And Then There Were None

Alice Roberts*
of the day. "Daddy, dink . . . dink, Daddy." Laughing, his teeth flashing white in his face, the father lifted his son. "Well, now, son, there are lots of fountains here. Which one do you choose?" His son's laughter bubbled up, joining in the game. He pointed a confused mixture of stubby fingers: "Dis one, an' dis one, an' dis one . . ."

So they played the game. Lifting his son to each leaping jet of water, the tall stooping figure of the man moved on down the line, and as he moved, the face above the little laughing wet one was set in a strange and sober quietness.

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*by Alice Roberts*

The rabbit stared back unblinking. The dry brown weeds, split and broken and angled against the snow, did not hide the rabbit as well as it imagined. Jimmie bent over for a handful of the dry white stuff and pressed it together within his mittens. Once flung, the ball never reached its destination, but disintegrated in mid air, sifting and settling back to the ground. The rabbit started and blinked, eyes widening, but did not run. Jimmie turned away from it and went on. There were no marks ahead in the smooth new snow which contoured the ground and edged and piled upon the branches. Snow crystals floating in the air glittered in the light of the just-past-full moon and the bright dust was cool as it touched and melted on his face. Shadows stood out sharply violet against the snow. He stepped over a clutter of broken brush in his way. A long-thorned plum branch caught at his sleeve. He pulled aside and moved along slowly, keeping the road at his left in constant sight. It was easy to get lost in these woods. He remembered the tales his older brothers told of the old wood-witch and wondered if she was still out in the wintertime. On his right the tree-filled ravines all looked alike and it wasn't very far in before the forest grew thick and wild, going on for miles, back into really rough country where only a few trappers still went. He some-
times heard them in the general store in the small mining
town, talking with each other and exchanging tales of the
lonely nights.

It was cold out and with the night sky so clear it was sure
to get colder. Still, it wasn't the cold of the night that mat­
tered. He would go, he had to go. All the kids from school
went. Besides, he had told Steve and Lenny that he was com­
ing and so he would be there. It was tradition to have the
Christmas party, complete with Saint Nicholas, at the big
town hall every year. It was a secret, well-kept from the very
young ones, that the presents given out so merrily were pro­
vided by the parents, wrapped and marked for each child,
and placed under the tree for Saint Nicholas to hand out.
The older boys knew, of course, and then there were the boys
like Jimmie; it had never occurred to them to think about it,
the whole idea of whys still nebulous, but the glimmer be­
ginning. It's a thing grown up with. That's why he never
wondered at coming home to the empty house, empty
whether they, the mother and father, were there or not,
empty under the shared shingled roof. He'd grown up with
it, yes, and only now began the feel of the glimmer why—
no thought, no question aloud, just the feel, like tiny mice
scurryings within.

A deep ravine cut across his way ahead. He followed its
top edge and made his way to the road, leaving the woods
behind. The town was not far. He was passing by the older
unpainted houses now, then the kept-up white frame ones
with the wooden sidewalk in front, dark and sodden from
many passing feet. Businesses, stores. The town hall was only
half a block away. He slowed. He stopped at the general
store. It was locked, but lit up inside. Stiff new harness hung
on the wall—you could almost smell the clean oil odor; sets
of sleigh bells lined up next to it. Shelves and tiers of canned
things, boxes and barrels, more boxes and the single glass
candy case where many a penny-decision was made. And in
the center of the filled display window pastel sugar-coated
bon-bons spelled "Merry Christmas," signed in licorice whips
by the store owner. A heavily parka'd man bumped him at­
temting to avoid another passer-by.

Jimmie went on towards the hall. The doors were jam­
med but most of the kids were already inside. He joined the
edge of the group and found himself pulled into it. Several inches of the rotted backseam of his cloth coat gave way as the boys jostled and pushed against each other. He tried to unbutton it to take it off, but they were too close.

“Hi, Jimmie.” It was the boy who sat next to him during arithmetic. His stuck-out ears and round shiny eyes made him look like a squirrel. He moved in spurts. Now he was watching; his tail almost twitched.

“Hi, Steve.” Jimmie tried to see over the heads of the others. He stamped his cold feet. The snow brought in by the many boys was turning to slush and soaking through his patched soles. With a habitual flick of his fingers, he brushed back the fine black hair that tumbled over his eyes. The clear skin of his face showed clearer against the warm red of his wind-burned cheeks.

They were coming to the chairs now. The heated inside air carried the scent of the fresh-cut pine. The cranberry and popcorn strung tree stood in the center of the stage. Beneath it, cascaded out and around it, were piles and mounds of silver and red and gold and green, sparkling a wink here and there.

