



Twelve Days
By Gareth Davey



The First Day of Christmas

Mya waited at the kitchen table, cradling her hot tea – wishing it were wine. Cass was at the neighbours with Jenny, at her Mother's request, and Junior was still at football training. If Junior wasn't at training she'd have had an issue getting the kids out of the house; Junior hated the neighbours and would have refused to go.

The kids had gotten old fast – both teenagers now – but they weren't old enough for this conversation yet. For one, she had no idea how Tyson would react. Would he grin with his entire face, his eyebrows shooting up in that goofy way and pull her into a hug like that man in their wedding photos? Or would she see what she'd seen so much during the past five years: vacant eyes, watching her like a heron watches the surface of a pond for hours, waiting for the shadow of its prey. Vacant eyes and a gentle shake of the head, a curled fist before making some sort of excuse to leave.

Need to drive. That's what he'd started saying. But somehow all his drives lasted entire nights and smelt like strip clubs.

Mya saw his BMW pull up in the driveway, her view partly obstructed by the leaves of their window-sill plant. Tyson didn't get out of the car straight away, the engine idling as he sat on the drive. Checking his phone, probably. Mya didn't want to know what he was checking for.

After a few minutes, the engine switched off and she heard his car door open. His body rose upwards, his skin obscured by the leaves, creating green tiger stripes on his skin. He was a beautiful man, his chin stubbled, his hair carefully buzzed to a short trim, an over-priced Gucci suit blacker than a night-sky of clouds hugging his well-toned body.

They lived in a four bedroom home in a middle-class neighbourhood. Two nice BMWs, one for each of them – a big granite and marble kitchen that Mya was sat in – a big garden behind their

conservatory. Tyson was an Accounts Manager at a Marketing firm. He'd worked his way to his money. To their money. To their lifestyle. He'd earned it.

Mya watched as he approached the front door. Heard the metal clanking of the locking mechanism. The door opened with a rush of air.

She felt her throat begin to dry up, her palms clam. She was reminded of another time she'd waited for him in the kitchen, sitting at the table with moonlight spilling through the window. That was summer though. She'd been ready to divorce him that night.

This was different. The light was fading outside but the Sun was still visible in the dim blue glow. And this time, Tyson hadn't done anything wrong. This time, if anyone was to blame, it was Mya.

She'd maybe missed a pill. Maybe two. She'd probably had to get up early and sort the kids out – get them fed, groomed, encourage Junior to take a shower before he left. Stop Cass wearing one of her mini-skirts that would show too much leg for a fourteen year old. The inevitable night before would have been a blurred memory, as if it hadn't happened to her. Like she'd watched it on an old movie.

The sound of Tyson taking his shoes off almost made her drop her tea. She glanced at the pregnancy test that sat on the table in front of her. The plastic plus. A tiny symbol that would change their lives once more.

The kitchen door opened. Tyson was frowning in the doorframe, his large, muscular body filling every inch of space.

'Baby? What – what you doing in here?' His eyes moved from Mya to the pregnancy test. He moved towards her, frown line furrowing through his whole body, making him seem crooked. His arms folded across his body. He moved forwards, so she could smell his musky aftershave, and bent over the test. She saw the moment his eyes went vacant. Like a plug had been pulled from behind him, sucking the energy from his circuit. 'Nah,' he said.

The Second Day of Christmas

'Where was Dad?' Junior walked two feet behind his sister, staring at the fresh-white pair of *Air Jordans* on his feet that he'd finally been able to sneak out of the house. He knew he wouldn't be allowed to wear them in school, so he'd stuffed his black trainers into his rucksack.

Cass was walking in front of him, annoying him by stopping at every corner as their Mum requested, tapping her feet dramatically. She was only one year older than him, but whenever they walked to school she acted like his Mum – or his teacher.

'Where was Dad?' she repeated, louder this time. Junior jogged to catch up with her.

'He's ain't never there in the morning,' Junior said.

'He's *not*. And he's there when I wake up. I don't wake up twenty minutes before we need to leave.'

'I need my sleep. Anyway, he probably just left for work early or whatever.' They were quiet for a few minutes, Cass still walking ahead of her brother despite letting him catch her up, but still glancing back at Junior every few seconds, as if she was worried a car might swing off the road and suddenly strike him down. Junior deliberately slowed his pace to a shuffle, all the while making sure he wasn't scuffing his *Jordans* on the pavement. His old *Nike's* had to be thrown out because of their scuff marks, and he didn't want the same happening now. Their Dad would be furious – he'd bought them for Junior as a rare gift.

