

Welcome to Spooktown – Ed Easton & Kath Hughes

[Spooky Christmas music]

[Wind sounds]

ED EASTON: Oh god, it's a real-life Krampus ghost!

ED: I'd like to get a tree that I can look up at rather than down on. I want it to be tall enough for me to be able to look up at it.

KATH HUGHES: Do you want to look up at it in a way that you're as tall as the, um, you know, the bit before the leaves start? The – the branches start, sorry? Do you want to be like underneath it looking up at only branches?

ED: [laughs] Wait, do you mean – do you mean there's a 6'2" stem base?

KATH: Yeah.

ED: Trunk? And then the tree starts?

KATH: Yeah.

ED: Um, that would –

KATH: Do you want that? Or do you –

ED: I mean like 7', not 40'. Redwood or nothing.

KATH: Okay.

ED: I mean like – yeah, that’s 7’. I want to be able to see branches above me, rather than just that spindle that – not trunk, trunk, trunk, trunk, trunk, 6’3”, branches.

KATH: Okay.

ED: Decorations.

KATH: I thought you just wanted to look directly up and see it.

ED: Dig me a ditch and let me look up at my tree.

KATH: Okay. Okay. Now we can gauge what we want. But we should pick one out, then.

[Footsteps]

ED: These are all tiny. These are all tiny little shitty ones.

KATH: Yeah, not good. Going to have to stand next to all of them.

ED: Don’t get a tree if you’re going to get one this small.

KATH: Well, some people – not everyone’s as tall as you and not everyone wants to look up at a tree.

ED: Happy to.

KATH: Some people want to look down on the tree. I don’t know. Wouldn’t do for everyone to be the same, would it?

ED: I guess I just can’t empathise with anybody who wouldn’t want to look up at a tree.

KATH: Yeah. You struggle with that.

ED: Mhm.

KATH: This one looks pretty good. Stand next to it.

ED: Yeah, this one's perfect. Hello!

KATH: Look up at it.

ED: I'm looking up, but not – yeah, I'm looking up.

KATH: Yeah?

ED: I am looking up. It's nice. It's big enough.

KATH: Yeah? Yeah?

ED: All of the spindles have dropped off.

KATH: Mhm. The best.

ED: It's the perfect Krampus tree.

KATH: Should we get it then?

ED: Yeah, 100%.

KATH: Great, let's go and get it then.

ED: Have you got cash? I'm a bit – I'm a bit strapped at the moment. If you could just get this one.

KATH: Uh, I've brought nothing. We could rob it?

ED: Hm, yeah, okay. Let's just drag it back. I'll sort it out with the guy later.

KATH: Okay.

ED: Right, come on. Let's grab it quick.

[Heaving, dragging tree]

KATH: Oh, bloody hell.

ED: If you grab it by the branches, then –

KATH: Yep. Okay.

KATH: Uh! Yes, there it goes.

ED: Ahh.

CHRISTMAS TREE MAN: Oi! Where are you going with that?

KATH: We'll pay for it later.

[Running footsteps]

[Spooky Christmas music]

[Wind sounds]

ED: Oh, uh, I got the – I got a story I've been researching in the Spooktown library.

KATH: Oh yeah?

ED: Yeah, I found like a great, kitschy Krampus story.

KATH: Oh, great!

ED: If I could read it to you?

KATH: Yeah, absolutely. Yeah yeah yeah.

ED: Can you take the tree? It's just I've got a – I've got the book to read out of.

KATH: Well could you not – [sighs] tell me a different time? Like read the story at a different time?

ED: No, I've got the book now. Do you not know how a library works? This is – this book isn't mine now, I've borrowed it from the – the government? Council?

KATH: [sighs] Right. Okay, go on then.

ED: Ahh. [Pushes tree]

KATH: Christ!

[Drags tree]

ED: Benry, the old librarian, showed me where the sort of Spooktown history section was. And I found this book. And there's a chapter and it's by Elsa Flusson. And the chapter's called 'Spooktown's First Christmas.' I thought it was quite interesting. If I may?

