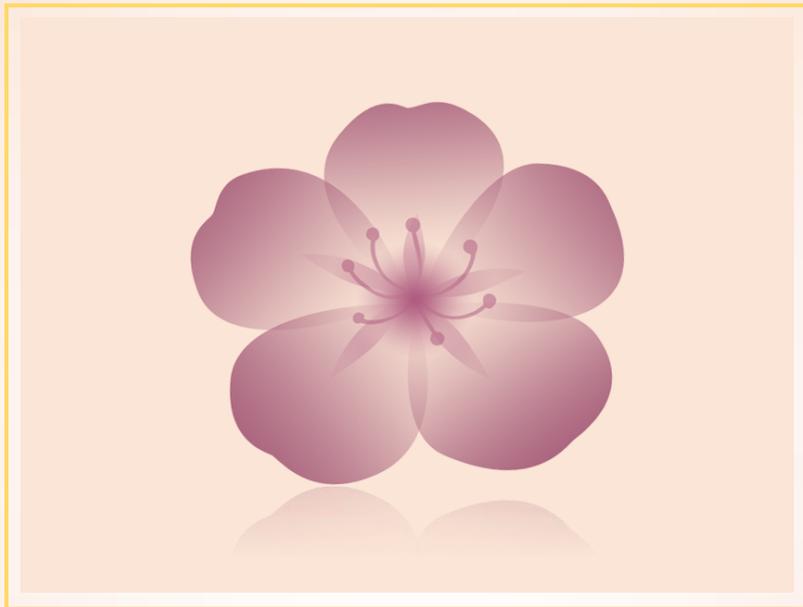


THE SPIRIT OF CHRISTMAS



A SHORT STORY



T.J. BEACH

Bob stood in the middle of the cul-de-sac to get the best view of his 2018 creation. He nodded. A masterpiece. The best yet. Santa's sleigh made all the difference, loaded with prezzies, thundering down the roof. Even deflated, flopped over the Solahart, it looked fantastic. And Frosty the snowman with his four little mates round the front yard water feature. Bob's hand shot to his mouth. What if he could freeze the pond? A brilliant thought. No. Wouldn't work. No one would see it at night even with the whole house covered in blazing fairy lights.

A grey head bobbed over next door's super six fence.

"Hey," Bob called. "Ivan, mate, come and have a look."

The old guy shuffled down his driveway and stood by Bob, arms crossed. He took in the vast expanse of festive decoration spread over the bungalow like icing on a Christmas cake.

"Waddy think, Ivan? Better than last year?"

Ivan shook his head. "How much electricity does all that use?"

"Huh. A shed load. Worth it though, don't you think?"

Ivan angled a glance towards him. "And I suppose we'll have queues of cars blocking the lane every night?"

"Hope so! We like to share. Make all those little kids smile. It's what Christmas is all about, isn't it? I reckon we'll get on Channel 7 again!"

A raucous shout from Bo's wife Beryl echoed off the walls from their kitchen.

"Bob! Is that Ivan? Ask him!"

"Oh yeah, almost forgot. Ivan, mate. We're having a few people around on Christmas night .."

"That's okay. No problem."

"No, no, mate. We want you to come round. Have a few drinks with us, a bit of a laugh."

Ivan turned to him with a forlorn half grin.

Bob didn't know what to say, so he blurted out the first thing that came into his head. "Sorry, I mean you won't know many people, I guess, I don't know what your plans are." As if Ivan would have plans, he hardly ever left his house.

Ivan nodded. "Thank you. For asking. It's nice of you both, but ... I'm planning a quiet day."

"Oh come on, mate. It's Christmas! You can't do it on your own. Everyone loves Christmas."

"Not everyone, Bob. It's a bad day for a lot of people. The homeless. The lonely. Family violence peaks on Christmas Day. And suicide."

"Well, the invitation's there."

“So what did he say?” Beryl asked as soon as Bob pushed open the kitchen door. “Is he coming?”

“Nah.”

“Oh.”

Bob went to the fridge, looked for a beer. “He’s a right grumpy, sad old bastard, isn’t he?”

“Especially since Renee passed on,” Beryl agreed.

“Zero Christmas spirit. But you can’t help feeling sorry for him, can ya?”

By six o’clock Christmas night Bob, comfortably sozzled, barbie shut down, at last, had settled himself into the Pool Lounger of Honour. All set to cruise through the rest of the evening watching the grandkids splashing in the pool or his kids, his brothers, and his mates joking around and sinking a few beers. Shani, his daughter, would bring the baby and a sparkly, sit on the end of the lounge for a natter. She always did. One of his favourite Christmas night traditions.

Beryl sauntered over wiping her hands on a tea towel. “Go and ask him, Bob.”

“What?”

“Ivan. Go round and ask him to come over.”

Bob cast a glance at the fence. “I dunno, love. Haven’t seen any movement there all day. Is there even a light on? I got the impression ... well.” He sighed.

“It’s Christmas, love. Go ask him again.”

Bob put down his beer and pulled himself to his feet. “Guess he can only say no, eh?”

Reverend Pieters rubbed her hands together and beamed. Another highly successful Christmas. They’d fed lunch to over a hundred homeless and underprivileged people, and almost every table was filled for the women’s shelter dinner, with more mothers and children in the line waiting to be served. She frowned, plucked at Marge’s shirt as she walked past. “Is Ivan still serving?”

Marge looked, smiled. “Yeah, that’s him.”

“But he’s been here all day. He helped us set up this morning.”

“Did he? Goodness! I told him to go home two hours ago, but he just smiles and joins in whatever’s next.”

“I’ll have a word.” The Reverend patted Marge on the shoulder as she strode to the serving line. “Ivan?” She waved.

He laid down the tongs, took off his apron, and limped over. “Yes, Reverend, how can I help?”

“Oh, you’ve already done much more than your fair share today. Go home. You must have family, people to see ...”

“Oh no.”

“Well then, Ivan. We’re under the mistletoe.”

“What? Oh ...”

She pulled him in and kissed him on the cheek.

He stiffened, relaxed, squeezed her back, just for a moment.

“Thank you, Ivan. Thanks for everything you’ve done today and thank you for letting me hug you. I badly needed to do that. You’ve got so much Christmas spirit. I wanted to see if some of it would ooze out into me. It did.”

“Oh.”

She hugged him again. “Afterwards some of us are getting together for a nightcap. I’d really like you to come.”

Ivan patted her on the arm. “No. Thank you. You’re very kind.” He set off for the serving line, took a couple of steps and turned back. “I think I will go home if that’s all right.”

“Of course.”

“You reminded me, actually. There’s someone I was rude to. About his Christmas lights. I think I should apologise.” He nodded. “Yes, peace and goodwill to all men. Merry Christmas, Reverend.”

“Merry Christmas, Ivan.”