

“Just taking this rubbish out,” says Carol. She may as well have said she was nipping over to Darren’s across the road to give him a Christmas blowjob for all Rob cares; he’s glued to the Mrs Brown Festive Special. Popping her jacket on, she reaches in her pocket for her cigs, closing the back door quietly before lighting up.

She sits on the old coal bunker and takes a good drag, releasing an ethereal plume up into the night sky. She can make out the shape of him through the tatty old blinds. Fat sod. All day she’s been watching him feed his face and now she’s dreading that bedtime wink. Please God don’t let him want it. Not like with Jamie when they used to unwrap each other Christmas night. She reaches over and lifts the lid on the green bin and drops in the tray of turkey scraps, carcass, and fat. Let the rats and foxes come sniffing, what does she care.

“Fuck’s sake, aven’t you ‘eard of bin bags?” A familiar voice, accompanied by a series of sizzles and sparks, echoes from within the wheelie bin.

“Jamie?” She whispers, scanning the yard. “Is that you?”

“Course it’s me, who else would it be?” Jamie, the Ghost of Husband Passed replies, pulling himself up and perching on the edge of the bin. “Don’t I always pay you a visit on our special day?”

It’s true. Ever since that fateful Christmas when she’d given him ‘the honours’ of switching on the dodgy lights she bought off Knock-off Nathan down the Miners’. Now he was doomed to spend all of eternity, trussed up in the string of malfunctioning multi-coloured bulbs. He’d gotten used to the shocks, but he was still coming to terms with the loss of his mane. The turkey grease only served to accentuate his bald demise.

“Didn’t grow back then?” Carol says.

“Alright, no need to kick a ghost when he’s shawn.” He delves down into the bin, pulls out a handful of scrunched up wrapping paper, and wipes himself down.

“What’s that doing in there?” Sue asks. “I told him BLUE BIN for the sodding wrapping paper. Honestly, he can’t be trusted with the simplest of tasks.” Jamie

holds out the gift wrap, dripping with meat-juice. "It's no good now, is it?" She shakes her head and draws on her fag.

"Give us a drag," Jamie says, looking longingly at the cigarette.

Handing it over, she says, "I don't know what would shock him more: me smoking again or me chatting to his dead predecessor."

"I think that's the least of his worries." He tries to point dramatically across at the patio doors, but he's somewhat restricted by his light-shackles. He settles for a nod in the general direction of the living room. "Don't you think you should do something?"

She can make out the shape of Rob the Blob rolling around in paroxysms of glee. Most probably Mrs Brown made a joke about stuffing balls or turkey breast.

"Do what?" Carol asks. "Hose him down?"

"He needs an ambulance, not a fire engine. That's a heart attack if ever I saw one."

"Studying medicine in the afterlife, are we?"

"I don't need to. You just get a premonition; that fatal-feeling, if you like. When they cross over into the no-man's-land between life and death."

No-man's-land, thinks Carol, sounds about right. Rob's nowhere near the man Jamie was. But he has gone very still all of a sudden.

By the time the paramedics arrive, of course it's too late. They try to seduce him back with kisses and when that fails, out come the jump-leads, but it's like trying to animate a tyre mound.

Sitting in the back of the ambulance, before the driver shuts the doors, she watches Jamie trying to wave goodbye. That's the last of him until next year. Sitting opposite her is Martin, the kind one with the soft warm hands. Their eyes meet over the hillock of Rob's carcass.

