

The Grumph who Spiked Christmas

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"Jingle bells, jingle bells, jingle all the way. Oh what fun it is to ride in a one horse open sleigh. Oh, jingle bells, jingle bells, jingle all the way..."

The woman serving coffee didn't smile. Probably hadn't smiled for twenty years. She had a face that could suck lemons through a vinegar bottle, and still leave room for a tart comment, the lines of her misery ingrained deep in skin that was as dry as parchment. She should have been the exception, but looking round the cafeteria, he could see she was not. Face after face trudged through the day as if wading through treacle, not one of them enjoying the twinkling lights or melodic tones of the festive season.

Russ felt his natural enthusiasm being pulled like a decaying tooth, the pliers gripping tight as it was drawn bleeding from his gums. It was two days to Christmas, but despite Main Street's colourful window displays, mock Victoriana, and decorative lights, the atmosphere inside the supermarket coffee shop was icy beyond belief. Cold as a witch's tit. He wished he was back home in the bosom of his family, preparing for the big day with his wife, and hiding the presents from their daughter.

Voices whispered over his shoulder. Snatches of overheard conversation. "...and she was so over-the-top, all gushy gushy, as if she was the world's best grand-daughter. I know what *she's* after..." Then, from across the aisle, "...because I tried every shop in town. Do you know, there wasn't a single card worth looking at. Horrible pictures, all of them." There was enough negative energy here to fill a suitcase.

Or a bag of shopping. The carrier bag was caught in the crossfire, winged by a ricochet, and it leaned over in a slow dance of death. It spilled its contents across the floor, raising an arched eyebrow from the wicked witch of the north behind the counter, who had just frozen another customer with her patented ice machine stare. A family bag of Walker's Ready Salted Crisps crunched loudly, and a jar of Hellmann's Mayonnaise rolled towards the front door. Russ was dying to follow it. What had become of the traditional bonhomie? That warm feeling everyone was supposed to have at this time of year, when giving was the order of the day, and receiving a pleasant surprise? What had happened to the spirit of Christmas?

Crash. The jar of mayonnaise smashed against the door, and the noise sparked him into action. He quickly refilled the carrier bag, stuffing the crisps haphazardly in the top, and made a dash for the door. Icy hooks tried to snag him with their barbed stares, old men and single mothers alike, but he was too quick. Enough was enough. With a sidelong glance at the squishy mass of mayonnaise on the doorstep, he was out and free, blissfully unaware that the night would bring darker creatures than the living dead at Morrison's.

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A pickled burp woke Russ, and for a moment he thought he'd dropped into Santa's grotto. He couldn't recognise where he was until his eyes adjusted to the gloom. The living room was dark except for the Christmas tree lights, which painted the walls with reds, and greens, and yellows. Shards of light glinted off dangling baubles, and drifts of tinsel moved silently in the night. The fire was on full, sapping his energy.

He burped again. *God love a duck. If I survive this Christmas I swear I'll never eat a pickled onion again.* The sweet taste resurfaced like the living dead, swimming up to haunt him. Shadows crawled out of the corners of the room, slithering towards his outstretched legs. One knee jerked, flicking his slipper onto the floor. He was wide awake now. Mary had put Anne to bed hours ago, then followed suit after wrapping the presents. Russ had tried to help, but after twenty minutes of sellotaping his fingers to the first three parcels, he'd left it to the expert. Mary was the wrapper in the family. And not a coloured gene in her body.

A noise outside drew him to the back window. The garden was frosted and white in the moonlight, the conifers decorated with their own version of Christmas sparkle. They looked far better than the coloured lights of the tree by the fire. The noise again. Russ couldn't place it, but suddenly his heart felt cold. He stepped back into the shadows, wondering what had plucked his string.

Frost sparkled rooftops from the next street jutted skywards, just visible over the trees, their chimneys impotent since almost everyone on the estate had central heating. A shadowy figure leaned casually against the nearest stack. He wore a green duffel coat with the hood bunched up around his neck, and held a

grubby coal sack in one hand. The other held onto the chimney like grim death. Evidently this fellow wasn't as adept at chimney stalking as Father Christmas.

Russ's hands trembled, and he tried not to swallow. His breath rasped in his throat, loud as a trip hammer in his own ears. His eyes were stuck wide open, stinging to the point of tears. A pulse ticked gently in one eyebrow. The intruder snapped his head round, nostrils flaring, and looked straight into Russ's eyes. Cadaverous, chiselled features snuffled up as if catching the scent, then the head bowed, tilting to one side. They saw what they saw, then dismissed it. With a flick of the wrist his chimney hand sprinkled fairy dust down the hole, then he was gone. Vanished down the far slope. A hint of green mist hung above the chimney, and the echo of a deep throaty grumph sounded across the cold night air.

Suddenly the frost coated conifers seemed less friendly, and the crisp expanse of lawn, dangerously open ground. Russ shook off his fear, gulping it down like pieces of hard-to-swallow custard, and closed the curtains. His legs were shaking, but he wasn't sure why, and as he climbed the stairs to bed he thought he heard a grumbly "bar humbug" in the distance. Only in his tired mind it sounded more like "umph grumph-grumph."

