

A winter scene with snow falling. In the foreground, a person wearing a red jacket and a hat is holding a large, yellow, triangular banner. The banner is tilted and has the words "BORN SCARED" written on it in a black, hand-drawn font. The background shows a snowy landscape with several trees and a dark sky filled with falling snow.

BORN
SCARED

KEVIN BROOKS

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CANDLEWICK PRESS

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**BORN
SCARED**

CHRISTMAS EVE

I'm as far as the hallway now. Coat, hat, boots, gloves . . .

Cold sweat running down my back.

It's three o'clock in the afternoon, Christmas Eve.

The snowstorm's getting worse.

My heart's pounding. I'm shaking, shivering. I feel sick.
And every cell in my body is screaming at me to turn around
and run.

But I can't move.

Either way.

I can't go back.

Can't go out.

I can't do it.

It's impossible.

I can't go out there.

I'm terrified.

LESS THAN NOTHING

My fear pills are yellow, which isn't a bad color for me.

Red is blood (and Santas), black is death, blue is the drowning sea . . .

Yellow is cheese and bananas.

And pills.

I don't know why I call them fear pills. They're antifear pills really.

I'm chronically afraid of almost everything.

Sometimes I think I can remember being scared when I was still in my mother's womb. It's not much more than a distant feeling really, and I have no idea what I could have been frightened of in there, or how—in my unformed state—I could have perceived it.

Unless . . .

Unless.

It's probably more accurate to say that I sometimes think I can remember being scared when *we* were still in *our* mother's womb. There were two of us in there: me and my sister, Ellamay. We were twins, and I know in my heart that my embryonic fears — if that's what they were — were as much Ellamay's as they were mine.

We were scared.

Together.

We were as one.

As we still are now.

And perhaps we knew what was coming. Perhaps we were frightened because we knew one of us was dying . . .

No, I don't think that's it.

I don't think any of us knows what death is until it's explained to us. And the strange thing about that is that although there must be a pivotal moment in all our lives when we find out for the first time that all living things die, and that at some point in the future our own life will come to an end, I certainly can't remember the moment when I found out, and I'd be surprised if anyone else can either.

Which is kind of weird, don't you think?

What I *can* remember though is the effect that moment had on me.

I don't know how old I was at the time — four? five? six? —

but I clearly remember lying in bed at night with my head beneath the covers trying to imagine death. The total absence of everything. No life, no darkness, no light. Nothing to see, nothing to feel, nothing to know. No time, no where or when, no nothing, forever and ever and ever and ever . . .

It was terrifying.

It still is.

. . . lying there for hours and hours, staring long and hard into the darkness, searching for that unimaginable emptiness, but all I ever see is a vast swathe of absolute blackness stretching deep into space for a thousand million miles, and I know that's not enough. I know that when I die there'll be no blackness and no thousand million miles, there won't even be nothing, there'll be less than nothing . . .

And the thought of that still fills my eyes with tears.

But sometimes . . .

Sometimes.

Sometimes it feels as if that memory doesn't belong to me, that it happened to someone else. Or maybe I read about it in a book or something—a story about a mixed-up kid who lies in bed at night trying to imagine death—and I identified with it so much that over time I gradually convinced myself that *I* was that mixed-up kid, and his imaginations were mine.

Not that it makes any difference, I suppose.

A memory is a memory, wherever it comes from.

*

I've sunk down to the hallway floor now, and I'm just sitting here with my eyes closed and my back against the wall. I'm trying to breathe steadily, trying to calm my thumping heart, trying to empty my mind.

After a while, Ellamay comes to me, her silent voice as comforting as ever.

It's all right, Elliot. It'll be okay.

"I'm scared."

I know. But you won't be alone. I'll be with you all the way.

"I don't think I can do it."

Yes, you can.

"It's too much."

You have to do it, Elliot.

"I know."

For Mum.

"I know."

For us.

We were born prematurely, at twenty-six weeks. I weighed just under a pound; Ella was even smaller. It was a traumatic birth, and at first the doctors weren't sure if any of us were going to survive. Mum had lost a lot of blood and was in a really bad way, and while she was rushed off for an emergency operation, Ellamay and I were taken to the neonatal intensive care unit,

where we were put in incubators and hooked up to all kinds of stuff to keep us alive.

It didn't work for Ellamay.

She only lived for an hour.

I almost went with her.

Our hearts stopped beating at virtually the same time. But although the doctors and nurses somehow managed to save me, they couldn't do anything to bring Ella back.

