

NOW'S THE SEASON TO BE JOLLY, TRA-LA-LA, TRA-LA-LA, TRA LA LA!

Two days before Christmas Eve, Barbara telephones Michael.

“Ellie? Is it you?”

“It’s me. Your wife, not your child-slut.”

“Oh. What do you want, Barbara?” he says coldly. “You’ve woken me up. And she is not a child.”

“For Christ’s sake, Michael. Drunken stupor again, is it? It’s gone ten o’clock, you know. And she is barely sixteen, Michael and she is still at school, as you very well know, so as far as I am concerned, and most other people too, I should think, she is a child. And that is what I shall call her. I refuse to use the little slut’s name.”

God rest you merry gentlemen, let nothing you dismay.

Michael is about to refute that term too, but stops himself, realising that Barbara is being deliberately, albeit understandably, peevish and contentious.

He fumbles for his wristwatch and sees that she is right.

“What do you want?”

“We need to talk. I’ve been at Mum’s a month. Things can’t go on like this,” she says mechanically.

Michael freezes, thinking that she is about to suggest moving back to the cottage and trying some kind of reconciliation.

“The girls would like to see you, although God knows why. Fascination with pond life, I suppose. This afternoon? You know, if it’s not too much trouble and you can drag yourself out of bed. Then when you bring them back we can have a few words,” she says as if they were arranging a trip to the supermarket.

“What, at your mother’s?”

“Hardly, Michael. No, I’ll come out to the car and say what I have to say there. It won’t take long, I can assure you.”

“Er, OK. I’ll pick them up at two o’clock. I’ll be the one wearing the trout mask; make sure the kids don’t confuse me with your mother.”

Laughing, he puts down the phone without waiting for her reply.

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He showers, shaves and finds some clean clothes. At two o'clock, he pulls up slowly outside his mother-in-law's house in Combe Down. Jowls of grey clouds are flopping on the damp rooftops.

Then a poor man came in sight, gathering winter fuel.

Michael turns off the engine and waits. A curtain flicks in the front room and a few moments later the front door opens and the twins appear on the path. Lucy turns back to look at someone inside, says something and then takes Hannah's hand and the two of them walk towards the gate. The front door closes.

Inside the car, Michael takes a deep breath. He jumps out and throws his arm around the two little girls, the three of them a tight, weeping bundle on the pavement. The curtain flicks again.

"How are my two lovely girls?" he says, swallowing back the second wave of tears.

In a tiny, tight voice, Hannah says, "OK, 'spose."

She pulls away from Michael and turns towards his car.

A few minutes later, as they drive down Entry Hill towards the city, Michael says, "So, shall we go and gorge on ice cream and then find you both some presents?"

Deck the halls with sprigs of holly.

"Yeah!" replies Lucy with what feels to Michael like forced enthusiasm.

"Huh! Too cold for ice cream," snaps Hannah.

They compromise and find a surprisingly quiet little café in one of the arcades where those who want ice cream can have it and those who want to be resentful can sulk and then eventually weaken and ask for a rum baba. Michael leads them to a relatively private corner table where, he thinks, they may be able to talk more comfortably.

He has failed to be sufficiently sensitive to the circumstances. The girls are used to communicating with their father in fits and starts as the day progresses at home. This is an odd, new game. They do not understand the rules. They feel unhappy. Their mother is angry with Daddy. He looks scruffy and this feels awkward and false. What to do in this strange new world?

Lucy swallows the last of her Knickerbocker Glory, smacks her lips and drops her long spoon with a loud clatter. She looks at Michael to see what this transgression of normal table manners will produce. He looks at her balefully and frowns.

"I'm freezing to pigging death," she announces shrilly.

“Lucy, I don’t know where you’ve heard that but it’s not very nice in the mouth of a little girl,” Michael says sternly.

“If you’re cold, it’s your fault for having ice cream, div,” says Hannah, sarcastically, through a mouthful of sticky rum baba.