KATH: Yeah yeah yeah, go for it.

ED: Thank you. Are you okay with the tree?

KATH: Yeah, I'll have to be.

[High-pitched bells]

ED: Back when Spooktown was just a cold huddle of canvas tents [wind sounds, bees buzzing], wooden buildings [door slams], and a gallows or two, bound together by plight, hope, and the chance of a warm seat and frosty beer at the tavern, a traveling salesman under cover of darkness rode his cart [cart rattling, horses neighing] down Main Street, a wet dirt track that followed the will of the people and bent to their whim. He rode past old, worried faces in the dark that turned away at the sight of the cart. Past mould black alleyways that echoed with shivering voices [whispers] and the gnashing of tiny teeth. He rode past the water fountain [splashing], where Ollie shat himself after downing a bottle of Jaeger, do you remember?

KATH: Oh yes! Yes.

ED: Yeah. Yeah, he passed that.

KATH: Gosh, what a mess.

ED: And up to the market stalls. On that night, the 24th of December, some time in the 14th century. The salesman, tired from what had been months of travel [yawns], jumped from his cart [thudding], passing the reins to his wife. Patting all nine of the horses, which by some sickness or curse were horned, and gifted them a carrot from under his great coat by way of payment. He then set his sights on the tavern. It's now a mobility scooter hire place, do you know, on, um, Nut Street. But I think it's just like –

KATH: Yes.

ED: Back then, it was known only as Claw. A sign hung outside the tavern, swinging in the cold wind. It was as though a huge claw had torn through it, lodging itself inside the metal frame. [hitting metal] The salesman had never seen a sign like it. It made him uncomfortable, like an unimaginable beast had narrowly missed his head with its massive paw, and was waiting to strike again, this time with deadly accuracy. He pushed the thought aside, and with it the door to the tavern. [knocking]

The pale light that pooled like sick outside the windows of the tavern originated from a candelabra that hung from the low ceiling [fire crackling]. It ended at about waist height, so patrons had to skirt the room in order to get to the bar. And there were plenty of patrons, but all was quiet. It had the air of a church emptied for a burial. A playground without children. Not because the salesman had just entered, no. This was a sustained silence. It coloured the walls grey. Even the floorboards had a begrudging respect and barely whispered when the salesman walked in [door creaking], around the candelabra, and up to the bar.

He took off his grey coat [shaking coat], by far the loudest thing in the room. And in a thick German accent, he asked the barkeep for a sherry. The barkeep, a normal aged man with a thin beard and thinner lips, nodded to the salesman, poured a rich, tart sherry [popping cork, pouring] and placed the full tankard on the bar [thudding]. As soon as the tankard hit the wood, the patrons of the bar started pumping their fists on the tables before them. Thump thump thump, [thumping] crashed their hands. A terrible drumbeat that naturally drew the attention of the salesman. He surveyed the bar. Everyone in there was staring right at him.

[Wind noises]

KATH: Ed, I don't think you can write in library books.

ED: Thump thump thump [thumping] crashed their hands. A terrible drumbeat that naturally drew the attention of the salesman. He surveyed the tavern. Everyone in there was staring right at him, pounding their flesh and bones into the wood. [thumping] Driving home the beat. [thumping] Some who did not have a table used their own legs or heads as makeshift drums, [laughing] adding to the cacophony. [thumping]

The salesman, alerted to this new circumstance, calmly took a sip of sherry. [slurping, sighing] Before he had a chance to swallow, the drumming sped up. Thump thump thump thump. [thumping] He turned back to the normal aged man, whose thin lips opened like a paper cut into a smile.

‘Drink up’, said the normal aged man.