Jimmie sat in the half of the hall with the rest of the boys, the girls chattering busily in the front section. No one sat on one side of him. Steve’s smaller squirrel brother sat on his otherside. He was five, an expansive three years younger. He sat juggling in his seat, head straight forward and wide eyes riveted to the kaliedescope of packages on the stage.

Jimmie sat slumped down in his rough brown coat, one hand jammed into his pocket and the other twisting the loose knot of thread from a missing button. He watched the excitement, the people doing last-minute organizing on the stage, the remaining boys finding seats.

After a moment the principal appeared and stood above them on the stage. The once-a-year smile was held on his face. Quiet suddenly existed where the eagerly babbling young voices had been. He was going to lead the singing, he always did. “Silent Night” was the first. It was his favorite, about the Virgin Mother and Child. Eyebrows raised and chins thrust forward as the immature voices reached for the high “‘hea-ven-ly pea-ce,” sliding up at the end, and finish-
ing, “sle-ep in hea-venly peace.” The principal was fairly beaming. Very nice, children, he told them. Then “Joy to the World” and “Deck the Halls.” Someone brought in a couple of chairs. The singing finished with, “‘Glad tidings we bring to you and your kin, We wish you a merry Christmas and a happy New Year.”

It was time for the passing of the presents. There was a stir and the red-and-white clad Saint Nicholas came stepping out from the curtains at the side. He patted the principal on the shoulder. The principal patted him back and grinned. The teachers standing around smiled and winked at one another, remarking quietly on the resemblance of the jolly old man on the stage to Mr. Bowan, the general store owner. Saint Nicholas had a bulging brown bag which was known to be filled with candy, a small bag for everyone. He asked how all the boys and girls were. Fine. And had everyone been good? Yes, they had. Most of the time. So, he went to the tree and his helper handed him the first package. He called off the name on its tag and a skinny girl with straight blond hair went to claim her present. Next, the boy in front of Jimmie answered and jumped up. He came back with his candy bag and a small red and silver box. Tearing the paper and ripping off one end of the box, he put his hand in and withdrew a genuine Barlowe pocket knife with a dark wood handle. He exhibited it to the boys on both sides of him, opening the blade and snapping it shut and holding it carefully in both hands.

They were calling off names faster and more rhythmically. By the time one was back to his seat with his present, another was on his way. The little squirrel boy trotted up to get his package. He returned and broke it open to find a silver whistle, and it really was silver (Jimmie showed him the mark that said so). He said nothing more, but stared at the shiny metal thing, rubbing it and putting the mouth-piece to his lips, but afraid to blow hard enough to do more than make a timorous fluttering rattle.

Jimmie sat half-listening. He thought he heard his name and waited to see if anyone else got up. He saw Jenny Kroft stand and go to the front. Most of the packages were gone now. There were just the few scattered under the cranberry-
and-popcorned tree. Stray pieces of decoration and ribbon and dry pine needles were visible on the bare parts of the floor. Two more packages went, both to girls. All around was the rustle of paper and the showing of cars and whistles and dolls. One box for a boy who wasn’t there, and the last to another girl, and then there were none. Jimmie looked around him slowly. Carefully he buttoned his coat and put on his mittens. Sliding from his chair, he stumbled over unyielding feet in the aisle, quickly making his way out of the hall. He passed two of the teachers who stood talking. The one, a quiet-looking short woman, reached out as if to stop him, but then let him go. Watching him hurry out, she muttered:

“If only we’d known.”

Her friend, nodding, “Why yes. We could have gotten something. Are his folks so poor?”

“They must be very poor.” And then she was quiet.

He was out on the wooden sidewalk now. Snow was beginning to fill the air and the wind was gusty. A thick-coated dark horse and its sleigh jingle-bobbed by. The still-locked general store and the bon-bons in the window, the tavern full of men and laughing and warm smells spilling out onto the street. There was the doctor’s place with candles lit in the window, the weather-grey houses, fences—a picket, half-picket, a hole, a post and a rusted gate squealing with the wind.

Just past town the woods began on both sides of the road. It was quiet and soft except for the scrunch of the snow underfoot and the occasional scrape of leafless branches. Collar pulled up around his ears and hands tucked under his arms, Jimmie looked out from this warmer world into the crystal night, the overhead stars piercing a path through the icy air. The town was a warm world for some, like the squirrel boy, but here he made his own.

A rabbit hopped from beside the road and into some rattling weeds and a thicket. He watched it go and then stepped off the road. The rabbit leaped and ran back into the darkness of the soft silent woods. The boy looked back at the faint glow of the town in the distance and then followed the animal tracks, small shadowed perforations in the thin snow, the wind scurries already filling them.