“That’ll do, Hannah,” interposes Michael quickly. He is not in the mood for squabbling and can sense the early signs. The twins are being fractious and rebellious.

“She is a div,” responds Hannah.

“I said, that’ll do,” says Michael.

Hannah gives a long sigh and mutters something under her breath.

“Hannah,” admonishes Michael, “if you have something to say, let’s all hear it. Don’t mumble into your beard.”

Lucy laughs and Hannah looks frosty.

“We’re fed up at Nanny’s,” blurts Hannah, “and we want to come home.”

“Yeah, like before,” agrees Lucy.

“Look, girls,” sighs Michael, “you’re not little babies. You know what the score is here, although I’m sure my version and Mummy’s will be entirely different.”

“And Nanny’s,” says Lucy. “She says that time will tell and stuff like that, on and on.”

“I’ve always thought that “Time will tell” is one of your grandmother’s most over-worked and fatuous remarks,” snaps Michael.

Lucy looks puzzled.

“What’s fatuous?”

“It means silly or stupid. Of course time will tell; time will tell every bloody thing, won’t it? Or it already has, if you subscribe completely to Einstein’s Theory of Relativity.”

“Language, Daddy!” says Hannah.

Michael looks rueful and tells himself to calm down. He realises that the tensions of the situation are making him short-tempered, but who is to blame for that? He has caused the tensions. Whatever has happened, it is not the twins’ fault.

“I don’t think we know what you’re talking about, Daddy and anyway, you’re not answering the question,” Lucy complains. “When can we come home?”

“Like before?” asks Michael. “I’m sorry but it’s not going to be like before, girls. I’m very, very sorry because I know it’s making you sad and angry with me; fair enough; but that’s the brutal truth.”

Hannah's bottom lip quivers for a moment and it looks as though she's going to burst into tears, but she manages to recover herself.

"There's stuff at home we want to get, then," she says petulantly.

"Yeah," chimes in Lucy, "if we can't come home then I want my drawing things. Can you bring them for me?"

"If you let me know what you want," begins Michael, "oh, but no, I might not be able to bring them just yet. I may be away."

There is a silence whilst the twins digest this information and then, as if their father was not there, Lucy turns to Hannah and says matter-of-factly, "I expect he's going to see that little tart. I expect they're going to f... do it, you know."

Hannah nods at her sister in agreement.

"Keswick tart!" she splutters and they both dissolve into peals of hysterical laughter.

Michael coughs loudly.

"Girls! That's enough! Now, what do you want for your Christmas presents?"

Lucy looks at Hannah who frowns but Lucy is going to say it anyway. She has decided that she's not going to let the matter drop.

"The best present in the whole wide world? Stop all this messing about that you're doing," she announces in the clear, piping voice that she reserves for her considered pronouncements and occasional State functions.

Of all the trees that are in the wood, the holly bears the crown.

Michael raises an admonishing eyebrow, conscious of a curious, critical glance from the haggard waitress behind the counter. Lucy, however, is not to be silenced by a mere expression on her father's face.

"Stop behaving like a hormoned teenager and make it up with Mummy. And then we can all go home."

"It's hormonal, not hormoned, you divvy," whispers Hannah, pompously.

Lucy sniffs.

"Whatever," she says, aggressively.

"I think we just dealt with all that. Is that what your mother says?" asks Michael. "And keep your voice down, Lucy. We don't want the whole place listening in."

"Embarrassing," adds Hannah.

"OK," says Lucy, almost as loudly as before. "Yeah, I s'pose so; what Mum says. So what? It's true, isn't it?"

“Do you know what it means?” asks Michael, rather obviously avoiding the issue.

“We know what it means, Dad. We’re not babies any more, like you said. And we know what shagging means too. We overheard Mummy saying it about you to Nanny,” counters Lucy.

“Is it what you think too, H?” asks Michael.

“Yes, Daddy, of course it is. You’re making us very unhappy,” she says and begins to snivel into her napkin.

