

A CHRISTMAS STORY

I'd never seen the man who lived on the top floor. Bedsits are like that; you keep yourself to yourself, and so does everyone else. Nobody wants a chatty neighbour. In fact, most of us dread them, and our days are spent waiting to hear the front door slam before going downstairs, thereby avoiding someone who shares the same house as you and might want a chat. It's the golden rule of bedsit life: when you hear the thud of the morning's mail on the mat, you wait for someone in a downstairs room to come out and sort the post before sneaking down yourself and getting your own letters. You come in quietly at night, to avoid disturbing any potential chatterboxes, and you never ever venture up to a floor higher than your own. A girl once visited me in a room I had in Turnpike Lane and asked me, "What's upstairs?" I had to tell her that I hadn't the faintest idea. There could have been a swimming pool for all I knew.

So, while I was familiar with a few faces on the floors below – most of whom were, thankfully, as unsociable as I was – I had managed to completely avoid the man on the upstairs floor. And I knew virtually nothing about him. No mail came for him, he hardly ever went out and the only interesting thing I knew about him – which was more of a deduction, really, was that he had the entire top floor, so technically he was living in a flat.

Like the rest of us, he kept himself to himself (I say "like the rest of us", but there was for a time a youngish man on the second floor who was fond of leaving his door open while he sat on his bed and played the acoustic guitar. Needless to say, he didn't last long) and, like the rest of us, was completely anonymous, except for one thing.

Father Christmas.

Christmas is supposed to be a difficult time for those of us who live on our own, and I can see why people might think that: words like "lonely" and "sad" spring to mind. In actual fact, it's a great time to be on your own, because unlike all the poor saps who are forced to spend time with drunken workmates and boring relatives, in a bedsit you can do what you like, enjoy your own company, and eat, drink and watch television as you please. A lot of people skip Christmas all together, which makes sense to me.

I like a sherry and an individual turkey dinner myself, but that's the extent of my interest in the festive season, and I'm pretty sure most people in my house feel the same way. No celebrations, no fuss – and no decorations. You might get the odd mini-tree on someone's table, or a bit of tinsel round the mantelpiece, but that's it. Bedsits aren't the kind of places where people go crazy with inflatable reindeer and enormous displays of Christmas lights.

Which is how the man on the top floor differed from the rest of us. Three hundred and sixty days a year, his flat was utterly indistinguishable from the rest of the house. Just three windows and a blank brick wall. But at Christmas, for reasons nobody had ever been able to fathom, outside the window nearest the side of the building he placed – hung might be a better word – a Father Christmas. It was an unimpressive thing, just a dummy in a Santa suit, with the hands holding onto a rope as though it was trying to climb up the wall. The suit was old and not very clean, and the dummy itself was floppy and shapeless, like a scarecrow or an old Guy Fawkes that had been in a lake for a few days.

And that was it. No lights, no Christmas messages, nothing. Just a sad sack Santa, hanging from a wall. Despite its size – it was as big as a man – it was entirely unimpressive. People walked past the house and didn't even notice it. Nobody in the building ever commented on it (but then nobody in the building ever commented on anything). It was just there, just itself and nothing more.

Certainly, I never noticed leaving the house or coming back in: and things might have stayed that way until a girl who was visiting me (not the girl from Turnpike Lane: she was long gone) got off my bed and said, "Those boots would get on my nerves."

"What boots?" I said.

She nodded at my window.

"Those," she said.

I got up and went over. At first it was hard to see what she meant. The window was pretty filthy and the evening light was fading.

She pointed up, and now I could see what she meant. Outside the window, at the very top, I could see the bottoms of two boots.

"Oh, the Father Christmas," I said. "I don't really notice it, to be honest. You can't see it from here."

"You can see the boots," she said.

"The soles of the boots," I corrected, and she gave me a look.

"All right, the soles," she said. "Which are part of the boots."

Now I gave her a look.

"I think my taxi's here," she said. We both knew it wasn't, but the exchange had clearly annoyed both of us, and the evening was suddenly over.

