

FEARFUL FESTIVITIES



GARY FRY

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Screaming Dreams

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Screaming Dreams

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This book is dedicated to Chris Essen,
some kind of guide in a crazy world.

“Such is the state of every age, every sex, and every condition: all have their cares, either from nature or from folly; and whoever, therefore, finds himself inclined to envy another, should remember that he knows not the real condition which he desires to obtain, but is certain that by indulging a vicious passion, he must lessen that happiness which he thinks already too sparingly bestowed.”

“That the happiness of man may still remain imperfect, as wants in this place are easily supplied, new wants likewise are easily created; every man, in surveying the shops of London, sees numberless instruments and conveniencies, of which, while he did not know them, he never felt the need; and yet, when use has made them familiar, wonders how life could be supported without them. Thus it comes to pass, that our desires always increase with our possessions; the knowledge that something remains yet unenjoyed, impairs our enjoyment of the good before us.”

Samuel Johnson

“The grass always looks greener on the other side.”

Traditional proverb

“Everything you *want* ... but nothing you *need*?”

Sign outside a church in Whitby, UK – Christmas, 2008

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Prologue

There was a monster in his wardrobe.

Even though Kevin Potter was only eight years old, he knew this was true. He'd heard it slithering overnight, and once a creak of the doors, as if the thing inside had been sneaking out to devour him.

The wardrobe was situated near his window, on the opposite side of the room to his bed. He glanced at it now, bathed in morning sunshine. It didn't look scary at the moment: just a dark bulk of wood with scuffed corners and tarnished metal door handles.

His mum had told him that he'd been reading too much lately, and that this affected his imagination. In desperation after one night when Kevin had wet himself, Mum had taken him to the big new shopping complex outside Hitherton to buy him what she'd termed a "normal present" – anything other than the books he got from the village library. But it hadn't worked. The following night, after playing with the Action Man, Kevin had suffered a terrible nightmare involving exactly the kind of creature he believed lived in his wardrobe.

It was huge and green and had either countless strands of thick hair or narrow feeding-tubes stretching out from all over its body. Kevin thought that the thing breathed fire, that its eyes were as green as the many scales on its flesh, and that it was hungry – oh, *ever so* hungry.

There was just one problem: how could such an immense creature – in his last dream, it had been fully as large as the village of Hitherton – fit inside his tiny wardrobe?

Kevin flung back the bed sheets and swung his thin legs off the mattress. After climbing to his feet, he tried to steel himself by thinking of his dad who was away with the army in Afghanistan. Dad would tell him to be brave and that

this was nothing to be frightened of. Then Kevin paced directly for his wardrobe to clasp one of the door handles with a pale, slightly shaking hand. For a queasy second he imagined one of those horrid tube-like things he'd pictured on the monster's body lurching through the gap between the doors ... but the winter sunlight from the window helped him suppress this image and then tug open the door.

There was of course nothing inside but his school uniform, and at the bottom a pair of tatty old trainers.

He'd been worrying over nothing. Rather than feeling embarrassed, however, he experienced relief. Now his body felt whole again, all its parts connected up. And a moment later he realised that he needed to pee.

He shut the wardrobe door on his uniform and the trainers, and then paced for his bedroom doorway. It was the 22nd of December today and the school holidays would last until the New Year. At least he wouldn't be picked on before then about not having the latest brand of sportswear. His so-called friends made his school life a misery, just because Kevin's family didn't have a great deal of money (and Dad had been forced to go to war to earn the little they did have). It wasn't fair. Even though he realised that the other pupils' expensive clothing was exactly the same as his own cheaper stuff, except for the addition of stupid logos, he envied them their parents' extra funds and frequently wished his family had the same. But much more than this, he wanted his dad home soon, and he knew this was unlikely ...

If only something wonderful would happen to me this Christmas, Kevin thought as he passed along the corridor, beyond his mum's presently silent bedroom, and entered the hallway. The bathroom stood directly ahead.

As he entered the small room and lowered his pyjama pants in front of the toilet, he wondered what he'd choose if anything in the world could be given to him. He always liked doing this; it was exciting and reassuring. However, as he began to pee, nothing came to mind. Stuff he'd seen advertised on the telly didn't seem to capture the depths of his neediness. That all seemed shallow, silly. As Kevin continued to urinate, he tried to decode in his brain exactly what he meant by this ... but he couldn't. In addition to his own private turmoil – an appetite inside him he couldn't

come to terms with, and the mental confusion this always caused – he'd just heard a sound from outside his home.

The bungalow was situated on the outskirts of Hitherton, in a quiet street bearing a handful of other such dwellings. It was one of the first areas in the village reached by the postman each morning ... and that was surely who was now advancing along the garden path, beyond the frosted pane in front of Kevin. Here came the even footfalls – one, two, one, two – but all Kevin could presently see was a fractured blur of countryside. The land outside the building had been turned to green smudges and grey wads by the scooped and bevelled windowpane.

But now here finally *was* the postman.

Kevin was still peeing. Suddenly his urine went all over the tiled floor, splashing his feet in a warm spray. Mum would be furious, but right now that was the last thing on his mind.

Kevin gazed at the postman. The postman gazed back.

The man's eyes were green, his face pale, and instead of a smart cap, his head bore innumerable strands of what should be hair, yet which actually resembled tiny tubes, like the feeding devices of hideous insects. These appeared to move on his scalp, their pointed ends searching for purchase on anything that might provide sustenance.

But the worst of it was that Kevin shouldn't be seeing any of this. Although the postman's uniform was a mess of colour behind the distorting glass, *his face was perfectly visible*.

Kevin backed away quickly. The man beyond the pane began to smile, revealing dragon's teeth – no, those of a surely unnameable monster. The tongue flicking between the thing's greenish lips was a fleshy red fork.

Panic overruling his bewitched curiosity, Kevin snatched his gaze away. Unmindful of the wetness creeping down his leg, he hurried back through to the hallway, now screaming, now rousing his mum from sleep with a drowsy, troubled utterance: "Oh, *Kevin*, what's wrong *now*?"

But he couldn't reply. Indeed, he couldn't decide which of his following thoughts was most horrifying: the prospect of what the terrible thing masquerading as a postman had brought in the mail ... or the possibility of finally seeing this creature face-to-face, without the warped glass between himself and it.