“When are we all going home? Together. Like before?” says Lucy firmly. She is not going to let this moment dissolve into pools of tears like her sister. “We’re fed up with being at Nanny’s. She makes us eat porridge every morning and we can’t even say bum.”

“Well,” says Michael.

“Mummy says when you’ve shagged it out of your system, you’ll want to come home again. With your tail between your legs,” blurts Lucy.

Gloria in excelsis Deo.

“Lucy!” says Hannah, scandalised.

“So! So! She did. You heard her too,” mutters Lucy, beginning to realise that she may have over-stepped the mark.

There is another uncomfortable pause. Michael sips at his coffee.

“So when, then?” insists Lucy.

He puts down his coffee cup.

“I’ve told you, girls; look, things have not been too good for Mummy and me just lately,” he begins. “It’s probably more my fault than hers, but...”

The twins both study the design on the tablecloth intently.

Lucy looks up briefly.

“We know what’s going on. But she’s one of the kids in the sixth form, Dad. Gross, isn’t it?”

“OK,” says Michael, “we’ll use her name, then. Ellie; Ellen. I’m sorry if you think it’s gross. I don’t, of course.”

“We see her about, Dad,” confirms Hannah.

“Mum says you’re not in love with her, it’s just infa...infantile...no,” struggles Lucy.

“Infatuation,” Hannah supplies the word.

“Yeah, that’s it. And shagging.”

“I expect she does,” says Michael lamely.

“She says you’re infatooted or whatever it is because she’s got long legs, a flat belly and big boobies,” says Lucy, employing the piping voice again. “Well, actually, she said tits.”

“I am not in the least bit surprised she says that. It sounds like the kind of thing she would say. Is she saying it in front of you?”

Lucy shoots a glance in Hannah’s direction.

“Well, not, not exactly,” says Hannah.

Michael looks at them expectantly, waiting an explanation.

“We were on the landing,” says Hannah, “and we heard them talking in the kitchen.”

“And Nanny didn’t tell Mummy off when she said tits or shagged,” offers Lucy, “but she tells us off even if we only say bum or willy or something. It’s not fair.”

“I see,” says Michael, ignoring Lucy’s last remark. “Some might call that eavesdropping.”

The girls look at each other but surmise that their father is not really angry. Lucy shrugs her shoulders.

“And just for the record,” he adds, “life invariably is unfair. Sorry, but it is. And already I can hear your Mum telling me to stop introducing pessimistic analyses in front of you.”

“Dad, sometimes we don’t know what you mean,” Hannah remarks plaintively.

“Are you and Mummy going to get a divorce?” says Lucy bluntly.

Hannah makes a clicking noise and rolls her eyes towards the ceiling.

“What’s the matter?” says Lucy sharply. “That’s what we want to know, isn’t it?”

“Alright, girls,” says Michael, intervening, “don’t start squabbling. The answer, Lucy, is that I don’t know yet. It does largely depend on Mummy but, well, yes, probably.”

Both girls are silent, examining the table cloth again.

“But even if we do, it doesn’t mean we’ve stopped loving you two. It just means that we have decided to live separately,” he adds.

“Will you go and live with Ellie?” asks Hannah, quietly.

“It’s too soon for that, Hannah. I mean, too soon for that decision,” replies Michael. He realises that his daughters have already moved the relationship to at least the next phase before he has had time to talk to Ellie about it.

“But I suppose that in the fullness of time we shall.”

The girls look at each other. Hannah's lip begins to tremble. Suddenly, Lucy's bravado deserts her and she begins to wail and then to bang her fists on the table.

"I hate her, I hate her," she blubbers, "she's a horrid cow and a slag and a tart!"

All the heads in the café turn in their direction.

Silent night; holy night.

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An hour later, he sits in the car waiting for Barbara to come out of her mother's house as arranged. She keeps him waiting for nearly ten minutes and even though the engine is running, his feet are going numb. Eventually, she appears at the front door and stumps purposefully towards him. She is wearing a large red coat and some sort of flat, felt hat. Michael smiles to himself, despite the situation, for he thinks she looks not unlike a pillar box.