Before he could stop himself, the salesman took another sip. Again, the drumming frenzy increased in both speed and volume. [fast thumping] People began stamping their feet as hard as they could. The salesman continued to drink and the drumming roared. There was no joy. No dance. They stared. They pounded their fists. They bled. It was such a big tankard of sherry. The salesman slammed the empty tankard on the bar, gasping for air.

Everything was still.

He turned to the patrons one at a time. While it felt like all eyes were upon him, he could not make contact with a single pair. Except for the normal aged man, who winked.

‘That one was on the house. One more for the road?’

‘No,’ said the salesman. ‘I’ve seen enough here.’ And with that he got up, threw on his grey coat, tossed a coin into the tankard, and walked to the door. He turned, framed by the exit, and

spoke: 'To the rest of you, at midnight I set up my stall. I urge you all to come and see what I have to offer.'

The normal aged man spat. 'And what do you have, old man?'

'I have joy and tidings and Christmas spirit.'

'We'll see about that, Nick.'

And with those words, the salesman was violently thrown out of the tavern, as though an invisible cannonball had hit him in the chest. The door slammed shut and the lights went out. Not a creature was stirring. The salesman rose and dashed off to his cart, his horses, and most importantly his wife.

'He's here.' The salesman barged through the flap of the tent.

'I know', his wife replied. 'I heard the drumming.'

'We have to set up now', growled the salesman. His wife pointed to a large spruce tree covered in red and green wards that glinted in the fire light.

'For protection', she whispered.

'Who's that?' asked the salesman, pointing at me.

'I don't know, she came in with you.'

'Oh, I'm just recording everything that goes on in Spooktown for the history books. Don't mind me,' I said beautifully.

'How much longer will the workers need, my love? There's not enough time, they're working as fast as their little hands can –'

Just then, from outside the tent, came a drumming. It was the same as inside the tavern, and yet somehow ancient. Older than mountains. Thrum thrum thrum thrum. And then silence. Even the snow stopped its descent.

‘Old Nick! Come out come out wherever you are!’ It was the normal aged man at the front of a mob of townsfolk. ‘You said you were here with joy and good tidings, but there is no joy here. There is nothing you can get your Klaus into,’ he cackled.

The salesman’s eyes turned black. His wife grabbed him by the arm. ‘Don’t. he’s too strong here.’

‘Ho!’ The tent whipped away into the back of the cart. ‘Ho!’ The snow whipped up a storm, spinning around the town and blinding all. ‘Ho!’ Tiny, incomprehensible men wearing aprons appeared behind the salesman.

‘Now Dasher, now Dancer, now Prancer and Vixon! On Comet, on Cupid, on Donder and Blitzen and Mark!’ The horses with their horns flew into the sky, arced upwards and descended on the normal aged man. They pulled up just before hitting the ground, scattering the men around. But the normal aged man reached up and grabbed one of the horses by the horns, dashing it to the ground. The salesman and his wife gasped.

‘Well well well,’ purred the normal aged man. ‘A Christmas cracker.’ He pulled the horse in half with an unholy ease, blood bursting forth like a popped berry. He held the corpse back at the salesman, who fell to his knees. He picked up the body of his friend, losing his life to the snow on the ground. The crowd had now surrounded the salesman, his wife and the tiny workers.

‘You have no power here, Klaus. This town belongs to Krampus.’ And with that word, his legs unfolded backwards and horns rose

from his head. It looked excruciating, but he enjoyed the pain. He towered above everyone, and the drumming began afresh.

‘Oh, I’ve waited a long time for this, Klaus. A long time.’ He reached down to pick the salesman up. But just before his claws wrapped around his blood-soaked crimson coat, the Krampus screamed out. The spruce tree was protruding from his chest, thrown with fearsome power by the salesman’s wife, who panted now upon the cart.

‘I think it’s time we were going, Klaus,’ the salesman’s wife said. Klaus sprinted to the cart, and they rode out of Spooktown, leaving it forever to the Krampus.

[Spooky Christmas music]

KATH: Oh, so it’s a story of how Krampus saved Krampus Day.

