

Living in a good area
Short story
Christmas story
a cosmos original 2010
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Set in Times New Roman.

published by Cosmos Original Productions, Glasgow.

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www.cosmos-original-productions.co.uk

CHRISTMAS: LIVING IN A GOOD AREA

A story for Christmas

Many people who passed by her house wondered who she was. The popular question was: ‘What age do you think she is?’

What can be said here is that the old woman who sits by the window lives alone: for her husband has been dead for many a long year. She has lived in the same small house in the country since she got married. Unfortunately, she is too old to go out on her own now, but her son they say delivers food to her, and from time to time keeps an eye on her. If only they knew, for the old woman as she stares out through the living room window onto the green grass has good memories inside her, happy days remembering life as a mother and as a wife.

When she feels down she sings to herself, and once feeling better she reminds herself about her situation: “Nobody out there, and just little old me sitting here.”

It was true that not many people called to see her now. However, one day a tradesman appeared up at the old lady’s house; he had been sent by Mr Crossbow. It was common knowledge that the aforementioned man owned many of the houses in the local area where she stayed. Mr Crossbow was always in the press. He was always maintaining: ‘This is a good area, you know - all you have to do is walk along the street and look at the cars.’

This was a strange thing to hear: for the woman had never owned a car.

She could see the tradesman, wee Johnny as he was called, was a bit lackadaisical. And it really was not a great surprise to her that before he had downed tools that day she was proved right: for he had damaged her house while trying to fix something upstairs. As the water poured through the ceiling she had to shout to him to stop what he was doing and come down: for he had obviously damaged the water supply.

When he appeared in the living room he had a daft look on his face, but when he saw the damage he had caused he seemed to sober up. In a rough voice he said to her: “If you write down what I have damaged, missus, I will pay you back next week.”

The old woman knew that it would not come out of his wages, but that his boss Mr Crossbow would give him the money for it. From articles in the local press she had gleaned that Mr Crossbow was very rich; he received most of his income from the government, through once source or another.

The old woman had watched the local boys grow into men, and she knew that, when they got older, some were better than others at counting.

“I have written down here what you have damaged, and what needs to be fixed,” she said, pointing at the list in her hand, “Please check it, Johnny.”

The young man looked at the list, and laughed, “Yes, it’s all here, missus. I’ll see you get your money all right.”

However, something must have happened that day to Wee Johnny on his journey as he made his way back to see his boss Mr Crossbow.

A few days later the woman heard someone at the door; it was a loud knock. When she opened it a tall man was standing there. He was well dressed, slightly sparse on top. He appeared affable. He had a smile on his round pallid face; although she noticed his eyes told a different story than his smile did. The common phrase ‘an old fox’ came to mind.

“I have come to pay for the damage the tradesman caused to your house last week,” he said in a cultivated manner.

The old woman remembered where she had put the note, and went and got it. When she returned to the door she read it out loud to him.

The Old Fox had a different list in his head, and said to her: “This is not the note Wee Johnny told me about.”

As she wondered about this, and what Wee Johnny was up to, she thought about another local lad she knew in the local area. Word had got round the village that this lad had been thrown out of his house by Mr Crossbow.

With Christmas just round the corner she thought she would ask the man who worked for Mr Crossbow about

him: “Do you think Mr Crossbow will let the wee lad back into his house for Christmas? For it is cold now, and I am sure he will not last the winter sleeping out in the woods, and in the fields.

“He died madam,” said the Old Fox in a deadbeat tone.

The woman was shocked, for she knew that it was not his fault that he could not pay the rent Mr Crossbow was asking him for.

“What happened?”

“Oh some wild boys got a hold of him in the woods and one thing led to another; he perished not long after.

The Old Fox became irritated, it was as if she had no right to ask him these questions, and for a moment or two he just looked straight through her. Quite forgetting whose door he was at he looked down at his conservative brogue shoes, tapped his left foot twice, and quoted Calvin the philosopher to her: “*Death is the extremity of despair, madam.*”

The woman was shocked. She had lived through a war, but this misanthropy in local people was new to her. She had heard like everybody else what the people were saying in the local area, that things had changed and that it was no longer a good area to live in: for men and women were now turning against the vulnerable in society. The reason for the change was that they wanted to become rich. These people she had heard were mainly men and women who worked for Mr Crossbow, the man

who owed many of the houses in the local area.

A man who had cut her hedge in the summer had warned her about them, when the topic had come up in the conversation: “That lot they will do anything to cheat you out of what is due to you - they will even push you to the ground if you give them a chance.”

It was well known that the party members that he was referring to were every day spreading rumours and lies and stories that were made up to discredit people they did not like. Even though the party members did not go around saying bad things about the poor people in the good area no one believed them when they said: ‘Oh yes, of course we help the vulnerable in society.’

