality of poverty like that.

Marjorie has barely slept this past few weeks. With no prospect of the mine going back to full-time working any time soon, she has no idea where January's rent is going to come from. Her greatest fear is that the landlord will turf

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them out onto snowy streets.

She opened the door to John and he immediately saw the strained look on her face. 'You look like someone with the weight of the world on her shoulders,' he said.

'I'm sorry, what can I do for you?' She wiped her hands on her apron. 'You don't expect strangers to call on you on Christmas morning.'

'I've been getting that reaction a lot,' John said. 'I'm going around the village trying to find those people for whom this Christmas is a strain.'

'Well, you've found us,' Marjorie said, sadly.

'There are many other people than you, I'm afraid. I've come to invite you to Christmas dinner, and before you start making excuses, I know you have nothing else planned. A few of us are meeting at the Collier's Arms and we'd like you to come too.'

Marjorie was initially appalled at having a stranger come to her door to offer a free dinner. 'We might look poor, Mr...'

'Swinney, John Swinney.'

'But we're not at the point where we need to take handouts from strangers.'

'I'm not a stranger, really. I'm good friends with Amos Pratt — your granddad,' John told her in a matter of fact way.

'You mean you *were* friends with him. He's been dead twenty years.'

John corrected himself, 'Of course that's what I meant — I *was* good friends with him.'

'Funny, I don't recall ever seeing you around the village.'

'Oh, I've been here, I obviously have one of those faces that folk don't remember. Anyway, old Amos would have said not to *look a gift horse in the mouth and if someone comes to the door offering a free dinner, bite their hand off.*' He chose his words carefully, using exactly the turn of phrase Amos would have used, and he even altered his voice so that he

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sounded like the man. The result was another housewife standing on her doorstep with shivers running down her spine. For the briefest of moments, it was like her grandfather was standing right in front of her.

'If you knew Amos, then you'd know that he would also have said to offer to help.'

'Glad you said that,' John smiled and produced one of his turkeys. 'Shove that in your oven and bring it with you. We've plenty of space for us all to eat, we just don't have enough to cook the food.'

Next to receive a visit was Miriam Black, a sunny woman, always with a smile on her face, beloved across the village and especially by the local children. Miriam, or *Miss Mimm* as she's known, helps out at the primary school — playing piano in assembly and assisting some of the teachers. She always gives the appearance of a happy woman, but her smiles hide a terrible worry.

Her husband, Tony, is in hospital, and has been for the last three weeks. Doctors can't get to the bottom of his stomach pain and he's lost a lot of weight. He needs to stay in over Christmas, and Mimm is worried senseless. This will be the first Christmas she's spent completely alone. Her only son, Frank, lives in London and can't afford to come home for the holidays. Since Tony was admitted, Miriam has been commuting to and from the hospital daily, on the bus, and it's getting to her. There being no buses on Christmas Day, there's no way she can get to the hospital to visit, and she feels awful about leaving Tony alone in there. She has neither the energy nor the inclination to cook for herself. Instead, she had planned cold meat sandwiches and a day of reading and listening to the wireless, trying to take her mind off the all-pervading fear that this could be Tony's final Christmas and that he'll be spending it with nurses and not the people he loves.

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As expected, Miriam initially refused the invitation. 'I know what you're worried about,' John told her. 'You think this is it with Tony and you won't be there with him.'

'I'm worried that this might be his final Christmas, for sure.'

'Then let me tell you that it won't be. The doctors will work out what's wrong and they will treat the illness. He'll be back with you as right as rain in January.'

'How the hell can you possibly say that?' she looked angrily at John.

'Just a feeling I have,' John replied. 'But doesn't it make you feel better knowing that?'

'It would if it were true.'

'For the next few hours have faith that it is true. He wouldn't thank you for staying home being miserable. How does he phrase it? *Catch yourself on, girl — get on with it and keep smiling!*' John even mimics Tony's Northern Irish accent.

'Do you know him?' she asks, now discombobulated.

'No, but I feel as though I've known him years,' John says.

'I hate the thought of being somewhere without him, today of all days. Tony was always the life and soul of the party.'

'*Is the life and soul,*' John corrected her, then added, 'When you're feeling low, the best tonic is to let your hair down and have a good time. Have a dose of something good — that way you'll be stronger to be able to look after Tony.'

'I expect you're right.'

'*I am* and one day you'll look back at this conversation and you'll wonder how the heck I knew. So, how about it? You coming?'

'There's something odd about you. I think you know more than you're letting on.'

'Alright, I'll tell you what I think. They'll operate after Christmas, he'll come home and you'll spend the next month with him under your feet wishing he was back there. Just

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you watch.'

'I know your face from somewhere,' she tells him.

'You've probably seen me around.'

He handed over one of the turkeys and gave her details of where to come and when. Then, without a further word he left. Miriam wracked her brains trying to remember where she knows him from. She was sure his face was familiar from her childhood.

'Has Mr Swinney told you who's coming or how many, yet?' Lilian appears in the pub lounge, where Peter and the kids are hard at work decorating and laying the table. Peter is currently worried that in spite of having lots of tables around the pub, there aren't enough that match. He's trying to make one long table. Arthur is doing his bit by polishing the table tops. 'What are you doing?' Lilian asks, shaking her head.

'These tables don't match,' Peter moans. 'I'd never noticed before, but they're all different.'

'Are they the same height?' Lilian asks.

'More or less.'

'Then it's fine.'

'No,' Peter points to one he's dragged over. 'Look, this one's a darker wood than that one. It's going to look ridiculous.'

'Not when they're covered up,' Lilian says.

'What?'

