

Home *from*
Home

Danny tore open the plastic bag. He'd waited eleven months for this, bag thrown into a drawer after he'd picked it up for seventy five pence in January. Not a lot of need for Christmas stock at the start of a new year, but he had looked ahead. Besides, the orange formica table top wasn't very festive, so it would make a difference. He hoped.

The paper table cloth folded out, he saw that the pattern of holly went right around the edges. He had suspected that it would just be on the bit that you could see through the plastic. After all, the pound shop he had bought it from could be a bit dodgy sometimes. So that was, he thought, maybe a bonus. That he hadn't been duped out of his money. A relief.

He flung the paper over the orange formica table. Oh. Maybe not so good. Nope, it hadn't said how big it was. It just said 'Festive Table Cloth' on the bag. So it was a relief that the pattern went all the way round. It was a disappointment that it didn't really cover the table.

'Ah well. You can't have everything,' he thought. 'But no matter. I've made an effort. That's the main thing. Shall I leave orange formica at both ends, or just orange formica at one end? Maybe I could sit there, sit at that end. I don't mind not having a table cloth - no, that was the wrong word - a table paper at my end. It's my gig, so I should take that hardship. Still, it would have looked better if all of the orange formica had been covered. Just for a change, just so that...so that it felt better. A bit more Christmassy. But no matter. I'll take the orange end. Anyway, I'm cooking, I'm serving up, I'll be at the table less than the others. So all in all the best solution.

I wanted this to be special. Of course I did. Away from the humdrum.

Although I wasn't sure that they'd appreciate it. The extra effort that is. A table cloth...a table paper...holly all the way round, not just on the bit I knew was there because I saw it through the plastic bag. Worth the planning. Maybe, after Christmas this time, I'll be more careful what I buy from the pound shop. But the food is the most important thing. Of course it is. That's the point. Important not to be humdrum. Like it was every other day of the year. Well almost every other day of the year.

And besides, there'll be other things on the table. Brighten it up. Paper hats. Christmas crackers. Oh, more paper. Why is it that everything at Christmas, on the table for Christmas dinner, is paper? Because...because of course, it's disposable. No need for hats and crackers for the rest of the year. Just this special day.'

Danny stood back. Admired his work, adjusted the layout. Napkins. Red ones. He hadn't bought them specially. Well maybe he had, but that was ages ago. Years ago. They always come in packs of fifty don't they? Did he buy these at the pound shop? He couldn't remember. Maybe. But he laid them out carefully. Hat, cracker, napkin. Eight times. There would still be thirty napkins left (hats and crackers went in the bin afterwards) so...if there were fifty in the pack to start with he had taken eight out each year for...for three years...or was it four? No matter. There were still plenty left for next year. If he had to set places for eight next year. He never knew. Never knew from year to year. And...and let's face it, not everybody turns up who's been invited. Although most do. It's difficult to tell. Anyway, he had bought eight paper hats (packs of four) and twelve crackers (packs of twelve). They always seemed to be in packs of twelve. Packs of ten sometimes. Never...never packs of eight, or six...or even four. Ten was optimistic. Twelve was...well, how many people

had twelve for Christmas dinner? Anyway, if everybody turned up there would still be four crackers left and he'd save them for next year. Although...that would mean buying another pack of...the sums just didn't add up.

'They all turned up. First Peter...Pete...Sharky. Nobody ever really knew why Pete was called Sharky. Not even Pete. Then Dave...Dave and Kirsty together. Always seemed to arrive together. Come to think of it, always seemed to leave together. Jimmy, Ronnie, Dan (they always call him Dan, because it's confusing. That's why they call him Dan and me Danny, although it doesn't help much). Of course Dopey was last. Always was. That's not why they call him Dopey. It's because once he found somebody sleeping in his bed and somebody said he was like one of the Seven Dwarfs – finding somebody in his bed I mean. They had a vote which one to call him and everybody agreed that Dopey was the best name. The one that suited him best. So Dopey stuck.

Anyway it was good that everybody turned up. Always good that you could rely on people. And they appreciated the table cloth...the table paper...and the hats and... People just get silly on Christmas day. I mean they would never walk around with a silly hat on any other day. Although come to think of it Sharky wears a silly hat most of the time. But that's because he's bald and he doesn't like it. I guess nobody likes it, being bald I mean. But he's just so sensitive. He's very sensitive about lots of things. I mean whenever anybody asks him about his family, or what he did for a living, he just looks away and mumbles something. I'm not surprised, not really. I know he misses them and I know it wasn't really his fault. But he'll never talk about it. Even though I'm sure it would do him good. To talk about it I mean.

