The Gift

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Extract

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1.

An Army of Secrets



If you were to stroll down the candy-cane façade of a surburban housing estate early on Christmas morning, you couldn't help but observe how the houses in all their tinselled glory are akin to the wrapped parcels that lie beneath the Christmas trees within. For each holds their secrets inside. The temptation of poking and prodding at the packaging is the equivalent of peeping through a crack in the curtains to get a glimpse of a family in Christmas-morning action; a captured moment that's kept away from all prying eyes. For the outside world, in a calming yet eerie silence that exists only on this morning every year, homes stand shoulder to shoulder like painted toy soldiers: chests pushed out, stomachs tucked in, proud and protective of all within.

Houses on Christmas morning are treasure chests of hidden truths. A wreath on a door like a finger upon a lip; blinds down like closed eyelids. Then, at some unspecific time, beyond the pulled blinds and drawn curtains, a warm glow will appear, the smallest hint of something happening inside.

Like stars in the night sky which appear to the naked eye one by one, and like tiny pieces of gold revealed as they're sieved from a stream, lights go on behind the blinds and curtains in the half-light of dawn. As the sky becomes star-filled and as millionaires are made, room by room, house by house, the street begins to awaken.

On Christmas morning an air of calm settles outside. The emptiness on the streets doesn't instil fear; in fact it has the opposite effect. It's a picture of safety, and, despite the seasonal chill, there's warmth. For varying reasons, for every household this day of every year is just better spent inside. While outside is sombre, inside is a world of bright frenzied colour, a hysteria of ripping wrapping paper and flying coloured ribbons. Christmas music and festive fragrances of cinnamon and spice and all things nice fill the air. Exclamations of glee, of hugs and thanks, explode like party streamers. These Christmas days are indoor days; not a sinner lingering outside, for even they have a roof over their heads.

Only those in transit from one home to another dot the streets. Cars pull up and presents are unloaded. Sounds of greetings waft out to the cold air from open doorways, teasers as to what is happening inside. Then, while you're right there with them, soaking it up and sharing the invitation – ready to stroll over the threshold a common stranger but feeling a welcomed guest – the front door closes and traps the rest of the day away, as a reminder that it's not your moment to take.

In this particular neighbourhood of toy houses, one soul wanders the streets. This soul doesn't quite see the beauty in the secretive world of houses. This soul is intent on a war, wants to unravel the bow and rip open the paper to reveal what's inside door number twenty-four.

It is not of any importance to us what the occupants of door number twenty-four are doing, though, if you must know, a ten-month-old, confused as to the reason for the large green flashing prickly object in the corner of the room, is beginning to reach for the shiny red bauble that so comically reflects a familiar podgy hand and gummy mouth. This, while a two-year-old rolls around in wrapping paper, bathing herself in glitter like a hippo in muck. Beside them, *He* wraps a new necklace of diamonds around *Her* neck, as she gasps, hand flying to her chest, and shakes her head in disbelief, just as she's seen women in the black and white movies do.

None of this is important to *our* story, though it means a great deal to the individual that stands in the front garden of house number twenty-four looking at the living room's drawn curtains. Fourteen years old and with a dagger through his heart, he can't see what's going on, but his imagination was well nurtured by his mother's daytime weeping, and he can guess.

And so he raises his arms above his head, pulls back, and with all his strength pushes forward and releases the object in his hands. He stands back to watch, with bitter joy, as a fifteen-pound frozen turkey smashes through the window of the living room of number twenty-four. The drawn curtains act once again as a barrier between him and them, slowing the bird's flight through the air. With no life left to stop itself now, it – and its giblets – descend rapidly to the wooden floor, where it's sent, spinning and skidding, along to its final resting place beneath the Christmas tree. His gift to them.

People, like houses, hold their secrets. Sometimes the secrets inhabit them, sometimes they inhabit their secrets. They wrap their arms tight to hug them close, twist their tongues around

the truth. But after time truth prevails, rises above all else. It squirms and wriggles inside, grows until the swollen tongue can't wrap itself around the lie any longer, until the time comes when it needs to spit the words out and send truth flying through the air and crashing into the world. Truth and time always work alongside one another.

This story is about people, secrets and time. About people who, not unlike parcels, hide secrets, who cover themselves with layers until they present themselves to the right ones who can unwrap them and see inside. Sometimes you have to give yourself to somebody in order to see who you are. Sometimes you have to unravel things to get to the core.

This is a story about a person who finds out who they are. About a person who is unravelled and whose core is revealed to all that count. And all that count are revealed to them. Just in time.