'We're putting table cloths over them. Who's going to know if they match or not? And why's Arthur polishing something that's going to be covered up?'

'We don't have any table cloths,' Peter says.

'Cupboard, top of the stairs. There's loads up there. Arthur, go and get some.' Arthur is mightily relieved to get a break from polishing — a job he hates. She turns back to

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Peter. 'Why don't you and the kids start putting up the decorations?'

'Shame we don't have a tree,' Peter laments.

'We can do without. Remember, a few hours ago, we didn't even have Christmas.' She watches Peter work for a moment, noticing how well he's getting into the spirit. She hasn't seen him as enthusiastic as this, about anything, for a long time. She smiles to herself. 'Did you hear my question before?'

'Huh?'

'Do you know who's coming and how many, yet?'

'Erm, some... I know the Swifts are coming...'

'That's a relief,' Lilian exclaims. 'At least we know we can get along with them.'

'And Mrs Connolly.'

'Good, so it shouldn't be too bad, after all.'

'That's all I know so far, but *he's* still out there, prowling the village.'

'It would be good to know how many.' Arthur returns with the tablecloths. 'Good lad,' she smiles. 'Now I need you to go to the back cupboard, where we keep the crockery for the pub and *carefully* bring some plates in. Don't carry too many at once, though. I don't want any breakages. Got that?'

Without a word, Arthur goes. He now feels aggrieved at being given the dullest jobs, but he's too excited about having people around that he doesn't want to rock the boat and risk being sent to his room.

'Glad to see you're getting into the spirit of the occasion,' Lilian says to Peter.

'I think today isn't going to be so bad after all. Could turn out to be quite good. Mrs Connolly's been through the mill of late. It would be good to do something nice for her... and the Swifts, too. Maybe this is what Christmas should be all about.'

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John re-appears, a satisfied look on his face. 'I never realised there could be so much need in a place so small,' he says. 'I managed to get us quite a crowd.'

'How many?' Lilian asks. 'Will we have enough space?'

'There's plenty of space,' John replies.

'Will we have enough food?'

'I'm counting on there being too much,' John tells her. 'Later, I'd like to go and take some of the cold meat around to the elderly and housebound. Now, what about wine?'

'What about it?' Peter asks.

'Do we have any?'

'This is Oxley, mate. We're not exactly big on wine.' Peter pauses a second before adding, 'We're more beer drinkers around here. We wouldn't know one wine from another.'

John shakes his head. 'Didn't you try wine when you were in France?'

'In the war? Yes, I had some...'

'Didn't you like it?'

'Yes, but... I've not had any since.'

'What do you have with your Christmas turkey?'

'If I had anything to drink at all, it would most likely be ale.'

'Not this year, pal,' John says. 'We're going to do things right. We're having wine.'

'We don't have any,' Peter tells him. 'And even if the shops were open, we couldn't afford it.'

'Leave it with me,' John says, turning around and leaving the pub.

Lilian asks, 'Do you have any idea who that man is?'

'Until last night, I'd never even clapped eyes on him.'

'What do you think he's up to? He turns up out of the blue and starts throwing his weight around, inviting everyone for Christmas. Don't you think it a bit odd?'

'Very much. But, there's something about him that makes

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me want to do whatever he says.'

'You and me both, but we'd better keep a close eye on our silver ware,' Lilian suggests.

'I would — if we had any,' Peter shrugs.

'And where did those turkeys come from?'

'I know what you're thinking and I don't want the police turning up here. either' Peter rubs his chin. 'But another way to look at it is this. If the birds *are* stolen, then someone had too many in the first place. I don't have a problem nicking off the rich if it means our kids get a hot meal in their bellies. Anyway, now those turkeys are in the oven, not even Sherlock Holmes could trace them back to where they came from. I think we'll be safe from police coming snooping around.'

'I'd love to know who Swinney is,' Lilian says. 'You don't think he's visiting one of the families in the village do you?'

'If he was, why is he coming to dinner with us and not them?'

Mrs Connolly arrives, popping her head warily around the front door. 'Knock, knock!'

'Come in,' Lilian beckons her.

'Are you expecting me?' Evelyn asks, unsure of herself.

'We are, if you're here for our last minute Christmas dinner,' Lilian says.

'I wasn't sure... I thought that it might be a cruel joke.'

'Well if it is, we're all victims of it,' Lilian says. 'Would you like me to take that?' she points to the pudding dish.

'Oh yes, thank you,' Evelyn hands it over and takes off her coat, which she gives to Arthur to hang up. 'What's the idea behind all this?'

'It was Mr Swinney,' Lilian says. 'He turned up on our doorstep first thing this morning and talked us into it.'

'We didn't have much choice,' Peter adds. 'He was very persuasive.'

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'Well, whatever the circumstances, I think it's a wonderful idea and I'm glad you agreed to it,' Evelyn says, warmly. 'Only, if you decide to do it again, I'd appreciate a bit more notice and I don't especially want Mr Swinney on my doorstep again. It was most disconcerting.'

'You should have been here. He was banging on the door like someone possessed long before it became light. I'm surprised he didn't wake you up he was that loud,' Lilian comments.

'And he kept hiding, too,' Peter adds.

'Hiding?'

'Each time I went to the window to see who was at the door, he was nowhere to be seen. I thought it was kids playing a prank. He's lucky he didn't get our Arthur's cricket bat around his head.'

'Who else is coming?' Evelyn asks.

'We were told to leave the guest list up to him,' Lilian tells her.

'And you're alright with that?'

'Depends who he brings,' Peter adds. 'So long as *you know who* doesn't come, I'll be fine.'

'And what will you do if he *does* come?' Evelyn asks. The *you-know-who* they're referring to is David Smith.