I showed her to the door, and climbed the stairs back to my room. I drank her glass of wine and went to bed.

The next day I got up, made myself a coffee – I have a very nice coffeepot that I gave myself for my birthday – and sat down at the laptop to check my emails. replying to some work emails – there were very few, because it was mid-December and people were winding down their offices. Then I spent a few minutes on social media (I'm the sort of person who never posts anything or makes comments, just sees what other people are up to) and after that, I just stared out of the window for a while. At least, I tried to.

The rain was coming down outside and the light was bad, but I could still see them.

They were different in daylight, grimmer and less convincing. They weren't real boots, of course, just some vinyl and fake fur trim stapled and glued together. But they were *there*, that was the important thing. They were there and they annoyed me. I got up and drew the curtains. This had the effect of making the room darker, and as the street lamp outside was still on, the boots still cast a show against the curtains. I drew the curtains back again and took my coffee cup into the kitchen.

My bedsit has a small kitchen, with a sink, a fridge and a small table. It also has a window. I couldn't see the boots from there, so I got my laptop and sat in the kitchen for a while, finishing a few pieces of work that weren't really essential.

When I looked up again, I was surprised to see the boots outside the window. They were closer now, almost tapping the glass.

I got up and went into the room with my bed in it. The boots were outside the window there, too. This seemed odd, given that the windows were at least ten feet apart.

I went back into the kitchen. The boots were still there, too.

After a few minutes going from window to window, and establishing for sure that the boots were somehow outside both windows at the same time, I sat down again and closed my eyes.

Clearly I had been spending too much time indoors. The girl's remark about the boots had stuck in my mind and made me fixate on the boots, which until now had not bothered me.

I put on my coat, checked my keys and phone were in the pockets and went out.

I wasn't sure what I intended to do. In retrospect, I should have gone and booked a doctor's appointment, but at the time I didn't feel that I was unwell. Instead I went downstairs, opened the front door – I didn't even stop to pick up my post – and crossed the road. I stood on the opposite pavement and looked up at the house.

The Santa was in his usual place, dangling down just above my room. His boots were just visible from the main window, but not, as far as I could see, the little kitchen. And yet I had seen the boots, almost touching the kitchen window.

"Hello!" said a voice, and I turned to see one of the people who also lived in my house, a small man whose name escaped me. He was carrying an armful of wrapped Christmas presents and his nose was rather red from, I presumed as it was still morning, the cold.

I responded in kind and, encouraged, he went on: "Admiring Nick's Santa, I see."

"Nick?" I replied.

"Nick upstairs," he said. "I don't know why he keeps it. That thing's like an old scarecrow."

He laughed at his joke. I didn't.

"Well, I expect you've got lots to do," he said.

I gave him a blank look.

"Christmas Eve!" he said, patting his packages, and strode off.

I looked up at the dummy again. Now I came to think of it, it did look like an old, red scarecrow.

That night I couldn't sleep, nor the next night either.

The third night I could hear something tapping on my window. A branch, would have said, if there had been a tree outside.

I opened the curtains. There was nothing there.

I frowned. Had the thing fallen down? Had "Nick" removed it?

Whatever the reason I was glad. Now perhaps I could get some sleep.

The tapping continued. Once again, I got up. This time I checked both rooms. I even opened a window, sending a shower of paint flakes into the night like a sudden burst of snow.

I couldn't get back to sleep.

Putting on a dressing gown and slippers, I went downstairs and as quietly as possible opened the cupboard under the stairs, where the landlord kept a few things, including a small ladder.

I went outside. It was a cold and cloudy night and the dim street lamps provided very little illumination. Looking up at my window, I could not see if the dummy was still there. I set the ladder against the wall and began to climb

There was something dangling from above my head, something like a wire, or a rope. I climbed to the very top of the ladder and grasped the end of it.

The wind and the rain seem to take turns up here, and it is always cold, or wet, and the chill cuts through my robe.

There's a window below me. I can almost touch it with my boots.