

O Tannenbaum

‘Time to get your sparkle on.’

That’s what Mitch would say to me as we got ready to go out.

In the days when we did. When I did.

When he was still alive.

There was never any doubt this year that I’d buy a ‘ridgy-didge’ tree, as Mitch would call it. It was our ritual, having persuaded him to leave behind the imitation trees of his youth in Queensland; to embrace the traditions of Christmas here in the northern hemisphere. Out with the fake. In with the real.

I felt the vaguest hint of sweet childlike anticipation as I left the house for the first time in days, to purchase a link to Christmases past and possibly even a glimpse of Christmases future; in short – a tree. It felt like a major outing heading to the village farm shop albeit but a five minute drive. All I’d managed since the funeral was a quick walk to the corner shop to top up on milk and freezer meals, and ‘medicinal’ libations. The farm was easy to spot at the end of the pot-holed, muddy lane; the converted barn’s twinkly lights shone brightly, warming the vista of a late-afternoon settling stoically into persistent drizzle and encroaching dusk. The scent of wood-smoke from the farm’s chimneys hung heavy in the moist air. I regretted leaving my warm snug and pulled my pashmina tighter, tucking it inside my puffer jacket to plug any possible gaps.

The Christmas tree station had been set up in the gravelled car park and was doing a lively trade as customers shook fir, spruce and pine trees and turned them this way and that, to find the type, size and shape that best suited their needs. Little clouds

of frosty fog puffed out of warm mouths as couples chatted happily or argued irritably over the height of trees, the feasibility of it fitting safely on the roof rack or in the car, and whether or not the mother-in-law would 'still be able to find *something* wrong with it'. Patrons stamped their booted feet and clapped gloved hands against the biting cold as they purchased their chosen tree and waited to get it netted, ready for transport.

I didn't feel ready for human contact. I wanted to shy away and hide among the trees on the periphery – those beyond the amiable glow of seasonal coloured lights that strove to illuminate the farthest corners. The shadows felt safe, familiar. Somewhat timidly, I selected a specimen and dragged it toward the exit, taking my place in the great British queue, avoiding eye contact, terrified of being recognised by a well-meaning someone. They'd attempt to decorate my pain with sympathy and adorn my broken heart with empathy. I wasn't ready for either. I'd pretended at the funeral: wore my fake smile, straightened shoulders with a rod of 'that's the spirit', nodded politely, and suffered others' death stories with disguised horror. Why do people do that?

I felt for my engagement ring – 'engagement bling' Mitch had called it – cushioned beneath a layer of sheepskin. He'd presented it to me in March, to replace the lurid green plastic one he'd pulled from a cracker on Christmas day. The bon-bon ring may have been mock but the sentiment was bone fide, as was my unadulterated acceptance. Three months later came the real bang – terminal cancer. No jokes or funny hats this time. Just the screwed up aftermath of two lives ripped apart like the torn remains of discarded bon-bons.

'Nice one, love,' the guy at the till said, as I inched forward, grappling with my tree and wishing I didn't feel as cold on the inside as the outside. Thank God he was a seasonal temp – his nametag labelled him Bill; recognition avoided. I removed a damp

sheepskin mitten with my teeth and scrabbled in my pocket for the notes I had carefully tucked into its depths, while trying to hang on to the tree with the other hand. Bill obliged, taking charge of the tree with the confidence of an experienced tree wrangler. In my hands, the branches had a life of their own. In his, they acquiesced as he shoved them through the device that wrapped them in netting. Like my emotions on this outing, the branches were brought into temporary submission.

‘We might get a white Christmas if this cold keeps up,’ he said, cheerfully relieving me of £30. I noticed his laughter lines crinkled in the same way Mitch’s had. ‘Don’t get white Christmases no more, not like when I was a little blighter.’

I’ve watched *QI*. Bill, obviously a Londoner, was wrong. Like most of us, he’d conjured counterfeit childhood memories of being knee-deep in snow for Christmas. Stephen Fry said there’d only been a handful of ‘official’ white Christmases in the 20th century, and not many of those would’ve been recorded here on the south coast of England. If Fry said it, it must be true, yes?

‘I’m sure you’re right.’ I faked a smile and feigned agreement to fend off a debate on the weather. I wanted, needed, to get back to my cocoon. The temperature was dropping as darkness overpowered the dwindling dusk. I still had to battle the impressively large tree into my small silver hatchback, which I hoped lived up to the advertising hype of having a Tardis-like interior.

It was a short, pine-scented journey home. One semi-successful wrestling match and sap-rash wrists later, the tree was in the cottage’s snug, in its rock-filled pot, and ready to be blinged. Could I do this on my own? Without Mitch? It seemed like a sham. How long could I go on pretending that it was okay, that I could draw a breath, and then another, and then another without the pain of loss? Well, I’d come this far: got myself

out the house and bought the tree, retrieved the decorations from the loft, popped on some Christmas music, and poured a sherry (another tradition). Like they say, ‘you haven’t come this far just to come this far’.

I settled on the floor in front of the tree and gently opened the lid of the storage trunk – a treasure Mitch and I had found in Carnaby Street. At first, as I started to unwrap each decoration, tears flowed. But as each memory was hung on the tree and a new one released from eleven months of incarceration, I realised my sorrow was metamorphosing. The first hint of a smile came with the battered paper angel, with her skew-whiff head and scuffed dress, that we’d found in a sale bin in Boots, in the dregs of the January sales.

‘Oh, sweetheart, we can’t leave you here among this debris,’ Mitch had said, carefully lifting the angel from the bin as if she were alive. Always talked to inanimate objects, Mitch did. It’s one of the left-of-centre things I’d loved about him. It was genuine, honest, authentic.

As more beautiful memories were unwrapped – a nutcracker soldier we purchased in Munich, a painted gumnut from Mitch’s Mum, a wooden red lobster from Boston (it’s a long story) – my smiles grew more genuine; they were neither fake, forced nor fabricated. I even chuckled at the bright shiny ornament we’d bought to remember our visit last year to the state rooms in Buckingham Palace, open to tourists in the summer months. It was a bright red padded crown covered in excessive gold embroidery and beading. We loved it!

‘That’ll get your sparkle on,’ Mitch had told the tree when he’d hung the crown last year. ‘Get that on yer!’

I took a break, warmed some red wine with cinnamon and cloves, and leant against the radiator to warm my back. Cradling my mug, I mulled over Mitch's exhortation that I continue to get on with my life, being happy for what's been and hopeful for what may yet be.

It'd been three months. It was time to get real; to cast off the fake, to shed the imitation of life that'd dogged my days for weeks on end. I leant forward and retrieved another memory from the trunk, and hung it on the fresh spruce, relishing the sensory experience of the real, the genuine article.

'Come on, time to get your sparkle on.'

I wasn't sure if I was talking to the tree or myself.