'Don't worry, I won't make a scene.'

'Glad to hear it.'

'I'll just kick the bugger out.'

'I have to say, this is all rather disconcerting,' Evelyn says. 'I didn't know what to make of Mr Swinney when he came round, but he was very persuasive. You don't suppose he's up to no good do you?' Evelyn lowers her voice.

'In what way?'

'A number of us will be out of the house at the same time. You don't suppose he's planning to come and rob us do you — or worse?' She pales at the thought. 'He does look very

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shifty.'

'Why would he go to the trouble of getting four large turkeys if he wanted to rob us?' Lilian asks.

Peter adds, 'Yes, and according to him, he's inviting the lonely, vulnerable and poorest in the village. He won't get far robbing the last lot.'

'Or me, come to think of it,' Evelyn adds. 'I'm wearing all my jewellery that's got any value.'

'Just in case,' Peter says, 'you have locked up your house?'

'I always do.'

'Then you'll be fine. How about a nice cup of tea to take your mind off it? Arthur, go and make us all a brew.'

Arthur throws his arms up in the air. 'Why do I have to do all the work around here?' he demands.

'I'll give you a thick ear in a minute, young man,' Lilian snaps. 'You want to talk about work... *you* cook the bloody meal.'

'Nah, you're alright,' Arthur slouches off to the kitchen. 'Sugar, Mrs Connolly?'

'One please. Let me come to the kitchen to lend you a hand. You know what they say about many hands and light work.'

They leave Peter to finish putting up the decorations with the rest of his children — old decorations they found in a box in one of the storerooms, coloured paper chains and tinsel. The lengths of paper chains are perfect for stringing across the ceiling, or at least they would be if Peter could reach whilst precariously balancing on a bar stool. The kids brace themselves for the spectacle of their father falling off, which they would find highly hilarious, but remarkably he stays balanced.

'It's not much, but it'll do,' Peter comments, admiring his handy work, and already starting to feel quite festive. He's pleased Mrs Connolly has come. He's had a soft spot for her

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since he was a small boy and she used to give him sweets in exchange for scrubbing her doorstep.

By the time Bill Swift arrives, the decorations are all up and the kids are setting the places on the long table. Bill is none too convinced about the idea. His wife had sent him over to find out if there really was a meal. She didn't want to leave the house unattended — just in case...

'It is happening, then?' Bill asks.

'Aye — such as it is,' Peter says.

'We've a turkey cooking, but I still had doubts about whether it was all a hoax. At least we'd have had a whole turkey to eat, though, I said.'

'I'm afraid you'll have to share it with us, instead.'

'How many of us are there?'

'Don't know — a dozen maybe.'

'It's not that big a turkey...' Bill points out.

'Yours isn't the only one. We've one cooking here and there's another two being roasted somewhere else in Oxley. I think we'll have more than enough.'

Bill looks around at the decorations. 'You've been busy. I know this is a pub, but will there be anything to drink at this do, or do you want me to bring anything with me? I might have a few bottles of home brew left over from when I had enough money to make the stuff.'

Peter shakes his head, 'Things aren't so desperate that we'd need to break into your home brew — I've tasted it, remember. I'd like to be conscious on Boxing Day if it's all the same to you... Don't worry about the booze. I think we'll be alright.'

Bill looks worried. 'Thing is, I can't afford to be buying beer from you, Peter — we've had to tighten our belts and booze is one of the things I've had to kick into touch.'

'Please don't worry about it. We'll sort it out.'

'Thanks, Peter — you're a pal.'

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Peter smiles but in his mind he wonders *if I'm that much of a pal, how come you don't ever come in this pub?* But he doesn't want to make a scene. Instead, he graciously shows Bill the door. 'See you in a couple of hours.'

John returns, with his hessian sack over his shoulder, and full again. 'You'll never guess what I've got,' he beams, placing the sack very carefully on the floor. 'Wine!' he announces with a flourish, taking each bottle out one by one and standing them up on a table next to him. He looks pleased with himself.

Peter, on the other hand, looks worried. 'Where did you get that lot?'

'I said I'd sort it and I have. This is decent stuff too — French, and a good vintage.'

'There's no way you got that lot from the village. Nobody around here has a stash of wine like that, except for the Forrester's up at the main house. Please tell me this lot isn't stolen...'

'Relax!' John replies, calmly. 'Nothing's stolen.'

'Then where did you get it?'

'I have my sources, is all you need to know.' He taps the side of his nose with his index finger. 'You don't need to worry about where it came from.'

'I won't have stolen goods in my pub,' Peter fumes.

'And you don't — at least not as far as I'm concerned.'

One by one, the guests arrive. Lilian moves gracefully around them, acting like the perfect hostess, making sure they're well looked after. 'Is this everybody?' she asks, trying to find John. But he's nowhere to be seen.

Unnoticed, he has slipped out to go and find the final guests who haven't turned up despite the agreed time having

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come and gone. It's the Smith family — the ones Peter Jepson is keen stay away. John knocks on their door and patiently waits for the answer. He's shown into the back parlour, where David is pacing around nervously, unsure what to do.

'Why are you still here?' John asks. 'Everyone's waiting.'

'I don't like it,' David replies. 'Going to the Collier's — and seeing *him*.'

'I don't understand,' John says. 'It's just dinner.'

'But it isn't, though, is it? It's dinner with the Jepsons.'

'I don't see what the problem is. It's also dinner with a lot of other folk.'

'Is Jepson the host?'

'Him and me, yes.'

'And he's alright with us coming?'

'Aye,' John replies, but he doesn't sound too convincing.

In fact, the Jepsons don't know.

