

A Silent Night

There was a thin layer of hoar frost outside, desperately clinging on to some festive relevance. Upon twitching the curtain to scan down the street, I could see little glittering crystals in response, flashing under the garish orange glow of the lights. It blanketed the small patch of grass my garden offered - thematically decorative - the blades rigid and sharp as actual blades, and I knew that should I pop outside, and press a slow step into them, I'd hear that satisfying icy crunch that I used to adore as a child. Above, stars I could see dotted the sky like a landscape of snowflakes, frozen and apt for a night such as this.

I would have quite liked for it to snow. Snow was nice, snow was picturesque and delved into the territory of fairy tales. Everything was happier in fairy tales. Snow always had the roads busy with squeals of delight, pure laughter, and fugs of cloudy breath as crude projectiles were hurled with force before hitting their target with a soft thud, when they would disperse back into their powdery quintessence and pepper to the floor. Or, in the stead of safe, glacial warfare, the gardens would be occupied as people added a new temporary member to their family - one who, in their Christmas charity, would be swiftly dressed in a woolly hat, a frayed and colourful scarf, and be gifted with senses at the cost of vegetables or fuel. They were never as perfect as the ones in the movies; always muddled, and misshapen, sitting atop a pool of sludge – but, we're meant to love family regardless of imperfection, no matter who they are or what they've done. Be them made of snow or not.

In the absence of snow, the street was quiet, as I'd expected. Christmas Eve usually is quiet. But it's a sentimental silence. One in which the roads are peacefully empty as everyone has made their journey home, even if they live at the other end of the country. One in which buses are paused, trains are retired and shops closed early. A sweet silence in which conversations are held low over a mulled wine, cider or some concoction that is often spiced and veering into the higher numbers of acceptable alcohol levels, or aided by the clinking of ice cubes in a small glass of Bailey's.

People would chat about their plans, who they're visiting tomorrow and when. Worrying about what they've got for their loved ones and if it's enough, even though the other is thinking the exact same thing. Or, they may be trying to placate their children's giddiness, or their own sadness at the thought of late members that aren't here to offer a tipsy '*cheers*' to the year. Christmas, in spite of all, was always a time where smiles and tears were only a waylaid thought away, and sometimes even met together – as people would sob bittersweet tears at happy memories.

Most people on my street were small families, new families, or first nesters – and I could just imagine, in each of their living rooms at this moment, the television

would be showing whatever movie they personally associated with Christmas most, or whatever the channels had deemed prime Christmas Eve material. The fires would be crackling away with hearty snaps, the baubles offering a warped reflection gifted to them by the twinkling fairy lights, the nutcrackers standing tall and proud for their one working month of the year, and pets would be gratefully resting beneath the slow, steady subconscious stroking of dangling fingers.

As a child, I always loved that pregnant excitement that built up over December, slowly climbing to a bursting crescendo on Christmas Eve. It was special. No school, no homework, no responsibilities. Just a lead up to thinking about the things I'd asked for, then receiving those things, then playing with those things! Innocent bliss.

Of course, things change as you grow, but this year I was determined to reclaim and cement that spirit. I had decorated the house myself. The first time I'd ever done it! I'd lived on this street since I was a child, and always loved how my parents would team up, against all odds, to battle snaking tinsel, dud lights, chipped ornaments and wonky trees until our home was fit for festivity.

Every day after, something would be fussed over, and fidgeted with in the most negligible manner, being moved less than a centimetre before one of them would offer a, "There we go, now it's perfect," before the other would stumble past it moments later, cock their heads, undo what the previous did and utter the exact same phrase.

And, then, on Christmas Eve we would sit and play board games, more often than not from dawn until dusk – which of course meant arguments, cheating and gloating... but all in the spirit of fun. Besides, I was their only child, so, I tended to escape the worst of the treachery. Then the clock would strike ten at night, and I'd be allowed to open a present early. I'd take it up to bed with me, and play a game to see how long I could last before I'd rip it open. I think my record was twenty-five seconds. I was feeling that same excitement now, even though I already knew which one I was going to open, I bought it, and wrapped it, after all. But still, I was excited.

There was just something about the mundane being decorated that stirred a profound happiness within me. Of course, as a child, emotions are unbridled and excitement literally buzzes within, but even as an adult, when emotions are dulled and happiness is tempered by the harsh realities of existence, I still felt a hint of contentedness unfurling from its long dormancy.

Christmas *was* just special. Whether you believed or not, whether you went all out or not, smiles would tickle at your lips as you knew, around the world, togetherness was being championed on this day. This year more so than any other, I was feeling it. I was excited!

