**A special hug for little ‘I’s is’.**

“Charlotte, can you help me find my glasses? I know I had them on a few minutes ago.”

“Oh grandma, you are funny, they’re on the top of your head”, she replied, collapsing into a fit of giggles. Grandchildren have that wonderful ability to see the funny side of things.

Later that evening, after Charlotte had gone home, this humorous moment had me thinking why it is that I cannot remember what I did yesterday, yet an event from forty years ago remains so indelibly imprinted on my memory. Then again, perhaps it’s not the events themselves, but the people at the heart of them. For me there still remains one truly unforgettable evening, on a winter’s night, just before Christmas 1968.

Two people who couldn’t have been more different. The first was ‘Basher John’, a local legend. He had a quite unique, some might say ‘disarming’, way of raising funds. The other, that very special person, little ‘I’s is’, who touched me so deeply, even though I only met him for three hours. It is strange that the memory of him should still be so vivid, especially when I never even got to know his name.

I was just seventeen years old when that evening began at the King’s Head pub. I had met up with my two friends, Caroline and Jane. They had both been there in previous years but this was my first visit. We were part of our church choir that went there to sing carols, and take a collection for charity. I had heard so many stories about ‘Basher John’ although I had never actually seen him in the flesh. It was wonderful to get into the warm of the room, because it had just begun to snow and the icy wind was making it feel bitterly cold.

We hadn’t even got through the Function Room doors before ‘Basher’ was climbing onto one of the tables. Already a little the worse for wear, especially so early in the evening, he was swaying slightly as he delivered his ‘Christmas Address’. Everyone else had put on their Christmas glad- rags but ‘Basher’ was wearing a worn tweed suit and polo neck jumper. His flattened nose was evidence of the punishment he must have taken in the ring.

All eyes in the room turned towards him as he raised a fist, taking up his boxer’s stance. I heard someone nearby say as I passed, “Watch out! He might look old now, but in his younger days, he was a boxing champion. He could still throw a punch that would knock you into the middle of next week.”

As our choir moved towards the stage we listened to his ‘words of wisdom’.

“You all know,” he said,” this is the season of love and goodwill. These wonderful people have given up their time tonight to sing us some carols. They’ve got their collecting tins with them and later they will be going round the room. Just remember the money’s going to our local Children’s Home.” He paused as he stared intently at everyone, turning a full circle on his table. “Now I’ll be watching as you put in your donations. I wouldn’t like anyone here to be less than generous. I’m sure our guests will tell you that their God ‘loves a cheerful giver’. Well, that goes for me too! So be sure to dig deep, everyone.”

By now we were on the stage, and still watching ‘Basher’. Out of the corner of my eye I caught him giving our leader Maddie, a crafty wink. She immediately burst out laughing, and ordered a round of applause for the ‘truly unforgettable welcome’. Knowing that I was new she whispered to me, “Don’t worry Sarah. This is the traditional greeting ritual that has taken place here for the last nine years. It’s not how we might choose to introduce ourselves, but then again God often moves in mysterious ways.”

We led the singing of five well-loved carols, enthusiastically accompanied by most of those in the room. The quality of their singing may have been questionable, but I couldn’t fault their desire to join in.

When we finished, we went down among the tables with our collecting tins. I was quite amazed at their generosity, but still remember thinking this may have had something to do with ‘Basher’. It felt like he had the ability to scrutinise everyone in the room. I heard him just once ‘tut-tutting’ as he stared at one particular group, and he shouted that the choir member should consider going round the table again!

As we reached the exit door, Maddie looked to ‘Basher’ to ask for just a moment of silence. He shouted at the top of his voice, “Your attention, ladies and gents!” It was amazing to watch just how quickly everything went quiet, with lots of ‘hush’ and ‘shush’ spreading like a football wave across the terraces. Maddie thanked everyone for making us feel so welcome, and for their generosity. She wished them all a very happy Christmas. Once again there was another round of applause and many shouts of ‘the same to you’. ‘Basher’ bowed to us, nearly falling off the table.

As we got outside, the cold night air hit us full in the face. The snow was now settling everywhere. Our thoughts turned to getting home safely. It was late in the evening and we found it difficult to walk on the slippery pavements.

We caught sight of him just as we turned a corner off the main road. He could not have been more than five years old. He was wearing striped, threadbare, flannelette pyjamas. I could see that he had tried to wrap a grubby white towel around himself. He was walking in a pair of bedroom slippers which were soaked by the snow. His little face was blue with cold and his nose was running. He was sobbing as he tried to shuffle along.

We ran up to him, and Jane took her coat off and wrapped it round him to try to give him some protection from the cold. Caroline bent down, and, trying not to frighten him, asked him his name.

He looked up at all of us, struggling to keep his eyes open, and shivering from head to foot. He didn’t reply.

Jane then tried asking him where he lived. He raised his head, and, through tears rolling down his cheeks, he sighed “I’s is lost.” We could see no sign of anyone looking for him. The street was deserted. Jane said to me, “Sarah, try asking him again.”

I tried. “Is your house on this street?” I asked.

He stared into our faces, and whimpering, replied only with, “I’s is lost.”

We knew that it was now very important that we got him indoors. As we looked around, feeling the desperateness of the situation, we saw that a curtain had been pulled aside in the front window of a nearby house. We heard the door being unlocked and an elderly lady shouted to us to bring him in. Caroline picked him up and carried him through the door and into her living room. She had a blazing coal fire in the grate, which made the room feel wonderfully warm.