Junior didn't think there was anything to worry about with his Dad not being there that morning. He thought Cass was just being a girl and worrying about nothing (*women always worry* his Dad had said, more than once). But Junior did remember the noise in the night. He'd been staying up late to watch the basketball in America on a website that kept popping up naughty Ads, when the gentle purr of the *BMW* had growled through the night.

His Dad hadn't been there when he'd got back from football, or when he went to bed. But in the middle of the night, as LeBron soared through the air and dunked over the *Warriors* defence, Junior had heard the front door open, a shuffling in the house, the door close again, and the *BMW* purr back into life. He'd closed the streaming site and had lain awake for a while, staring at the black ceiling. Convincing himself that the noise was made up.

Now though, he wasn't so sure.

'Are you coming?' Cass yelled, waiting at the zebra crossing, the wind pushing her hair into a gnarled cape behind her. Junior jogged the distance between them, feeling his eyes sting from the harsh wind. When he got to his sister, she looked at his feet and sighed. 'You know,' she said. 'Those shoes will get you in trouble. Mr Pitskin will –'

'Mr Pitskin can do one,' Junior said, grinning. 'Anyway, I've got my black shoes in my bag'

'Good,' his sister said, and they crossed the road together.

The Third Day of Christmas

'Thankyou,' Mya said. 'For coming.'

'Shut up you idiot, you're my oldest friend.' Pila was everything Mya had dreamt of when she was younger – when both of them were younger. She was long legged, sexy, had long black hair that curled in just the right places – and a loving husband that wasn't constantly on the edge of walking out. The only problem with Pila was that she was so busy running her own business that she didn't have that much time to see her oldest friend – but she was always there when Mya needed her.

'Tyson is just – he's Tyson,' Mya said. She tried to stop the cold tears beading in her eyes, but they were there like frozen dew drops in the middle of winter. She wiped them with the back of her hand.

'He's had a few good moments over the years,' Pila said, scowling. 'But come on. The guy is a grade A tosser. You need him now – this should be him here, not me!'

'I – I don't even know where – where he is.' Mya shut her eyes and felt her best friend's hand rest on her thigh. 'How am I gonna – how am I gonna do Christmas for them if he doesn't –'

'Mya, listen to yourself.' Mya blinked away her tears. Felt a loose drop trickle down her cheek. She felt her palm stretch across her stomach. Somewhere in that darkness, a life was growing. Even now that miracle gave her a surge of energy.

She thought about how mad it was whenever she looked at Junior, with his Father's rugged but clean looks, his Mother's caring nature. Thought it when she looked at Cass – her femininity, the flickering lashes that didn't need mascara, her growing body. They were both tiny embryos inside of her once. Pila kept talking.

'Tyson has been a piece of crap for years. Barely spends a weekend out of the bar now, has probably cheated on you more than he's actually *been* with you this last year. You have raised these wonderful children *on your own*. And you're doing an amazing job. There's nothing he can do that you can't! And anything more you need – well hell that's what you got us for. Me, Sanj, we can do anything you need. We don't have kids – we have time. But please have some – some respect for your family, Mya. You've let him get away with too much.'

'What about – the kids? He's their Dad.'

'Do they rely on him? Who signs off on school trips, or gets them ready, or goes to parent's evenings? Whose there to teach Cass about being a woman? Who taught Junior to shave – when he cut his chin – for goodness sake? Not him. You're a new breed, Mya. Strongest damn Mum I know.'

Mya sniffed, reached for a tissue and wiped her eyes first, then her nose. She was imagining cleaning the mouth of her baby, with smegs of food all over his or her little podgy face.

The Fourth Day of Christmas

They were dripping rain-water as they walked down the cold aisles in the supermarket, the trolley shuddering around every corner like a grumpy child.

‘Are there any pigs in blankets?’ Cass said, her hair in droopy ringlets, holding drops of water in the curls, her shirt collar soaked from the sudden downpour. It was dark outside, but they’d come straight from school. Junior was at his last football match of the season, and Cass was more than happy to come along to the shops. ‘It’s just – I don’t know. Jenny is a vegetarian and I might –’

‘Might become one too?’ Mya said. She couldn’t suppress the grin that stretched across her face. She had said the same thing to her Mother when she was fourteen. ‘You eat so much meat – the farms would all close down.’