ED: Yeah.

KATH: That’s really nice.

ED: It’s lovely, isn’t it?

KATH: Yeah, really nice to learn a bit of history.

ED: That’s why I thought I’d sort of, yeah, read it out to you. I think it’s – it’s probably a little bit, um, I think there’s some exaggerations there. It’s very flowery for a history book.

KATH: Yeah, a few, uh, descriptive words thrown around, weren’t there?

ED: Yeah, that makes me not believe it as much, but I think – also, just the idea of like – was it Christmas? Chrizzmas? Chrizzmas?

KATH: Yeah, is that was it was –

ED: Ooh, nice Chrizzmas.

KATH: Yeah.

ED: Have a berry berry Chrizzmas-mas.

KATH: Yeah, that's mad, that, isn't it?

ED: It's just all s's. It doesn't make any sense. 'Krampus Day, Krampus Day, everybody's here for a Krampus Day.' That's a, you know –

KATH: Yeah, happy Krampus Day. Yeah, yeah. That's a chant.

ED: That's a chant. You've got yourself a chant right there.

KATH: Mhm, yeah. Did you know that apparently Krampus used to wear green until he did all those murders? And that's now why he wears red.

ED: What? That's – that's not true. It's – he used to wear green, and then in a Pepsi advert they made him red. And then it stuck.

KATH: Oh, I thought it was the murders.

ED: No no no no. No, it was Pep – it was a Pepsi advert.

KH Oh, okay. Well, that's me wrong then, isn't it?

ED: It is you wrong and I'm glad you said it.

KATH: Oh my god, this tree's making me – my hands bleed.
Krampus Eve blood.

ED: Great.

KATH: Right, I think we're here.

ED: Matches.

KATH: Yeah, but – I've only brought matches though. Is that enough? Do we need – you did insist on a big Krampus tree.

ED: Yeah, but this is – I mean this has been drying out since the 90s. This is – this is going to go up like nobody's business.

KATH: Okay. If you're sure.

ED: Yeah, this is going to be a hit. If you light the top end –

KATH: Mhm.

ED: And then it'll just spread all the way down. If you light it from the bottom, it's going to be trash. But if you light it from the top –

KATH: Okay, so if we – do we lie it flat, light the top end, and then you just put –

ED: I'll just hold – I'll hold it from the –

KATH: Push it up. But I can't reach the top, because it's your –

ED: I'm going to invert it, Kath. I'm going to invert it.

KATH: Okay.

ED: I'll hold onto it. It'll get hot for me, but it's Krampus. I don't mind.

KATH: You wanted to look up at it, so –

ED: Yeah. Uh, you light it from the bottom, which is now the top. Well, no, you light it from the top, which is now the bottom.

KATH: Yeah yeah yeah. Yeah.

ED: I'll hold onto it until it gets good heat going.

KATH: Okay.

ED: Ready?

KATH: Ready?

ED: Yeah.

KATH: Yeah. Okay.

ED: Ah... ah... yeah.

[Voices chanting 'Krampus Day' in background and playing drums]

KATH: How does it look?

ED: It's really nice. It's really nice. I feel very Krampusy, yeah.

KATH: Yeah? Yeah, same.

ED: Ah... ah fuck. Ah, this is it. This is the magic.

KATH: Happy Krampus Day, Ed.

ED: Happy Krampus Day, Kath. [groans]

KATH & ED: Happy Krampus Day, one and all.

ED: Don't eat too many bugs!

[Both laugh]

ED: No, no.

[Spooky music]

This has been a Little Wander Production. Music from Rhodri Viney. Local artwork from Suze Hughes. Voice by Melanie Walters. With special thanks to Beth Forrest, Steve Pickup, Sam Roberts, Henry Widdicombe, and Jo Williams. Other podcasts from Little Wander include Here to Judge and I Wish I Was An Only Child. Subscribe now on iTunes, Spotify, or wherever you get your podcasts.

[Wind]