“He’s soaked through.” she said, “I’ll fetch a woollen blanket and we’ll get him out of those wet things.” A few minutes later he was wrapped in the blanket and curled up in an armchair by the fire. We introduced ourselves, and thanked her for her help. She told us that her name was Lillian Chambers, but everyone called her ‘Lily’.

I asked Lily, “Have you ever seen him before?”

She shook her head. “I don’t think he lives round here ‘cos I’m sure I would have recognised him.”

He huddled down into the blanket, as much for security as for warmth. Initially he didn’t say anything, and then, looking at the table, said quite nervously, “I’s is hungry.”

Lily smiled. She told us she had made some stew for her dinner earlier, and that the leftovers were in the pot on the table. “I can re-heat this for him,” she said, “It’ll give him something warming inside.”

He looked at her and then looked back to the table. “I’s is hungry,” he repeated.

While Lily was getting this for him, we tried again to find out where he lived. Jane knelt down beside him and asked, “Do you know the name of the street you live on?”

He went quiet just for a moment and then replied, “I’s is lost.”

Caroline asked him if he knew where his mum and dad were.

He stared at us all and then, with a touch of embarrassment, said, “Got no dad. Never had a dad!” and then he hid his face inside the blanket.

We were a bit unsure about what to do next. I whispered that we should try to find out about his mum, being careful not to upset him. “Where’s your mum?” I asked gently, “ Is she back at home?”

His head peeped out, and then he told us, “Mum went out last night. I’s was all on my own. I’s was frightened. I waited and waited ‘til it got dark.”

He stopped for a few seconds and tears filled his eyes. “I went out to look for her… didn’t know where to go… walked for ages. Now I’s is lost.”

I can still remember the expression in his eyes at this moment. They were dull and lifeless, echoing the hopelessness he must have felt.

Lily brought him the bowl of stew on a tray. He picked up the spoon and gobbled it down. He looked at her again and whispered, “I’s is still hungry.” This made her smile and went to the kitchen and brought him back another bowl. After eating this more slowly he ended by licking the bowl out. He gave a tiny wave to Lily, and she went over to him.

“I’s is thirsty.”

This somehow broke some of the tension we had all been feeling and we all broke out into a laugh. Lily winked to us, and went to fetch him a drink, a hot mug of cocoa. As he finished it, the blanket slipped off him.

I went over and lifted him out of the chair and sat down. Then, wrapping the blanket around him again I cuddled him in my arms. He snuggled up, nestling his head on my shoulder. I could feel him relaxing and could sense that he was starting to get sleepy. He looked up into my face, and, with a hint of a smile, said very quietly, “I’s is warm now.” I remember at this moment being overwhelmed by the surge of love I felt for him. I gave him a kiss. He let out a deep sigh. Then he dropped fast asleep.

We discussed what we should do next and realised, reluctantly, that we had to ring the police. There was nothing further that we could do. Lily made the call and was told that two officers would be sent out, but she was warned it could take some time. She went in the kitchen and made us all a mug of cocoa. ‘I’s is’ remained fast asleep. He had pulled his hand out of the blanket and was sucking his thumb.

About forty minutes later the two officers arrived, a sergeant and young WPC. Seeing that ‘I’s is’ was asleep, they went into the front room. I stayed in the chair, cuddling him tightly.

Jane asked, “Where’s he going to spend the night?”

The sergeant replied, “We’ve already contacted his grandma and we will be taking him to her house. We know he’ll be safe there. It had already been decided she could act as Guardian for him.”

Lily, slightly nervously, asked, “This must mean, does it, that you know his name? We couldn’t get it out of him.”

The sergeant paused before replying, “Poor little mite. Wise beyond his years. He won’t tell you anything, because he doesn’t want to get his mum into trouble. It’s better that we keep his identity secret.”

Caroline then wanted to know an answer to the question on all our minds, “What’ll happen to him tomorrow?”

The WPC explained that this would be up to her Inspector, who would be contacting the local Children’s Officer.

They came back in to the room, and asked me to wake him. They had brought a blanket with them. I took Lily’s blanket off him. He woke up and tried to put his arms round my neck. Jane brought me his clothes, which had dried by the fire, and I got him dressed. He clung on to me. “I’s is happy here,” he said. “Can’t I stay just a bit longer?”

The sergeant knelt on the floor, and, as gently as he could, replied, “I’m sorry, that’s not possible. We have to take you to Grandma’s now. I know you’re happy there too.”

‘I’s is’ went very quiet and then let me go. The WPC wrapped him up tightly, and held him close in her arms. As she moved towards the door, she said to us, “I just want to thank all of you for the love you’ve given him this evening.”

‘I’s is’ looked back at us, and, pulling an arm free, he waved goodbye. His tiny face was still full of sleep, but he blew four farewell kisses as he left the room.

It was now very late, and, after thanking Lily for everything she had done and lots of affectionate farewell hugs, we all made our way home. We agreed that we would tell no one what had happened.

I never saw or heard of ‘I’s is’ again.

Only a few nights later I was at our Carol Service at Church and I was doing well until we sang ‘In the bleak midwinter’. It was the verse where Mary, holding the baby Jesus, ‘worshipped the Beloved with a kiss’. My heart when straight back to that moment I kissed little ‘I’s is’ as I held him in my arms. Tears fell from my eyes.

Forty years have passed since I met these two remarkable people. Every time I pick up a newspaper or see on the television that a big boxing match is due to take place, my thoughts go back to ‘Basher John’, someone with a tough exterior, but who inside, I believe, had a heart of gold.

Every Christmas I still go to the Carol Service. ‘In the bleak midwinter’ still moves me to the depths of my soul. My memory transports me back to Lily’s room and to that very special hug I was able to give little ‘I’s is’.

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THE END.