

Spirit of Christmas

Su Bristow

It's boiling hot in my niece's overcrowded sitting room, crammed with assorted parents, stepchildren, in-laws and outlaws, two dogs who hate each other, and a giant Christmas tree now rather the worse for wear. Wrapping paper everywhere, presents all jumbled up, children scarlet with excitement. I'm not normally claustrophobic these days, but right now I want to lift the curtain behind me and fly like a bird into the cool dark, rising far, far above it all, until all the multicoloured Christmas lights dwindle into a scatter of embroidery on the velvet earth.

It's what I used to do as a child, yearning to be anywhere but here. Sometimes I even hid behind the curtain, waiting to see how long it would be before they missed me. It's very tempting. And yet ... Carefully, I lever myself out of the sofa and pick my way across the room. It has occurred to me that someone else is missing.

In the kitchen, I find Sean, sitting at the table amid the wreckage of the Christmas feast. My step-great-nephew, I suppose you'd have to call him. He is twelve years old, and said to be 'difficult'. At the moment, he is engaged in constructing something and, although he knows I'm there, he doesn't look up. Taking this as permission, I move a little closer.

It seems to be a sort of figure, with a sausage for a body – *How did that escape the feeding frenzy?* – and a sprout for a head. Two bulging red cranberry eyes, skewered in place with broken cocktail sticks, and a sort of skirt made of multicoloured bits of ribbon tied around the body. To these he has attached all sorts of things: some ivy leaves, a plastic toy from a cracker, a bit of mistletoe and a trail of tinsel, a sprig of holly and a small bauble from the tree. At the moment he is trying to glue a silver star from the cake icing to the end of a cocktail stick with hot candlewax. Now he looks up at me, challenging me to disapprove.

'Wow,' I say. 'Is it finished?' He pushes the stick into the sausage at an angle, and lifts his creation carefully by a ribbon tied around its neck. The thing dangles like some barbaric fetish, revolving slowly; then he gives it a sudden twist so that the ribbons fly out like a ballgown.

'It's the Christmas fairy', he says, giving me a level stare. And suddenly I laugh, and he grins at me.

'Your way's better,' I say, as we hang it from the central light fitting, and he doesn't ask what I mean. Together, we go back into the sitting room.