Part One

Sibling Rivalry

When Tom awoke that morning, his head hurt like a world in pain. He got up and struggled into his dressing gown, trying not to disturb his wife snoozing fitfully in bed. He'd staggered in last night from the pub at about midnight, and although he'd known Eleanor had still been awake, she'd said nothing as he'd settled beside her. And now his hangover was so unpleasant that he hoped to delay the inevitable cross-examination for as long as possible – with any luck, until after his day at the bookshop. By then, he might have some cheering news to report.

Once he'd freshened up in the bathroom – again, quietly, so as not to wake the kids; their squabbling rivalry was the last thing he could cope with right now – he crept under a few streams of cheap tinsel pinned to the hallway ceiling and into the kitchen to put the kettle on. After letting in some light by flipping open the horizontal blind at the window, he dry-swallowed two supermarket-brand paracetamol from a blister pack in the scuffed kitchen cupboard and then tried to resurrect what few vague memories he had of the previous evening's frolicking.

He and his brother Graham had met for their usual weekly night out at The Green Dragon. Both nursing private problems, neither had been in much mood for conversation, a difficulty always inversely related to the amount of ale they supped. What had it been last night – five or six pints? Such large quantities would surely account for the argument that had developed on their way home from the pub.

Graham had been getting on his usual high moral horse about the state of the world – corporate exploitation in South America or something – when Tom had told him to shut up, the way he had as children growing up in

Hitherton. Of course Tom regretted this now, but at the time such a rebuke had felt like a necessity. After all, what did his brother have to moan about? Graham had no familial responsibilities, no mortgage, no job. And all he'd done with his PhD since being awarded it last year was moan at his elder brother about largely irrelevant issues – irrelevant to Tom, that was, and the problem of supporting a family while his business failed like some desperate, dying animal.

The kettle had now boiled and Tom tossed a heaped spoonful of cheap instant coffee and several sugars into a mug. As he added water and then milk, he glanced properly at the window and was surprised to find his eyes smarting in response to a blaze of sunshine in the unkempt back garden. It was winter, nearly Christmas – shouldn't it be snowing, the way it had when he'd been young and the only real dilemma he'd suffered was whether he should build a snowman or go sledging?

Just then, Tom suppressed a feeling of nostalgia as he processed what was surely an erroneous impression: a small, striped object had thumped against the glass before taking wing and bobbing away. No, this couldn't have been a bee or a wasp. Global warming hadn't tilted the world into such chaos yet; even his conspiracy-receptive brother would agree with that! Tom closed his eyes, feeling the pain in his skull dissipating. He sipped blindly at his coffee, craving a cure for all his problems. If only there was something he could do to stave off this latest financial crisis ...

It was then that his post-slot rattled.

The truth was that there weren't enough funds in the current account to buy the kids' Christmas presents this year. Tom was expecting to hear from the bank any time now about the possibility of extending their overdraft, but with only three shopping days before the big morning, it was all getting worrying. There was, however, an outside chance that there'd be something in the mail today, and with this feeble hope in mind, he stepped across the bungalow for his front entrance.

He stooped to gather the crop of envelopes on the carpet. Then he stood and rifled through the pile. Here one promised he'd been "specially selected" for some bogus prize or other; it had a cheap metal key in its transparent

cellophane window. Here was another bearing the unmistakable logo of a multinational company. Tom sighed, and was about to return the lot to the kitchen – and more importantly, the dustbin under the sink – when he chanced upon the remainder of the post.

There were four letters, all sealed in identical small, white envelopes. The stamp in each upper-right corner displayed some kind of mythical creature soaring over a blasted landscape, its green flesh covered in scales and what resembled thick strands of hair. At the centre of the envelopes, the recipients' names and addresses had been handwritten – or at any rate, it looked like that. The writing was elegant and old-fashioned, though Tom knew that computers could these days mimic such a personal touch with electronic fonts. He was about to disregard these items as the same junk as the rest he'd received when he noticed something slightly disquieting: there was one letter apiece for each member of his family, Toby and Natalie included.

Now, if only he and Eleanor had been targeted by whatever promotional guff this was, Tom could perhaps forgive the sender. But when his six- and seven year-old son and daughter also came in the firing line, his patience had to break – it was like a law of nature.

“Bastards sending me this crap,” he said under his breath as he fought to unlock the door with the key he always left in the chamber overnight. *“Isn't it enough for them to build a shopping complex nearby to steal all my customers? Isn't it enough to target my kids through shitty television adverts? And so now we have to put up with this, do we? Well, we'll see about that ...”*

Tom's hangover had suddenly grown so intense he hardly knew what he planned to do once he'd opened the door, paced out onto the step, and glanced along the grove in search of the postman. What did the Royal Mail employee have to do with who was responsible for this latest, typical violation of his family's privacy, anyway? Nevertheless, Tom found himself watching the uniformed man pass behind the greenhouse of the property on the corner. Tendrils of emaciated growths inside this glass dwelling seemed to distort the postman's face; it looked momentarily like a tapestry in the process of being unpicked. Then the man was gone, out of sight along the

avenue leading to the high street and the village centre. Tom felt his shoulders sink with dispirited impotence.

What had he intended to relate to the postman anyway? Maybe one of Graham's typical diatribes about the twisted *mores* of a world gone horribly wrong? Whatever he might have said, it would surely have been frustration speaking. Now Tom had had chance to reflect for a moment, he could admit this was true. There'd been nothing from the bank in the mail – that had obviously affected him more than he'd realised.

He was about to retreat back into his home when he heard someone call him from across the grove. "Hey, Tom! How's tricks?"

"Ask a magician," he replied immediately, the way he had ever since he and his younger brother had first invented the exchange twenty years ago as kids, when life had been so much simpler.

He turned to watch Graham strolling towards the garden gate. The man had emerged from an alley on the opposite side of Brosther Grove, between two detached bungalows much like Tom's. Graham had presumably just taken the short cut from his flat across the fields beyond this residential area. He'd removed his jacket and tied its arms around his waist, a sight that reminded Tom of how surprisingly warm it was. However, he had no opportunity to comment upon this before his brother leapfrogged the low garden gate and came bounding up the path.

"Just thought I'd pop round to say sorry about last night," he said, and let his gaze drop to the envelopes in Tom's hands. "Hey, what was the deal with that post-box – you know, what happened before we left each other?"

