

# Christmas, etc.

## by MJA Smith

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The doorbell rang, its stupid synthetic plastic rendition of 'London Bridge Is Falling Down' causing our cat, Benjie, to jump off the sofa and leg it upstairs. We'd had the doorbell for years but Benjie just hadn't ever got used to it; he was supposed to be the hardest cat on the street but I knew the other cats in the neighbourhood would – if cats were able to do this – laugh themselves daft if they were to find out his secret.

I was out of my own chair just about as quickly if I'm honest. My dad, already slouched in his favourite armchair, beer clutched in his right hand, wouldn't have sprung up even if he wasn't halfway to being hammered already, thanks to his size. In any case, I wanted to be the one to open the door to Ryan, my brother.

More specifically, it wasn't Ryan that I wanted to see at the door, but Kelly, his girlfriend, who I had a massive crush on, and who I had fancied for about two years. Ryan was four years older than me, but Kelly was only two years above me at school. Apart from being really fit, she was also in that group of really cool girls who only ever went out with lads who didn't go to the school. You know, the ones like Ryan who'd left, got jobs, drove rusty old cars and could legally buy alcohol.

It was actually sort of my fault that Ryan and Kelly were together. One Saturday afternoon, Ryan and I were heading into town to play pool at the local leisure centre, when I saw Kelly on the other side of the road, walking with her mum and big fuck off German Shepherd. I'm not a dog person, just so you know. I got bitten by one when I was really small and I've been scared of them ever since. Ryan loves dogs.

Ryan and I were talking about the afternoon's Liverpool – Everton derby; dad was from Liverpool and he made us grow up Liverpool fans. He used to take us there once a year until he got the boot from his job and started eating and drinking himself to an early grave. Ryan was banging on about the strength of Liverpool's defence, but I'd stopped listening to my brother because I was too busy staring at Kelly across the road.

'Isn't she gorgeous?' I said, cutting through Ryan's speech.

'Who? Her?' he said way too loudly, pointing across the street at Kelly, who turned around when she heard the raised voices from the other side of the road. I'm sure I went crimson, but the humiliation was about to become much worse.

'My brother here fancies you,' bellowed Ryan. Kelly's mum was in hysterics by then; Kelly too. She handed the leash to her mum, waited for a bus to pass, and then crossed the road. I sort of wished that the bus had mounted the pavement and ploughed into me, just to stop the embarrassment.

Kelly came over to talk to us. I say *us* but I really mean *Ryan* because that's who she focussed all of the conversation on. Me, I might as well not have even been there at all, in spite of being the reason she'd crossed the road in the first place. At least, that's what I thought anyway. Turns out that she just fancied Ryan, and he fancied her too. I think they'd seen each other in a local nightclub before and had already snogged by that Saturday afternoon. I still had a crush on her, and Ryan knew that, but he only ever mentioned it when he wanted to have a good laugh at how red I would go.

Ryan and Kelly started seeing each other most nights, which was good in some ways. Most nights they'd go out somewhere so I wouldn't really see much of them at all. On the rare times they stayed in, I'd disappear up to my room and play on my PlayStation or watch DVDs to avoid any more embarrassing incidents, but over time it just sort of got easier being around the pair of them. On the nights they stayed in I'd spend more time with them, watching films and TV and gradually I got used to seeing them intertwined and snogging on the sofa. She was Ryan's girlfriend and Ryan was my brother, so it was pretty clear that Kelly was off limits, and I kind of shrugged it off and dealt with it.

Well, I *say* I dealt with it. I never really came to terms with it, but I tried to convince myself that I had whenever I was around them and that Kelly *wasn't* this sexy girl with a her WonderBras, tight skinny jeans and Uggs (knock off, of course). When she went, and more specifically when I'd go to bed, that's when

I really started to think about her. And not just think about her, but *fantasise* about her. Well, you get the picture. I was a fourteen year old boy. That's just what fourteen year old lads do.

I didn't think it would last; in fact, I kind of hoped it wouldn't. Not because I could then position myself for being in with a chance with Kelly, because I knew *that* was never going to happen, but just so I wouldn't have to deal with her being around any more. The more she was around the less I was able to get her out of my system. I tried going out with other girls at school, but none of them were anything like her. She was like a real woman, almost, whereas they were all pretty childish. I wouldn't say it was hell, because I always had her around to, you know, stare at and stuff, but it wasn't much fun.

One day I came home from school to find Ryan sat on the front step drinking a can of lager and smoking a joint. He never really did that much weed at that time, so I knew something must have happened. I asked him what was up, and he grunted something I couldn't really hear. He passed me the roll-up, his arm waving round in my vague general direction until I grabbed his wrist and plucked the joint from his fingertips. I wasn't a big fan of the stuff, but I did like a puff every now and again.