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The day before Christmas. Russ had a few final chores today, but scrappy remnants of the night before clung to his mind like a bad dream. A bad smell. Daylight banished these thoughts to the space under the bed where they belonged, but snippets kept creeping out. A shadowy figure. The frosted rooftops. And the grumph grumph sound across the night sky.

Mary packed Anne off for her last day at school, then went on her own secret mission, to get Russ's stocking filler. Stockings on their own would be all right for him, but he supposed she'd wear more than that, unfortunately. At least until bedtime. With the females gone, Russ had time to reflect on what had spooked him last night. His mouth went dry even thinking about it, but the problem was he didn't know just what he *was* thinking about.

He looked out of the back window, and remembered. Or did he? Was the shadowy figure on the neighbour's roof a burglar, or simply his reaction to waking up dry and groggy in front of the Christmas tree lights? Santa Claus, and sleigh bells, and crisp winters nights. Surely the Christmas spirit had played a trick on him, showing a dark side to the season's rooftop escapades. Father Christmas in black. No, not black. Green.

A shiver ran down his spine. Something about that last image curdled his good cheer. Bringing him a peg or two nearer to the shambling miseries he had encountered yesterday. He tried to rationalise what he had seen. A man on the roof. Not some demonic Santa, but a burglar pure and simple. There had been enough reports of overnight crime in the Wharfedale Times over the last few weeks. That was the answer.

Russ put his coat on, and went to the back door. Paul and Sarah Naphine lived round the back. Happy Nappy. Easy to check if everything was all right, or if there had been an unwelcome visitor in the night. He cut through the hedge between their gardens and knocked on the door. One look at his smiling neighbour's face should allay his fears. Living behind Paul was like living next to Ned Flanders. Russ half expected him to chime "Oakly diddly oakly," with that idiot grin.

The fairy dust and the green mist popped into his head while he waited for Paul to answer the door. That, and the green duffel coat. Green always reminded him of all those old horror films he'd watched as a child. Despite being in black and white, the monster was always green in the magazines he read. Green wasn't a safe, summer, freshly-cut-grass colour for Russ. It was the monster colour. And that worried him.

Happy Nappy opened the door, but there was no sign of an "Oakly diddly oakly" this morning. The eyes were downcast, and the voice sombre, and one thought struck Russ like a slap in the face. *The grumph has got him. He's turned Happy Nappy into one of those miserable people who have been serving me for weeks.*

The conversation was short, but not short enough for Russ. Whatever bug had got into his normally jovial neighbour, he hoped it wasn't catching. The flue was one thing, but the bar-humbug was another altogether. His heart sank, because before he left he noticed a green tinge in the corner of those rheumy eyes.

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Panic didn't set in until later that night. Christmas Eve. All day long the problem had been eating at him, colouring his day a murky green. Shop assistants grumbled, and bus drivers ranted, and shoppers made silent threats of violence if he didn't get out of their way. All to the strains of every Christmas song imaginable. Bing Crosby, Nat King Cole, Cliff Richard. Not one of them could inject a note of jollity into the

proceedings, but the worst thing was, most of these people had been normal, well adjusted, smiley people, two weeks ago. Many of them he knew personally, one of the benefits of living in a small town, and he couldn't remember them ever acting like this before.

That led to his next thought. The man on the roof. As fanciful as it seemed, the thought that he might have something to do with this grew as the day wore on. Russ was a rational person, so this was hard to accept, but as more and more grumpy old clones bumped into him during the day, the more certain he became. It reminded him of that old film, "Invasion Of The Body Snatchers", where a woman came to realise that Uncle Ira wasn't really Uncle Ira, but an exact copy, substituted during the night.

Russ's neighbours weren't really his neighbours any more, but replicas with only one subtle difference. They had become grumphs. Miserable wretches who hated the very thought of Christmas, and bar-humbugged their way through the day. Something had changed them in the night, and Russ thought he knew what it was. The Grumph. The shadowy figure on the rooftop, sprinkling misery down the chimney like so many presents. A Christmas gift from Hell.

By teatime the idea seemed feasible, but by the time Anne and Mary were in bed, it became a racing certainty. Sitting in front of the fire at eleven o'clock, with just the Christmas tree lighting the room, certainty turned into panic. The grandfather clock in the dining room ticked away the minutes to Christmas Day, and Russ was afraid to go to sleep. If he closed his eyes before midnight, he knew he would wake up changed. Altered from his usually cheerful disposition into a moaning old grumph who hated Christmas.

He made a mug of coffee. The rest of the house was in darkness, and the kitchen light shone out across the back garden like a beacon. The trees cowered back, and the lawn kept a low profile. Wicked frost dusted them all, too cold to let it snow, and too mean to want it to. Grumphed already. Russ turned the light off, and went back into the lounge, not noticing the icy footprints angling across the lawn to the back window.

