

Merry Christmas

by Jack Swenson

The street was in deep shadows. High houses were bedecked with threadbare strings of lights. A swept and carpeted staircase led to his wife's sister's house, as dingy as a tenement. At the top of the stairs a small black dog was barking loudly and simultaneously wagging his tail. They climbed the stairs, laden with gifts. He brought up the rear. Two women were in the room, a fat one on the couch knitting black wool. The other one got up and walked straight at him. She hugged him, then hugged his wife, her sister. They put down their burdens by the tree.

He looked about. The room was packed with mismatched furniture, overstuffed chairs, dark wood tables, a small wood-burning stove in one corner emitting a cheery warmth. His wife's brother wandered into the room. They shook hands and exchanged a few words of greeting. Joe's hair had been gelled and spiked, his wife's doing, no doubt. His wife, the woman on the couch, glanced at the visitor above the black plastic rims of her glasses. The swift and indifferent placidity of that look troubled him. She seemed to know all about him, and all about her husband and her sister-in-law, too. An eerie feeling came over him.

Dinner was served. The lamb was undercooked. The children emerged from the bowels of the house and jockeyed for position at the table, elbowing each other and smirking. He picked at his food. The teen-aged boys gnawed the bones. The conversation was nothing he was interested in. Chitchat and family jokes. His wife's brother recalled the time when their father was watching out for the neighbor's dog, and it got run over by a car. Everybody roared with laughter.

After dinner they all sat in a circle and took turns opening their presents. They pulled the gewgaws, some wrapped, some not, one by one out of a paper sack. No one got anything they wanted or could use except the kids, who got money. It took several hours to

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open the presents. Then it was time to clean up the kitchen. The children disappeared. Joe fell asleep in an oversize upholstered chair. His wife, Clara, returned to the sofa and resumed her knitting. Her fingers kneaded the black wool frantically.

Later as they stumbled out into the starry night, he eagerly sucked in the cold, damp air like someone escaped from the heart of a dark and alien place.