Tom frowned in confusion. Graham could clearly hold his beer better than he could. Then again, he'd had much more practice. He'd been on an Open University course for four years and a fully funded PhD for another three. That had been one helluva piss-up.

Responding to his brother's prolonged frown, Graham added, "Don't you remember? We both thought we'd heard something *moving* inside it. That was what stopped us arguing."

"What are you on about, man?" Tom replied, half-serious, half-playful – the way they'd always got on together. But then he thought he did remember: there *had*

been something strange about that pillar post-box in the village centre. As they'd both passed it, on the verge of a drunken punch-up, there'd been a sound – a sort of scratching from inside. Rats, probably. Still, it wasn't worth fretting about now. It had served a function at the time: defusing bitter fraternal envy.

Tom knew why Graham visited here so often: he liked to see the kids, his niece and nephew. As much as Tom envied his brother his lack of responsibilities, Graham coveted Tom's family situation. And this was largely what their dispute the previous evening had been about, wasn't it? Deep-rooted, universal and unavoidable sibling rivalry.

"Look, never mind all that," Tom said, stepping back to beckon his brother inside. "If anyone should be apologising, it's me. Now come in and have a coffee and let's forget about it, shall we?"

"Sounds good to me, mate."

They both entered the building. As Tom slammed the door behind them, Graham still had his eyes on the letters in Tom's hand. And when they started pacing along the hallway for the kitchen, he asked, "Any Crimbo cards from the relatives, then?"

"No, not even one."

"Miserable bleeders. Still, that's the modern family for you."

Graham sounded as if he was about to go off on one of his tirades about the state of the world, but Tom couldn't deal with that now. So he quickly replied, "There's time yet: two more days till Santa's great shift. You never know what might ... arrive before then."

He'd sounded desperate, and to throw his admittedly sharp brother off the scent of his difficulties, he flung the mail on to the work surface and then reactivated the kettle. This time he spooned coffee and sugar into two mugs, and while adding milk asked, "Any luck on the job front yet, mate? I don't think I asked you about that last night."

Now it was Graham's turn to sound defensive. "Oh yeah, I've got, uh, a few options to pursue – nothing concrete yet. But it's looking promising."

It's about time you did something other than live off my taxes, Tom thought, but of course didn't say. That would come from a side of him he wasn't too fond of, but which nonetheless existed. Instead he added, "Well, good luck

with that, whatever it is.”

“Cheers.”

At that moment, a door opened from deeper inside the bungalow and then two pairs of light footfalls started racing along the hall. In the run-up to Christmas Day, the kids had taken to sleeping together head-to-toe in Natalie’s bed, just as they always had during the winter holidays. Tom had told himself that on this occasion this wasn’t because he couldn’t afford to switch on the central heating. Still, as Toby and his sister came barrelling into the kitchen, neither looked particularly cold. With any luck, the decent weather would hold, and by the time they were both old enough to require privacy, there would be money in the bank again ...

“Uncle Graham! Uncle Graham! Uncle Graham!” cried the two in grating unison.

“Hey, soldiers! Ambushed, aren’t I?” Graham replied, sweeping them into his arms like the noble rescuer Tom knew he secretly fancied himself to be. Then Graham went on, “Now, who wants to hear a story about mysterious faraway places?”

“Me!”

“Me!”

“No, I said it *first*, Toby.”

“But that’s not fair! Stinky Natalie!”

“Okay, kids, cool it,” Tom interrupted, handing over a mug of coffee to his brother. “If you don’t stop behaving pettily, your uncle won’t tell you a thing.”

As the children lapsed into immediate silence, Tom caught Graham’s gaze and read it at once: *Well, you and I behaved exactly like this last night, didn’t we?* But he snatched his glance away at once and gathered the second full mug from in front of the kettle.

Then, as his brother prepared to thrill the children with something amazing he’d presumably read about recently, Tom headed back for the main bedroom and hoped his headache wasn’t about to grow even more unpleasant.

When he entered the room, he noticed that Eleanor was awake and sat up in bed. He maintained eye contact for as long as it took him to carry her drink to the bedside table, and then, feeling suddenly guilty and embarrassed, he looked away. His reddened eyes fell upon the curtains and

he paced across to drag them from the window.

“It’s a nice day today – rather warm actually.”

For several long seconds, he kept his back to his wife. He examined the green hills running away from the village, a cradle formed by the Yorkshire Dales. Clusters of trees studded this sweep of countryside, while approximately at the village’s boundary, there was a dry-stone wall. The grass had always looked greener on the other side of that wall; all the time he’d lived in Hitherton, Tom had believed this. This visual quirk must be caused by a play of daylight falling on that section of land. Years ago, after growing regularly bored of the village, he and his childhood friends (including Eleanor and Graham) had ventured on their bikes as far as the fields beyond the wall, and close up, they’d discovered that the land up there was no different from the rest in the area. Like so much in life, this had just been an illusion ...

Tom was now tugged away from this wistful reverie by his wife’s response: “I’m surprised you can bear *any* light at all in your condition.”

He stiffened slightly and then turned. Eleanor had taken the coffee and was sipping from the mug, the action reminiscent of sinking a pint or several. But it was surely only paranoia making Tom believe she’d meant the action intentionally. She could often be disapproving, yes, but rarely devious.

In the event, he said nothing.

“Are the kids up yet?” Eleanor added after realising he wasn’t about to rise to her bait.

Now Tom felt able to respond. “Yes, they’re in the kitchen. Graham showed up this morning. He’s telling them a story or something.”

“Oh, you mean *he’s* not hung-over, either. Remarkable.”

“Leave it, Ellie, will you?” he replied with a depressed sigh.

But she wouldn’t be put off. “No, sorry, Tom, I *have* to say this. Here we are with all our difficulties, and there you two are, out *drinking* as usual.”

“You know very well I’ve had a lot on my mind lately.”

“But what about Graham? He doesn’t even have a job. How can he afford such a long night out? Because I know very well that *we* can’t.”

By now, she was raising her voice, and Tom had come

to sit beside her on the bed in the hope of containing her anger. This worked to some degree. Even though she held the mug of coffee, he managed to hug her and then explain. "I'm sorry. I guess I just needed a skin-full to stop worrying about it all. But I'm back on the case today. There was nothing in the mail this morning, so I'll call Harry Deane at the bank this afternoon – make an appointment, get a decision. He's a good lad, Harry."