'I can tell by your tone that he isn't.'

'It will all be fine, David. Trust me.'

'I don't even know you,' David says. 'That's it, we're not going.' As he speaks his eyes make contact with his kids, all of whom have looks of utter disappointment at the thought of missing out on Christmas.

'Aw, come on, Dad,' one says.

'It's too risky,' David adds. 'Nobody wants trouble, me least of all.'

'There won't be any,' John tells him. 'Anyway, don't you think it high time the two of you buried the hatchet and went back to being friends?'

'It's not me you want to be asking that to,' David says. 'I'm not the one keeping this going.'

'It takes two to tango, David.'

'Jepson *doesn't* know we're coming, does he?' David stops pacing around.

'It'll be fine,' John shrugs.

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'I knew it!' David throws his arms in the air. 'You think I'm just going to walk in there and bury the hatchet?'

'Someone has to make the first move,' John says.

'When were you going to tell me?'

'Tell you what? It's all going to be alright — trust me.'

'You keep saying that, but how can I? You know what this row is all about, don't you?'

'He blames you for his brother's death.'

'That's right.'

'But you didn't do it,' John says.

'I know.'

'The truth always wins out in the end.'

'Maybe, but a lot has been said — mostly by him — and none of it's soon undone.' David rolls his eyes and throws his arms into the air. 'I knew this was too good to be true. How can anyone be so cruel, and to kids on Christmas Day?'

'Nobody's being cruel,' John says.

'All that effort we put into cooking that bloody turkey and for what?'

'All this can work out so everyone's happy, but you have to swallow your pride and come with me.'

'This isn't about pride,' David tells him.

'Alright, so Peter doesn't know you're coming, and he might well react badly, but I can handle him. Do it for the kids. He's not going to throw you out at Christmas.... Nobody's going to get hurt.'

'That's exactly the sort of thing Peter Jepson *would* do.'

'He won't cause trouble in front of guests. And there will be enough other people around to distract both of you from each other.'

'Please Dad,' his young son pleads. 'We want dinner.'

David looks hard at his brood, and his wife, Rose, who all want to go. Rose has been trying for years to find a way to make peace. She had even met with Lilian a time or two.

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She'd stop at nothing to end the feud.

'Alright,' David gives in. 'Have it your way. But, the slightest sign of trouble and we're leaving and bringing the turkey with us.'

'Technically, the turkey's mine,' John points out.

'I don't care. If there's trouble between Jepson and me, I'm blaming you and then I'm taking the food to feed my family.'

'Fair enough.'

Reluctantly, David follows John across the village, carrying the cooked turkey in a large dish covered with a tea towel. His family follow on behind, the kids excited but Rose feeling frightened about what might await them.

They pause at the pub entrance.

David is having second thoughts. 'I can't do it,' he says, panting heavily.

'Do you want to go back home, love?' Rose asks.

'Aye,' David replies.

'Give Mr Swinney the food and we'll go. It's no good you feeling like this.'

'No, no, no,' John replies. 'We have an agreement. You're coming inside.' His tone changes into a more serious one. 'You owe it to yourself and to your family.'

'Alright, have it your way,' David says. 'I'll come in, but only to drop the food off. You lot wait here,' he says to the family. 'I'll be back out in a minute.'

'No, we'll come with you,' Rose says.

'There'll be trouble,' David is keen to keep his family out.

'Then we'll face it together.' She pinches his arm. 'Moral support!'

From inside the pub, they hear the sound of laughter and music from an old gramophone. 'Sounds like they're having fun,' John comments.

'There haven't been noises like that coming out of this pub in years,' David comments. 'Not since Jepson took over, the

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miserable old goat.'

John leads them inside. All the guests are there and the whole place is transformed. It's so completely different to earlier. Even Peter has a smile on his face. He's starting to enjoy the role of genial host — and what it feels like to bring joy to people. It's something he's long since forgotten.

His smile disappears, however, when he looks up from putting out the last of the wine glasses and sees his worst nightmare walk in through the door — David Smith.

'What the hell are you doing here?' Peter growls.

David stops in his tracks. 'Told you,' he mutters to John.

Peter turns to John, his face stern. 'What's *he* doing here?'

'I invited him,' John replies.

'Then *un*-invite him,' Peter demands.

'No.'

'That man isn't welcome here,' Peter states.

'I thought this was meant to be a *public* house,' John says.

'Today this is *my* house. The pub's closed and I want him out.'

David doesn't want trouble. He steps forward to put the dish on a table. 'I told you I wouldn't be welcome. So, here's the food. Bring the dish back tomorrow.'

'Wait,' John stops him.

'What's under that towel?' Peter asks, stepping forward.

John answers, 'The Smith family very kindly roasted a turkey for us, which is very decent of them.'

'Aye, well he can take it back with him. We have plenty and I won't touch anything they've cooked.'

'Peter!' Lilian snaps.

'Well, they could have done anything to that turkey,' Peter says.

'What a terrible thing to say,' Lilian steps forward.

'We wouldn't be the first people he's killed,' Peter states as David squares up to him.

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'You take that back,' David hisses.

'Touched a nerve did I?'

John steps in between them. 'With respect to you, Peter, I'm disappointed in you. I brought all the food for this feast and the least you could do is show me some gratitude and that includes respecting the guests I invited. You wouldn't have this dinner if it weren't for me. The Smith family are *my* guests. You throw them out and you throw me out. Is that what you want?'

'Of course, I'm grateful to you Mr Swinney...'

Lilian also steps in. 'Peter, Mr Swinney is right — David and Rose are his guests and the least we can do is to respect that. David, you're welcome,' she tells him. 'Peter?' She glares at her husband, daring him to contradict her in front of guests.