She flings open the front passenger door and collapses onto the seat. Michael has already decided to try to snatch the initiative, rather than to allow himself to be wrong-footed. He starts talking before she has even shut the door.

"I won't say good afternoon," he begins, "because I have no doubt you will respond with some savagely caustic remark. So may I ask straight away what you have been saying about me and Ellie to the twins?"

Barbara looks a little surprised by the aggression in Michael's tone.

"What do you mean?"

"Well, they obviously know she's up in Cumbria. How? Why? And they have referred to her this afternoon as a tart and although Lucy didn't actually use the f-word, I think she was about to," he replies curtly, "in order to describe my relationship with Ellie."

"Does it matter if they know where she is? What's the problem? And I can assure you, Michael, that I have done my best to keep all discussions factual and non-emotional. It hasn't been easy. Obviously. They are very, very distressed and disturbed. I have not used the word tart in their hearing."

"I think you may find they're hearing more than you think they are," he says. "I suggest you keep the kitchen door closed when you're ranting on about it with your sodding mother."

"Leave my mother out of it. She's been very kind, especially to the girls. I don't know what I'd have done without her."

“Ask your father. He’s got a comprehensive plan on it.”

“I’ll ignore that. And I don’t rant. Look, Mike, we both did the child psychology. You know what happens to kids in this situation as well as I do. If they are unsettling you or needling you, it’s no surprise, is it? I expect they’re doing it deliberately. Their way of hurting you a little by way of return for what they sense you’ve done to them. Their way of showing you their dismay, anger, disgust and revulsion at what their father is doing. Not to mention the humiliation they are likely to feel when they get back to school after Christmas. Have you thought about that? It’s all over the valley, so you can imagine some of the stuff they’ll be subjected to in the playground. You may not have thought about it, but they have. I was up half the night with Hannah last night, crying her eyes out with worry about the first day of term.”

Michael feels a stab of pain, just as Barbara intended. He realises that already he has lost the initiative of the conversation, if ever he had it.

“You haven’t given it a bloody single thought, have you? You’re so wrapped up in your own selfish, lustful affairs that you can’t even consider what effect all this might be having on your kids. If all they did was call her a tart and imply that what’s uppermost in your mind is your next fuck, then I’d say you got off lightly,” Barbara glares at him.

Michael lowers his head and studies his knees.

“OK, OK,” he mumbles. “What did you want to talk to me about? Let’s get it over with; I’m freezing to bloody death out here.”

“Just try to think about them, instead of yourself. I know you couldn’t give a shit about me anymore, but at least give some thought to what effect you’re having on them. They’re still young.”

“Alright, Barbara, alright!” Michael shouts. “You’ve made your sodding point. I’m the complete, selfish, fornicating bastard. Message received and understood.”

He pauses; she snuffles. Then, more calmly, he speaks again.

“Look; for what it’s worth, I’m sorry. I didn’t plan to hurt them. Or you, come to that. I don’t know; it just...”

“It just sort of happened? Huh! Don’t give me that crud, Mike. What happened to free will? You chose to do what you did. It wasn’t forced on you,” she snaps. “You’re making a big mistake, Mike. In time, you’ll see that I’m right.”

“I can hear your mother’s favourite phrase coming on,” he replies. “I don’t believe I am making a mistake but time will tell.”

“Quite so. I give it no more than a year, at the outside. She’ll tire of it long before you will. She’s a kid and she’s a user. She’s just playing with you. Finding out what power she has over men. She must be very pleased with herself at the moment. You need to think about it. You’re going to look like a bloody fool.”

Michael looks puzzled.

“What do you mean, power over men?”