The presents I wrapped sat beneath the tree – I was never an exquisite wrapper,

but I was proud of myself. It would almost be a shame to see them opened. It's strange that, how we take such caution to ensure something that will be torn apart with ravenous frenzy is so intricately presented.

The streetlight outside flickered through my netted curtains, bringing me from my musing which is when I checked the time. Nearly ten, almost time for guests! With an excited spring, I made for the kitchen to see if the kettle was ready, and, when seeing the steam rising in a hypnotic dance, I grabbed my favourite Christmas mug (in the likeness of a Christmas pudding), scooped a small mound of coffee grounds in it which offered an apt *tinkle tinkle tinkle*, then I clasped the handle of the kettle, poured the boiling water in, and, as the smell of the beautifully bitter coffee reached my nose, I smiled. With a cheeky look to either side of me, as if I may be caught out, I trickled in a small helping of whiskey, and, finally, *my* festive drink was ready.

Then, I made for the living room once more and busied myself about the candles dotted around the floor. They were especially bought for purpose, but I did have others, scented varieties, that I placed on the mantelpiece and window ledges – sugared fig, chocolate orange, gingerbread. They were nice. They mingled with the incense I lit much more harmoniously than I expected. But, regardless, this was going to be a great night. Even if the candles were acrid, and my coffee was repugnant, I'd still happily sniff and sip away, because tonight, I would be sharing.

See, eight years ago, I lost both my parents. The pain of losing someone is just-indescribable. The pain of losing two in one day? Immensely more so. And, during a holiday that is intrinsically centred around family togetherness, being alone is stark, terrible. I wouldn't wish it on my worst enemy.

On a day in which I would usually spend watching black and white movies with them, I was sentenced to think about the arguments we'd had, the fall outs and the tears. How, the older I got the more distant we grew as a family, and, rue every single action of mine. Why couldn't I have just remained the bright-eyed and well-behaved kid that thought they could do no wrong, that they encompassed perfection. I didn't expect that, in the depths of despairing grief, how the brain would plummet into the negatives rather than grip and grasp for the happy memories as a form of tonic.

I tried everything in my power to keep the tears at bay, but they flowed, and stung, acidic and torturous. I didn't have the heart to decorate that year, nor the mental fortitude to do anything but sit and drink myself in to a numb stupor. That was one of the most tragically lonely days of my life. Void of family, fun or festivity.

And, since their death, I've spent Christmas alone. Though, I tried every year to make sure I didn't have to do it again. To face it. Most friends I had I'd lost contact with, or they moved away to set up their own life elsewhere. I'd try and garner an invite from a colleague, going as far as outright asking if they had room

for one more after my increasingly obvious hints were deflected. But, most people didn't want to talk about work on a day meant for joy; they wanted *family*, not finance. I put ads out to see if anyone else was in a similar position, but, being in the suburbs, it seemed everyone had someone to spend it with. And, those who lived nearer the city had already left home to be with their families. I posted Christmas cards in everyone's house on my street the past three years, in the hopes someone may take heart, knowing I was along... but in return, I received nothing but brief, perfunctory nods in the street.

It got easier to be alone, and I'd accepted my circumstance on some level. But still, every year, I would yearn for just someone else. Anyone else to share it with. I still liked the holiday, I just felt like I was looking in from the outside; window shopping so much that I romanticised what I no longer had. I was even happy to spend the whole month alone, but just Christmas Eve and Christmas day, I wanted company.

Then, I had the most perfect idea. And I knew it would work.

It was actually embarrassing that I'd gone eight years without the stroke of genius. Instead of sit and wallow in the pits of pity, reaching out with grasping hands and desperate pleas for invites or companionship, all I had to do was make sure Christmas still happened within me, within my home. Make sure that the house was fitting, that the traditions I'd grew up with were followed. And, then guests would come to me. It was so simple, like a moth to flame. I just needed to kindle and stoke. That's why the tree was up, the presents wrapped, the lights glittering, the coffee whiskeyed. I was stoking.

Another glance to the clock, and I realised it was almost time. I played my Christmas playlist on low, listening to the crooning deep voices mingle with the silky and soft counterparts above jingling bells, tambourines, and upbeat melodies.

Then, I got the board games out in anticipation, as was tradition, after all. If everything went to plan, I'd be playing all these throughout the night.

But first, time for my favourite Christmas tradition. The early present!

I plucked it from beneath the tree, and my heart jolted with joy at the sound of crinkling paper. It was a soft silver, with white snowflakes dotted across it. I brought it over to my dad's old chair, my chair now, positioned in the corner of the room, having a perfect view of the television, the patio, and now, the tree.

