

An old man's ghost teaches an unruly boy the terrible consequences of bullying

Cold Cure

Mark's cure for devilry in his hyperactive son (unbearable, ten-year old Tom) was a trudge in the snow. Grandma was grateful. Though they'd been with her for only hours that icy weekend, she needed a break.

"Must we, Dad?" the boy whined. "It's really cold out."

He fiddled with a china figure on the sill until it dropped; an arm snapped off; he smirked defiance.

"Oh dear, that was my Granddad Wright's," Grandma sighed.

"Sorry Joan," Mark said, grabbing at his son. "Tom, put on your anorak and boots," he ordered, echoing his wife's tone — she'd deserved a break too. Warmly dressed, he opened the front door.

Garden and roadway shared a duvet of snow. The blizzard had reduced the picket fence to a rib-cage. It reminded him of a fact he'd learnt at Tom's age: moss grows on the north side of trees.

That would mean nothing to Tom who divided his time between football and bullying.

"We'll be at least half an hour, Joan. I'll take the torch." He lowered his voice. "I'll exhaust him."

January was Christmas-card wintry. The forecast for the eighteenth had been freezing fog but it had snowed all morning. On most Friday afternoons, weekenders' cars hurtled through the village forcing walkers into the hedge; only off-roaders had risked the journey this time. Half the village was frozen out and the rest was snowed in. Years ago, Mark reflected, Inkpen must've been as eerily quiet as this all winter Tom started like a gazelle, springing in long strides but the effort was too much. Father and son waded silently ten yards apart, alone in time and space.

"Can we go home now?" the boy called from beyond The Lamb.

"No way. Go left towards Kintbury," Mark ordered.

The light was fading fast. It would snow again. Draped bushes assumed the shapes of crouching men frozen to the ground. The halt sign at the junction was the only evidence of the twenty-first century. Tom went on, kicking snow in lieu of children's legs. When he veered right, Mark braced himself for whining.

"Look Dad," the boy shouted. He pointed at the laurels fronting a wall. "It's a man," he called.

Mark grunted disbelief and shone his torch at the dark mass. He could see why Tom had been mistaken. A dense holly bush grew amongst the straggling laurels. He stepped back but slipped.

His swinging torch panned the brickwork. A cross had been carved behind the holly.

"But there was a man," his son protested. "I saw his hand."

Suddenly, it had become breathtakingly icy.

"Let's go home, Dad," Tom pleaded.

"OK. It's colder than I expected," his father admitted, nodding surrender.

Soon they were beside a roaring fire watching a cartoon. But when the TV news began, Tom looked about for something else to do. There were photo albums on the bookshelf. He tugged at one until its spine split. Without a word, Grandma put it on a higher shelf. Mark sensed her inward anger.

"That's enough damage for one day," he told Tom. "Go upstairs and play your PlayStation until tea. Any more trouble and you'll not watch the football highlights."

The phone rang at sixish while Grandma was in the kitchen.

"Di," Mark greeted his wife. "God, You're well out of it: He's been bloody awful."

"Now you know what I have to put up with," she replied. "The twins have been really happy without him. How's the weather your end?"

"We're snowed in. He wouldn't build a snowman, there's no one to snowball so he's bored sick.

Your mum's been very understanding but she looks exhausted. We've had only one bright spot: he became almost human when he thought he'd found a corpse beside the road."

There was no response.

“Di, did you hear me?”

But the phone was dead.

“Cut off again,” Grandma tutted when he told her, “that’s three times this week.”

“And I left my mobile at home,” Mark frowned.

“Did I hear you say ‘corpse’?” she asked.

Mark explained Tom’s mistake adding that he hadn’t seen the cross before.

“Until summer, it was hidden by bushes but people complained that their cars were being scratched so the Council cut them back. Granddad Wright told ghost stories about that cross when I was Tom’s age. Oh, now what?”

As if on cue, the lights had gone out. Only the flickering fire lit the room.

“That’s Tom’s football gone,” Mark sighed. “There’ll be more devilry.”

“Perhaps he’d settle if I told him a ghost story,” Grandma murmured. “Granddad Wright ...”

“Hey Dad, what’re you doing?” Tom interrupted from upstairs. “Must be lines down like the phone,” Mark called back.

“Can I have the torch?”

“No, come here. Grandma’s going to tell us a story.”

“I don’t like her stupid stories,” Tom complained. “They’re rubbish.” They heard him stamp back to his room. He was quiet for half an hour.

