



## Last Christmas

I remember it as clearly as yesterday, and you're lying when you say it all passed in an alcoholic blur because of your new job and celebrating and so on. We were living together so it would have been a bit hard to fool me that much. Most of the time you were sober and a bit morose about having to move, to leave, even though you were pleased with the new status and even more with the new pay package.

*I gave you my heart...*

...right after the office party, on the way to the station. You were grumbling about having to pretend we weren't together and I suggested we should stop pretending, let the world know, get married (it's legal now, after all) and let the office busybodies have their nine days' wonder, shock and salacious gossip. I said I would come to London with you, find a job somewhere, somehow, so that we could be together. We stopped under one of those huge streetlights on the station approach and you kissed me right there in public. Well, OK, there weren't many public around and the ones there were were wrapped up in their own thoughts and destinations. But you kissed me without looking over your shoulder and I remember the sleet glistening on your hair under the light, the fiery coldness of your lips and the way my heart sang. Then you held my hand till we had to leave loose and run helter-skelter for the last train, laughing.

Neither of us had had that much to drink. We never did at those office things, too scared, I suppose, of giving ourselves away. So instead I gave my heart away and when we got home we fucked, or rather made love, till almost dawn.

*The very next day ...*

It was Christmas Eve and we went into the village to buy a tree. We thought they might be cheaper, with less than twenty-four hours to go. We found a really nice little tree outside the supermarket, with a huge 'reduced' sign on it and we were just going to go in when Anna, that new girl from the typing pool, came past. We hadn't known she lived in the same suburban village as us; she'd left the party early and of course we normally travelled in by car so we wouldn't have run across her. She looked surprised then asked if we were together, with one of those smirking, knowing looks that some people seem to find appropriate. I was just saying yes, proud and dizzily happy when you said no, we were just flatmates. I felt the bottom drop out of my world.

We didn't even decorate the tree and it just stood there all dark and bare till I threw it out on New Year's Eve, tired of the needles dropping on the carpet, dry and spiked like my thoughts.

You left on the Sunday night and you tossed me your keys without a care in the world.

*This year...*

I was surprised to see you, pleased for you to hear about the promotion and the return up north, but not impressed that you seemed to think I'd just have been waiting all year, like some kind of doll you can throw into a box and take out again when it suits you. You were never that great a 'catch' despite the inflated salary. I could always have found someone else but we were good together or at least I thought we were. You didn't. obviously.

*... someone special.*

He's already asked me privately and he's arranged this romantic public proposal under the mistletoe at his mum's house. They know, too, so there won't be any outcry, just lots of people pleased for us. He's really dependable, and not bad-looking. I'm going to be happy.

But sometimes, very privately, I just wish it was last Christmas all over again.

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New Year Mirror Stories (the first is dark and the second has a happy ending)

**New Year's Resolution 1 (500 words)**

He stroked the soft worn leather; fingered the prong on the well-known buckle – a snake swallowing its tail.

He watched her bring a bag of cast-offs, her own, her husband's, her son's. All for charity. The sick. The deserving. But when she looked at him there was no charity in her eyes.

He remembered skin, supple and brown as the belt encircling it. His eyes must have shouted their loss because he heard the girl on the stall say gently to him,

'We haven't priced this lot yet but if you really want it that badly ...I'll just ask.' Then after muttering with another woman,

'Is 50p OK?'

And he exchanged the 7-sided coin for a memory.

At Christmas he wore the belt close, like its owner had been. Had appeared to be. True closeness could not, surely, have been severed by the parental knife so surgically, easily, in one direction. The filaments of his own life were still entwined..

On New Year's Eve he stayed in. Others had asked him to join them at parties, in bars, at meals in private houses and convivial restaurants. He had refused all invitations. Each thought he was with another, never imagining him alone. Their brilliant friend, star of every gathering.

He leafed through the photographs, glad he'd had them printed. The two of them, on the beach, in the woods, walking in the hills. First one, then the other, then, as familiarity with the camera brought confidence, both, smiling at the timer that allowed them to pose together. The belt showed clearly in some of the shots. He held it as he remembered, the leather warming beneath his touch.

He had never understood how they had known. Or how strong their hold was. How all that love and brightness could crumble to ash in the blaze of their fury. His invitation to leave, live with him for ever, had been spurned as if it came from the devil himself. The family had closed around their own, leaving him on the outside, not even looking in.

Did they know what they had destroyed? He sensed that they did.. That they were proud of their achievement, would be equally proud of the outcome.

He dreamed fitfully and rose at a quarter to twelve. He'd already set crossed sticks and balled paper in the grate. Now he carefully added the photographs and placed the belt on top. As the church clock started to chime the hour he lit the match and set fire to his life. Ringing bells across the town accompanied the beautiful flames.

His brain made moving pictures in the flickering orange and gold. Two young men. Teenagers still. A camping holiday that turned into something more. Turned, in the bitter end, to tears and mud. Careless of the remaining heat he smeared the debris across his forehead and lay down beside the hearth.

After that, it was easy, inevitable even, swallowing the bitter medicine. And falling gratefully, permanently, asleep.

## **New Year's Resolution 2 (500 words)**

He stroked the soft worn leather; fingered the prong on the well-known buckle – a snake swallowing its tail.

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He remembered skin, supple and brown as the belt encircling it. His eyes must have shouted their loss because he heard the girl on the stall say gently to him,

'We haven't priced this lot yet but if you really want it that badly ...I'll just ask.' Then after muttering with another woman,

'Is 50p OK?'

And he exchanged the 7-sided coin for a memory.

He wore it sometimes, savouring the closeness, his own skin tingling with the remembrance of touch. Mostly it stayed coiled on the windowsill, a memento of summer and teenage craziness, the buckle a reminder of desire and laughter. Bittersweet memories, like the nest of adders they'd disturbed on the South Downs. Tender memories like the night on the cliffs at Dover.

Then he would remember the homecoming and the look on their faces when they said he wasn't welcome any more. The finality of the door closing in his face.

Christmas had no sparkle this year, despite the lights and the music. All he wanted was something he couldn't have. And he imagined the scene in their house, the prodigal son restored, the fatted turkey roasted to perfection, the devil cast out. All their prayers answered. He made duty visits then returned home.

New Year approached on leaden feet but all at once he felt a stirring of courage. One final throw of the die, for the sake of his pride if nothing else. He bought wine, cheese, chocolates. Entertaining his as yet uninvited guest had to be treated as a foregone conclusion. He dressed with care and forced himself into the frosty streets.

When he let the knocker fall beneath its pine wreath and heard the echo in the hall he almost turned away. It was too like a death knell. But the door opened and a startled face blossomed with joy.

'They said you'd gone away!'

'They said you didn't want to see me!'

And as easily as that the door swung shut and they were together. Running down the street hand in hand, shouting, laughing, crying. Shivering, too, in the icy east wind. His apartment, then, and a quick rummage through clothes that were all too big, too long, but were at least warm. A sweater that could be held in by the belt, restored to its rightful place. As he fastened it he knew it would have to be unfastened almost at once, but first, first ...

They went out onto the balcony and stood, arms around each other's shoulders, each holding a glass of wine. Wished the whole world a Happy New Year as the clocks chimed, then turned to the warmth, and to each other.

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