



THE GOOD NEIGHBOUR

by A.A. Abbott



Disclaimer: this is a work of fiction. Any similarity to real people is completely coincidental and unintentional.

The girl next door was odd. Usually, she rushed straight past him, scowling and slamming her door. Although he'd intended to be a good neighbour, Kevin tried to ignore her on the rare occasions they met on the landing.

Today, he couldn't. She spoke to him.

"You want to switch those lights off," she said. "Your icicles are keeping me awake."

She stood before her front door, arms folded to create a barrier between the world and the sanctuary behind her. There was a perma-frown on her lightly tanned face. Her long black hair reached nearly to her waist. There wasn't much in the way of clothing above her shiny black stilettos, and there wasn't much meat on her bones. A gust of wind would blow her away.

Or: "If the wind changes, your expression will stay like that," he was about to say. Kevin thought better of it. "Pleased to meet you. I'm Kev," he said.

"Well?" Her tone was aggressive.

"Christmas lights are supposed to be left on." He was proud of his newly acquired house bling: the coloured bulbs outlining each window, the flashing icicles festooning his balcony.

“I work shifts,” the girl snapped. “I’m reporting you to the council.” She stormed back into her flat.

The door’s violent closure echoed. Kevin shrugged, pulled his anorak tightly around himself, and descended in the lift to the noisy highway below. On his bus ride, he was constantly reminded of the season: neon decorations hung from streetlights, and Christmas trees glittered in windows. They brightened the dark morning, as did the sugary tunes that regaled him once he was at work, resplendent in his uniform. Festive songs were piped into the grotto on a continuous loop. The elves moaned about musical boredom.

Kevin didn’t mind. The novelty of his own flat was almost outweighed by enjoyment of his job. Unlike colleagues in the department store, he sat down most of the time and his customers were always in a good mood. Everyone liked Father Christmas except, it seemed, the Santa Slasher. The serial killer had despatched Kevin’s predecessor a month before, which had given Kevin this job opportunity. It also introduced an element of risk into the role, because the murderer remained at large. Whenever there was a fresh news report of a death at a grotto in the region, Kevin looked anxiously at the burlier fathers accompanying their bright-eyed offspring.

Still, today was Christmas Eve. By nightfall, the threat would have passed. Meanwhile, it was a busy morning. After lunch, by contrast, time dragged. The floor manager led his grumbling elves away to put discount stickers on the tinsel. Kevin sat

quietly on his throne, a carver chair entwined with plastic ivy. He closed his eyes, humming along to White Christmas.

"Don't move," a familiar female voice said.

Kevin opened a corner of his eye. Right in front of him stood his unfriendly neighbour, holding a carving knife. It gleamed under the fairy lights.

Realisation dawned. "You're the Santa Slasher," he said miserably.

For the first time she smiled at him. "Full marks, old man. Now, sit still and I might let you die quickly."

Kevin stared at her. "What's your problem with Christmas?" he asked. "You may not have got everything you wanted in your stocking, but your reaction's extreme, isn't it?"

His neighbour's lip curled. "The only stockings I care about are French silk," she replied, caressing her black-clad legs with her free hand. "And the only snowball I want is a cocktail. I hate the schmaltzy hypocrisy of Christmas, and Santa Claus most of all." She advanced on him with the knife.

Kevin decided she'd gone far enough. He hadn't spent two decades on the streets without being able to look after himself. Dodging, he tripped her up. The weapon fell from her grasp. Kevin stood on it.

The girl rose from the floor, glaring at him. "You're spry for an old man," she spat.

"I'm forty-five," Kevin said. "I shouldn't have white hair, but that's what twenty years of rough sleeping does to you. I'm not from the North Pole, either. When the store closes tonight, it's

back to a lonely flat and the dole queue. At least I'll be safe from you."

"I suppose you'll call the police," she said. The fire seemed to have left her.

"No," Kevin said. He knew Christmas in the cells wasn't fun. "I want you to stop killing harmless old men with white whiskers, though."

She flushed beneath her tan. "Harmless, you say?"

"We all have baggage," Kevin said. "Most of us rub along with each other rather than murdering people." He sighed. Soon, she'd have to stop for another year. Maybe he could talk her out of it by then.

"Why don't you come round to mine tomorrow?" he suggested. "I don't suppose you've planned anything. We can share two turkey legs and a box of crackers." Psychopaths held no fear for him. He'd met a few in the homeless shelter. While he hadn't played host to one in his flat, it was only because he'd never had a visitor at all.

"You really mean it, Kev?" she asked.

"Go on," Kevin said. "There's always a first time."