Part of me died with her, and part of her lived on with me.

We're dead and alive together.

The first time I experienced fear in the outside world—as opposed to the inner world of my mother's womb—was the first time I woke up in the incubator after Ella had died. It's a moment that's as much a part of me as all the other things that make me what I am—my heart, my brain, my flesh, my blood.

I was just lying there—on my back, my eyes open—looking up through the clear-plastic dome of the incubator at the white sky of the ceiling above. Muted sounds were drifting all around me—soft beeps, hushed voices, a low humming—and although I didn't know what these noises were, I wasn't scared of them. They were the sounds of my world, as normal to me as the sound of my own stuttered breathing.

Then, all at once, everything changed.

The white sky suddenly darkened as three unknown things

appeared out of nowhere and loomed down over me. I didn't know what they were—moving things, menacing things, things that made strange jabbering noises—*wah thah . . . pah banah . . . al tah plah . . . tah yah ah lah . . .*

Monsters.

Then one of them moved even closer to me, stooping down over the incubator, getting bigger and bigger all the time . . . and that was when the fear erupted inside me. It was uncontrollable, overwhelming, absolute.

Pure terror.

It was all I was.

The three unknown things that day were my mum, her older sister Shirley, and Dr. Gibson, and the funny (peculiar) thing about it is that although they were the first people to scare me to death, they've since become the only three people who *don't* scare me to death.

They are, to me, the only true people in the world.

Everyone else is a monkem.

CHEAP AND NASTY

The two men in the stolen Land Rover were both dressed as Santa Claus. The Santa disguises had been a last-minute decision, and because it was Christmas Eve, most of the local shops and costume rental places had run out of Santa suits. The only store that hadn't sold out was the PoundCrusher at the retail park in Catterick, and the only reason they had any left was that their costumes were so cheap and nasty that Scrooge himself wouldn't have bought one. The red nylon they were made from was so thin it was virtually see-through, and the stringy white trim on the hats and jackets was glued on rather than stitched. Parts of the trim were already falling off, the loose white threads sticking to the static cling of the flimsy red nylon like dandruff. Both of the costumes were XXL—the only size left in the shop—and since neither of the two men were anywhere near “extra extra large” they'd had to make some

rough-and-ready adjustments to their outfits. Extra holes had been made in the belts, sleeves and pant legs were rolled up, and the Santa hats had been made to fit by wearing beanie hats underneath. The costumes didn't include Santa boots, so both men were wearing sneakers.

SO MANY OTHER THINGS

The worst time for Mum was the first couple of years of my life when all I did was scream and cry almost constantly. People kept telling her not to worry — it's perfectly normal for babies to cry all the time — but she knew this was different. I wasn't just crying like a normal baby, I was bawling and howling, trembling all over, cowering away from just about everything.

“It's not right, is it?” Mum said to Dr. Gibson. “There's something seriously wrong with him.”

The Doc looked at me — I was cradled in Mum's arms — then turned back to Mum. “I don't know what it is, Grace. I honestly don't. The only irregularities that have shown up on his regular hospital checkups are a faster-than-average heart rate and high blood pressure, but considering the trauma he went through at birth, it's perfectly understandable for him to have an instinctive fear of the hospital environment.”

“But his heart rate and blood pressure go up when you’re examining him too,” Mum pointed out.

“Not as much as when he’s at the hospital. And again, it’s only natural for him to be scared of me when he knows I’m going to be prodding him and sticking needles in him.”

“No,” Mum said firmly, shaking her head, “there’s more to it than that. I could understand it if he only got upset and agitated when he’s being examined, but there are so many other things that bring it on too — unfamiliar people, strange sounds, cars, birds, dogs, rain, wind, darkness . . . he’s terrified of the dark, Owen. I mean, he’s not just frightened of it — I could understand that — he’s absolutely *petrified* of it. He’s never once slept without a light on.”

The Doc frowned and scratched his head. “Well, physically, there doesn’t seem to be anything wrong with him. As I said, the hospital checkups have all been clear, and you know yourself that I’ve been testing him for everything I can possibly think of — heart, liver, blood, allergies, infections — and I haven’t found anything out of the ordinary.” He paused, hesitating for a second, glancing at me again. “The only thing I can think of at the moment is that the underlying cause of his extreme agitation isn’t directly physical.”

“What do you mean?”