“Christ, you can be so blind, sometimes. Like all men when some young slut’s sucking their dick. Isn’t it obvious? No, I suppose it isn’t to you, is it? That’s the whole point. Look at it this way. What has she caught? Snared might be a better word. Not a spotty youth like her friends, some immature gibbon with his knuckles grazing the floor and smelling of B.O. and fried food. Not a bum-fluff, gangling oik wearing an oily, ripped jacket with Iron Maiden scrawled on it. Still exchanging smutty jokes behind his hand about hard-ons and jerk-offs with his equally simian mates. Jumping up and down at the school disco like a bloody pogo stick, ignoring all the pretty girls in the corner who’ve made an effort before coming out and had a shower and got changed? An inarticulate, greasy slob who is about as sensitive and romantic as a baboon? If he pays a girl any attention it’ll only be to smooth talk her so he can lift her skirt up in the side alley and shoot his packet into her before she’s had time to check her lipstick!

No, no! Oh, no, none of that for your precious, precocious Miss Effing Fortune. A child she may be but she has netted handsome, debonair, Deputy Head Dr. Chadwick, hasn’t she? Look what I got, girls! Quite a catch. And what’s more, she can let it be known that he’s really good in bed and that he’s leaving his wife and children for her; the bitch!”

Barbara’s analysis dissolves into sobs and tears as she arrives at the final, painful sentence.

Michael cannot resist a grin, for it was Barbara’s caustic and vulgar sense of humour which had attracted him to her all those years ago in the student bar.

“Very amusing. Shoot his packet! Very good; very drole. Have you been working on that or was it entirely spontaneous?”

“Oh, piss off,” she hisses.

“Anyway, I don’t agree. You are ascribing a degree of guile and pre-meditated cunning to Ellie which, frankly, she could never possess. She’s not like that at all,” says Michael, defensively.

“I didn’t expect you to agree,” she says. “You’re still at the blind stage. But you’ll see.”

“So you keep saying. Well, this discussion just going round in circles, isn’t it? Obviously, we are looking at the thing from entirely different perspectives and so we’re never going to agree. By definition,” he replies assertively. “So is that it? You wanted to see me to tell me that she’s the cat and I’m the mouse?”

“No, actually, I didn’t plan to say any of that; although I’m glad I’ve said it. It needed saying, even if, predictably, you don’t want to listen, or can’t listen, at the moment.”

She pauses and takes a breath.

“No, I want to talk to you about what happens now, given that you’ve done what you have and are clearly hell-bent on continuing on the same course. I’ve been doing a lot of thinking over the last month, Michael and I’ve made a number of decisions. All of them, I hope, with the girls’ interests uppermost. We cannot pretend to be a married couple any more. I’ve had enough, given that this is not the first time that you have dipped your wick. Maybe I still love you, maybe I don’t. To be honest, I don’t know. Contempt is getting in the way. But I can’t live with you any more, that’s a certainty. What you have done to me and our marriage is unforgivable. You are treating me like shit. I meant what I said in the letter I wrote to you a month ago. I’ve seen a solicitor, as I said I would and you should be getting the divorce papers any day now. Please don’t bugger about with it or start delaying or something. Let’s just get it over with. Finito. Goodnight, Vienna, to use your favourite phrase. Yes?”

She looks at him.

He studies his knees again for a while and then looks up, although he finds it difficult to look at his wife, instead staring ahead at the fog gathering around them.

“Yes, alright. I agree, I suppose,” he says.

“You suppose?”

“I mean, I agree it has to happen but I haven’t thought about how. I haven’t seen a solicitor. I suppose I should.”

“Yes. Obviously, we have to decide on the practicalities: the house, money, possessions and so on. My solicitor will be writing to you and I think you would be best advised to take his letter, with its proposals, to your solicitor.”

Michael doesn’t reply straight away, but chews his lip, considering this sudden turn of events. Of course, he thinks, I should have thought about this; she’s right, there has been time enough.

“Proposals?” he asks.

