

## A SEVENTIES CHRISTMAS TO FORGET

Christmas was looming, and she dreaded it. Lack of funds, and only being allowed Christmas and Boxing Day off work, made it impractical to spend Christmas in Jersey, even though she yearned for home. Although in her mid-twenties, she still needed her mother at Christmas. Her estranged father, who she'd never got on with, lived in America with his new wife. She envied her teenage sister and twenty-three-year-old brother. They would be experiencing a proper full-blown festive season in Jersey, being pampered by their mother. She was a wonderful cook who'd always known how to make Christmas a magical occasion.

Mug earned paltry wages as the sole graphic artist at a West London printer works. She desperately needed to find a better-paid job. On asking her boss for an extra fiver a month, she'd been greeted with a menacing reply. 'You know where the dole queue is!' He'd since caught her scanning the job vacancy section in a media magazine, and had been giving her the sulky, silent treatment for several tense weeks.

Her bedsit, situated near Swiss Cottage, seemed Dickensian. She was on the top floor of a large, antiquated building which had seen better days. She shared a dilapidated bathroom, complete with corroded taps, scummy bath, and poorly flushing toilet, with the occupants of the seven other bedsits. Everything in the house seemed to be shades of brown, with none of the vibrant, psychedelic colours prevalent in the seventies. Her low wages made buying furniture impossible. She had to rely on the armchair, single bed, perilous gas cooker, sink, and ancient gas fire. The entire house reeked of gas, and she feared she was gradually being poisoned. The rug was so threadbare that the floorboards were visible; draughts rose through the rug, and whistled through the rattling window frames. She was sad to be spending Christmas day alone in such a hovel, but had no option. At least she had a television for company, even though the choice of programs was dire. If all else failed, she could fall back on her treasured cassette player and tapes.

After work on Christmas Eve, she bought a chicken portion, a few potatoes, and Brussels sprouts to eat on the big day. It was all she could afford, thanks to the stinginess of her boss. As she owned neither fridge, freezer, nor table, she placed her purchases on top of the cooker, confident her room was chilly enough to keep it fresh until the next day's much-anticipated, special mealtime. She went for a brisk walk in nearby Regent's Park, because it was warmer outside than in her bedsit, with its high ceilings, draughts, and ineffectual gas fire.

Her best friend, Gill, had given her a bottle of white wine for Christmas. It was to be her one treat, as she had no spare cash to buy Christmas decoration or extras.

'Are you sure you'll be okay on your own over Christmas? You're welcome to spend it in Yorkshire with me,' Gill had kindly offered.

Eager to reassure her anxious friend, Mug said, 'Don't worry about me. I'll be fine.'

The big day dawned. A thrill of excitement tingled in her belly, even though all she had to look forward to was devouring her Christmas dinner. Her mouth watered at the delicious thought. To get into the Christmas spirit, she switched on the blurry television to seek out some festive cheer. There wasn't much choice in the seventies, but the sight of children singing carols warmed her heart, reminding her of how excited she'd been as a child at Christmas, when the nativity held more significance for her. There were no mobile phones for her to contact friends and relatives. There was a pay phone three floors down, but she had no coins to call home. Her mother may have phoned her to wish her a merry Christmas, but, being so far away from the phone, she would never hear it ring. There was no internet back then, so there was no opportunity to seek out online human contact or entertainment.

The big moment came to cook the Christmas dinner. After peeling the potatoes, she unwrapped the chicken portion. A vile fishy smell wafted up from the slimy object. Its pink

colour was tinged with an unappetising yellowish green hue. She was devastated to realise that her chicken had undoubtedly turned rancid, so was now inedible. She briefly considered cooking it anyway, having nothing to replace it with, and no money to buy an alternative, not that any shops were open.

Not wanting to risk being poisoned, she threw the chicken into the bin in disgust. Mug still needed to eat, so she roasted the potatoes, boiled the sprouts, and finished eating in time to watch the Queen's speech. Christmas dinner was supposed to be the culinary pinnacle of the year. The severe contrast with her bland, unappetising meal made her want to cry. The lump in her throat felt as large as the Brussels sprouts, making it even harder to swallow her insipid fare.

The other bedsits were eerily quiet, due to everyone having disappeared to celebrate with relatives or friends over the festive season. Depressed at the thought of the fun the rest of Britain was probably having on what should be a magical day, she uncorked the wine Gill had given her. She drank every drop to numb the painful solitude.

Mug felt like Tiny Tim standing out in the snow, gazing through windows at happy Dickensian families celebrating Christmas in style. An overpowering urge to jump off any one of the London bridges into the icy Thames washed over her. Instead, she settled for crawling back into bed, even though it was only late afternoon, preferring to sleep the day away in a drunken stupor than sit wallowing in unattractive self-pity. One thing was certain; she would do anything in her power never to spend Christmas day alone again.