“The symptoms we’ve been talking about — increased heart rate, high blood pressure — are classic indicators of fear and

anxiety, and while I still think it's fairly normal for Elliot to have an instinctive fear of the hospital, and—to a lesser extent—me, it's possible that his problems have a psychological basis rather than a specific physical cause.”

Mum's face visibly paled.

“It's not uncommon, Grace,” the Doc said, putting a reassuring hand on her arm. “Small babies have all kinds of curious problems, and sometimes we simply don't know what's wrong with them. And of course, they can't tell us anything themselves until they start talking. But in my experience, by the time they *do* start talking, the vast majority of them have left these problems behind.”

“The vast majority?” Mum said, raising an eyebrow.

“Elliot's going to be okay, Grace,” the Doc said softly. “Trust me, everything's going to be fine.”

Everything wasn't fine, though. I didn't leave my problems behind. And by the time I was talking well enough to express my feelings, there was no doubt what was wrong with me.

“I'm scared, Mummy.”

“Scared of what, love?”

“Everything.”

SOLID GOLD BUTTONS

The Santa in the passenger seat of the stolen Land Rover pulled down his stringy white beard and cursed again as he scratched his unshaven chin.

“This is killing me,” he said, flicking angrily at the beard. “It feels like it’s made of asbestos or something.”

“Put it back on,” the Santa in the driver’s seat told him.

“I don’t see why—”

“Put it back on.”

The driver’s voice was calm and measured, but there was a chilling edge to it that his companion knew better than to ignore. He’d seen firsthand what his partner could do to people who didn’t take him seriously, and although they *were* partners—of a kind, at least—he knew that didn’t make any difference. Partner or not, if the man sitting beside him wanted to hurt him, he wouldn’t think twice about doing it.

“I was only saying,” he muttered, pulling the elasticated beard back up and refixing it to his face.

“Yeah, well don’t, okay?”

The Santa in the passenger seat shrugged sulkily, then turned away and gazed out of the window.

It was 11:42 a.m.

They were taking the back way to the village, driving across the moors, and the Santa in the passenger seat knew this area like the back of his hand. He used to come up here with his friends when he was a kid, happily ignoring the KEEP OUT! MILITARY FIRING RANGE warning signs to search for anything the army had left behind after their maneuvers the night before — spent rifle shells, burned-out flares, even live ammunition, if you were lucky. He knew that on a clear day you could see for miles up here, all the way across to the distant Hambleton Hills, but today the snow was so thick and heavy that visibility was practically nil. The raw moorland wind was blowing so fiercely that great sheets of snow were gusting horizontally across the desolate landscape, and he could feel the car struggling to stay in a straight line.

As he rested his head against the cold glass of the window, he wondered once again what he was doing here. *Why do you keep getting yourself into these things?* he asked himself. *I mean, what’s your problem? What’s so difficult about saying no?*

His name was Leonard Dacre. Most people called him Dake.

The driver's name was Carl Jenner.

“When this is all over,” Jenner said, breaking the silence, “you can go out and buy yourself the most expensive Santa Claus costume in the world.” He glanced at Dake. “Solid gold buttons, silk pants, a snakeskin belt . . .”

“A beard made from polar bear fur . . .”

“Yeah.”

The two men grinned at each other, and the Land Rover drove on through the snow.

BIG MONKEY TEETH

I don't like hiding things from Mum — it makes me feel like I'm betraying her — but I learned a long time ago that sometimes it's best for both of us if I keep certain things to myself.

Like Ellamay, for example.

I was about four years old when I first realized that I had to keep Ellamay to myself. The Doc had been around to see me, and afterward — while he was talking to Mum — I was sitting on the floor looking through one of my favorite picture books, and it just so happened that Ellamay suddenly came to me.

Are you all right, Elliot? she asked. *What did the Doc say this time?*

“He wants me to see a special doctor,” I told her.

What kind of special doctor?

“A brain doctor.”

Why?

“To stop me being frightened.”

“Elliot?”

It wasn't Ellamay's voice this time, and for a second I didn't know what was happening. Then Mum spoke again.

“What are you doing, Elliot? Who are you talking to?”

I looked up at her. “It's Ellamay.”

“Who?”

“Ellamay.”

Mum looked puzzled, and as she turned to the Doc, I could see that she was worried too.

“Who's Ellamay, Elliot?” the Doc asked me.

“My sister.”

“Your sister?”

I nodded.

The Doc turned to Mum. “Ellamay?”