"A drinking crony, you mean? Was *he* at the pub last night, too?" Suddenly Eleanor's face grew bitter in appearance. "I bet the Deanes have got enough to spend on their snotty-nosed brats this Christmas. God, every time I see Margaret in the village, she's got something else new and *expensive*. The well-kept floozy!"

"Hey, come on, Ellie, this isn't like you." Tom stood and crossed to the wardrobe. He produced a pair of pants, a shirt and underwear. As he began climbing into each garment, he added, "I thought we were both above that kind of ... jealousy."

She scowled. "Did you happen to glance at my clothes when you just removed your own? Did you see anything modern, anything fashionable in there?"

"But you've never been interested in all that crap." Having tugged on underwear and his shirt, Tom climbed into his designer-label-free trousers. "Isn't that one of the reasons we got married? Because we agreed on this. Isn't that why we decided to stay in Hitherton? Because it was relatively uncorrupted by high street stores. And isn't *that* why we chose to set up the bookshop?"

Eleanor hesitated, drained her coffee. But then she scowled again. "That *bloody* shopping complex," she hissed, placing the mug back on the bedside table with a thump no louder than her voice had just been. Then she seemed to slump in the bed. "Oh, look, I'm sorry, Tom. *I'm* stressed out, too, you know. Natalie and Toby are desperate to go to the toy store in that *ghastly* place – the one next to the bookshop that's destroying our business. I realise it's all wrong, but we're parents, aren't we? We *should* be able to provide for them both."

"I know. I *know*." He simply stood there, feeling ineffectual, yet suddenly more determined. "Look, I promise that I'll sort it out somehow, okay? If I have to stand in the bank for hours until Harry agrees to see me,

I'll get an answer today."

"And meanwhile we'll lose trade at the shop."

"I'll ask Mavis to watch the till while I'm gone."

Eleanor appeared to think for a moment. Then she added, "Yeah, okay. Mavis is nice."

"She certainly is. One of the old school." Tom stepped across to his wife, stooped to kiss her, and after slipping on the shoes he'd pulled from under the bed, he made for the doorway out. With one hand on the faded brass knob, he turned to add, "Don't worry, all right? I guarantee you some good news this evening."

She smiled, wanly yet convincingly. "I trust you," she told him. "And I'm sorry about what I said about your brother. That was cruel."

Tom wasn't so sure it had been, but he kept this to himself. In any case, Eleanor soon spoke again.

"Is Graham still coming for his Christmas dinner on Saturday? I hope so."

"I'm sure he will be. I'll ask him now. He'll probably want a lift back into the village when I drive to the shop."

"We've got enough money for food, at least, haven't we?"

"Oh yes. And the bills are covered, too. It's just those ... those presents."

"Toby wants a new atlas – a big one of the world. You know how he loves looking at maps. And Natalie wants a plastic pony – one of those whose hair you can brush."

"I think I've seen them on telly, yes."

Suddenly they exchanged a tender look, one that threatened to bring tears to Tom's eyes. To avoid this, he turned the doorknob and opened the door. And he was about to depart when Eleanor asked, "Oh, before you go – just one more thing."

He replied without facing her. "Yes?"

"You mentioned that we'd had some post. If there was nothing from the bank, what *was* there?"

Inexplicably, Tom felt scared; this must be just his current physical condition monkeying with perception. "Oh, just the usual crap," he told his wife, and only after dry-swallowing felt up to adding, "I'll leave it in the kitchen for you to look at. But really, it deserves nothing more than binning."

And then he went out.

“Come on, kids, set your uncle free now.”

“But, Daddy, he’s just getting to the good bit in his story,” said Toby, his eyes an eager blue to match his father’s.

“What’s the story about?” Tom asked.

And then Natalie – her own eyes as brown as Eleanor’s – told him. “It’s about a monster that wants to take over the whole wide world.”

Both children were sitting on the couch in the lounge. Graham stood beside the scantily decorated Christmas tree, having obviously just told them a tale – or rather, most of one. Tom had apparently interrupted it midway through.

“What happens next?” Toby asked, but he’d already conjured up a suitably grim development. “I think the monster should rise out of the ground and kill *everyone*.”

“No, that’s horrid,” Natalie protested. “All those people in the village helped *make* the monster, didn’t they? So they shouldn’t be *hurt* by it.”

“But that’s what would happen in *real life*,” her brother insisted.

“Even so, I don’t want to think about that.”

“What *is* this monster anyway?” Tom wanted to know. He wasn’t prudish about what the kids were exposed to – hell, some of the computer games his son played could make even Tom squirm – but he couldn’t help performing his usual protective duty as a father.

“Uncle Graham gave it a funny name,” his daughter explained. “I can’t remember what it was now.”

“It was something to do with hats!” Toby cried, and then got up to gather his beloved atlas from the coffee table in the centre of the room. As he started to flick through it, he said, “God, that thing must be *massive* to be under a whole village!”

“Are you going to be a mapmaker when you’re older, mate?” Graham asked, looking at the book over the boy’s shoulder.

“Yeah! I can’t wait!”

“And I want to be a nurse,” said Natalie, as if she was also eager to join the job market as soon as possible.

Despite this disconcerting digression, all Tom could think of asking was, “Er, what did you mean by *hats*?”

“Toby meant ‘caps’, Daddy,” his daughter told him. “The monster’s name was cap-something. Wasn’t it, Uncle

Graham?”

“All will be revealed in the next thrilling instalment,” Graham replied, before turning his attention to his brother. “You off to work?”

“Yeah. Fancy a lift back?”

“Wouldn’t mind, actually.”

“Aw, are you going now?” Toby asked his uncle, having looked up from the atlas that he’d already turned to a map of Hitherton.

Just then, Tom had an opportunity to watch Graham respond. Although he said with casual indifference, “Yeah, I’ve lots of stuff to do, I’m afraid,” it was clear that he wasn’t being wholly sincere and that he wouldn’t mind spending the day with the kids. If only he knew what that would really involve, Tom thought: the rows, the racket, the nagging ... But he suppressed these ruminations and then spoke.

“Don’t worry, you two. Graham will be back on Saturday just after ... Santa Claus has been!” As the kids started cheering, Tom asked his brother, “You are still coming for Christmas lunch, aren’t you?”

Graham smiled and replied, “Of course. I love turkey.”