'Kelly's only gone and got fucking pregnant,' he muttered, taking a swig from the can.

'What the fuck?' I said. It seemed like the only thing to say.

So, of course I knew they had sex. I mean, he'd told me the first time they'd done it, and since then whenever they did anything new or different he'd generally tell me. It killed me to hear it I suppose, but it helped with those fourteen year old fantasies and all that. Still, I didn't think they'd be so stupid as to get pregnant.

'Did you not, you know, use *anything*?' I asked, pretty innocently I think in the circumstances.

'We were both pissed and stoned, and she said she'd heard from her friend that you couldn't get knocked up if you'd done weed. Said everyone knew it was the only contraceptive that worked.'

'Even I know that isn't true, and I'm only a kid.'

'Look, I'm not stupid. I *know* it isn't true.' He didn't, I could tell. 'But we were just sort of, you know, not thinking.'

'Shit,' I said, sitting down next to him. 'What are you going to do?'

'Well, I can't afford for her to get an abortion, and she can't tell her mum because she'll sling her out.'

'Have you told mum?'

'What, do you think I'm *nuts*? Of course I haven't told mum. She'd be livid.'

'Well, you have to admit that it is pretty bloody stupid of you.' I knew that he was going to hit me, which he did. Funny thing was that I only said that so he *would* hit me. I knew that sometimes the only way Ryan was going to be able to get over something was to sort of just get it out of his system, and I seemed to find out somewhere along the lines that hitting me, or hitting something, did the trick. It turned out that she wasn't pregnant of course. She was just a couple of days late with her period.

Ryan got a new job driving a van for a parcel delivery firm and when Kelly had flunked her GCSEs, somehow they managed to scrape together enough money to get a poky little flat a few streets away, which was truly horrid. I mean, our house wasn't exactly plush, but it was better than the nasty little place they moved into. It looked like a crack den. They couldn't afford to buy new furniture, so they just moved in whatever they had in their bedrooms at home.

It didn't really feel like Ryan had actually moved out a lot of the time. He came round most nights for dinner, and was always at ours on a Sunday to bring his washing round. Kelly did the same in the week with her parents, but she'd normally come over with Ryan on Sundays and would help mum make the roast dinner. Mum and dad weren't terribly happy with them moving in together, but they'd pretty much done the same at that age, so you know it was a bit pot kettle black.

So, Christmas day. They'd moved in together probably two or three months before, and had agreed that they'd drop in on Kelly's mum and dad first and then come round and spend the rest of the day with us. I've always really enjoyed Christmas, always looked forward to it. I'm not a sentimental sort of person, but I really liked the way we'd get all of us together – my nan, mum, dad, Ryan and me. Nan died a couple of years back and I was really pleased that Ryan hadn't decided him and Kelly would spend the day with her parents. I'd have been pretty annoyed with him about that. I love mum and dad, of course I do, but the thought of it just being the three of us and Benjie didn't exactly thrill me.

Christmas round our house was pretty traditional, in so far as it involved the same things each and every year – massive fry up thanks to mum in the morning, lots of beer for dad and Ryan, lots of TV and the biggest roast dinner with every trimming you could imagine piled up on top. Mum and dad, and sometimes

Ryan, would fall asleep after that, and when they woke up we'd play games like Monopoly or something else until mum would retreat to the kitchen to make turkey sandwiches.

Now that dad wasn't working and mum's wages didn't go very far, money was pretty tight, so I knew I wasn't going to get many presents. Dad got me a couple of games for my PlayStation from one of his slightly dodgy mates and I got some funny socks, and I was pretty happy with that. I'd started a paper round earlier in the year, and so I was pleased that I could buy my parents something a little better than I did in other years where I was just relying on pocket money. I managed to get my mum some perfume and dad a book on World War Two, which is what he likes reading about. It felt nice to, I don't know, give something back in a way. I know it was only a paper round, but I could tell they were really proud of me. I was pretty proud of me too if I'm honest.

We weren't expecting much in the way of presents from Ryan, but fair enough. Most of the money from his job went on the flat, and Kelly was having trouble finding work. Well, she was having trouble being bothered to look for work anyway. She seemed to spend most of the day under her duvet in the lounge watching daytime TV. Mum and dad weren't happy with it, but they didn't say anything. Ryan was happy, and that's all they wanted.