‘There!’ Cass said, rolling her eyes. She ambled across the aisle in clumsy steps. Some days Mya saw her daughter slipping towards womanhood in elegant steps – like a young baroness learning the ways of royalty. Others, she was a foal, taking hazardous steps across an icy field. Cass came back with a large pack of premium Pigs in Blankets, placing them in the trolley with a *thunk*.

‘They expensive?’ May said, frowning. Tyson hadn’t sent over money for the food shop like he usually did. Cass opened her mouth to say something, but seemed to think better of it.

‘No. Half price.’

‘Wahey,’ Mya said. They walked to the end of the aisle quickly, listening to the distant sound of carollers at the front of the store. They were just starting up a rendition of *Good Tidings we Bring* when Cass spoke again.

‘Where’s Dad?’ She was closer than she usually got to Mya in public, her hand resting on her Mother’s forearm. ‘He – he hasn’t been back since Monday, has he? So where – where is he?’ Mya bit into her lip as she battled the trolley around the corner, wondering how to handle this situation. There was no page in the Mother’s handbook about cheating scumbags running out on their pregnant wife. She considered protecting him, as she had in the past. *On a work-trip, honey. He’ll be back soon.* But she didn’t owe him anything. Not anymore.

‘I don’t know,’ Mya said, tensing her whole body to stop her voice quivering. ‘I – I gave him some news and he – he left. I’m not sure –’

‘So is he – will he be –’

‘Back? I don’t know.’ Mya took her daughter’s cold hand in hers. Felt Cass’ fingers wrap around hers, like she’d done when she was just a baby. ‘But even if we don’t see him, we’re a family, and we will have an amazing Christmas. Won’t we?’ Mya could sense Cass repressing her tears, and felt a fresh anger boil inside her. This beautiful young woman having to be strong, having to fight against the complete hopelessness of her Father at the age of fourteen. Experiencing the let-down of a man before she was even a woman. Mya felt her own rage rising, like goose-fat bubbling on the hob.

‘I love you, Cassy-moo.’

‘I love you too.’ Cass walked across the aisle then, looking more like the elegant woman than ever. She plucked a half-turkey from the fridge and carried it back. She smiled – a strained smile – but a smile. ‘I’m not going to be a vegetarian just yet,’ she said. ‘Maybe next year.’

‘Whenever you want,’ Mya said, sighing and smiling in unison. ‘Whenever you want.’

The Fifth Day of Christmas

Tyson had a habit of counting their rings at the bar. Usually he'd be with a friend, sometimes on his own, when they'd lean towards him – when he could smell their perfume – that's when he'd look at their hands and see if there was a band of metal on their wedding finger. A diamond, a gem, a Celtic knot – whatever it was, he wanted to know.

He sipped on his Brandy and Coke in the seductively dim light of the bar and surveyed the hands of the woman in front of him. She had long, slender fingers, black painted nails and three fingers of her right hand. Subtle, gold rings. No decoration. On her left, banded around her pinky and her thumb were two more rings, each with a tiny diamond encrusted in their crown.

Somewhere in the bar, music played, although Tyson couldn't focus on it. It was like the little voice in his head, drowned out by the woman with five gold rings and two deep brown eyes, the colour of rum.

They'd been talking and dancing throughout the night. Tyson already knew the shape of her body – her thick thighs, her flat chest. Hips larger than he liked but still, his type of woman.

'You wanna come through? Back to my hotel?' he whispered through her hoop ear-ring. She smelt like musk and apricot. She didn't say anything as she stood up, placed her palm in his and started walking.

Her rings were cold against his palm as they weaved through the bar.

The Sixth Day of Christmas

Junior walked home from football in the evening, his last training of the year finished. He'd changed into his *Jordans* before he'd left the Astro, keen to wear them as much as he could before they were no longer cool (shoes generally had about four months of being cool, before becoming 'old-school') and so he'd taken the opportunity to impress his team-mates with his trendiness. It had worked, too. The best player on the team, Matt, had sworn and said they were exactly what he'd asked requested for Christmas.