Jimmy never shuts up about things. You don't have to ask him, in fact he bores

the pants off everybody about where he's been, what he's done, how he could have had this, that and the other. Not sure anybody believes him. Apart from Ronnie who sort of looks up to him as some sort of...of father figure. I guess that a big part of that is that Ronnie never knew his dad. Although between me and you I know that he did. It's just easier to say that he never knew him. More convenient. I think it's only because Jimmy is older than him - not old enough to be his dad I mean, just older, that he looks up to him. And, of course, Jimmy never shuts up telling him what to do because he never shuts up about anything. Always giving advice. As if he can. Not really.

And Dan (not Danny, that's me), well he's quiet too. But deep. He smiles a lot and...and he can be very funny. He picks his moments. It's like when Dave and Kirsty said they were going out to get something to eat one day and when they got back he asked them if they'd been for a Pot Canoodle. Everybody laughed. It was a good joke and...well Dave and Kirsty just always seem to be together. Although I know that Kirsty worries about bumping into her husband...or ex-boyfriend or whatever it is. Guess Dave worries about that too, though he would never admit it.

Sharky's just Sharky. Always trying to sell you something. Maybe...I've just thought of this...maybe that's why his nickname is Sharky. Daft things that nobody would ever want. Last week it was a radio that you could play in a shower. Everybody said he wouldn't know whether it was waterproof or not because he hadn't had a shower for years. It was still in the box, no idea where he got it from. Wanted a fiver. Nobody wanted it, even when he dropped the price to three quid.

Anyway, they all turned up, which was great. Nobody brought anything

though. I thought that they might, just some mince pies or something. I mean, I had a bit of help buying everything, but it still cost me a few quid. I did the whole lot, wasn't scrimping. Everybody had a turkey slice. And roast potatoes. And carrots. And I didn't even get the sprouts from Iceland. I bought them fresh on the market. Although that's not strictly true. Charlie on the market... Charlie who has the veg stall...well I offered to pay him and he just said 'You can have them. Merry Christmas.' Good of him really. Really good. And I did the Christmas pudding in the microwave. It was OK. Microwaved the custard too. Everybody really enjoyed it.

Of course it got a bit rowdy. I think that's what happens when you have a good meal and you're all wearing silly hats. And Jimmy going on and on. And Dan taking the mickey out of him in his own way. Just one liners. Jimmy was going on about losing a game of cards for 'really big stakes' because the other guy was cheating. He was going on and on about losing 'big stakes' and Dan just said to him, I'll bet you really wanted that Mars Bar. Funny.

I mean I see them almost every day and a lot of the time we have some grub together. Even sit at this table a lot of the time, depending on who turns up. They're a good crew. Characters. Don't usually cook for them though. Just Christmas dinner. It's my speciality. Everybody knows that. Can't remember how many times I've done it now, but I guess I could count how many napkins are left in the pack of fifty and I'd be able to work it out.

Anyway the other thing is that nobody helped me to wash up. They never do. Like they never bring mince pies. But that's OK. Cooking for friends is good. Even if it's only one day a year. Dave and Kirsty left first. Together. Well not exactly together. Kirsty left and then Dave left a couple of minutes later. I

guess...I guess Kirsty might have been seeing if the coast was clear. I don't know.

By the time they'd all gone I had plenty of time to wash up, straighten everything. Make sure everything was ship shape. Whatever ship shape means. I even found a Tupperware in the cupboard and put what was left in it to take with me. A take-away. Separated the last bit of Christmas pudding of course. Wrapped that in tinfoil so it didn't taste of sprouts. Just waited a while until John came to lock up. He said thanks for leaving everything clean and tidy. He said he had something in the car for me, so I waited whilst he pulled the shutter down and locked up. Then he went over to his car and took two tins of Fosters off the passenger seat and gave them to me. Really kind. I wished him Happy Christmas and he said that he was going off to have a drink himself. A drink with his family because he hadn't been able to have one all day. What with having to come out and drive to lock up.

Really kind of him.

It's not far to the block of flats. Just a five minute walk. Though it was very cold out there. Still, since the flats have been empty the rubbish chute is a good place. I mean once you pull the door shut it's not very drafty. And I've managed to build a sort of wall that I can put up against the inside of the door. A wall of cardboard. I still have enough to lie on. So there's plenty spare. It's quite cosy really. And quiet.

But I've got a sort of confession to make. When Sharky couldn't sell the shower radio, he left it behind. Must have forgotten about it. So I borrowed it. It's still working, the batteries last for ages. It's been a good day.