

Christmas Haunt

by Celia Micklefield

Always at the corner of my eye. A blurred thing. A transitory image of something bright and shimmering but when I turn my head to look at it there's nothing there. Something rushes past me but I can never see what it is.

I ignored it at first. *Just a trick of the light*, I told myself. Nothing to worry about. But it keeps happening. It's been three weeks now. This ephemeral thing at the corner of my eye. Like a mirage. It moves so fast I can never get a good look at it. Every night it comes. Every *night*. Never during the day.

Christmas is near and all the television channels are full of the same stuff as every year. I haven't bothered with a tree or fairy lights. I can't do with with all that rigmarole. Decorations? There'd only be me to look at them. It would feel false. It wouldn't feel right. So I look at television instead. Every night I sit with my coffee and watch the Christmas specials. I've seen them all before. Even the newest ones seem old, somehow. They play just like all the other repeats. Year after year they roll out the same old same old. And just as I'm feeling like I'm also part of the rerun the blurred mirage flickers at the corner of my eye.

I try a rational approach.

Oh, you're just tired. You've spent too long watching the telly and now your eyes are going funny. That's all it is. Maybe you need new glasses.

But there it goes again just out of sight and this time I think,

Next time, don't move your head to look at it. It can see you moving. Keep still. Just move your eyes.

And so, on the sofa I sit sideways on to the television. I have to watch out of the corner of my other eye but my head is facing forwards so in my peripheral vision I'll be able to see whatever it is that keeps flashing around the edges of the room.

It's uncomfortable sitting this way but soon I get used to watching television like this while I'm waiting for the blurred thing to happen. I'm not going to let it catch me out again. This time, I'll be ready and catch it and then I can put an end to all this wondering.

My neck is aching. It's sharp like toothache. I want to move but I know what will happen if I do.

It knows.

It knows I want to move and as soon as I do . . .

My shoulders are aching now as well as my neck and there's a pain running down my right side. My muscles are tensing. I might get cramp. If I budge just a little I'll feel more relaxed. I lean back on the sofa and THERE IT GOES.

At the corner of my eye a blurred, shimmering thing races around the skirting and disappears before I can get a good look at it.

It was waiting, I think.

It had to be waiting for me to make that move because as soon as I shifted my position on the sofa it knew it could come out and do that blurred, shimmery thing as it raced past me. I make myself another hot drink and I sit in my kitchen to think about the shape of it.

Shifting.

Its shape shifts.

Yes. It's a silent shape shifter that won't let you see it. It won't be pinned down. Stubborn. A bit like me, I think.

Suddenly I know what it is and make myself laugh aloud at the impertinence of it. The answer forms itself in my mind as if it wasn't me who'd thought it. Why hadn't I realised that before? It all

seems so clear to me now. So now I know what it is I suppose it'll stop its nightly flight around my sitting room once I've done what it wants me to do.

It isn't easy climbing the loft ladder without help. I remember the times when we'd wait till long after the kids were asleep and Steve would hold the ladder steady while I scrambled up. He was too big to get through the hatch so that bit was always my job. I'd pass everything down to him and then we'd have a nice drink together while we finished off the wrapping and put out the piles under the tree. I know there's a smile on my face now as I recall those Christmases past. I can smile at them now. Those days are long gone but, at least, I still have the memories. I'll always have those. Wouldn't it be sadder still not to have even the memories?

The blurred, shimmering thing is up there in the loft. I know it is. I can't see it yet but I know that's where it goes whenever I try to look at it. I know it does. It's waiting for me and I'm still laughing and it doesn't matter that there's only me to see because I feel better already. Carefully, I retrace my steps with the box in my arms. Steve isn't behind me to help me with it so I have to manoeuvre the thing so it slips down the loft ladder a bit at a time while I prop it up. Then I let it slide down the stair carpet to the living room. I open the box and take out the pieces. Sort them into size. Short branches for the top, bigger ones below.

There's a bulb blinking near the top. I'll find a replacement tomorrow. In my living room I stand back to admire my handiwork.

"Grandma," a little voice says, "you've put up your tree!"

"I didn't hear you come in," I say. "Is your mother here?"

"She's just coming."

I hurry for a tissue. Steve is in my eyes and all I can see is blurred and shimmery.