Junior was pleased that his plan had worked – though he wasn't pleased that he'd managed to forget his headphones. Usually after training he'd plug them in and wouldn't think about the gathering shadows – instead listening to Hip-hop that his Mum would never let him listen to at home, and imagining the next football match, where he'd hopefully get his elusive first goal.

But he'd left them in his school jacket, and there wasn't even a match for three weeks, so Junior was stuck with his thoughts and the darkness. So he thought about his Dad.

It was five days, at least, since Junior had seen his Dad. Cass told him that he'd left them, like before. But Junior didn't remember before. It made him sad that when his Dad wasn't there, Junior didn't notice until he really thought about what was missing. His Mum made the food and got them ready for school. His Mum washed his football kit and took him to matches. They usually ate without their Dad, and even when he was at home, he'd be watching TV and trying not to notice his kids.

Sure, every now and then they got a gift from him. Like the *Air Jordans* that pattered against the wet ground, as Junior turned off the main road and onto the thin alleyway that led to their house. Into the dark alleyway that was lined with thick bushes and smelt like smoke – or sometimes 'weed' as their Dad had once called it. The alleyway was barely lit, only one lamp-post shining, right at the end. He could barely even see his feet in the darkness.

Junior got halfway down the alleyway and thought he heard a noise. Like a cough, behind him. He turned.

Nothing but shadows swirling like dry ice around his ankles. He started turning round when he saw something. Felt hands in his chest, stumbled backwards.

‘What the f-‘

‘Shut up, dickhead.’ He recognised the voice before he could identify the shape in the darkness. Ryan Pearson, in his sister’s year. Already six foot, with an eyebrow piercing and a moustache. ‘Where’s your sister at?’ he growled. ‘She not baby-sitting you today?’ Junior tried to push his hands into the other boy’s chest, but Ryan crashed a shoulder into Junior, knocking the wind out of him as he stumbled backwards again. ‘Woah there, Junior. I ain’t even after much, just them *Jordans* you got on. What size are ya?’

‘Leave me alone,’ Junior panted. ‘I’m going –‘

‘Home?’ Ryan said, laughing. ‘To yer Dad? I heard he’s at the bar with other women every night.’ He grabbed Junior by the collar and dragged him towards him. ‘I heard he’s banging his way through town. Now take yer fucking shoes off.’

Junior tried not to cry as he bent down towards his feet, loosening the laces of his left shoe, but the tears started to flow. All he could do was keep his head bowed.

‘Hurry the fuck up,’ Ryan said. Now the tears started streaming from Junior – he couldn’t stop his lip from quivering as Ryan gripped his shoulder. He started taking his foot out of the shoe when he heard a voice, somewhere over Ryan’s shoulder.

‘Junior?’ It was his Mum, yelling from beneath the lamp-post. ‘JUNIOR?’

‘Shit!’ Ryan yelled. And almost as quickly as he’d appeared, Ryan was gone, sprinting away from the light at the end of the alleyway.

The Seventh Day of Christmas

Tyson woke up for the second night running in the woman's room, wrapped in a silk duvet. She breathed heavily beside him, lost in sleep, a stench of sex and sweat hanging in the bedroom like the lingering exhaust fumes of an old car. He glanced towards her tattoo – a Chinese symbol that decorated her spine, his eyes adjusting to the shadows.

It turned out that the woman from the bar was a house-wife with her wedding ring off. The man who paid for her luxurious three bedroom apartment was away on business, and so she'd invited Tyson into her home for the last twenty-four and a bit hours. They'd spent the day getting to know each other in the bedroom, in the bathroom and in the kitchen. Between getting to know each other, they'd ordered pizza and camped out in the living room, watching Christmas movies, though they'd barely said anything to each other, mostly communicating through furniture creaks and sighs of contentment.

Tyson felt his head swimming as he sat up in the bed and reached for his phone. It was face down on the floor, knocked off the bed in the middle of the night when they'd woken up together and got to know each other some more. Then they'd fallen back to sleep, as if it was nothing but a strange dream.

Tyson scrambled around the floor with his hand and clawed the phone into it. When the screen lit up, he forgot why he'd wanted to check it.

There were two missed calls from Mya that he didn't care about, and a message from Junior that made him forget everything from the past week: the pregnancy test, the bar, the smell of sex on silk linen. On his phone were four words that ripped his heart from his chest and squeezed it like it was a dog toy caught in a Jack Russel's snarl.

