

## Cup of Tea on Christmas

Not remembering arriving in the kitchen must have something to do with the old brains at this ripe age, or maybe that the routine becomes second nature, ingrained, after over ninety years. Nevertheless, the cognitive functions don't slow down as much as they all say! I can just as well make a cuppa as I did 20 years ago. The milk, the sugar, the tea-bags – the Christmas tunes on – the mugs...the mugs...just one mug.

I'll take my tea to the fireplace, my chair. I like the smell of the ashes – what's left of what has burned before – oh, that's the kettle done. Time for tea!

She was like a flame, too. Vibrant and passionate, she left a mark on anyone she met, warming them to the core. No longer, just me now.

My chair, there as ever. Her chair too, only empty. Looking at her chair, in this room, with this fireplace. Her mug, warm in my hand. I can feel her here, her arms around me on the settee. In the place where we lived, loved. Married here, in front of the fireplace. Our children born and raised here. The years of her nagging about my nose hairs being too long. And, have I washed my eyebrows this week? Christmasses, with those many mountains of presents that she would spend weeks buying, labelling a select few "from Pops". We'd sit around the tree, she'd pass the presents to the kids with a little side wink to me, while I sat in my chair, as always a tea in hand. The watching of the hand-me-down TV, movies and programmes in which the storyline was always the same – a lonely man. I'd watch from my chair as from a high summit, the solitary man would watch the dawn come up, his face obscured by the pixels of the screen. The room is missing more than a tree.

I can smell the Christmas dinner as I close my eyes, feel the kisses before work that the light morning sun would bring, hear the laughter and the shifting of her slippers as she dances to the gramophone.

I know the moment is short-lived, and that when I open my eyes...I'll smell her perfume, lingering, but not the fresh coffee she loved to make every morning. I'll feel the emptiness in the room, but not the warm hand holding mine. I'll hear my breathing – in, out – but not hers.

I'll just take a second to breathe before I head out the door. Where's her presents bag? Ah, there – and her flowers. Peonies, always her favourite. The physical functions don't slow down as much as they all say, either. Still fit as a fiddle! Scarf, anorak, shoes...she always did scorn me for not using a shoe horn, said I'd do my back in, well, my old gal, how you were wrong.

Would you look at that, it snowed overnight! Well, it's been years since – back in my day, we'd have a white Christmas every year. Look at all those young loons on the hills, enjoying the snow together with those new flat toboggans. Oh – I just can't help my smile and – a wee pat on the head. Merry Christmas!

And Gosh – look at that wifey's red frock.. that looks like.. yes, *her* dress. The one she wore on our very first outing, when we began courting. I remember I was as nervous as a fart on a skillet, then I saw her – and my heart began to race in my chest. I saved up for weeks to take her to the pictures and then out for milkshakes at this restaurant that closed decades ago. Then begot a tradition that would be immortal, or at least – that's how we felt it would be.

We bought our house, the only one around that wasn't pre-fab at the time, for a few hundred guineas, and our greatest achievement – we had a family.

Doll, I'm not one for praying, I never was, but you always did love going to church. Tell me, God, if I will make it through my last few years. Will I manage the endless, endless lonely cups of tea?

I feel I am half a person now. My feet move without me.

That music – where is that coming from? The main street? It must be, many a busker has played there before – I've seen them over the years. I'll just take a look, why – I can't hear them from here, can I? What a pretty young lady. I would know this song from anywhere! – 'Please Mr. Postman'.

I'm there again, those secret nightclubs with their low ceilings and coin jukeboxes, polka-dot skirts that dance effortlessly across the linoleum. She sways, penny poised in hand by the jukebox – hair almost kissing the ceiling and edges of her smile touching the walls. The first time I ever saw her, I felt my feet walk underneath me towards this woman, this enigma of a woman. I blink – oh. It's the busker gal. Blue coat, battling the freezing cold – not blue skirt and nylons. Ray, my boy, you might even be getting old!

I'd better put some money in that busker's hat on the ground, so no one wonders why I'm just standing here, anyways – I'm not miserly and it's Christmas Eve, for Pete's sake.

I think it's time to move on, away from the busker...

This is the worst part. Having to go through the doors, and the corridors that smell distinctly of bleach to newcomers – but to me, no longer. Then into the lift, up and up.

I'm there beside her bed, although I don't remember arriving here – something to do with the old brains...and being of a ripe age. Her skin is so pale, no longer lit up by the glow of the jukebox, her hair lies needle-thin, sticking to her neck, no longer towering. I don't smell her perfume, or the coffee she loves to make – but something unnamed and sour. I don't feel her arms, or her hand around mine, but I can feel that the still, stifling air in the room hasn't been moved by her frail body in over 6 years. I'll put her flowers and her Christmas presents on that chair. I wish – oh, God, I do – more than anything, to hear her scorning me, for still not having invested in a shoehorn – but she lies, quiet, except for the awful waves of reminder coming from the pap machine. Why did I waste our last few years arguing, fighting even – with her? Why did I have to get so angry about her not washing the dishes properly, or staying out too late? I shouldn't have spent so many nights away from her. It was all stupid stuff really. Now it's too late to apologise.

These are the machines that preserve the last dregs of life she carries – they have been here every day, every minute, every beating second that I have been here, and those machines are the only obvious signs of life. She wears a paper frock – which I know, if she could, she would tell me was unbelievably bad for dancing, and that, Ray, it's awful, I'm terribly jealous because my nurse – well, she's gone to Jamaica! Let's go too! – but, her mouth is a fold in her face that doesn't stretch to smile, or laugh, or speak anymore.

She's ashes now, flat and grey, forgotten by most. She's a substance that exists but evaporates to the touch. Fragile. Am I the only person who remembers her?

I feel she lives every memory through me, and every object that I see. I know I should hold her hand, even though it's cold and thin like it is every time, never burning with love like before, and that I should tell her Merry Christmas, Toots, because I cannot give up hope, not for a second. I brought a present with me, an early Christmas one, I had thought to lay it out over the top of her duvet – the red dress, the very same one she wore to our first date, and I'll kiss her forehead – just gently, and take my leave. I'm doing this, although I think I'm kissing her a little longer than I had intended to, crying a little more than I had intended to. Then, these are the last few steps out of the door – they echo, slightly, and I'm gone.