

Grandpa's House for Christmas

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IT was snowing a little when they arrived at Grandpa's house. Mary glanced at the parked cars. Apparently most of her brothers and their wives were already there. And that green car looked like cousin Emma's. She tried to quiet the apprehension that had been haunting her since they'd decided to spend Christmas here. None of these people cared for children, but surely since they were all relatives and it was Christmas, they would try to give Jimmie a nice time.

Mary and her husband arranged smiles on their faces and followed their plump three year old son up the steps. Jimmie stretched his bulky little form on tiptoe to ring the bell.

Grandpa answered the door, a broad smile on his face, letting them see clearly that they were as welcome with him as anyone else would be.

"Hello, Dad," said Mary.

Jimmie ran forward and reached up for his Grandpa, yelling, "Paw-Paw! Paw-Paw! Santy Claus comin'."

The old man picked the child up and squeezed him. "Oh, he is? Well, have you been a good boy?" Sliding the little boy down quickly, he extended a hand to his son-in-law. "Hello, Paul. How are you? Old Santa been to your house yet?"

Paul nodded and smiled and allowed his hand to be pumped.

Mary maintained her smile as the old man leaned down to kiss her on the lips and drew them inside. Warm swirls of air and the odor of baking yeast bread enveloped them as they were led past the dining room door and into the living room.

The mantel over the fireplace was smothered with holly and candles, and in front of the bay window a tall thickly branched tree glowed and sparkled, filling the room with the fragrance of cedar. Under the tree was an impressive display of gifts tied with heavy ribbons and decorated with bells, pine-cones, and holly.

Jimmie clambered at Grandpa's legs, trying to climb back up into his arms, but was deftly warded off. The old man cleared his throat and said, "That's all now, Jimmie, that's all now." His lips pressed tightly with a smile, as he pulled back a little from the child. Jimmie stood still and stared seriously for a moment at his "Paw-Paw," then turned and looked quietly toward the rest of the group gathered in the room. Grandpa's face relaxed, and his broad grin returned.

The people in the room stopped talking to look at the Smiths. Mary smiled and called "hello" to her brothers and their wives, and her cousin Emma and her step-sister Alice.

Hands were waved in return, and ties straightened, and dresses smoothed down, and company smiles brought forth. And then the

group returned to their conversations. The Smiths repaired to the bedroom and hung up their worn coats. Mary, noticing Jimmie's quietness, knelt down by him and spoke softly.

"Darling, did you see the tree? Wasn't it pretty? Oh, baby darling, I'll bet Santa left you some nice toys, here at Paw-Paw's house." Oh, let there be some nice things for him! she thought. Surely there would be; these people were his aunts and uncles and his grandma and grandpa.

Jimmie's face broke into a gleeful grin. "Santy left me nice toys. Santy left me nice toys." He began to jump up and down, his little heels thumping soundly on the hardwood floor. "Did he bring me a teddy bear, Mama?" Thump, thump, thump. "And a choo-choo train? Tooo-ooo-oooot." Thump, thump, thump.

Mary squeezed him tightly. "Darling, I hope so. But whatever it is, you know Santa loves you, and it will be nice." She put her face on the child's shoulder.

Paul broke in. "Hey, you two. Are we going to spend all day up here? Come on, boy, climb up here, and I'll take you downstairs piggy-back." He hoisted Jimmie high at arm's reach above his head, then settled the child on his shoulders.

Marching and laughing they returned to the living room.

Uncle Frank, who was talking to the group at the fireplace, stopped a moment, glanced impersonally at the Smiths, and then resumed talking. Mary became aware of the sag of her husband's suit, the worn toes of Jimmie's shoes, and the shiny areas on her own crepe dress. She pushed her hair back in a nervous gesture and walked over to the couch, opposite the tree, and sat down. Patting the seat beside her, she smiled at her husband and son to join her. The three sat close together, the child between his parents, and watched the group at the fireplace.