“Hey,” he shouted, waking Grandma from a doze, “they’ve got candles in The Lamb. And there’re boys snowballing. Can we go to the pub, Dad?”

“No.”

Tom thumped downstairs carrying his father’s torch. Ignoring Mark’s protest, he put on his anorak and hauled open the front door. He had waded into the deepened snow before Mark reached the door. Cursing, he went after the boy who disappeared into the gloom. There was no one outside the dimly-lit pub. Tom’s footprints alone led to the door but then headed for the junction. Already they were filling with snow. The road was unrecognisable now. Mark saw only swirling whiteness. It was bitterly cold.

“Hurry Dad,” the boy called from the left, “there really is a man — I can hear him groaning.”

Mark stumbled towards his son’s voice. Tom pointed the torch beam at a dark object part covered by snow. A bony hand gripped a laurel branch. Mark reached to feel for a pulse but a voice from the Kintbury direction stopped him.

“What be that by there, Alfie?” it demanded.

A man in a heavy coat emerged into the torchlight. Ignoring Mark, he turned the casualty over.

“Bless us, Charlie, it’s Bill Bailey. We’d best get help. Go you to The Lamb. I’ll try wakening him.”

Still ignoring Mark and his son, the man began slapping the casualty’s face.

“They’ve done for him proper this time, the devils,” he murmured. “It’ll be that bully boy Thomas Wright, I’ll be bound.”

Tom turned open-mouthed to his father.

“Hoy, Alfie, how does he?” a voice came from the darkness.

Charlie was accompanied by a big man who carried a carol singers’ lantern on a pole.

“Near dead, I reckon. His jaw’s fixed,” Alfie replied.

Other rescuers appeared with a litter.

“Here’s his victual-bag,” Charlie said. “Why’s it tied up with cord, I wonder?”

“The boys from the farm again. I heard Hannah tell how they play tricks on poor old Bill. Oft-times they hide his bag, sometimes they soil his food with sheep dung. It’s hard enough threshing in this cold without him having no victuals. That’s why he’s collapsed: he’d no strength left.”

“And only ten score paces from home,” the big man observed. He stood up. “Come lads,” he said crisply, “let’s get him on the litter. Poor Hannah’s in for a shock when she sees how her man looks.”

Mark took his torch from Tom and shone light to where it was needed. But it flickered: the battery was giving out. He got no thanks from the locals.

The procession set off towards the inn. Before Mark left, he flashed the failing torch about the trampled snow. The bag had been forgotten. He made to pick it up but something caught his eye: the wall.

There was no cross carved into it.

“Let’s go home, Tom,” he said as calmly as he could, “There’s nothing we can do to help. I expect someone in the pub has a mobile they can call in the paramedics with. They’ll need the air ambulance.”

It was now dark and snow was falling fast. Mark swung the feeble torch about unsure of the way. It lit a tree whose trunk was uncovered on one side. He remembered the picket fence.

“That must be the direction for Grandma’s,” he pointed out to Tom.

But the boy had gone ahead. Mark called his name but there was no reply. As he came within sight of the pub’s lights, he heard his son’s mocking voice in the distance.

“I’m home.”

Mark paused, intending to go in to see how the casualty was doing. A gust blew fresh snow against the door; already, the men’s tracks were covered. Mark hurried on. Tom had waited at the gateway but when his father was within yards he scampered giggling indoors. As Mark took off his coat, his son reappeared from upstairs, still in his anorak, panting and excited — reminding Mark of the day the boy had been accused of shoplifting. What had he been up to?

When Mark told his mother-in-law what they’d seen on the Kintbury road, she looked uncomfortable.

“He froze to death,” Tom grinned, “really, really slowly.”

“Like William Bailey did years ago,” his grandmother said quietly.

She opened the album her grandson had damaged and took out a yellowed newspaper page... “I haven’t seen this since I was a girl,” she told them. “My grandad showed it me after telling us about the cross. Fancy it turning up again.”

It was from *The Newbury Weekly News* for 27th January 1881.

“*Heavy Snowstorm. Serious Loss of Life,*” Mark read. “*The Snowstorm of Tuesday January 18th.*” Tom gasped wide-eyed. “It’s the eighteenth today,” he said.

“*Death from Exposure at Inkpen,*” Mark continued. “*The body of William Bailey, labourer, aged 67 who died from cold ... dah dah dah ... Charles Taylor, shoemaker said ‘I was walking home with Alfred Batten between six and seven’ — God, it’s nearly seven now — ‘And the Coroner reprimanded William Coxhead and Thomas Wright for their cruel behaviour.’*”

“My grandad never forgot it to his dying day,” Grandma said quietly.