'Just so long as I don't have to speak to him, or even look at him.'

'Fine with me,' John beams. 'David?'

'Alright we'll stay.'

'Great! Then we should get this party started,' John announces.

The Smith family shuffle in. John notices a snatched, furtive, exchange of glances between Marian Smith and Arthur Jepson — the flash of a smile from Arthur, matched with a wink from Marian. They both look anxiously around, keen to make sure nobody saw them. John edges towards them, as they turn their backs on one another. 'I saw that,' he whispers.

'What?' Arthur asks.

'Are you two *Romeo and Juliet*?'

'Shakespeare?' Marian asks. 'I don't know what you mean.'

John grins and starts to recite, '*Two households, both alike in dignity, In fair Verona, where we lay our scene, From ancient*

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*grudge break to new mutiny, Where civil blood makes civil hands unclean.'*

'Huh?' Arthur says.

'Read it and then you'd know.'

Miriam grabs John by the arm and drags him to one side. 'You're a brave man,' she says. 'Or an idiot.'

'I don't understand.'

'You've taken your life into your own hands bringing those two together,' she points to Peter and David.

'They're not together — yet.'

'You think you'll manage that?'

'It's worth a try, no?'

'Let's just say that the last time they were in the same place was at the village fete a few years ago and they came to blows. Mind you, Peter had been drinking that day. He said some terrible things to David. Sergeant Morton had to pull them apart. He threatened to arrest Peter. Those two used to be as thick as thieves — inseparable. They did everything together. They even went off to war together. A whole group of friends went... They didn't come back together, though. Peter was wounded and came home first — hasn't been the same since. That terrible war did awful things to young men.'

'I thought it had something to do with the mine,' John says.

'Peter had to stop working down the pit and he ended up taking over the pub. When he came home, David went back to mining coal alongside Peter's brother Frank. It was all reasonably alright until Christmas nineteen twenty-nine. That was the year of the great disaster. The roof came down on some of the miners. Frank was one of those trapped and killed, but David got out. Peter blames David for Frank's death. He says David saved his own skin and left Frank and the others to die. Of course nobody other than David knows what really happened down there, and he won't speak of it.'

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'Do you think he could have done that?'

'I've known David all his life, and a more gentle soul you'll struggle to meet,' she shrugs. 'I don't think he'd leave anyone down there. Anyway, it doesn't matter what I think. It's Peter you'd have to convince and he's as stubborn as a mule. He'll punch your lights out before admitting that David might be innocent. You'll never reconcile the two of them. If that's what you're up to, nice try, but not possible. Too many hurtful words have been said.'

John places his hand on Miriam's shoulder as he admits defeat, 'Some things are too difficult even for the likes of me. Maybe we should be content in just having them in the same room without a fight breaking out.'

'Aye, well we'll see about that at the end of the party,' Miriam says.

'They haven't come to blows yet.'

'There's time yet. And a word of warning, their kids don't get on either. This could be a tinderbox. Keep everyone apart.'

'Romeo and Juliet again,' John mutters.

'Pardon?'

'Nothing, I'm just ruminating.'

John watches the dynamics in the room. The Jepsens keep themselves busy going between the kitchen and the pub, setting everything up. The Smiths remain close by the door and the other guests mingle between them, some helping Lilian.

'I'm looking forward to this,' John rubs his hands.

Peter picks up a glass and gently taps a spoon against it to attract everyone's attention. 'Ladies and gentlemen, a very merry Christmas to you all. A warm welcome to the Collier's. We're most grateful to Mr Swinney for bringing us together and providing us with this lovely food and we're almost ready. Lilian has made a lovely winter soup by way of a

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starter, which we'll serve in a moment.'

There are murmurs of approval from the guests. David, though, keeps silent.

Dinner is going well — the first two courses have gone down a treat and Lilian sits back feeling satisfied. Considering this was a last-minute, seat-of-the-pants, event everyone seems to have loved the food. Each plate had been returned empty.

They decide to have a pause, to let the meal digest. Bill, already slightly worse for wear from the wine, gathers the kids in a circle and organises party games. It takes him back to when he was a small child and the games his uncle used to have him, his brother and cousins play. The wine is going down well with the adults, and they're all feeling merry. There's a plentiful supply of it, too, it just seems to keep on coming.

Arthur doesn't want to play games with the other children, 'I'm too old for this,' he moans.

'Nonsense,' Lilian tells him. 'You're never too old for party games. Go and join in.' In truth, he's warily eyeing up the Smith boys, from whom he expects trouble. He doesn't want to be anywhere near when it kicks off, as it inevitably will. Lilian, however, pushes him towards the other kids. 'Just join in, there's a good boy,' she tells him.

'Before you start, Bill,' John gets up to his feet. 'I'd like to say a word?'

'Be my guest,' Bill answers.

'These are dark and trying times,' John starts. 'Our communities are starved of money and families all over can't seem to make ends meet. I've seen it with my own eyes and not just here in Oxley. Time was, though, that pit used to keep this and three neighbouring villages going.'

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'Here! Here!' Peter chips in.

'But not any more. Short time working was something we'd never heard of back in the day but now it's normal. We never needed to worry about losing shifts. Now folk aren't just frightened about a shift here or there — they're frightened about losing their jobs and their homes. How many families have had to move away to find work in the cities? Now, I don't want this afternoon to get all serious, but it seems to me that the best way through this mess is for us all to stick together. *They* want to divide us,' he points outside as though the bosses were out there. 'But we can't let them. There's a hell of a lot more that binds us together than separates us.'

'True!' Bill chimes in.