“About the cottage mainly. I don’t want it sold, not now anyway; I think that for the foreseeable future, I should be there with the girls so that the disruption in their lives is minimised. So we have to get it valued and then agree how to proceed from there. Basically, I may have to buy you out; maybe eventually, not now but at an agreed figure; a figure to take account of everything else of value, including your inheritance and, well, everything that’s happened. And there have to be arrangements for the twins. It’s not going to be easy, or cheap. So be prepared.”

“You mean that you’re about to take me to the cleaners?” Michael says.

Barbara snorts.

“Please don’t take that tone, Michael. If we can agree things between ourselves it will be easier, quicker and cheaper than having the solicitors wrack up costs over it. Remember what happened with Jane and Paul?”

Michael grunts his agreement and smiles to himself. He remembers what happened to them alright. Paul had told him about it, in detail, several times. Apparently Jane had awoken in the middle of the night, and found herself alone in the bed. When, after thirty minutes, Paul had not returned from what she presumed to be a visit to the bathroom, she went to investigate. Hearing muffled moaning noises from the guest bedroom, she gently opened its door and saw her husband taking the seventeen year old babysitter from behind.

“She arrived for the finale,” Paul had said. “Impeccable timing, Jane. She’d have been none the wiser; we’d managed it two or three times before, but little Mandy is a bit of a squealer. Delicious, firm little body,” he had sighed, “and unquestionably the best sex I’ve had for years. You should try it, Mike. Unbelievable.”

“I could take you to the cleaners as you put it. Maybe I should,” Barbara is saying. “Mum certainly thinks so. But, perhaps surprisingly, I find myself of the view that we should arrive at a sensible solution. I won’t say amicable, because, well, that’s not how I feel, but I don’t want years of antagonism and protracted arguments and bitterness because that will have an effect on the twins and, as I say, they are uppermost in my mind. I just hope that you will be prepared to see that what you have done and what you intend to do, I assume, comes at a cost.”

“Alright, I’ll think about it. And see a solicitor, I suppose,” he says.

“Good. And I’d like you to move out of the cottage now, so that the twins and I can go back there before the start of term,” she announces with a note of finality. “Mum’s been kind but, well, we can’t stay here forever.”

“That’s one thing we can agree on. No one should have to stay with your mother forever. And that includes your father,” Michael says, enjoying the opportunity for further insult. “And what am I supposed to do, then? Sleep in the shed?”

“That’s your problem. You should have thought about that before you started humping the child. No, not the shed, don’t be stupid. I think it would be best if you were some way away from the valley. I want us to be able to move back there at the weekend.”

She looks across at him defiantly.

“That only gives me three days, for Christ’s sake!” he complains.

“So? You’ve got a lot on, have you? Get it organised, Michael. Rent somewhere.”

Michael opens his mouth to object, but changes his mind. A revelatory thought has suddenly occurred to him and he wonders why it has not done so before. Perhaps Barbara has unwittingly presented him with the answer to his current depression and malaise. Of course! Being at the cottage is part of the problem. It is the past, not the future. He could indeed move out: it would give him plenty to do and the process of making a fresh start in a new place would surely make him feel better?

Barbara looks at him, both sadness and contempt in her eyes.

“You are a cruel, thoughtless bastard,” she says. She levers herself out of the car and slams the door as hard as she can.

Michael sits for a minute, reflecting on what has just occurred. It does not make him feel any better about himself to acknowledge the accuracy of Barbara’s parting remark. She is right and, not for the first time in recent weeks, he feels ashamed.

Instead of returning to Watery Lane and the lonely gloom of the cottage, he starts the car and drives back through Bear Flat to the city. He knows of a letting agent in George Street, once recommended by a colleague. The rather suave young man there takes him to see an immediately available flat. It is furnished, clean and tidy and has a parking space at the rear. The road is noisy, but that’s reflected in the rent. It’ll do for six months.

The following day, he withdraws money from his own account at the bank and pays the suave young man six months’ rent and the necessary fees in advance, in cash, to expedite matters. He can collect the keys on Saturday morning, the young man says.