We don't need you the text read.

The Eighth Day of Christmas

Mya spent the day cleaning the house, calculating the bills, looking for jobs online and waiting. For him to call? For him to turn up? She wasn't sure, but she waited. He usually called. But this time was different: it had been a whole week.

She'd have chased after him before, followed him to his bar, to work, to wherever he was hiding. She used to pluck him from the hole and bring him home – relish the time afterwards where he actually showed remorse and care for his family. Where they were in love again, cuddling in the moonlit kitchen, going out together as a family, eating at restaurants or getting delivery and watching a film. And then – two months later, he'd do the same thing, an endless cycle of cheating and forgiveness. Cheating. Forgiveness. Cheating.

The kids had two days left of school, and Mya wanted to find a job before then, but she was struggling. She was regretting investing so much into their relationship; she had no job experience, no degree, nothing except the A Levels she'd gained in 6th form – when she'd first met Tyson. When he was the sweet young man that everyone loved.

Mya leaned back in the kitchen chair and sighed, webbing one hand through her hair and feeling the pounding of a coming headache. She placed her other palm on her stomach.

Tyson sighed at his work-desk. The lights were glittering out around the office, leaving, eventually, just Tyson and his laptop. He was finishing up the final campaign that would run over the holidays, leaving him free to take his week's leave. He was putting this in place on his laptop, but mostly – he was thinking.

The photograph of his family on his desk had watched him all day. The shy eyes of Cassie, eleven in Florida with the curls of brown hair that hung recklessly around her face. She was more

careful now, more aware of how she looked. Junior grinned up at him from the photo, his hair a larger afro, his teeth glinting in the morning Florida light.

And Mya. Mya was as beautiful as always, wearing her cropped top and her hair in braids – the way Tyson loved it. The way she never wore it anymore. Smiling – really smiling. Like she loved the man whose arm stretched round her back.

Could they really raise another child together? There'd be a huge difference in ages between Junior and Cass and the new baby, plus another eighteen years of parenting at least. But then – Mya was the best mum Tyson had ever known. She'd raised two wonderful children – and she was still young. *They* were still young. Most of their friends hadn't even had kids yet. There was still time for them to live. Just a bit.

He'd just about decided to go home, to grovel and make up for the last week – to raise the family, when his phone rang. The number across the screen wasn't in his phone book, but he knew who it was.

The woman with five gold rings. He answered.

The Ninth Day of Christmas

Mya got back from her Mother's at half past five, having sat in rows of traffic for forty minutes, trying to forget the conversation she'd had in her Mother's living room. She hadn't even told her any of the details about Tyson's disappearance, only explained that he wouldn't be with the family on Christmas day, when her Mother had burst into a rant about how he wasn't good enough for her, and how his family were wasters and he was too, and how he had no manners or commitment, and was totally useless around the house. The whole thing had made Mya feel exhausted.

And even though she knew she never wanted to see him again, a part of her wanted him to come back and be better than ever, for good this time. Even if just to prove her smarmy Mother wrong – who, Mya refrained from bringing up, had loved Tyson the first time she'd met him.

In fact, everyone loved Tyson the first time they met him. He was so wonderfully cheeky, and funny, and charming that it was almost impossible *not* to love him. Tyson, on the first night he met Mya's family, had helped her Grandfather cheat at Rummy by hiding cards with him.

It was that wonderful first impression that probably made him so successful at bars. That, and he looked like he'd just stepped out of a *Calvin Klein* advert for some tacky aftershave. He was charming and mischievous and had a vibrant mind that never stopped whirring. Bright sparks of wonder that sadly lived beneath the shadows of his seedy personality.

Mya had let her Mother rant until the tea went cold, and then had finally left the house as she knew she needed to get Christmas sorted; she was panicking about the lack of decorations and the bills in the hallway. The dust that had clustered on every surface of the house and the webs in the corner of the shower. She simply didn't have time to make Christmas for the kids.

Mya sat outside the house for a few moments, trying to ease the wave of nausea that came from her panicked thoughts. She started to cry. Slow, thick tears. Not for her, but for her wonderful children who deserved the greatest Christmas, and would get a terrible mess instead.

For two minutes she let the tears sting her eyes as she wept. And then she sniffed, wiped her eyes, and got out of the car, into the cold December air. Behind her, the house across the road's Christmas lights blinked. Rows of LED bulbs that lined the roof and outlined the windows. They reminded her of stars. And made her think about how far away the stars felt some nights.