Mum shook her head, and I could see now that there were tears in her eyes. “He didn't get it from me . . .” she muttered, her voice catching in her throat. “You know I couldn't bear to give her a name . . . he must have made it up himself . . .”

“Have you heard him talking to her before?”

“I always thought he was just talking to himself.”

She was crying now, tears running down her face. I got up and went over to her and put my arms around her neck.

“Don't cry, Mummy. I'm sorry, I didn't mean to make you cry.”

“It’s all right, darling,” she said, sobbing. “It’s not your fault . . .”

But it *was* my fault. Who else’s fault could it have been?

And ever since then, I only talk out loud to Ellamay when we’re alone.

Another thing I learned not to say out loud was “monkem.” Monkems are all the people in the world except for Mum, Auntie Shirley, and the Doc. They’re called monkems because they come to me in my dreams as horrible scary things with hairy monkey bodies and long grasping arms and bandy legs and little human heads with vicious grinning mouths with their lips pulled back over nasty big monkey teeth . . .

That’s what other people are to me.

Terrible things that want to rip me apart and eat me.

Monkems.

The first time I said it in front of Mum she told me I mustn’t say it anymore.

“Why not?” I asked her.

“You can’t call people monkeys, Elliot.”

“*Monkems*,” I corrected her. “Not *monkeys*.”

“Well, that’s as may be,” she said (which made no sense to me at all), “but people might *think* you’re saying monkey, like I just did, and they might think you’re being horrible to them.”

She gave me a look. “You don’t want anyone to think you’re being horrible to them, do you?”

I told her I didn’t, and since then I only ever use the word when I’m on my own or with Ellamay. Not that it makes any difference. The way I react to monkems — screaming my head off and running away in terror — they must think I’m crazy anyway, so what does it matter if they think I’m horrible as well? And besides, even at that age — three or four years old — I was very rarely seeing anyone else apart from Mum and Shirley and the Doc, so the chances of me upsetting a monkem by calling them a monkem were virtually nonexistent.

I wish this was easier. I wish I could just lay my hands on your head and transfer what’s inside me to you. I wish you could be me, if only for a moment, so you’d know exactly how I feel.

But that’s not going to happen, is it?

Wishes never come true.

THE SNOW GLOBE

shake it . . .

like this

It's twelve minutes past three now and I'm back in my room. Still hatted and booted and gloved, still sticky-skinned from the drying cold sweat, and still sick to my bones with fear.

What are you doing, Elliot? Ellamay says, sounding confused and slightly frustrated. *I thought we were ready to go. I thought we'd—*

"It's all right," I tell her. "I've just remembered something, that's all. I won't be a minute."

I cross the room and go into the bathroom.

Oh, right, Ellamay says. *I see.*

She thinks I'm going to the toilet.

"No, it's not that," I tell her, opening the cabinet above the

sink. “I’m just checking to make sure there aren’t any pills in here that I’ve forgotten about.”

You’ve already done that.

“I’m double-checking.”

You’ve already done that as well.

“I’m triple-checking then.”

There are four empty brown-glass pill bottles in the cabinet. I always keep a few empty ones, just in case I break one or something. And Ellamay’s right, I *have* already checked each of them twice. But sometimes I get riddled with doubts — about all kinds of stupid little things — and there’s something inside me that won’t let me rest until I’ve hammered those doubts into the ground.

So I check all the bottles again — take one out, shake it

like this

unscrew the cap, look inside, turn it upside down and tap it against my palm . . .

Nothing, empty.

I put the cap back on, place it to one side, take the next bottle out of the cabinet. Shake it

like this

unscrew the cap, look inside . . .

Nothing.

I go through the same process with the other two bottles, but they’re both empty too, as I knew they would be.

Satisfied?

“Not yet.”

I start removing everything else from the cabinet — packets of pills (for headaches and indigestion), eczema cream, toothpaste, toothbrush—and when the shelves are completely empty, I stand there scanning the dusty emptiness for any specks of yellow, hoping against hope that if I look hard enough I’ll find a stray pill. But I don’t. So then I reach up and start running my fingers through the dust, feeling around in every little corner of the shelves, every little gap between the shelves and the back of the cupboard, every possible place where a small yellow pill could be lodged . . .

There’s nothing there.

No doubt about it.

I close the cabinet, reach into my pocket, and pull out my current pill bottle. I give it a shake

like this

and the last remaining pill rattles thinly against the glass. I close my eyes for a second and think again about taking it now. The last one I took is beginning to wear off, and I can already feel the first faint stirrings of the thing I dread the most—the beast that is the fear of fear itself—and I know that if I don’t take the pill now . . .