The coffee was too hot. He set it down next to the tree, and stretched his legs out in front of him. The clock ticked on. Eleven fifteen. Not long to wait. He glanced at the back window but could only see the Christmas tree's reflection. The dark hooded face staring in was invisible, but the fire in its eyes flared brightly. Greenly. Russ should have noticed, but his own eyes were growing heavy. One leg jerked, and he was suddenly wide awake again.

He rubbed his face, and tried the coffee. Still too hot. He didn't really want a drink anyway, but needed to stay awake. For a second he saw the green darts of light through the window, then they were gone. Just part of the colourful display of festive lights in the living room. A shadow, even darker than the night outside, whooshed upwards, barely seen. Drifts of frost, dislodged from the roof, danced past the window in a mocking parody of snow that wouldn't come.

The clock ticked on. Eleven thirty. Almost there. Russ's head nodded forward, jerked upright, then lolled again. His eyes were lead shutters on the windows of his soul, and the store was closing for Christmas. The coffee was forgotten. The Grumph forgotten. Soon, Christmas itself would be forgotten. As the clock ticked slowly toward midnight, the house grew quiet, waiting with bated breath, and Russ fell asleep.

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Christmas Day. Russ didn't remember going to bed, but that's where he woke up. His head was thick and heavy, his mouth as dry as a Jack Dee's sense of humour. The curtains were drawn, but early morning light was pushing back the folds of night, and soft music drifted up from the living room.

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Mary stirred beside him. "Up already?" she mumbled, still half asleep.

Russ nodded, knowing very well his wife couldn't see him, but unable to trust his voice. Of course Anne was up already, it was Christmas Day, what child wouldn't be? He vaguely remembered this day in his own childhood, trying to get to sleep early in the hope that morning would come sooner, then getting up as soon as his eyes opened, even though it was only two o'clock. His father had ordered him back to bed, but that only held him until five. Then the excitement was too much, and he was up again.

More recently, Anne's Christmases induced a similar feeling of excitement in her parents, neither of them wanting to miss the moment when she saw her presents stacked under the tree. But not this morning. This morning Russ had been Grumphed. Mary too? He didn't know, but she was still in bed wasn't she?

That told its own story. Usually they were both awake as soon as they heard Anne's door, and downstairs almost before their eyes were open.

Russ lay in the cold expanse of the bed, not even feeling the warmth of his wife's body beneath the sheets, and wished it were summer. Wished it were any time but now. Christmas was a pain to be suffered, and he didn't suffer it gladly. He felt anger balling up in his stomach at the music that had awakened him. At the daughter who had turned it on.

No, don't do this.

He had no choice. His legs swung out of the bed involuntarily, and he wasn't surprised to find that he was still dressed from the night before, trousers creased, and shirt crumpled into a parody of designer grunge.

No, please. Not on Christmas Day.

But Christmas Day had no meaning for him now, his altered perception seeing it as just another day. A grumble crawled up his throat, ready to moan at anything and anyone who would listen. Bar humbug. I hate Christmas. The bedroom door opened silently, and the stairs swam up towards him as he headed towards his destiny. Anger cranked up a notch as he neared the tinny, crappy, Christmassy music. And his daughter.

Please, oh please, no. Somewhere inside him, the old Russ was struggling to get out. Some part of him that the Grumph hadn't managed to reach. *Heineken, reaches the parts that other beers can't reach.* That may be so, but that part was so small it couldn't fight the rest of him, the parts that had been grumphed. His hand reached for the living room door as his anger flared into white hot magma. The lid of the pressure cooker was about to blow, and it would explode at Anne.

Cold grey dawn had forced back the shadows, but the room was still dominated by the Christmas tree, and the decorations, and the pile of presents on the floor. The curtains were open, but the conifers blocked out most of the light, not even frosted any more, and definitely snowless. Extremely unfestive.

Anne knelt in front of the fire with her back to him, staring at the presents as if waiting for the starting gun. Russ clenched his fists, his face grumphing into a mask of hatred, then something strange happened. Anne heard the door, and looked round. Her eyes were full of excitement, and love, and seeing her father standing in the doorway fired the starting pistol. She dived on the presents, ripping and snarling first at one, then another, then another. Shredded paper sprayed upwards in a comical display of cartoon mayhem, and the look on her face was pure happiness. The true meaning of Christmas.

One present after another was laid bare, then discarded as she attacked the next. The music played on, less tinny now, less crappy, and definitely more Christmassy. Russ felt the Grumph melting away at the sight of his daughter's happiness, and a warm hand slipped into his. Mary was behind him. After a moment she said, "Look," and pointed to the back window. Outside, heavy flakes of snow began to fall from the heavens, a veritable blizzard of happiness. The conifers caught it, and wore the white coat of Christmas as Russ went to his daughter and hugged her. "Merry Christmas honey," he whispered, and somewhere far away he thought he heard a throaty roar. Or it might have been a throaty grumph.