The excitement was bubbling within me so much, that it was pouring out of my fingers in the form of drumming on the hollow box. The patter only added to the excitement, and I realised after a moment it was in tune to the song playing. Too busy my hands which were so ready to tear the paper, I took another sip of my Irish coffee, and when the clock began to chime ten, I almost scalded my throat from swallowing too quickly.

It didn't matter, my hands were already gripping and ripping faster than my eyes

could process. And, then, in my lap was my first gift! I beamed, looking around at the empty room, in spite of myself. Then, with the aid of the drink, uttered aloud, “Oh, what a nice *surprise*.” Then chuckled, in spite of myself.

A board game!

Well, that’s fitting! That’s in tradition.

In one swift motion, I jumped to the middle of the room. So quick that I was there just as the tenth chime struck, and the waning sound could still be heard, fizzling into the tune of the current song so perfectly, that it almost felt destined.

I made sure not to knock any of the candles over that were placed around me. The last thing I’d need was to contend with a fire when I finally had guests coming over. *Anytime now*, I thought, and clapped my hands together.

It’d been so long since I opened a gift. So long since I played a board game. So long since I entertained. And here I was, about to experience the wonderful trifecta in quick succession. With delicate expedience, I opened the box, barely glancing at the cover, having studied it at length on the day I bought it and spoke to the seller for almost an hour on the ins and outs of it. “You have to follow the rules,” my dad would always say. So, it was only due diligence. Though, my mum would always answer, “But you’re following your rules, not the game’s!” Then an argument would ensue over the trivialities of how cards are drawn, how the scores were counted, so on, so forth.

I knew the rules, though. I weren’t about to fall into that trap. I was reciting them in my head as I opened the board, placed it before my crossed legs, and fished out the wooden planchette. It was beautiful, the shape, the varnished wood with a perfect circle within. I was at a loss to decide whether that, or the lettering on the board was more exquisite.

It was clearly handcrafted, which apparently was important. The seller explained that there’re versions mass manufactured, but they’re poor products that held no charm or heart, which is what made this particular board game work. I bought the real deal, I could already feel it.

I quickly glanced to make sure the candles were all still lit, worrying that maybe one was extinguished with my sudden jump to the centre. But, no, they were all still aflame, and the circle they surrounded was unbroken. *Perfect*.

It was time to start!

I glanced out the window one last time, to see the lamppost blurred by the net. One more check for the candles and circle, apparently that was of utmost importance. And then, I played. I had to go first, such was the nature. I placed the planchette on the board, shuddered with anxious excitement, and asked, “Is anyone there?”

The question hung heavy in the air, almost as resonant and lingering as the last chime from before. I realised my hands were shaking, though there was no

whisper of a chill in the room. Within moments, I realised it wasn't just my hands, but my entire body. Shaking so violently that I may as well have been convulsing. Still, I kept my fingers on the wooden piece, praying – in spite of everything. I was about to ask again, to say that I wanted company, that's all, but then...

An almost imperceptible scuffling, a soft scrabbling, as the planchette crept, slow and cautious to the top of the board. Within that perfect circle, the word *Yes* was framed**. My heart soared. The convulsive shakes stole over me with such a turbulence that it was a Christmas miracle I could keep the thing still.

"A-are-" I stuttered, unable to form the words. A splutter, a cough and a gulp to swallow the knot in my throat. I attempted again. "Are you- is- is this my- er- my mum or dad?"

The merry little song, playing oh so low, seemed almost deafening in the wait for another response. I sat, the convulsive shaking almost impossible to control now. But somehow, my hands stayed solid on the wooden piece as it shifted directly to the left. And, framed within that same circle, which just moments ago boosted me to elation I've not felt in almost a decade, I read the word.

No.

That- that wasn't the plan. That's not what I intended. This was supposed to be a reunion. A gathering. I was- I was supposed to be like everyone else on the street, the suburb, the city, the planet this year. To share Christmas with my family. To spend the night playing board games with them. To talk to them. To let them hear my voice. To explain. To- to-

"C-could you-" I attempted. But, trying to form words suddenly require a herculean effort. To even conceive them mentally was like swimming against rapids. "Could you- could you, um, find them? And tell them, er, tell them I'm- that I regret-" Warm tears trickled down my cold cheeks, they taunted a tickle as my eyes stung in contrast. "That I'm sorry for- for-"

I couldn't finish the sentence, even though that one word was burned at the forefront of my mind. But, I didn't need to finish. The planchette jolted from my quivering grip, enacting a swift circle before once more framing a brutal, unmoving:

No.