“Is that one of the countries that might get burned up by cap-thingie – your monster?”

“Toby, I already told you. Stop talking like that. It scares me.”

“Scaredy! Scaredy Natalie!”

By now, Tom had led his brother through to the kitchen. The kids had followed with a scurry of bare feet. Tom hesitated for a moment before collecting that morning’s mail from the work surface. Then he thrust aside any foolish misgivings, divided the pile, and handed half each to his son and daughter.

“Take these to your mummy. Your uncle and me are leaving now.”

“How come Natalie gets the bestest letter?” Toby demanded, observing that the envelope with the key in the crinkled window was in his sister’s pile. “Just because she’s older ... just because she’s a stinky *girl*.”

“Oh, don’t be so *silly*, Toby. Honestly, sometimes you’re so ... *envious*.”

Tom now had a moment to reflect on how advanced his daughter’s vocabulary was growing. If this was a

consequence of listening so often to her uncle talk, that was surely good for her. Nevertheless, for a vague reason he couldn't define, he remained unsettled by what the kids had been talking about in the lounge: 'cap-something' – what *was* the monster Graham had been telling them about?

Still, as the kids rushed off again – still bickering and vying to be first through the master bedroom's doorway – Tom thrust these concerns to the back of his mind. It was small potatoes compared to all the problems he had to face up to in the *real* world.

"Do you remember when you and me were like that?" he asked his brother while gathering his jacket and his keys from the hallway.

And when Graham replied, he looked far too knowing. "Vividly, yes."

If he was referring to the previous evening, what exactly was his point? That envy drove the world? That not having what someone else had – or at least, *seemed* to have – was the real source of misery in life? That girls wanted to be boys, and boys girls? That children wanted to be adults, and vice versa? Tom had heard Graham rise to this theme on several drink-befuddled occasions. But he couldn't deal with any of that now. It was all philosophical twaddle. And he had a living to earn.

Once he and his brother were out in the car – a battered hatchback whose servility was bettered only by resilience – Tom buckled up and started the engine. The radio came on at once. As the car started crawling along the grove and Graham left his own seatbelt dangling laxly over one shoulder, the newsreader announced, "... Peace talks in the Middle East have broken down again ... A teenage boy waiting for a bus was stabbed last night in Leeds ... An earthquake in China has devastated several communities ..."

"Poor old China," Tom said, and then added, "Helluva world."

"Indeed," replied Graham, before drawing a heavy breath, as if about to launch into another pious lecture.

Just then, however, Tom sought to side-track his brother's penchant for political commentary by asking, "Do you remember how Dad used to say that? *Helluva world.*"

"Yeah, I do," said Graham as the car left the grove and entered the avenue. When he went on, he sounded slightly

evangelical. “But he really had no sense of perspective, did he? Whenever Mum burnt an omelette, it would be: *helluva world*. And if the neighbours were making a din, just the same: *helluva world*. Ha!”

Tom wanted to laugh, too, but he was reluctant to do so. He pretended to focus on negotiating the junction leading to the high street, but in truth something about Graham’s comment had bothered him. Their parents had died ten years ago in a car accident on their way back from a shopping trip in Leeds. Neither had got to know their grandchildren, nor witnessed their own children progress through their late teens and early twenties. In short, Tom didn’t think it was appropriate for his brother to make a political point at their expense ... if indeed that was what he’d been doing.

However, the awkwardness of the moment was soon eliminated. As Tom steered round a bend and trod on the accelerator, the local news station babbled on: “... in the run-up to the Christmas holidays, snow will make travelling difficult in the West Yorkshire area ...”

“Snow? *What* snow?”

Graham dipped his head to look through the windscreen. The bright sunlight now compromising Tom’s driving made him flick down his visor. “You’re right there, mate. Indian summer or what?”

Turkey ... China ... India ... These countries, whose names had been randomly uttered by Graham lately, suddenly weighed on Tom’s mind, especially when his brother added, “I guess something nasty’s on its way ...”

“Let’s hope not, eh?” Tom said, hastier than he’d intended. Images of Natalie and Toby had just flickered in his brain, and the really weird part was that he’d pictured both children opening the letters that had arrived that morning ...

He tried to suppress these foolish thoughts by re-examining the heart of Hitherton as he drew the car into it. The great majority of the buildings dated back several centuries to when the village had been developed as a marketplace/farming community specialising in fresh produce and wool. Of course the place had since lost its industrial drive and had been transformed into a quaint tourist destination, renowned for independent businesses and a kitschy atmosphere redolent of the past. A small

Victorian conference hall stood close to an even older church. Several rows of terraced shops were punctuated at various points by a school, a doctor's surgery and a small police station. The housing in the area was of a more mixed heritage: original dwellings occupied the centre of the village, while a bit further out newer properties like Tom's own had been constructed. On the fringes of Hitherton, off the main road leading to Leeds and beside the disused factories which had previously supplied most of the local employment, there now stood a council estate.

Tom knew a lot of people in the district and roughly where they all lived, even the few unsavoury characters. Most had visited his shop, and he'd always been fond of socialising. This was one of the place's finest qualities: it had a feeling of togetherness. He, Graham and Eleanor had lived here all their lives, and while others of their generation had fled to cities to pursue spurious dreams, a sense of neighbourly cohesion and unspoilt tradition had held the family here. It was a wonderful location, and woe betide anyone – or anything – that tried to unsettle this ...

The new shopping complex five miles outside the village serving several urban districts of Leeds had certainly had a go at that, but Tom knew that Hitherton would somehow survive. Its small population knew better than to sell out, surely. Given a choice between saving a few quid down the road and supporting their local shops, they'd always choose the second option ... wouldn't they? There wasn't even a proper bus route to the multi-million pound commercial park; this was why most of the jobs it had created had gone to residents of other areas ... while destroying so many here ...

Tom again sensed his mood becoming despondent, and he was relieved when Graham spoke to him.

"You can drop me at the Post Office, if you like. My ... my benefits cheque is due."

His hesitation was understandable. Several months ago, Tom had paid his tax bill, and this was what had almost cleared out his bank account. Of course Tom knew what his brother would claim if he raised this issue – that *he* couldn't legislate for what the government spent public funds on, whether too many arms for defence or all the dubious foreign policy initiatives in the news lately. Tom certainly didn't want to get involved in *that* conversation

again, so he pulled over in front of a block of commercial properties and said, "Okay, bro. Here you go."