'Here we are, Christmas nineteen thirty-seven, and I fear there are even darker days to come that will bring challenges, worse than anything we've faced before. Before this decade is done, each of us in this room will be tested beyond anything we've ever known.'

'What do you mean, John?' Bill calls out.

But John doesn't answer directly. Instead, he continues, 'The only way through will be to stick together and strengthen those things that we have in common. This is a time to help each other out. This is a time to end our differences and forge the bonds of brother and sisterhood.'

'Not sure what that means...' Peter says, '...but hear, hear!'

John glances at him before continuing. 'Too many people in Oxley are staring at a bleak Christmas, of poverty or loneliness. I decided to do my bit to help some — you — but there's more out there who need your help — people on their own, struggling with demons, skint, nearly skint, ill, or just worried about what the future has in store for them. Today is Christmas and they'll feel it even more. But they'll still feel it tomorrow and the day after. I helped you... now I ask you to

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help your neighbours.'

Evelyn raises her glass, 'Thank you John.'

'No, thank *you* — each of you. You've all contributed something to this afternoon — you cooked the food, you brought pudding, but most of all you brought yourselves. We've had a cracking afternoon and that just goes to show what can be achieved when we come together to a common goal.'

'I'll drink to that,' Bill says, swaying.

'But there's still one thing that's missing...,' John adds.

'Nah, there's nowt missing,' Lilian contradicts him. 'We've all had plenty.'

'Presents,' John announces with a flourish. 'It's not Christmas without presents.'

Peter stands up, 'John, there isn't the money for presents. I think that's why we're all here.'

'There might have been if you hadn't put everything on a horse,' David mutters, earning him a sharp dig from Rose.

'I couldn't let the day pass without some gifts,' John says. 'It's not much, but they're from the heart.' He points to the window where two previously unseen hessian sacks are laid out.

'No, come on, this is too much,' Peter says. 'The food's one thing, but presents...'

'There's something for everyone,' John says. 'Dig in.'

Peter steps over to the sacks, which are brimming with beautifully wrapped gifts. He pulls each out in turn, announcing the name on the label and passing it to Arthur to hand out. Everyone opens their gift, their eyes wide with delight. Each seems to hit the mark with its recipient. 'How could you possibly have known?' Lilian wonders, as she unwraps her new knitted gloves.

'Call it intuition,' John beams and then adds, 'Oh and Mrs Black, there's one in there for your husband, too. We

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wouldn't want him to feel left out!

The gifts handed out, Bill starts the games, giving the adults a few moments to relax. John sidles over to Peter and pulls out a stool to sit down. 'Enjoying yourself?' he asks.

'It's lovely — thanks.'

'Can I ask you a question?'

'Go on...'

'What's the story between you and David?'

'Let's not spoil a perfectly nice afternoon.'

'Why?'

'Too raw, I'm afraid.'

'I thought the two of you were old friends,' John says.

'That was a *very* long time ago.'

'You think he had something to do with Frank's death.'

'I don't *think*, I *know*, but if you don't mind, I think we should change the subject.'

Peter is about to stand up and walk away when John grabs him and stops him. 'I'm going to ask David to come and join us.'

'Don't! I'm warning you, I want nothing to do with that man.'

'The two of you need to talk,' John insists, his eyes wide.

'Like hell...'

'Didn't I just buy you both dinner? You owe me,' John says. Then, without waiting for an answer, he signals for David to come over and sit on a stool next to them. 'It's time you two had a talk.'

Neither Peter nor David are willing to talk. They fold their arms defiantly. So, with nothing forthcoming, John speaks up. 'Alright then, I'll start. I'll tell you how I see it.'

'Let's not spoil a nice afternoon...'

Peter starts.

'Peter, you seem to think that somehow David was involved in Frank's death...' John says, ignoring Peter.

'I don't *think* it. I *know* it.'

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'You *know* nothing,' David cuts in, sharply. 'You weren't even there.'

'You've never denied it,' Peter snaps. 'Eight years you've had to set the record straight...'

'And if I'd tried, would you have listened?' David asks. 'You've never been interested in my side of the story.'

'Alright then... now's your chance — tell me!' Peter demands.

'You really want to hear it?' David asks.

'I'm all ears.'

John sits back and lets David have the floor.

'This is very hard for me to talk about,' David says.

'The truth usually is,' Peter growls, accusingly.

'Let him talk,' John cuts in as Peter sits back and throws his arms in the air, despairingly.

'We'd been digging out a new seam... been at it for weeks,' David begins after a moment's pause to collect his thoughts. 'Mr Barstow had ordered that the new chamber needed to be ready for the new year. You know what it's like when you're digging out a new chamber.' He looks for a reaction from Peter, but there's nothing, only a stoney face. 'Barstow's the one you should be having a go at.'

'What could it possibly have to do with him? He wasn't there either — he's the owner.'

'Barstow's the one who insisted we went faster and faster in digging out the new chamber. We didn't have time to properly shore up the walls and ceiling. We kept warning him it was dangerous, but he wouldn't listen. He said it was safe enough to keep going and that we weren't to worry as the shoring would be done right behind us. But it wasn't. He didn't give a damn about us. All he cares about is money. On the day it happened, there were four of us working in the new chamber — including Frank. At the exact moment the roof caved in, I was working at the entrance to the chamber.'

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The ceiling didn't come down much at first — just some rubble, like we're used to seeing. It was enough to make us stop for a second, but we thought it was safe so we carried on. What happened next... it was all over before I even realised what had happened. The whole thing just came down right in front of me. It was lucky for me that I was at the entrance or else I would have been buried in it, too.'

'So you spun on your heels and got the hell out,' Peter interrupts.