Struggling with her bag, Mya unlocked her front door and stepped into the warm hallway, placing her bag on the floorboards and slipping out of her heels. She tried not to glance at the mountain of bills as she walked towards the kitchen for a cup of coffee – and then she stopped. She

heard Christmas music coming from the living room, and only now noticed the glow of light beneath the door. The kids usually went straight up to their rooms. Junior would play *Fortnite* and Cass would read or call her friends. They never went to the living room after school. Unless their Father was there.

Mya walked up the door tentatively, and paused outside the door. She put her ear to the wood. Mariah Carey was playing from the TV.

‘Kids?’ she said. And then she pushed the door open. ‘Oh – wow!’

In the living room, with her two children crouched before it, was the saggiest, biggest Christmas tree she had ever seen. It was decorated with randomly placed baubles and uneven layers of silver tinsel that hung off the floppy branches like clothes off a broken hanger. Junior and Cass glanced up at her, both smiling nervously, as if they might be in trouble.

‘Where did you get a tree?’ Mya said, and she couldn’t help but laugh at the sight of the most wonderful, incredible – ugliest Christmas tree she had ever seen. She kneeled on the floor as Junior spoke.

‘We got it from the ur – the garden centre. In town.’

‘How did you – how did you get it here?’

‘Carried it,’ Junior said, and Cass nodded.

‘You brilliant idiots,’ Mya said, ruffling their hair, pulling them in for a hug. ‘I love both of you. Blooming idiots. Give me some tinsel then, come on.’ She held a floppy piece of silver tinsel in one hand and then stopped. ‘Wait – guys. I’m – I need to tell you something.’ They stared at her with big eyes, Junior doing that thing where he cocked his head, Cass’ hands crossing on her lap.

‘You’re going to have a new brother or sister,’ Mya said, and she felt a smile spread across her face as Junior and Cass came towards her. ‘I’m pregnant.’ The caress of their warm hugs was everything Mya had ever needed.

The Tenth Day of Christmas

'Mya, this all looks incredible.' Pila sat with a cup of mulled wine warming her hand, across the freshly decorated living room from Mya, who drank warm tea. The tree had actually been salvageable, a few carefully spread tinsel lines, and neatly placed baubles creating a living room that really felt like Christmas. A fairy with soft white wings sat atop the tree, casting her eyes over the cards on the window, and the ornaments in the corner. The smell of fresh pine needles filled the room. 'There's loads of gifts too!'

Six or seven boxes sat beneath the tree, all wrapped in plain white paper, a red bow on top of each.

'We bought loads at the start of the month,' Mya said. 'Well I did. Tyson paid, but I bought the presents. Stayed up all last night wrapping them up.'

'Seriously, you have been incredible. Just shown how strong you are and how shit that bell-end is. You heard from him?'

'The kids helped more than ever,' Mya said. 'And no, not a peep. I'm more worried about that Ryan kid, the dodgy one from two streets over. Saw him trying to mug Junior for his shoes the other day.'

'Piece of shit,' Pila said, shaking her head. 'He's the one that was egging the houses on Halloween.'

'Yeah, well Cass has a few big mates in her year that are looking out for him. Hopefully he doesn't try anything with Junior again – though he hasn't worn the *Jordans* in the last few days, and today was non-uniform.'

'How's Junior getting on without Tyson about? I mean – it's usually the boys that have it worse when a Father ducks out.'

‘Actually – he’s brilliant. Motivated, awake, lively. He’s started taking on jobs – cleaning his room, emptying the bins, polishing the hallways. I didn’t ask him too. And the Christmas tree was his idea - Cass loved it, but he came up with it.’

‘And how’s the new little one?’ Mya pressed a hand to her stomach and felt the slight swelling of her skin. She’d been feeling ill in the mornings, but in the evenings, everything felt fine. She even felt a gentle warmth through her fingertips. She knew she was imagining it, but she still felt it.

‘Strong,’ Mya said. ‘We’re all strong. You should have heard the kids last night – I told them I was pregnant. I think Junior wants to actually be the Father figure in the little thing’s life.’

‘You guys are incredible,’ Pila said, and Mya blushed. But she didn’t deny it.