“Higher up it says they used to tie the strings of his bag in knots so that he couldn’t get at his food,” Mark said.

He looked accusingly at his son.

“It doesn’t say that, Dad,” the boy scoffed. “You’re lying. And I bet we’ll hear the helicopter any minute. I’m going up to watch for it.”

He snatched a candlestick and ran from the room, slamming the door.

“And stay there, you little ... and don’t forget your teeth,” his father shouted.

After Mark had described the man in the snow to Joan, she laid a hand on his arm.

“Tom saw William Bailey,” she said. “as did Granddad Wright. Let him think what it means.”

Not surprisingly, there was no helicopter. The power remained off, the phone silent and there was no sound from upstairs. Mark and Grandma played cards until, at ten, someone coughed in the garden. A cold draught from beneath the door guttered the candles.

“Has that stupid boy gone out again?” Mark demanded.

He peered through the curtain. Something was approaching the door but the shape was too bulky to be a child. As Mark’s eyes became used to the light, he saw that the fence had sunk beneath drifted snow. A path had been trodden over it by many feet.

“What’s that on the stairs,” Grandma whispered.

Mark heard heavy footfalls on the landing. The boards creaked above their heads. He rushed to the open front door. A trail of snow led from it upstairs. There was no sound now. He went up two at a time calling Tom’s name.

In the darkened front bedroom, there was snow on the floor. When Mark held up his flickering candle, he saw what looked like the boy’s body curled on its side on top of the bedclothes. The fingers of an outstretched hand appeared to be grasping a branch. His pulse racing, Mark reached out to touch the wrist. It was iron-hard. Mark pulled at it. The arm snapped like that of the china figurine. Mark recoiled in horror. But was this Tom? He ventured forward and peered at the face. The cadaver melted slowly in the candlelight. The face and body became Tom’s. “Wake up,” Mark shouted, shaking the boy’s shoulder.

Joan entered the room.

“What’s this on the floor?” she exclaimed, picking up the victual bag which Mark had last seen in the snow. “It’s the bag my granddad kept it on a peg in the hall,” she went on. “He left a note saying that it must be buried with him. I thought it had been. Where did Tom find it?”

“Near the cross. He must’ve pinched it. That’s why he rushed up here before I got home.”

Tom groaned and turned onto his back. He lay there stretched out, his eyes staring, flexing his hands as if to stimulate circulation. He was shivering violently.

“They tied up the strings, Hannah,” he whined. “Fingers too cold ... teased me all day, they did ... never left off. I was so tired — so hungry — I could see only white ... I must’ve fainted.”

He turned his head painfully towards his grandmother.

“Hannah, why do they tie up my bag?” he whimpered.

“To make you suffer,” she replied. “Bullies never think of the likely consequences of their actions.”

Tom frowned at her and sat up, his teeth chattering.

“Grandma? Dad? Who were all those men?” he faltered. “Why am I so cold?”

“They were the good people who brought you home,” his grandmother explained. She turned solemn-faced to Mark. “William and Hannah Bailey lived here before my family,” she said. “I think William has shown Tom what being bullied feels like — just as he did my Granddad. He was given the bag to remind him. Tom must keep it now. Whenever he feels like bullying, he must remember the cold and the pain.”

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2001

Author’s Note

In 1996, while researching my book ‘Curiosities of Berkshire’, I came across an old travelogue which told of a cross cut into a wall in Inkpen, Berkshire. A man had died there in 1881 but no more detail was given. Having met by chance an elderly resident who had heard the story, I asked for help in locating the cross. Soon afterwards, the resident phoned me to ask whether the name ‘Windrush’ meant anything. “Yes, my father named his house ‘Windrush’ after a troopship he sailed on,” I replied. “And your name is Watson?” the resident asked. “A retired gardener aged 86 knows of it,” she went on. “The house whose wall bears the cross is named ‘Windrush’ and the owner who employed the gardener was named Watson.” Having seen the cross, I called at a local newspaper office where I was shown the edition from 1881; it reported the death of William Bailey in the snow. At an inquest, Thomas Wright and others were blamed for the tragedy: they had bullied 67-year old William by tying up his lunch bag so that he became too weak to get home. My father’s house, however, was in Cheshire. Did William’s ghost will me to find the cross and revive his story?