

Hot Cocoa and Bourbon

by Matt DeVirgiliis

Carter stirred hot cocoa mix into two Disney World mugs - one Mickey and one Minnie - and splashed the Mickey mug with some bourbon.

Walking into the living room and next to the tree, he handed his wife Kathy her Minnie and plopped himself on the couch. Their three kids, two girls and the youngest a boy, tore through the wrapping paper like a pack of rabid wolves tearing through a deer. Raw joy beamed from their faces. They still believed — in Santa, God, love — and they sparkled in the living room like little fire works.

He stirred his cocoa with his index finger and then took a few unsatisfying gulps, allowing the heat from the mix to fill and burn his throat. He peeled his eyes from his mug of sorrow and glanced out the window. No snow. Not even below freezing. No storybook Christmas this year. He was still cold. The past few nights, he would sit in front of the fireplace, throwing log after log onto the roaring flame, cover himself in blankets, and down a bottle of bottom-shelf bourbon. Yet he'd still shiver relentlessly. Cold to the core.

“Carter,” said Kathy, bringing him back to the living room. She pushed a smile at him as if it would force itself onto his face. He looked away from her and gulped down some more tainted cocoa.

The kids kept ripping through their presents, holding their new toys over their heads in triumph. Toys, donated by some organization trying to make Christmas better for the children, trying to make the holidays more joyous, proof of their parents' failures, reminders that some other father was able to provide for his family and had enough leftover to provide for some other family.

Carter finished what was left in his mug and then he excused himself. In the kitchen, he skipped the cocoa powder and poured straight bourbon into his Mickey. Liquid heat. Not enough to warm him, but a start... hopefully.