She looked down at the list again: “The amount is not right, the tradesman promised to pay for everything he damaged - he has not told you what he told me.”

The Old Fox slowly opened his wallet, and as he held out the money, he smiled at her. They were crisp new notes; they looked so colourful too in his big white hand.

“I’m sorry that this is all that we are offering you madam. You can take it or leave it.”

“What is happening to people in this good area?” she wondered to herself. She knew she had no husband now to defend her. She thought to herself: “My husband knew this man, but now he has passed away this man comes to my door and acts like my master.”

“Don’t you know people will visit me at Christmas and see the mess you have made of my house?”

The old woman knew that if she took half the money it would not be enough to fix the damage? And there would be no more after that. She would have to pay for half the damage Mr Crossbow’s worker had caused. It was bizarre. She had always paid her taxes too.

The Old Fox smiled at her again. Up until this point she had not wanted to believe what people were saying that the good area had changed, and that the people who were in authority had lost their way. It was clear to see that they were now only serving the great and the good in society, and that all others were to be forgotten about. She knew there would be more evictions after Christmas, and there would be more cheating people out of what was owed to them by the men and women who worked for Mr Crossbow.

She had heard that local trade was to be brought to an end. Mr Crossbow’s friends were to be given all the contracts to supply the markets, and once that had started everyone knew they would make sure thereafter that no one would get in on the game. Local craftsmen and women would soon find themselves out of work. It would not be long until some of them would be wandering around the woods like the local lad who had recently perished: for they too would soon be tricked out of their houses by bureaucrats who worked for Mr Crossbow.

It was well known that the man whom the people had appointed as their local representative for the good area had become influenced by Mr Crossbow: for he saw in him all his dreams. He was called the Skull by the local people. He was new to politics. People thought him funny at first: for he had the image of a Jesuit priest, as he strolled from meeting to meeting. It was the way he stared at people, as if he should be greeted as such that made him funny. He did not appear to be sympathetic to widows, local trade or vulnerable people, Mr Crossbow was exploiting. Consequently the protection of men, women and children had not been protected in the good area since his arrival.

Some folk made a joke of it and said that although he acted like a priest he did not bring any religion to his meetings with him. Although this was comical, it was not good for the good area to have such a representative. Many people in the local area could not take any more and had become UP's (youpees) Unrepresented People. Although they left their names on the voting register they reckoned that if the elected member was like that, namely that after being voted in he just did what he wanted to, and did not represent them, there was no way of making him do so, therefore they would opt out and make it known that although the local area had a representative he did not represent them.

“I am an UP!” the gardener had confessed to the old woman after cutting her hedge.

Apparently a local man had tried to straighten the elected

member out. The elected member got such a fright that he alerted the police, thinking that the man who had waved his fist at him was, as they say in the local area, was going to punch his lights out, when in fact all he was doing was showing him the sign that people all around the world use in defiance of elected representatives, or dictators, who have become corrupted and turn their backs on the people: ‘Stop representing vested interests and start representing the people who elect you!’

In a wider context it had been even said that democracy was coming to an end: ‘Politicians are careerists now,’ people said, and many people who lived in the good area now took that for granted. ‘Once they get in they just do what they like.’

There was a lot of truth in that: the umbilical cord had been cut a long time ago, and it was generally felt that only the media now could get them sacked or change their opinions on political matters. The people had not fought to maintain the democratic right of having an elected member to represent them. They had let it slip.

The good area may have changed, due to the fact that people with strange ideas were now exploiting it, but the old lady knew that time has a way of sorting things out.

The old woman knew that life was a strange thing; it was not something you could ever predict or understand by reading a book. She was certain of one thing: the light always overcomes the darkness.

The old woman did not take the money from the Old

Fox's hand, but instead she said to herself: "I will have a word with Wee Johnny the next time I see him, and we will get it sorted out," and she shut the door in his face.

The old lady tidied her house as best she could; she covered the damage with tinsel and cards, and got ready for Christmas.

Someone had told her that this year: 'Christmas was for the criminals,' it was so funny to hear people say that for she knew Christmas was for everyone saints and sinners. Some people must have thought Christmas was only for good people and upright people like Mr Crossbow.

The old woman knew that all wrongdoing was done in ignorance and therefore involuntary. She imagined the Skull, Mr Crossbow, and the Old Fox at a Christmas party, sitting together, looking very glum.

'Ah, there's nowt so queer as folk,' she said to herself and laughed.

After she had tidied the house she sat down at the table by the window and wrote out her first Christmas card: 'I wonder who I should send it to.'

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Merry Christmas to you all