Save it for later, Ellamay says.

“I don’t think I can.”

You're probably going to need it later a lot more than you need it now.

I know she's right.

I know I have to wait.

I shake the bottle one more time

like this

and put it back in my pocket.

Is that it? Ellamay says. Can we go now? It's going to be completely dark outside if we don't go soon.

"I know," I tell her, crossing over to the bedside table and picking up my flashlight, "that's why I need this."

I switch it on to make sure it's working. I already know that it is—I check it every night, and I put new batteries in it a couple of days ago—but I go ahead and check it anyway.

It works. The beam's strong and bright.

I drop the flashlight into my coat pocket, turn to leave . . .

Then stop.

And slowly turn around.

What now? says Ella.

The snow globe was a gift from Auntie Shirley. She'd been on a day trip to Whitby with her son, Gordon, and when she was looking around one of the souvenir shops, she'd spotted a snow globe that she really liked. In fact, she'd liked it so much that she'd bought two of them—one for herself and one for Mum.

I'd never seen a snow globe before, so when Mum finally showed it to me — after thinking long and hard about whether it would frighten me or not — I had no idea what it was. I remember holding it in my hands and gazing curiously at it, wondering what on earth it could be. A small glass dome, filled with clear liquid, with a miniature woodland scene inside. It was a fairy-tale scene — Little Red Riding Hood walking through the woods with the Big Bad Wolf — and although the small plastic figures and plastic trees weren't particularly well made or anything, there was something about them, something about the whole thing, that felt very special to me.

“Shake it,” Mum said, smiling.

I didn't know what she meant.

“Like this,” she told me, gesturing with her hand.

I copied her, awkwardly shaking the globe, and I was so surprised when it filled up with a blizzard of tiny snowflakes that I actually cried out in delight.

Mum was so relieved that I wasn't scared of the snow globe, and even more pleased that I actually seemed to like something for a change, that she let me keep it. And it's been sitting on my shelf ever since.

Shirley keeps her snow globe on the windowsill of her living room, and on the few occasions when I've been in her house — visiting with Mum — I've always wondered if there's some kind

of connection between our two identical snow globes, some kind of at-a-distance awareness of each other . . .

Or something.

I don't know.

What is it, Elliot? says Ella.

"Nothing," I tell her, looking away from the snow globe.

What did you see?

"What do you mean?"

You know what I mean. What did you see just now in the snow globe?

"Nothing . . ."

She knows I'm lying. She always knows.

Just tell me, she says quietly. What did you see?

"It was snowing . . . like someone had shaken it up. That's what made me look at it. And I saw something . . . or I thought I did."

In the snow?

"In the whole thing."

What was it, Elliot? What did you see?

I was in there, in the snow globe. Or something *of* me was in there . . . a bedraggled figure, limping along the pathway through the woods . . . snow falling in the darkness . . . great black trees all around me, their white-topped branches glinting

in an unknown light . . . and up ahead of me, an endless climb of rough wooden steps leading up a steep-sided slope . . .

That's what I saw.

It was all there, all in a timeless moment, and then it was gone again, and all that remained of it was an unfamiliar—and unsettling—feeling of deadness in my heart.

A BLOOD-RED NIGHTMARE

I was six when Mum took me to see a child psychologist. I don't think she really wanted me to see one — partly because she knew it would terrify me, and partly because it meant admitting to herself that my problem *was* mental rather than physical, which she still didn't want to accept. But deep down she knew it was true, and she knew she had to do something about it. So she'd asked the Doc to recommend someone, and he'd asked around and come back with a name, and Mum got in touch with her and made an appointment.

We got as far as the waiting room.

When the psychologist (or therapist, or whatever she called herself) came out of her consulting room and called me and Mum in, I simply couldn't move. The sheer sight of her terrified me so much that I went into some kind of shock — paralyzed in my chair, my muscles locked up, my eyes bulging, my throat

too tight to breathe. The psychologist lady also froze for a moment, and I could tell by the look on her face that she was a bit startled by my petrified reaction to her. But, to her credit, she composed herself pretty quickly. Forcing a friendly smile to her face, she came over to where I was sitting with Mum and stopped in front of us. I didn't want to look at her, but I just couldn't help it. She was fairly old, but not ancient or anything. She had longish white hair tied back in a braid, and she was wearing a big necklace made out of shiny gold discs. She had a pea-size mole or something on her upper lip, a hard-looking dark-brown lump, and as I sat there staring helplessly at it, I suddenly began to imagine it pulsing and throbbing, turning red, and then I saw it splitting open, and a big fat yellow fly crawling out . . .