"Thanks. I'll see you all on Saturday, yeah?"

"In the absence of any worldwide catastrophe, I'm looking forward to it."

Before climbing out of the car, Graham offered him a look as if to say: *Even I wouldn't expect anything like that to occur in as few as three days ...* And a moment later he was gone, quickly across the pavement towards the Post Office.

Tom drove on at once and didn't stop until he'd reached the parking lot behind his bookshop. Then he drew a sharp breath, killed the engine, and climbed out to face what would surely be another long day at work.

Graham felt a bit stupid doing this, but there was something he had to know. As he drew abreast of the pillar post-box – the one alongside which he and his brother had been arguing last night – he slowed slightly to cock an ear in its general direction.

Cars were now passing in the high street and that made listening to whatever might lurk inside the tall, metal drum tricky. Nevertheless, the closer he drew, the more the various sounds around him – church bells peeling at a distance, birds twittering out of sight, a low murmur of conversation nearby – faded to negligible background noise.

He still heard nothing, however, and the thing that proved even more dispiriting was the sudden sight of one of the young men who lived in the council estate on the village's outskirts. He was now watching Graham, his eyes a piercing blue and with an expression of ridicule on his face. This man was dressed in sportswear, had a crew-cut, and presumably was about to enter the Post Office for the same reason Graham was.

"Morning," said Graham, and straightened up to shrug resignedly. "Er, I was just looking for a ... pound-coin. Thought I'd dropped one here last night. After the pub, you know. I was a bit pissed."

"*Wanker*," the young man replied with savage contempt, and then disappeared inside the Post Office.

So much for trying to relate to people via their own cultural referents ... But Graham's mind now turned quickly back to the previous evening's events. Yes, he *had* heard

something moving inside the post-box. And what could that have been? At once his brain was hatching all kinds of conspiracy theories: *Royal Mail involved in secret post manipulation ... One of the few remaining non-privatised British institutions plays God with public communications ... CIA/MI6 infiltrates Christmas bonhomie ...*

He wasn't beyond satirising himself. As for his earlier feeling that the experience last night had possessed a spooky quality – well, couldn't he ascribe that to the quirks of alcohol? Yes, of course he could. After all, the only alternative was too troubling to contemplate.

Conceding defeat in his investigation, he entered the Post Office. There was a long queue inside, and as a responsible member of society he didn't complain as this was reduced by painfully slow increments. When it was his turn, he chatted briefly to the young woman at the counter, but as soon as he revealed his social security book, her smile faltered and she paid out his dole with uncommunicative haste. Anyone out-of-work was no use to her; she was clearly a city-fancier, in the market for some young flash-with-the-cash stud.

"I've got a PhD, you know," he thought about saying before heading for the exit, even though he realised this would probably put the woman off him even more. "I'm a doctor of sociology. And I can tell you one or two things about where we're *all* heading ..."

But who the hell was interested?

Graham stepped outside and started walking through the village. His home was a rented back-street flat just outside the centre of Hitherton. He'd done his degree remotely with the Open University, and a PhD while affiliated to the University of Leeds, travelling to the city for regular supervision meetings or to conduct detailed research in the academic library. This had been a solitary life, though he'd enjoyed every minute of it. Now, however, it was time to move on. There were two job application forms in his flat: one for a lectureship at a college in Bradford, the other to become a Research Fellow at Leeds Metropolitan University. So why didn't he feel like rushing back to complete either?

The simple truth was that he'd grown rather fond of the freedom involved in private study. He knew that a job would require him to knuckle down, to pursue what

someone else wanted to know. If he ended up teaching in Bradford, he'd have to toe the line of an official curriculum. And he couldn't imagine any significant research – any that really mattered – being commissioned by a former Polytechnic.

And were these the *only* reasons for his reluctance to apply for either post?

By now, he'd strolled beyond the village hall in which the local councillor and other minor dignitaries made such a hash of public affairs. A little further on, Graham spotted the small, new business complex located in the grounds of the only supermarket in Hitherton. Through its windows, he saw men and women wearing suits and other smart garments hacking away at computer keyboards or clutching telephones to their ears. The unseasonable sunshine beaming high above this property served only to dramatise its occupants' imprisonment.

Did Graham secretly fear this kind of entrapment? Was his resistance to finding work therefore selfishly motivated?

Surely not! Hadn't he been on the front line during protests organised by local activists when the proposed site of the shopping complex had been granted planning permission by Leeds city council a few years ago? And hadn't he been arrested for spray-painting provocative graffiti on the architect's sprawling car? Maybe this episode would compromise his search for work anyway. Although the charges were dropped, he surely still had that episode recorded on a police database, and he would have to declare it in that Draconian section on job application forms concerned with previous criminal activity.

The simple fact was that he was greatly divided over the issue of employment. As he strolled past a church, he felt a sudden need for guidance. A sign on a board in the graveyard read: JESUS IS NOT JUST FOR CHRISTMAS ... Graham smiled. He liked this line; it was witty and effective. However, upon further analysis, he realised what sentiment underpinned the message. Its allusion was to materialism, to buying stuff; and of course faith was about much more than the quick fix involved in commodity fetishism. This was an old observation yet no less potent for all that, particularly in this day and age. The trouble was that Graham wasn't at all religious. His beliefs were atheistic and politically grounded.

He wanted to *make a difference* – that was surely the real nub of his dilemma. And selling out to the mainstream job market simply wouldn't allow him to achieve this.

Before long, he joined an attractive young woman waiting at a pedestrian crossing. When he stepped up beside her, she offered him a brief, shy smile. Graham couldn't decide whether she found him attractive or had just been responding politely. He didn't have much experience in relationships, having had only a few short-term girlfriends in his undergraduate days and a couple of brief flings later. However, he frequently thought about settling down one day and maybe having some kids like his wonderful niece and nephew.

Thinking this way only exacerbated his predicament. To get himself into a secure position, he'd have to find work ... and he was aware what these responsibilities were doing to his poor brother. Nevertheless, Graham envied Tom his family situation. Despite rationally understanding that being a husband and father was extremely demanding, he continued to experience a longing for that kind of life. This was an emotional thing and therefore resilient to the quality he possessed in spades: intelligence. He sometimes thought he could crack just about every nut with reason, but not this one – not this one at all.