Uncle Frank was standing, leaning one elbow on the mantel, and with the other hand fingering the lapel of his suit. He suppressed a gratified smile and ran his hand over his hair.

"You know, this suit cost me a hundred and twenty for the tailoring and all, but it's worth it. You have to look good, if you're going to get any place in business." Cousin Emma and Grandpa murmured and nodded in assent.

From a corner of the room, Alice and her husband, Ron, turned to look. Ron said, "I understand you're doing pretty well now, Frank. Regional Director and all that. Never saw a guy who could move up as fast as you did."

Frank turned to face them, his back to the fire, balancing up and down on his toes. "It's all in knowing how to handle people, Ron. You gotta make them think they're smarter than you. Make them think they're regular brain-trusts, and they feel swell when they're with you and don't know why. They think you've got something on

the ball to see how smart they are." He raised his hand, palm up. "I can keep those guys I work for right in the palm of my hand. They can't move me up fast enough to reward me for finding out how smart they are." He squeezed his fingers over the nothingness in his hand.

Grandpa nodded a grudging approval. He had to admit that Frank was a smart guy, a chip off the old block. "Well, you're sure doing fine, Frank. I'll have to give you credit for that. But I'd hate to have to travel around like you. Wouldn't want a job like that myself. I like my home, a fireside to come home to at night." He patted the arm of his chair with his thick fingers, and looked smugly around the room. "Like to have my own bed to crawl into every night. No sir, wouldn't trade my job for yours."

Frank shrugged and stared absently out the front window.

On the couch, Jimmie became restless. There were no other children present, and his eyes were scanning the plushly wrapped gifts under the tree. "Mama, when we open the gifts? When, Mama?" A moist little hand clutched at his mother's arm. "Mama, let's open them now, can we, Mama?"

Mary bent her face close to his, her eyes tender. "Baby, we're at Paw-Paw's house. We must wait till he tells us to open them. Maybe soon, honey." The child's eyes were questioning but he did not protest. He returned his gaze to the gifts, and to the colored lights, and the star. His face broke into an expectant, gleeful smile. "Maybe soon, Mama."

Alice glanced out the window, and noticed that it was snowing harder. "Oh, joy!" she said. "A snow like this makes you forget how old you are, doesn't it? Come on, gang, let's have a few carols before dinner." Skipping a little, she went to the piano and ran a few chords. "Come on, come on. Gather round, you lazy people."

Everyone moved close to the piano, grinning self-consciously and burlesquing a little as they located the pitch by humming.

They sang loud and long, drinking their fill of the Christmas spirit until Grandma announced dinner.

With shouted declarations of hunger, they marched boisterously into the dining room. There was a great deal of noise and confusion as everyone tried to find the seat he wanted.

With a solemn face Grandpa called for a moment of Grace.

"Almighty God, Our Heavenly Father, we thank Thee that Thou hast seen fit to bless our table and our home with Thy richness. We are everlastingly grateful that Thou hast seen fit in Thy all-knowing wisdom to place us above our more unfortunate fellowmen. We pray that, through the goodness of Thy mercy, they may be brought to their knees to repent their sins, and receive the everlasting forgiveness that is Thine. Amen."

"Amen." "Amen." "Amen," said the others.

Grandpa smiled beatifically at the group, and then the spell was broken and food was passed. Turkey, mashed potatoes, green beans, and corn; peas, salad, hot rolls, and butter. They all made their way around the circle of eager hands. Alice shrieked as she dropped a hot roll on the floor, and there was a burst of teasing laughter from the others.

Jimmie grew excited at the noisy laughter and began to bounce in his chair, and banged his spoon on the edge of his plate, his face gleeful. The laughter ceased abruptly as annoyed eyes were turned on the child. Grandpa looked coldly at Mary and Paul and then at Jimmie. "Let's tone that down a little, Jimmie. Those are Grandma's good plates. We'll have to behave at the table." His face took on an abused look. "You know, if you want to come to Paw-Paw's house, you'll have to behave like a little man." Still looking abused, he turned his eyes on his plate and began to eat in silence.

