



Challenged

The wall in front of Clive dissolved. 'Fourth floor,' said a woman's voice.

Fourth, thought Clive, Fourth? But we only have two floors. He waited. 'Doors closing,' said the voice.

The wall closed, then parted again. Clive waited. A figure loomed in front of him, a man laden with packages. 'You getting out or what, mate?' said the man.


'What are you doing in my house?' said Clive. 'Are you the postman?'

'Nah, mate, and this ain't your house. It's a shop, mate. Had a drop too much, have we? Out you come, get a shift on.'

Clive took a step forward. How can there be a shop outside my lounge? It should be the kitchen. The room had been calm and evenly lit as usual, though he couldn't find the chairs or the sofa. But in the kitchen, oh, oh dear, a pandemonium of red, blue, pink, green, purple, silver and gold, sparkled and flashed, whirled and spun, stabbing his eyes, dizzying him.

As he hesitated he was pinned from both sides. 'How dare you. Unhand me or there'll be trouble,' he said, before stumbling forward as he was released. 'No need to push.'

The parcel man slipped around Clive. 'Take care, have a good one,' he said. Clive turned and turned, struggling to see the sink, the hob, the window through the brilliance of the colours, bright, flickering, dancing, but not in a nice way. And hot, hot on his face, making him sweat, like the July sun, but in the kitchen? No, no, too hot, something burning, burning in the kitchen.



‘Help,’ he shouted. ‘Fire, fire! The kitchen’s on fire. Sandra, where are you?’ He covered his face and crouched beneath a huge, horned animal tethered to a man who seemed on fire too.

He felt a hand on his shoulder. ‘Are you alright, pal?’ Clive flinched.

As other hands reached out to lift him, Clive swung his arms, and his assailants drew back to a circle just beyond reach. ‘Get away, get away,’ he said.

He closed his eyes to concentrate and became aware of noise. Shouting, wailing and howling, reinforced by regular thumping and whistles and screeches, sweeping high and rumbling deep. The rhythm of it seemed familiar, a dream that he could not quite capture. What was that repeating sound, ‘Mary mish mash, Mary mish mash?’ I don’t know a Mary, why don’t you stop them, Sandra? What are they doing in my house? He put his hands over his ears and tried to remember what had brought him to this disorder. ‘Dante, Giotto; Dante, Giotto; Dante, Giotto,’ he said, trying to force something from his memory.

‘He sounds Italian,’ a woman said. ‘Buongiorno? Come stai?’

Around him other mouths poured out words and phrases he half recognised but could not understand - water, help, chair, doctor, ill, ambulance, poor old sod - and harsh ones that frightened him - loony, bonkers, disgusting, drunk, lost it, shouldn’t be allowed. He shook his head, and battered his forehead with the side of his fist. ‘Thinking, thinking, thinking,’ he said, and began to weep.

‘May I help you, sir?’ The speaker was tall, uniformed, carrying his hat of office as doorman. ‘Aren’t you the gentleman who asked for directions to Santa’s Grotto a few minutes ago? This is Christmas Decorations, sir, so you’re nearly there. Let me show you the way.’

‘Santa’s Grotto,’ said Clive. ‘Yes, Santa’s Grotto, that’s it.’

The doorman offered his gloved hand to Clive, who took it as a child might. Together they walked past the inflatable Rudolf, keeping

time with the music that insistently wished customers a Merry Christmas.



‘Grandpa!’ said a girl of six with her hair in bunches, ‘There you are. Where have you been? I’ve seen Santa already. He’s even older than you.’

‘Are you alright, Dad?’ said her mother. ‘We were getting worried. I knew I should have come with you.’ She turned to the doorman. ‘Thank you. Where was he?’

‘He ...’

‘I went to the food hall,’ said Clive, ‘took the lift, and this gentleman kindly put me right. Nothing to be concerned about, Ellen.’

‘I think the bright lights confused him, madam, and for a moment he thought he was in his kitchen. Will you be alright now, sir?’

‘Oh, Dad.’




‘Well, Clive,’ said the doctor, ‘I can’t find a damn thing wrong with you. No sign of any head trauma; memory test’s fine, eyesight’s fine, kidneys, liver, BP, ECG. Even your cholesterol is down a bit, not that I think it’s relevant. For a bloke of 70, you’re great.’

‘So what happened, Doc? After all, I totally lost it in Christmas decs. I got them to show me on the CCTV. So embarrassing.’

‘Not sure. But ... how long is it, Clive, since Sandra died, three years?’

‘Come February.’



‘And she used to do the Christmas shopping? ... No, bear with me,’ he said as Clive nodded, but looked puzzled. ‘I read of a case like yours. A couple of cases, actually, in New York. Macy’s, Christmas decorations. One woman thought she was in her bathroom and took all her clothes off.’

Clive shivered. ‘Poor cow. But, what’s your point, Doc?’

‘In a minute. Tell me, Clive, how was Sandra at buying the presents?’

‘Brilliant. She remembered what we’d given everyone for the last 10 years, she knew what people liked and couldn’t stand. She was up-to-date on what the little ones were into. She was a genius.’

‘And you?’

‘Not bad - I do try, take it really seriously. But it’s not the same, and people notice. I see them looking sorry for me. I give them a present, and “poor old Clive” is written all over them. And some people are just impossible to buy for; I don’t know how Sandra did it.’

‘And that day, you know, the Christmas decs and everything?’

‘Ah, I get you. Well, I’d just been in the Food Hall trying to find the make of panettone that Sandra always gave her sister. Couldn’t find it. And I was running late, supposed to be taking my granddaughter to see Father Christmas. What you thinking, Doc?’

‘Well, let me see. My guess is that you have PPSD, Perfect Present Search Disorder. Unusual in a man, but that’d be trying to live up to Sandra.’

‘You are kidding. PPSD? A disorder. Is disorder better or worse than a syndrome? No, don’t answer that. PPSD. Do I say I *have* PPSD or I’m *suffering* from PPSD or I’m a PPSD *survivor*? Or is it that I’m on the PPSD spectrum?’

‘It’s the PP Spectrum, actually, and for you the accepted phrase is that you are *perfect present challenged*. You see, it’s not that you’re

rubbish at buying presents, it's that you worry about it to the point that it paralyses you, to put it in lay terms. Hence "challenge".'

'Challenged. Mm. And is there any treatment or a way of managing it, this challenge?'

'Well, yes there is, but I don't think you're going to believe it.'



'How much are these, gov?' said the man at the front of the queue, holding up a pair of socks to Clive, who was wearing brown plastic antlers and a red nose.

'A pound each,' said Clive. He pressed a button on his jumper. A £ sign on his nose lit up. 'We are the *One Pound Shop*, after all. All socks are a pound a pair. Would you like a bag?'



Merry Christmas !