“Hello, Elliot,” the psychologist lady started to say. “My name's . . .”

I didn't hear the rest of it. I was already up and running for the door, screaming my heart out as I went.

About six months after that, Mum and the Doc arranged for another psychologist to visit me at home, but that didn't work out either. The night before the day of the visit, I got myself into such a state just thinking about it that I ended up being physically ill. Vomiting, diarrhea, cold sweats, a burning fever . . .

The home visit was canceled.

*

“How about if I talk to him?” the Doc said to Mum. “I could ask him how he feels about everything, why he’s so frightened of things, and I could record our conversation, then pass it on to a child psychologist to see what they think.”

“Would they be willing to do that?” Mum asked.

“There’s no harm in asking, is there?”

DOC: How do you actually feel when you’re frightened of something, Elliot?

ME: I feel scared.

DOC: Do you know why?

ME: What do you mean?

DOC: What I’m trying to get at is *why* you get so frightened. What is it that makes you afraid?

ME: It depends.

DOC: On what?

ME: Different things scare me in different ways.

DOC: Can you give me an example?

ME: Like what?

DOC: Cars, for instance. You’re frightened of cars, aren’t you?

ME: Yeah.

DOC: Why?

ME: Because they can kill me.

DOC: Could you expand on that a bit?

ME: When I'm in a car, all I can think about is what happens if something goes wrong with it and it swerves off the road, or if something goes wrong with the driver and they lose control and drive into a wall, or if something goes wrong with another car or its driver and that car loses control and smashes into us . . . that's why I'm frightened of cars.

DOC: Because you think they can kill you?

ME: Because they *can* kill me.

DOC: So it's a fear based on a possible future reality.

ME: I don't know what that means.

DOC: It means you're frightened of something that *could* happen. It's highly unlikely that it *will* happen, but there's always a possibility.

ME: Right.

DOC: What about when you're scared of things that don't pose an obvious threat? Like colors. What is it about the color red that scares you, for example? Is it the actual color itself?

ME: Not really, no.

DOC: What is it then? Does the color red remind you of something scary?

ME: Blood.

DOC: Blood?

ME: Yeah.

DOC: Red reminds you of blood.

ME: Yeah.

DOC: And that scares you?

ME: Yeah.

DOC: Why?

ME: I don't know . . . it just does. When I see something red, the redness of it just kind of fills my head with blood.

DOC: Is that why you ran away from that Santa Claus when you were little?

It happened eight years ago, when I was five years old. I was in town with Mum, clinging on to her hand as we made our way through the crowds of festive shoppers. It was so noisy and chaotic that I was already scared out of my wits, but that was nothing compared to the utter horror I felt when a hunch-backed Santa Claus suddenly appeared right in front of me.

I don't know where he came from—he was probably part of some Christmas carnival or something—and I don't know what on earth he thought he was doing either. All I know is that as he loomed toward me out of the crowd—stooped over (so his head was level with mine), and with his arms

stretched out toward me — I was so shocked and horrified that I actually wet myself. He was hideous. His face all scabby and broken-veined, his eyes unfocused, his teeth just a row of rotten black stubs. His dirty old Santa's beard was yellowed with nicotine stains and dotted with cigarette burns and ketchup drips and God-knows-what-else, and underneath the beard, clearly visible, was a thick growth of bristly black stubble.

Although he had all the Santa gear on — red hat, red jacket, red pants — he didn't look anything like he was supposed to. He wasn't very old for a start — midtwenties at most — and he wasn't fat or jolly either. He was just horrible. A blood-red nightmare. And he smelled bad too, like rotten fruit . . . rotten fruit mixed with cigarette smoke.

It must have been obvious how terrified I was, but as I cowered away from him, desperately hiding behind Mum's legs, he just grinned and kept coming after me, as if it was some kind of game.

"Don't be scared, kid," he said, his voice all wheezy and croaky. "It's only Santa . . . hey, come on, I ain't gonna hurt ya . . ."

This all happened so quickly that I don't think Mum knew what was going on at first, but when this monstrous Santa reached around her legs, pawing at me in what he must have thought was a playful fashion, and I tore my hand from hers and