'It took a minute for me to come to my senses, because it knocked me off my feet and into the wall behind me. I didn't know it then, but there was another collapse further back, between me and the shaft. We were all trapped, but I didn't know that. All I could think about were the three miners under that rubble. I started digging, but there was so much coal to shift and the air was thick with dust. I couldn't breathe, and it was impossible to see. I knew I had to keep going because they were trapped. I don't know how long I kept digging, but because I couldn't breathe it wasn't long before I started to feel exhausted. I heard digging from behind, and I called out to get some help. It was only then when I realised that they were digging to reach me and that I was cut off too. Some lads broke through to me and started calling for me to get out. I told them I had to reach the others but they told me there was no time... that the whole lower level was unstable and we had to get out fast. I tried telling them we had to get the others out, but someone just grabbed me and pulled me away.'

Peter listens intently.

David continues, 'The second we reached the shaft, the whole thing went. We only just got out with our lives. Seconds later the whole lower level was gone.'

'I don't believe a word of that,' Peter says. 'The way I heard it was as soon as it collapsed, you legged it. They said

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that Frank called out to you. He was trapped under a load of coal, but you ignored him. You only wanted to save yourself. They said you were nothing but a coward. You've had eight years to come up with that story and that's the best you could think of. Absolute rubbish.'

Tears are rolling down David's face and he wipes them away with a handkerchief. 'Who told you that?' he sniffs.

'Ron Mason. He saw you with his own eyes, and I trust his word.'

'Ron Mason?'

'Aye.'

'He wasn't there, either.'

'How convenient for you to say that! I've known Ron all my life and I'd trust his word over yours any day of the week.'

'Check the records at the office if you want. Ron wasn't there. As I remember it, he had an accident that morning, hurt his leg and had to go off.'

'Then why would he say all that?'

'Did you know that Ron owed me money?'

'No.'

'I lent him some money and he didn't repay it. Every time I asked for it, he made up an excuse. Then he started bad-mouthing me around the lads. I think he was just after getting out of paying me back.'

Bill steps over to take a swig of his drink, and listens into the discussion. 'It's true,' he chips in. 'About Ron Mason. I was the one who took him up top to get his leg fixed. He never went back on shift that day.'

'He must have got his story from someone else, then,' Peter suggests.

'If he did,' Bill continues, 'he got it wrong.'

'How would you know?' Peter demand.

'I was one of those who went in to rescue the lads. We'd

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been digging out a different cavern when it happened. I was the one who broke through and found David trying to reach Frank. It was all true.'

David turns to face Bill, 'You were there?' he asks, quizzically. His memory of his own rescue is still hazy, even after all these years.

'I was the one who pulled you out, David. Don't you remember?'

'It was dark.'

'Well, I did. Peter, when that roof collapsed, tons of rubble came down on those lads. They wouldn't have stood a chance. When we reached David, he was digging like a man possessed, desperately trying to shift hundreds of tons of rock to get to them. I'm sorry Peter, but there was nothing he could have done. It would have needed dozens of men to shift the rock to get them out.'

'How many of you dug through to David?' Peter asks.

'Six.'

'*You* could have dug our Frank out. Six of you could have shifted enough to get through,' Peter says.

'We'd have needed dozens of lads and you're forgetting that the whole lower mine was unstable. We could feel it shaking and knew we only had minutes to get out. Chances are those lads were already dead.'

'You don't *know* they were dead,' Peter says.

'Hundreds of tons fell on top of them. Take it from me, they were dead.'

John takes a deep breath. 'What an awful story. But it doesn't sound much like David was trying saving his own skin.'

David continues, 'It was only by the grace of God that I was working at the cavern entrance. A few minutes earlier and I was hammering away next to Frank. If the roof had come in then, I'd be dead myself.'

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It's difficult for Peter to hear. 'I still don't believe you,' he says after a moment.

'You know what I think? You *want* someone to blame,' John suggests. 'I understand that. It helps you to make sense of it. But, the collapse was an accident. David didn't cause it, and it sounds as though he didn't turn his back on his mates.'

'And you know that for sure do you?'

'About as much as you know. You got your story from a man who wasn't there, where we just heard from someone who was.'

'This is very hard,' Peter says, defensively. He looks at Bill. 'You're absolutely certain that's what happened? You could be just saying it to...'

'Why would I make it up?' Bill asks.

'Swear it!' Peter demands.

'What?'

'Swear it on your kids' lives — that it happened just as Smith said it did.'

'I swear!'

Peter looks uneasily across at Lilian, the awful realisation dawning on him that all these years he's been falsely accusing his friend. He speaks quietly. 'Losing your brother is the hardest thing. None of you knows what that's like.'

David cuts in, 'One of the lads killed was my cousin, and we were close. Not like brothers, but not far off. That day, I lost him and a very good mate in Frank.'

Peter says, 'I think a lot about us all in that trench. The thing I can't get out of my mind is that nothing the Germans threw at him could stop our Frank. In the end it was a pile of coal that did for him.'

'I loved Frank like a brother, too,' David says. 'Remember all that we used to get up to as kids?'

'Like it was yesterday,' Peter's eyes mist up at the thought.

'After all we went through, how could you even think that

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I'd leave him to die to save my own bacon? I didn't do it in France, why would I do it in Oxley?'

Peter has no answer for that. He stares at the floor and wipes away a tear. After a moment, he softly says, 'There's no easy way to say this. It looks like I was wrong.'

David looks hard at him, 'Is that all you have to say?'

'What do you want me to say?'

'Sorry would be a good start,' David replies. 'Do you have any idea what it's like to be accused of killing your best friend's brother?'

