

A Christmas story

Sam was the last to leave the pub on Christmas Eve. The night was dark after the bright lights of inside and he pulled up his collar against the cold. He wasn't that keen on Christmas, living on his own. It just passed him by but the day off work was good.

He stumbled on the verge cursing the pile of stones half hidden in the grass. "Whoa there man," he muttered and headed off along Brown's track. It was a good shortcut and he could cut across the fields to home.

A banana shaped moon was lying on its back in the stream and Sam held onto to the wall for a minute while he looked up to check whether there was still one in the sky. Satisfied there was he started counting the stars, one, two, three but he had to stop because they were multiplying before he could even get to ten.

The track was muddy and rutted and the trees trailed behind him sighing their annoyance at the disturbance.

Sam heard an owl hooting. He loved that eerie call, spreading a warning over the woods and fields like an eiderdown. Then he heard another sound, a low moan, and then another, like a cow in trouble. Sam turned slowly in a full circle catching his coat on the briars that were clawing at him. "No cows around at this time of year man. Get yourself off home". A scream opened Sam's eyes as it flew past him down the track, quickly followed by another, making him stagger back against the hedge.

It was coming from Brown's old barn, the shape looming in front of him. "Funny I thought..." but Sam couldn't make sense of that thought before he reached the yard. The concrete was firm underfoot and a trough lay on its side rusted and wet where the water had spilled out, making its own map of the world.

The screams were quieter now like a gale blowing itself out. Sam put his eye to a broken slat. The light from the moon was a spotlight, lighting up a young girl. No more than sixteen he reckoned but in her arms she had a baby, naked and whimpering, its cord still attached same as the lambs in the spring. Sam pushed at the huge barn door. The latch was cold and the frost was beginning to outline it in white.

"It's alright, I'll help you, I'll phone an ambulance." The girl looked up at him, her black hair damp around her face but she smiled. Sam never used his mobile phone but maybe this was the moment for which it had been waiting and he dialled 999.

The barn was strangely warm and Sam took off his coat and wrapped it around the baby. The old tweed was rough but its lining was silk against the soft pink skin. The baby stopped crying and its tiny lips pursed ready to take on the world.

Sam sat beside the girl, Mary she said her name was, from over Wyke way. She said her boyfriend had gone for help but Sam wasn't sure about that. They sat without talking and he held her until she stopped shivering. The baby's hand was curled around his finger. He could hear sheep gently bleating and feel the warmth of their breath stirring the straw around his feet. He looked round but couldn't see them. Shadows played a black and white film on the wall of the barn and Sam told Mary he had been counting the stars earlier. See, he said, trying to keep her awake, like that one shining on us through the hole in the roof.

"Merry Christmas then you old bugger, I've got you a pint in. Slept late did you?" Joe was up at the bar at their usual place. The pub was noisy with people toasting each other and their laughter was as bright and fragile as the tinsel.

"What a night eh?" Sam said. "Anyone heard how the lass is?"

"What lass?" Ray behind the bar said as he pulled two more pints for his old friends.

"Well, Mary she said her name was from over Wyke. I stayed 'til the ambulance came. Gave birth in Brown's old barn she had, no more than sixteen I reckon. Plucky little thing."

"Last night, in Brown's old barn, you stayed 'til the ambulance came. What do you mean?"

"Just that, no need to repeat everything". Sam watched the froth form a line on Joe's lips as he gulped at his drink. The barman had stopped pulling the pint, his hand still on the pump.

"Sam," both men were looking at him now. "Brown's old barn blew down in the gale of '87, smashed to pieces and killed a load of sheep as I remember. You been on the whiskey?"

Joe stared at Sam. "You talking about Mary Roberts aint you? Early 1900's or something like that. Bloomin' miracle so the story goes.. Some bloke saved her life. Forget what she called the boy, funny choice I recall but I don't remember the detail."

Sam studied his palm and touched his finger where another little hand had curled.

"Funny that" he said. "Well, Happy Christmas mate" and he lifted the amber liquid seeing a gaudy, silver, star reflected in it.