Having now walked in the opposite direction to the pretty woman at the crossing, he'd reached his neighbourhood. The village school was situated here, deserted at the moment on account of the Christmas holidays. He, Tom and Eleanor had frolicked in this playground, along with countless others who now existed only in affectionate memory. And had those really been such great days? Graham was familiar with psychological theories about misplaced nostalgia, about how insidiously selective the human brain was when regarding the past.

He looked away and examined the landscape which encircled the village like some vast, comforting cradle. As children, he and his friends had believed that the grass was greener outside of Hitherton. Travelling to the fields that seemed to bear such a lush growth at a distance had never persuaded them otherwise. And didn't this imply that their youthful years hadn't been as great as he sometimes liked to imagine? Perhaps there was a lesson here for everyone ...

Graham turned to face the lane in which he lived and commenced walking along it. Situated off the high street, this was a private place full of old terraced buildings converted into flats. The occupants generally kept themselves to themselves, which Graham had always lamented, but such was modern life.

After advancing up the short, weed-strewn path, he fumbled in a pocket for his keys and then let himself inside the lobby, before closing the door behind him. There was some mail rested on the mat. When he stooped to collect this small pile, he noticed that one of the items was addressed to him. He deposited the rest of the post on the communal table and then studied what seemed to be a letter.

Its stamp was rather intriguing, he thought as he took it upstairs; and so was its graceful handwriting.

From behind his till, Tom performed a quick calculation to determine his current book-to-customer ratio: he had around five-thousand items in stock and no buyers at all. This certainly wasn't the kind of statistic to add to any business plan.

He'd been open now for an hour and not a single person had stepped into his showroom. Of course it was only ten o'clock, and the day trippers wouldn't start arriving in Hitherton until later in the morning. Nevertheless, the locals he'd served during the ten years he'd been running the business had more recently become reluctant to buy his books.

Was this all part of a global trend, a mass move away from literacy? If so, his business was experiencing a knock-on effect. Tom stepped up to his window and looked across the high street. The video-rental store opposite appeared to have a few customers milling around inside, as did the kooky fashion boutique beside it. Maybe reading was simply unpopular these days ... in which case, he was well and truly fucked.

Still, a multinational corporation had opened a big branch of its book stores in the nearby shopping complex. There must therefore be some money to be made from the printed word. Perhaps the problem was with the product Tom stocked, which couldn't compete with what passed for bestsellers these days: ghost-written celebrity

confessionals, mass-market hack fiction, and endless cookery, clothing and home decoration guides. In a moment of weakness a few weeks ago, he'd enquired with his supplier about the wholesale price of these and similar products, and the figures he'd been quoted had been nearly the same price the big bookshop was *selling* at. After slamming down the telephone, Tom had told himself he hadn't wanted to stock such rubbish anyway.

He turned to review his preferred merchandise. Here was a first-edition Graham Greene at £75, there a scarce proof-copy of *Catch 22*. Other treasures included rare publications by Larkin, Pritchett, the elder Amis ... But nobody was interested. The items he sold most copies of were ten-a-penny children's books or second-hand paperbacks at a quid a throw. And these were never likely to make him a fortune.

Not that this was his motivation, of course. He'd always loved books. His parents had instilled a fondness for literature in both himself and Graham from an early age. Tom had first met and got talking to Eleanor in the local library, so he certainly owed books a lot. He coveted them as a commodity, but this was about more than their exchange value. It was the quality of the work he admired. He'd always had a preference for novels, while Graham had been drawn to non-fiction. But they both had a healthy respect for good writing and strong narrative, and if this was combined with elegant typesetting, solid binding and striking cover art, all the better. A fine book could please in a way few other things in life could.

Tom strayed back to his till-point to examine his PC monitor. He'd sold a few items overnight in his eBay store, but the customer had purchased via PayPal by electronic cheque. It would take a good week for these funds to clear. Tom had thought seriously about closing down his shop and taking the business online, maybe even running it alongside a part-time job. But what else was he equipped to do? Aside from a handful of GCSEs and a few less impressive A Levels, he had no formal qualifications. He'd once made a choice between family and doing what his brother had done, and although he'd never regretted his decision, he often wondered what he might have achieved with a better education. Too late for this now, he thought with a bitter sigh. He was in his early-thirties, he had a

family to support, and he certainly couldn't wish all that away ...

He knew he should ring the bank, just as he'd promised his wife that morning. However, just as he was about to hitch up the receiver and make this resigned call, two things happened simultaneously: the telephone actually rang and someone paced into his shop.

Snatching the handset from its base, he watched the man now strolling across the showroom. It was Doctor Beckon, one of the nicest people in Hitherton. Tom and his family had been treated by him for years. Tom smiled, hoping to prompt a similar response from the doctor. Nevertheless, the man's expression was strained, as if he was tired or troubled by something ...

Right now, however, Tom had the caller to deal with.

"Hello. Young's Books. How may I help you?" he announced, and then hoisted one hand to his customer, a gesture intended to read: *I'll be with you in a moment.*

"Hello, Tom?" said Eleanor over the line, and Tom was unsettled to realise that her voice sounded every bit as fraught as his customer's face appeared.

He somehow managed to keep his voice steady when he replied, "Oh hi, Ellie. Listen, can I call you back? I'm just dealing with someone. Give me ten minutes or so, will you? Thanks."

He was sure she'd been about to ask whether he'd had any luck with the bank, and he needed a little more time to deal with that. When she next spoke, however, his wife sounded more mysterious than disgruntled.

"Christmas is a time for miracles – I guess it's true, after all."

Tom frowned. "Pardon? I, er, don't underst- ..."

"Just ring me back, Tom. I'll be here all day."

"Okay, love." For some reason, he now felt the need to prove he hadn't just been lying, even though in a way he had. He said, "Doctor Beckon's just come in. He's eager to ask me something, I think."

It was true: the usually relaxed man did look rather impatient. And when Eleanor then hung up after uttering only a perfunctory "Goodbye," Tom wondered what on earth was going on. What had his wife meant by her strange comment, *Christmas is a time for miracles?* However, as Tom set the telephone receiver back in its

plastic cradle, he suddenly had only one issue to occupy him: Doctor Beckon's expedient enquiry.

"Hello, young man. Good to see you. I trust the children are well – and your charming wife, of course. Anyway, I really must get on. I wonder whether you might order a book for me."