'I never accused you of that,' Peter says, sharply.

'As good as... you told everyone I left him to die. You might as well have told them that I caused the ceiling to come in as well.'

'That's not fair.'

'No, Peter, how you treated me this past few years... that's not fair.'

'He's right,' John interjects quietly.

'I'm sorry!' Peter says. 'There, I said it. Happy?'

John glances at David. 'Well?'

'You think it's that easy? I've spent the last eight years with the whole village looking at me wondering if it was true... even those who knew the truth, some of them were thinking *there's no smoke without fire*, and others kept quiet wanting to stay out of it. I've been made to feel like an outsider in my own village when all I tried to do was dig those lads out. And you think *sorry* is enough?'

'It's all I've got,' Peter says.

John nods his head and speaks softly to David. 'You have to start somewhere. I think *sorry* is as good a place as any. You can build on that — both of you.' He turns back to Peter. 'And now you've exorcised that demon, you can finally start to rebuild your life.'

'I think his demons are about more than just this one

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thing,' Lilian interjects. 'Peter's troubles are a lot deeper.'

John nods. 'I know, but we have to start somewhere. Peter, I guess that right now you're feeling worse than you've felt in a long time.'

'You could say that,' Peter agrees.

'You have to hit the bottom before you can come back up — and this is it, but it passes. You feel bad right now, but when you go to bed tonight, you'll feel a whole lot better and tomorrow you'll feel even better. And in a couple of days, you and David will sit down and have a few drinks together and you'll talk about the old times like old friends... and soon all the ill words you've spoken will fade into the mist of time.'

'You promise,' Peter wipes his eyes again.

'I do.' He turns back to David. 'I know you hurt right now, but it's important that you heed this too. You can't change what happened, because it's in the past but you can shape the future. If you want to spend the rest of your life bitter about what Peter said to you, go ahead. But if you want a brighter future then extend your hand to Peter, shake his and accept his apology.'

'Do it for the sake of the kids,' Rose steps in.

John glances at Arthur, who has his eyes on Marian. John grins. 'Yes, do it for the kids.'

'I don't think we have much choice,' Peter stands up and holds out his hand to David, who pauses to think. There's an interminable wait while he decides before grabbing Peter's hand furiously and shaking it.

John watches as two old friends cement old bonds and consign the past to where it belongs. 'Job done!' he smiles.

'You old devil!' Lilian whispers to him. 'You had this planned all along, didn't you?'

John winks. 'Let's just say, I like to bring the spirit of Christmas alive when I can.'

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'We've a lot of ground to make up,' Peter says, trying to hold back his emotions. It's all getting too much for him.

'I never would have expected this...' David struggles to get his words out. It's a massive weight off his mind, one less thing to cause him stress.

Peter turns to John, 'I don't know how you managed this, but thank God you did...' he blurts, before realising that John isn't there. 'Where did he go?' he asks.

'The toilet, maybe?' Evelyn suggests.

They wait, but John doesn't return. 'Go and see if anything's happened to him,' Peter tells Arthur, who runs towards the lavatories.

Moments later, he comes back. 'I've been all over. He's nowhere to be seen,' he shrugs.

'What about outside?' Peter asks.

'No-one's been out,' Bill reports. 'There's an icy wind blowing out there and I'd have noticed if the door opened. It hasn't.'

'Then he must be inside the pub,' Peter throws his arms up. 'Arthur, go and look upstairs, though I don't know what he'd be doing up there.'

Arthur rolls his eyes, 'Me again!'

'Yes, you again,' Lilian makes to clip him around the ear, but Arthur runs off, upstairs. They hear him stomping heavily around, padding from room to room.

He bounds down the stairs again, shrugging. 'No sign.'

'How odd!' Peter exclaims. 'He can't have just disappeared!'

Arthur feels drawn to the hearth, and the painting hung on the wall. The blood drains from his face, 'Dad, come and look at this,' he says.

'What is it, son? You look like you've seen a ghost.'

Arthur just points at the picture. 'Isn't that Mr Swinney?' he asks.

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Peter steps over and takes a closer look. In all the years he's run the pub, he's never paid that painting much attention. 'It does bear a striking resemblance,' he admits. His gaze is drawn to the inscription built into the frame. 'It says this fellow's name is John Sweeney. Our chap was Swinney, wasn't he?'

David steps up. 'Does look like him, though.' He points to the dates under the name. 'It says here that Sweeney died in nineteen ten... nah, couldn't have been...!'

### EPILOGUE

John Swinney, or Sweeney, was never seen again in Oxley after that day. My father, Arthur Jepson, used to tell us that story every Christmas Eve without fail. Our mother, Marian (nee Smith) always backed him up. Older members of my family who claimed to have been there all swore blind that Swinney was there, and that he was the kindest man they ever met.

Sadly, all the players in the story, Arthur and Marian included, have passed on. I tell the story to my kids at Christmas, now that they're old enough to understand. Always on Christmas Eve, just like dad used to.

This year was bitter sweet for us. Dad passed in the Spring and his dying wish was that we took his ashes back to Oxley and scatter them by the river bank. We visited the Collier's Arms which, these days, is a gastro pub. To my shock, the painting of John Sweeney is still hanging over the hearth. The manager told me it was in the deeds that it shouldn't be moved.

A far greater shock happened just as we took the lid off the urn. My son Matt tugged my sleeve and pointed to a man

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standing on the edge of our group, his overcoat fastened by a string. He looked directly at me, his deep green eyes unblinking. He smiled gently and uttered a soft incantation as I scattered dad's ashes and they were picked up by the wind. When I turned back to face him, he was gone. To the day I die, I will swear that it was John Swinney.