I was pretty happy with what Ryan got me, which was a boxset of old kung fu movies. He bought mum a new hair-dryer which he said he'd got on the cheap. I think he'd nicked both things out of a parcel, or maybe someone had returned something and he'd accidentally forgotten to put it through the system. He didn't buy anything for dad. Him and dad had fought a lot over the years, and before dad turned into a lardy couch potato the two of them had a couple of nasty punch-ups, both earning black eyes. I don't think they hated each other. Mum said the problem was that they were just too similar, cut from the same cloth or some old saying like that.

Anyway, things had got better since Ryan moved out. They may have thought Kelly was a lazy bitch, but I did get the feeling they were pretty proud of him going out and getting his job and the flat and all. He'd been a bit of a layabout at home, failed all his exams because he just couldn't be bothered, and was too interested in girls and getting drunk. I don't think they thought Kelly was a good influence, because if anything she was the opposite, but I guess they just thought he'd grown up a bit. I didn't totally agree, and in spite of how much I fancied Kelly, I thought he'd be better off getting rid of her. But I was pretty biased.

So, no, Ryan didn't buy dad a present. Instead, he said he wanted to take dad out for a drink to one of the pubs round the estate that he knew would be open. They've never been out like that, father and son, and I don't think I'd ever seen them having a proper grown-up conversation, and I don't think comparing notes on the footie really counts. Dad's not one for showing his emotions, but I could see that he was pretty touched by it. Come to think of it, I was pretty touched by it too.

I'd known Ryan was going to do this, and I guess that's one of the reasons I was so excited, because I knew that them going out would just leave Kelly, mum and me in the house. Mum would be busy in the kitchen with the dinner, which meant I'd have Kelly to myself. She was always pretty nice to me when it was just the two of us. The piss-taking really only kicked in when she was with her mates or Ryan, so I knew it would be okay.

I'd crafted this plan of getting a snog with her under the pathetic little cluster of plastic mistletoe that came down from the loft every year. I'd been thinking about it ever since Ryan had said they'd be coming round for Christmas day, and had become obsessed with it since he'd said he'd be taking dad out for a drink. Funny, in my head it all went perfectly well; she never said no. I'm not normally that confident about these sort of things, but in my imagination she was really up for it and in some of the better fantasies she lead me upstairs and did the sorts of things to me that a fourteen year old could only ever dream of, then, after, we'd lie there and I'd say she needed to leave Ryan, and she'd nod, and we'd live happily ever after.

Still, despite my confidence, come Christmas day I was pretty nervous and had been taking nips of dad's brandy when my parents weren't looking. I needn't have worried about them smelling alcohol on my breath, as by the time Ryan and Kelly came round I got the impression they were pretty hammered anyway. When Ryan threw dad's coat at him and they left for the pub, Kelly grabbed the remote control and began flicking through the channels, bored. I'd already put the mistletoe in my pocket when I was planning this all out earlier in the day. My plan was to walk over to her while she was watching the TV, hold the little branch up over her head, tap her on the shoulder and, when she turned toward me, I'd plant a kiss on her lips. In the fantasy she'd be startled at first and then sort of give in to the kiss.

I took the sprig out of my pocket and, after a few seconds of nervousness I went over to her and,

with a bit of a stammer asked her for a kiss. At just that moment mum came to the door and offered Kelly a drink, which made me jump and drop the mistletoe, which got caught on my belt buckle, and Kelly turned round to see the mistletoe just above my zip and slapped me on the arm, laughing. I was gutted, going really red as Kelly and mum fell about laughing. I went back to the TV, wishing the chair would just swallow me up.

Kelly's mobile went off, playing some annoying R&B tune I vaguely recognised from a year ago and I pretended to focus on the TV, trying not to look like I was listening to her conversation, even though I really was. It didn't sound good from the half of the conversation I could hear, lots of 'What happened?'s and 'Tell me who did it's.

I could hear her getting more and more upset, so I flicked the TV off and stood up, mouthing 'Everything okay?' at her while trying not to make it obvious that I'd noticed the mess her dark mascara was making as it trickled down her face with the tears. She looked a proper mess, but still really pretty, though I was trying not to think that while she was crying. Surely that just made me a really nasty person.

As she shut her phone, she burst into fresh tears, throwing herself into the sofa and pressing her hands over her eyes, slinging her mobile across mum and dad's laminate flooring and smashing the phone apart as it landed.

