

Celebrating Christmas

Ivy had been sorry to see John Jackson move away to live near his son in South Wales but pleased when she watched as the men emptied the pantehnicon. The jumble of outsized toys carried through to the back garden heralding the arrival of children. The new family arrived later in an elderly car filled to the gills its, windows smoky with condensation.

She wondered, should she make tea for the new neighbours? Since she had never before had new neighbours she wasn't sure of the correct protocol, her thoughts were interrupted by the ringing door- bell. Mr new neighbour was already at her front door, a bulky man with a big smiling face hand outstretched to shake hers.

“Hello, Alan Blake, wanted to say ‘hello’ and ask if you’d like to join us for a cup of tea later, meet the family. OK in an hour or so?”

She had no time to thank him before he was down the path and waving to her from the gate, she hoped that her returning wave was a suitable reply.

It seemed as though the Blakes had been in the cottage next door for ever, the three months since they moved in had flown by and Ivy could not believe how much she enjoyed knowing they were nearby. But she hardly saw them. At 8.30 each weekday morning the family, a girl of seven called Ellie and a boy of five who was called Sam left for the village school. Weekends seemed to be taken up with all sorts of activities and the cottage seemed somehow quieter than when John Jackson had lived there. Occasionally she would encounter the children carrying damp looking gym bags or quantities of homework books and she enjoyed her short conversations with the unfailingly polite girl and boy.

Rose, Ivy's sister, had begun to tire of the running commentary about the new people next door whenever they met and couldn't help feeling the day might not be far away when things might change. Her sister had been head teacher at the village school and was known for her sometimes acidic remarks about poor parenting and children's behaviour. What would summer bring? It was late in the year and the children had largely been confined to the cottage since their arrival and had not begun to play outside.

Just before Christmas the sisters left for a weekend, to visit the market in Lille staying in the Hotel Brittanique. A perfect choice their rooms looked onto the beautifully kept garden. It was a magnificent place built in the nineteen thirties which was near all the important sights but far enough from the market square, early morning clatter and the ever present lights of such markets were as far as Ivy was concerned to be avoided at all costs.

The three days in Lille had been a success, over several years Ivy and Rose had become experts on European Christmas markets and agreed that they might, unusually, repeat this trip next year. And so their arrival at the cottage found them in excellent mood, if a little tired, ready for a cup of something hot and then bed.

Since the cottages were at the end of the main village street, houses and street lights petered out as they reached them. Although it seemed unusually light as they neared Ivy's home. A thick hedge hid most of the front of the building from view but as Rose drove into the short steep entrance to the garage at the side of Ivy's cottage they saw why. The front of the Blake's cottage was covered in coloured lights. Some flashed on and off in rapid succession,

others stayed on illuminating a Christmas scene. Father Christmas stood on the roof as if about to climb into the chimney, his ladder draped over the tiles its end flapping in the wind and rhythmically tapping on a window. A life sized sleigh complete with a reindeer stood on the front garden. Rose glanced at her sister who looked as though she was about to have a seizure, she was holding her breath, clenching her fists and beginning to shake with uncontrolled fury.

“Ivy, dear.” said Rose. “Please, calm down. It is Christmas. The Blakes have been such good neighbours.”

Ivy couldn't think of one attribute she could apply to the Blake family. Suddenly she wished that her old neighbour had stayed with his tasteful white tree lights, she had forgotten the complaint she made the first time John's son had put them on the old apple tree.

It took all of Rose's power of persuasion to usher her sister into her house, luckily she had decided to stay in the cottage that night the women having thought that the extra half an hour's drive to East Grinstead would be too much for her after such a long day. The lights went out at 8.30 to Rose's relief and generous cups of Horlicks and warm baths settled the travel worn sisters who slept surprisingly well.

Rose woke next morning feeling refreshed but soon the feeling of dread that had enveloped her the night before returned. What, she wondered, would Ivy do? She was not a violent woman, there was no likelihood of her taking a sledgehammer to the offending light bulbs or wire cutters to the leads. She would probably use her oldest weapon, her voice. The persuasive gentle voice or the harsh commanding one, it was no wonder that she had become a teacher with such an asset.

Rose threw back the covers and wrapped herself in her dressing gown. She had to put the bedside lamp on to find her slippers, it was not completely light at 7.30 on a mid winter morning. Opening the bedroom door she became aware of someone singing a Christmas song in the kitchen below, Ivy?

Breakfast was almost ready, “Hello Rose. Not up to ‘otel Britannique standards, I'm afraid.” Ivy said with a cod French accent.

Rose wondered at the mood. If she hadn't known her sister's view of early morning drinking she would have been sure Ivy had had a nip of the cooking sherry. She sat at the table laid with egg cups heralding boiled eggs, with soldiers of thinly sliced bread on the side plates. Just like mother made. Ivy poured tea and joined her sister.

“You seem very calm this morning, Ivy.”

“I slept surprisingly well we had a busy day yesterday. Oh the lights you mean? The tapping was a nuisance I shall ask if something might be done to stop it but the Blakes are not likely to leave those monstrosities on their house for very long, after all it is only three days before Christmas, they are sure to take them down soon. ”

Rose was not as sure but was pleased that her sister was being so sanguine about the whole thing. The eggs eaten, Ivy put toast in her elderly toaster and pushed the handle down. Rose was never clear as to what happened next, in an order she couldn't remember the garden was

flooded in light and there was a quiet boom or a loud popping sound and the kitchen was suddenly in complete, darkness.

Later that day television cameras and journalists arrived outside the cottages, the village was on the regional TV station and the local newspaper's front page was filled with photographs and an article about the village 'black out'. To everyone's relief power was quickly restored to all the houses, the energy company reported that an immense overload had caused the wiring in the old cottage to fail, affecting the supply. John Blake was interviewed amid the piles of lights bulbs on his lawn. He apologised profusely for the damage done to the electricity and assured the village that he would abandon his elaborate decorations and revert to having just some simple white lights on his old apple tree in future, as his neighbour, Ivy, advised.

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