The Eleventh Day of Christmas

The bar was busy on Christmas Eve – it always was. Plumes of locals gathered in corners and booths and empty spaces, gagging and laughing, exchanging gifts and terrible drunken jokes. Tyson was glad he’d arrived early and claimed a seat at the bar. This time, though, he didn’t try and talk to anyone, choosing instead to stare into his murky brown liquor, and wonder what they were up to. His family. Junior, who said he didn’t need him. Cass, who hadn’t even tried to contact him. Mya, who had stopped calling four days earlier.

The absence of their arms reaching out to him made Tyson feel hollow, like he was missing something. The woman he’d been sleeping with was back with her husband, and had kicked him out with a long drawn out kiss, that he wished she hadn’t given him.

‘nother whisky,’ Tyson said, slurring his words. He placed a five pound note on the bar-top and pushed it towards the bar-lady, who wasn’t the usual woman but was a younger, shier woman who didn’t properly know how to pour a beer. She took the fiver and went to make him his whisky.

While he waited for the whisky to warm his palm, Tyson scanned the room, not really sure what he was looking for. Beautiful women? They were all too young. An old friend? He had none. And then his eyes fell on the young man by the door. He was animated, loud, forthcoming. About eighteen, maybe nineteen, with a large group of friends that were all listening intently to whatever he was saying. The boy reminded Tyson of Junior, especially when he grinned, his smile crooked.

He reminded Tyson of his boy, and how he couldn't wait to teach Tyson everything about growing up. Couldn't wait to share a whisky in a bar with his son, to teach him what life meant, how to make money, how to make the world love him. How to be a great Father.

Tyson pulled his phone out. He had no missed calls, no texts, no emails. It was Christmas Eve and nobody was wondering where he was.

'Fuck it,' he muttered. Without waiting for his whisky to arrive, he phoned a taxi and left the bar.

The Twelfth Day of Christmas

The taxi dropped him off at the end of the street at ten minutes passed midnight on Christmas Day.

'Have a good one, mate,' the driver had said, the bags under his eyes grey and his words partly slurred.

'Yeah, merry Christmas.' Tyson grabbed his suitcase from the seat-well in front of him, having stopped off at his hotel to grab his clothes, toiletries and his charger, stuffing them into his case and checking out in a blur. On the way back to his house from the hotel, he'd even convinced the taxi driver to stop off at a petrol station, where he'd purchased a blue teddy-bear that was meant to be a present for his new child. As it was Christmas, the taxi driver had waived the stopping fee. Tyson watched as the silver *Yaris* pulled away from the kerb, leaving him at home for Christmas.

Tyson walked up his driveway, smiling over his shoulder at the lights across the road that shone like a neon bar-sign, and fumbled with his keys with one hand, holding his case with the other. Every light was out in the house, the windows black squares of night-sky.

Tyson smiled at the wreath that hung on the door. It wasn't one he'd recognised, but he liked the flashes of red and white berries that speckled the dark green. He swayed as he pushed the key into the front-door lock. It didn't feel smooth, as it usually did, but the key fed into the metal with a rough glide. When Tyson tried to twist the key, however, it wouldn't move.

'What the fuck?' he said, trying again. It still wouldn't budge. He was about to try one more time when the light blinked on in the kitchen window. The blinds were open, and Tyson could see his son wearing a vest and shorts, holding a half-empty glass of water. He plucked his keys from the front door and went up to the window. Banged on the glass.

Junior looked at him, as Tyson pushed his forehead against the window and stared with pleading, bloodshot eyes. Junior's expression was the same as Tyson's was, whenever he had to make a big decision at work. Like he was considering every outcome with the utmost professionalism.

After a while, Junior smirked. He stepped towards the kitchen window, looked right into the red-tinted eyes of his father and raised his middle finger. Then, before his Dad could react, he pulled the chord on the blinds and let them fall across his Father's face.

Tyson retreated from the glass slowly, his arms shuddering and tears staining his cheek as he turned and walked into the darkness.

A Quick Note

Thank you for reading my short story, and have a merry Christmas. Mya and the family are lucky that they have caring friends and family in a tough time – but not everyone has that luxury. If you follow the link to my Justgiving page, you can donate to Buttle UK, a charity that helps children at risk, and in, poverty:

<https://www.justgiving.com/fundraising/twelvedaysstory>

Thank you, and Merry Christmas!

Gareth Davey