Mary pressed a restraining hand on Paul's knee, and turned to Jimmie, whose face was blankly hurt. "Take a bite of turkey, honey. It's awfully good."

Frank turned to Grandpa. "This is a mighty fine meal, Mom. I don't get better than this at the Palmer House in Chicago." He nodded approvingly, unconsciously straightening his tie as he said the words "Palmer House," and took a large bite to prove his point.

Alice said, "Mom has always been a fine cook, Frankie. I sure didn't take after her. My poor little husband just has to put up with canned stuff at home, poor little thing." She smiled kittenishly at her husband.

Ron winked and grinned. "She just wants me to brag on her cooking. She's almost as good as her mother, but not quite. Oh, well, if you can't get the mother, you might as well take the daughter, I always say." There was a burst of appreciative laughter at this.

It was soon time for coffee. Everyone was too full to eat fruit-cake, and they decided to save it till after the opening of the gifts. Lighting cigarettes and leaning back with satisfied sighs, they shifted the talk to Santa Claus.

Grandpa said, "Well, who's going to be Santa's helper this year? Somebody has to pass the gifts around for the old boy, you know." He looked around the table, waiting for volunteers or nominations. Mary pressed her hands together and thought, Oh, I hope someone asks Jimmie to do it. He would have so much fun picking up those lovely gifts and passing them around. Her eyes besought the faces around the table.

Frank, pointing a cigarette at Alice, said, "How about you, kid? You been a good girl this year?"

Alice giggled. "No gooder than I had to be, Frankie. I'm living, you know." She arched her brows and giggled again.

Frank grinned. "Well, how about it, gang, does Alice fit the bill?"

There was vigorous assent, and butting out their cigarettes they returned to the living room. Waiting until all eyes were upon her, Alice minced her way to the tree and picked up the first gift. It was for Frank. A hand-painted tie. And then a shirt for Grandpa. And a blouse for Alice. And a pair of hose for cousin Emma, who stretched a leg for everyone to see, and twisted her foot from side to side.

Mary looked at Jimmie, his face eager as each gift was picked up, and then sober and anxious as it was carried each time to one of the adults. Her heart constricted and seemed to beat with difficulty.

And then Alice was moving toward Jimmie. He jumped off the couch and ran forward, his arms reaching up. Grabbing the gift he squeezed it tightly to his chest and jumped up and down in front of his mother. Her heart started beating hard and fast, and there was a hurting in her throat. "Open it, darling. Open it, and see what Santa brought you."

The child placed the gift on the couch and awkwardly began pulling the wrappings off. It was a music-box from Grandpa and Grandma.

Mary put the cord over Jimmie's head and whispered, "Do you want to thank Grandpa and Grandma for keeping it for you?" Jimmie beamed at his grandparents. "Thank you for keeping it for me."

Grandpa smiled. "That's all right, Jimmie," he said generously.

The child sat back on the couch, and turned the handle on the box. It played "Jingle Bells" in clear tinkling tones. He squeezed close to his mother and smiled delightedly. She slipped her arm around him and kissed the top of his head.

"It's beautiful, baby. You play awfully good."

"It's beaufitool," said the little boy, turning the handle round and round.

And then Mary noticed that Alice was no longer calling out the names. Glancing around, she saw piles of gifts and paper and ribbons around the others. She began to count. Six for Frank. Twelve for Grandpa, thirteen for Grandma. Five for Alice. Her eyes skimmed over the rest. Gifts, gifts, gifts. Three for her and three for her husband. And a music box for Jimmie. She looked at her son, her heart breaking, and then over the shrieking protestations of the others about who was Santa's favorite this year, she heard the tinkle of the music-box; and over the glitter of the tree and the satisfied faces around her, she saw the happy shine in her son's eyes, as he bent his head and brought the music box close to his ear. She kept her arm around him, and looked to her husband to save her from tears.