These words had been uttered at such a hurry, and without any of the doctor's usual reassuring eye contact, that Tom's sense of confusion stepped up several notches.

"Er, yes, certainly," he replied and fished automatically under the till-point for his wholesale catalogue. Once he'd set this on the desk in front of his clearly uppity customer, he asked, "Hey, are you ... all right, doctor?"

"A significant inversion of roles, what?" Doctor Beckon replied, a nervous quip to match his jittery bearing. His arms shook in his chequered jacket. His neat, half-moon spectacles had slipped a little down his slender nose. His eyes, ordinarily a calming brown, looked watery and bloodshot. Then, still unable to gaze at Tom, he went on no less twitchily. "The book is called *Mythical Creatures, a Pictorial Guide*. I ... oh yes, I owned this splendid tome as a child and have, alas, since misplaced my copy. I'd ... love to track down a replacement."

What else could Tom do but turn his alphabetically arranged catalogue to the 'M' section? He did so immediately, and then, as if his customer's anxiety had now been conveyed to him like some sneaky infection, ran a trembling forefinger down the page to the spot where the volume ought to be listed.

But there was no such book there.

Tom glanced up and now grew even more uneasy as he said, "Well, I'm afraid it's not listed, mate. It's, er, probably out of print."

"Oh God. Oh, good God."

Despite the man's increasingly fretful demeanour, Tom was determined not to be beaten so easily. He pointed at his telephone and said, "I do have a number of contacts in the trade, though. I could make some enquiries, if you wish."

But the man wasn't happy with this – not at all. "Ah, but I ... I need it *now*, you see," he explained, shaking a tremulous forefinger against one of his wrinkled temples. "It's my dreams, you see. Oh, *my dreams*."

And before Tom could reply again, the doctor began retreating for the exit. “Mayhap I’ll try the bigger store outside of the village,” he added before reaching the door, opening it and hurrying out. The door clapped shut in his wake, having just let in a breeze that belied all the sunshine that continued to occupy Hitherton this morning.

“*Jesus Christ,*” said Tom, slapping shut the catalogue in front of him. Then he remembered Eleanor’s call and her weird words to him over the telephone. “Just what the *hell* is going on today?”

The doctor might well visit the bookstore closer to Leeds, but if the title wasn’t listed as being in print at the wholesalers the branch was unlikely to stock it. However, this issue was of lesser concern than the man’s behaviour during his visit. Okay, so Tom had just lost another customer to that bloody multinational company, but this seemed negligible compared to what he’d just witnessed. A charming, respectable man had been reduced to a fretful, impolite wreck ... and by *what*?

Suddenly all Tom could picture in his mind were those four letters that had arrived at his home that morning. Hadn’t their stamps displayed a mythical beast – the same thing the doctor had requested a book about? And then Tom replayed his wife’s curious words in his mind: *Christmas is a time for miracles ...*

Something bizarre was at work here – no question about that. And what he surely ought to do now was call Eleanor back to determine what exactly this was.

He’d re-gathered the telephone’s handset before realising that he’d yet to contact the bank. Then instead of pecking in his familiar home number, he dialled another which had become almost as familiar to him lately: that of the multinational organisation’s local branch.

Its premises were only up the road, but Tom had nobody to man his till right now. If he managed to get an appointment today, he’d call Mavis Harper and ask her to fill in for him later. She’d always been willing to help out and had repeatedly refused money for working these brief shifts. She’d been a good friend of Tom’s parents, back when community spirit had meant something.

His call was eventually answered and Tom recognised the voice: it was Jim Court, one of his drinking buddies at The Green Dragon. The man lived alone on the outskirts of

the village, not far from Graham, but could be found in the pub every other night. In his late fifties, he'd begun to ascribe his appalling memory (he'd sometimes forget what as few as four people wanted from the bar) to old age, though Tom secretly suspected that drink had a lot to do with this. But he was a good guy, a stalwart of Hitherton. He'd worked at the bank for over twenty years.

"Hiya, Jim." Tom said, trying to keep his voice calm. "It's Tom Young here. How's it going?"

"Oh hi, Tom. Yeah, things aren't too bad, thanks. Er, how can I help you?"

Jim's reply hadn't sounded very convincing – he'd seemed too eager to move on from Tom's routine question about his well-being – but maybe Tom was just projecting onto the man his own sense of unease. In any case, he forestalled any more chitchat by asking, "Is Harry Deane available today? I need a few minutes of his time – a meeting, I mean. Will you see what you can do for me, bud?"

Jim sighed – a quiet sound, but it reached the mouthpiece all the same. "Yes, okay, I'll have a word with him. Will you hold or should I call you back?"

The thought of having to get Jim to write down his number (he certainly wouldn't have it stored in memory) made Tom blanch. He was in too much of a hurry. So then he said, "It's fine. I'll hold."

Moments later, diabolical orchestral music assaulted the earpiece, though this provided a fitting accompaniment to what Tom suddenly saw through his window. Had a man just walked past the shop whose face hadn't been properly stitched together? That was a ludicrous suspicion, of course; edginess was surely getting the better of Tom. The image must have been just a trick of sunlight on his greasy glass. Besides, hadn't the figure been wearing a postman's uniform? Anyone with such a deformity surely wouldn't work out in public ...

He was being foolish, but that was when he was saved from such nonsense by a cessation of the bank's devilish music and the welcome return of Jim's voice.

"Harry says he'll see you this afternoon, mate. At about three o'clock. Can you make it?"

"Yes, I'll be there, Jim. You betcha."

And then after functional goodbyes, Tom hung up. Whatever his friend's problem was, it would have to wait.

Tom now had a more pressing matter to attend to.

He reanimated the line and pecked in the digits of his home telephone number. At last he had some promising news, which he hoped would overrule some of the bad stuff he and his family had endured recently. There was surely no way that Harry Deane, a friend of the family for many years, would let them all suffer over Christmas. Some things were more important than business. Everyone knew this ... except for the faceless shirts-and-ties who ran the world and were slowly destroying Tom's livelihood.

When a voice answered his call, Tom was about to speak but then suffered another uneasy spell of cognitive dissonance. The voice was female, but it wasn't his wife's.

It was Natalie's.

"Hi Daddy!" his daughter said, and then in no less an excited tone she added, "Mummy says we've just received an end to all our woes!"

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