Anxiety swelled up within then, blazing wilder and hotter than any fire. I clawed at the thing, trying to yank it from the board. But, even with adrenaline infusing my anxious strength, it was impossible to peel away. "Who- who is-" Then I caught myself, knowing that I was playing wrong. I was giving them power. I was supposed to be direct. And, stabilising my focus, I pushed the statement that the board's seller proffered to me: "I wish to speak to my kith or kin."

Again, the wooden piece began to navigate the board. This time with a speed and frenzy that was difficult to follow, pausing at a letter for a fraction of a second

before whizzing to the next one. I tried to staple each letter in my head, and then spell them out:

C-O-N-T-A-C-T

“Con-contact,” I said aloud, as if verbally taking notes. “Contact...”

K-I-N

“Kin!” Here we go. “Yes, Kith or Kin! I want to-”

D-R-E-D

“Dred? Dread?” I furrowed my brows in confused, until a subconscious thought fused the two.

“Kin, dred? Kindred?” I repeated, slightly anxious. I tried to certify dominance, “I wish to speak to kith and kin. Kith and *kin*. *Kin*!” I wanted to speak to my mum and dad-

S-P-I-R-I-T-S the board finished.

“Contact kindred spirit?” I voiced aloud, the words making sense within a fixed sentence, but somehow eluding any relevance to me. “Wh- what do you mean, ‘kindred spirits’?” I asked in the empty gloom, combatted only by candle and twinkle.

I froze, my heart hammering beneath sunk and heavy breathing. The current song fizzled into a solemn hush, before *Silent Night* took over; low, doleful, haunting.

“What do you- what do you mean? Kin-”

M-U-R-D-

Before it could finish the word, I lashed out. Gripping beneath the board and flipping it with as much force as I could muster. It catapulted against the wall, where it fell with a slap. The planchette clattered off, and continued to circle on the floor, as if still looking for the next letter.

“No!” I roared, feeling my throat shred with the primality of it. In a fit of panic, I scrambled backward, suddenly abandoning all sense and reason. “I’m not- I-I’ve regretted it. I wasn’t thinking straight- I didn’t mean for them to-” as I took in the sight before me, the anxiety paused for the briefest of moments, only as it was dwarfed by a much more ferocious panic.

There was a break in the circle of salt, and as I sprung backward, desperate to silence the board - or disengage from it - I had knocked a candle down. I did the one thing I was urged- no, *warned* not to do.

I had opened the circle.

In a moment, every light within my house sparked out, or exploded. All the scented candles I’d dotted around guttered, whereas the ritualistic ones began to extinguish, with no blow nor breeze, anti-clockwise in quick, rapid succession. The music continued to play, but I quickly noticed, it was just the start, again, and again, and again in varying states of discordance.

Silent Night. Silent Night. Silent Night. Silent Night.

The scuffle on planchette on wooden flooring could be heard, like a rodent sniffing for morsels to devour. And, from somewhere, a hissing. An insidious, omnipresent whispering that seemed to skitter across every surface in the house, seemed to crawl beneath the *Silent Night, Silent Night, Silent Night*, and rabidly scale my body to burrow into my ears, my thoughts, my repression. So much so that- that I couldn't ignore it- even with my hands pushed to my ears in an attempt to deafen the diabolic attack.

It wasn't a hissing. It was a whispering. From uncountable voices, all of varying tones and depravities. Each one of them, uttering the word like a chant, ensuring that no board could be silenced by someone like me: "Murderer," they were saying. "Murderer. Murderer. Murderer. Murderer."

Silent Night. Silent Night. Silent Night.

"I was never convicted..." I wept, already buckling under the thought.

"They all know," a voice called out, to my surprise. Even more surprising, I realised it was my own. Strained and tortured. "That's why no-one gets close to you. They know what you are."

Murderer. Murderer. Murderer.

Then suddenly, a feeling. A sense. A certainty.

Though my living room was unoccupied-

Murderer. Murderer. Silent Night.

I felt something.

And, from the glow of that orange light outside, I could see, cast upon the decorated walls of my house, shadow after shadow after shadow. They lurched across the walls with writing forms, stretching and winding about one another as some writhing mass. And though there were no discernible features, I knew... These things sneered, and smiled through wide eyes, and stared, and loomed before me. The damned from beyond.

Inadvertently, I'd welcomed company into my home.

Though, it was not the company I wanted. It was the worst kind. It was company like me. Murderers.

Murderer. Murderer. Murderer.

Parasites committing parricide. My kindred spirits.

I crumpled to the floor, sobbing pathetically, as the planchette scuffled, the *Silent Night* repeated, this whispers persisted, and the shadows approached.

...

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Sleep in Heavenly peace.

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Sleep in Heavenly peace.