I didn't really know what to do. I wasn't good at sentimental stuff. When I used to see mum getting upset after a big row with dad I'd just go upstairs and leave Ryan to do the comforting and soothing things he did weirdly quite well considering how much of an idiot he was most of the time. Must have been that whole first-born and mother type thing, something I didn't understand anyway. Thing was that Ryan wasn't here and mum was up to her elbows in turkey and chipolatas and stuffing and all that, so that just left me. I could be a coward and leg it upstairs, or stick the TV back on and just ignore her, but that didn't feel right, so I went over to her and put my arm around her, gently because I was so nervous.

I thought she'd wriggle away from me or something like that, but she didn't, so I hugged her a little bit tighter, which seemed to make her cry even more, but I figured it was nothing personal.

'What's the matter?' I asked her, and she replied with something I really didn't understand. She was all snot and tears and looked all blotchy and I really couldn't focus on what she was saying at all. So I just left it hanging there, waiting for her to calm down enough to talk to me so I could understand it. I tried not to think of her being pressed up to me like that in a sexual way, but I couldn't help it. You get the picture anyway. It's not like I felt good about it, but there you go.

It wasn't nice, sat there listening to her blubbing, and I suppose I should have gone to the toilet to get her some loo roll, but I sort of didn't want to let go of her. It was only when she calmed down and started wiping her eyes and nose onto her hoodie that I thought I'd better stand up and get her some. The green-black mess she left on her sleeves was gross, but she was pretty beside herself and you don't really think about things like that when you're upset I suppose.

She finally seemed calm enough for me to ask her again what the matter was. She looked at me like it was going to set her off again, so I thrust the toilet roll toward her which seemed to do the trick.

'Thanks,' she managed after she'd wiped her face clean.

It might sound strange, but seeing her like that was really weird for me. I'd got used to her being a certain way, you know that type of pretty, tough girl who didn't really show much emotion. If it wasn't for the fact that I saw her a lot with Ryan, I'd have been pretty terrified of her, but that wasn't the Kelly who was sat in our lounge, on our sofa, looking like her world had turned upside down. I guess the word is vulnerable; yeah, she looked really vulnerable.

'Fang got run over,' she said, taking a deep breath and then a big old blow of her nose into a corner of toilet roll. Fang was the German shepherd that her family loved so much. Just because I didn't like dogs didn't mean that I wanted to see one killed, so I made what I thought were sympathetic sounds.

'Pete,' her step-dad, 'was taking him out for a walk down to the swings when a cat ran out of the garden next door and Fang decided to chase it. Pete couldn't hold the leash and Fang ran straight out into the road. Bang! Straight into a van. Knocked him down the road and killed him outright. Poor Fang,' she started before bursting into new tears, smacking her fist down onto my parents' sofa in rage.

I sat back down and pulled her close to me and began stroking her hair, which was really soft. I don't know why I did it. It just seemed like the right thing to do. I could feel her body next to mine shaking as she sobbed.

It was at that point that Ryan came in, slamming the front door behind him. Of course, he saw me

there cuddling his girlfriend and thought I must have been making a move. He probably saw the mistletoe as well and put two and two together. Anyway, he pulled me up off the sofa and punched me hard in the face, Kelly screaming at him to stop while I wiped away the tears flooding my eyes and tried not get hit again, which he did anyway, in the stomach this time. Mum came in to find me on the floor, Ryan kicking me while Kelly tore at him to get him to stop.

Dad finally pulled him off me, holding Ryan's arms down by his side while his feet kept on kicking in my direction. When he stopped struggling, dad let him go and Ryan grabbed Kelly by the hand and pulled her out the front door. Mum was down next to me by this time, stroking me and trying to make sure I wasn't too hurt. Ryan and me had had loads of fights over the years but this one was pretty bad compared to some.

Thing is, I could see it from his point of view. It didn't look right, him going out and then coming back to find me pressed up against his girlfriend, but it was typical of Ryan to not stop and think. It didn't make it right for him to beat me up, but I could see how it must have looked to him.

Dad told me they'd been having a nice enough drink when dad had mentioned the flat and Ryan's job, and apparently Ryan got really defensive and started shouting, something about mum and dad never thinking he'd done anything worthwhile and not being proud of him, all stuff they used to say to him, so he stormed off in a huff.

So Christmas dinner turned out to be mum, dad and me after all and we didn't really speak during the meal. We listened to the usual crappy Christmas songs and I sat vacantly in front of the Queen's Speech with Benjie on my lap until mum and dad fell asleep, so I went off to do the washing up for mum. Ryan did try to call later on in the day, from the pub judging by the background noise on the message he left, but mum didn't feel like calling him back.

Kelly came round a couple of days later to pick up her mobile, which I'd managed to repair with Sellotape, and she said thanks for looking after her on Christmas Day. I just shrugged and waited for things to go back to normal, which they did, eventually.