

LA BEFANA

Gene Wolfe

When Zozz, home from the pit, had licked his fur clean, he howled before John Bannano's door. John's wife, Teresa, opened it and let him in. She was a thin, stooped woman of thirty or thirty-five, her black hair shot with gray; she did not smile, but he felt somehow that she was glad to see him. She said, "He's not home yet. If you want to come in we've got a fire."

Zozz said, "I'll wait for him," and, six-legging politely across the threshold, sat down over the stone Bananas had rolled in for him when they were new friends. Maria and Mark, playing some sort of game with beer-bottle caps on squares scratched on the floor dirt said, "Hi, Uncle Zozz," and Zozz said, "Hi," in return. Bananas' old mother, whom Zozz had brought here from the pads in his rusty powerwagon the day before, looked at him with piercing eyes, then fled into the other room. He could hear Teresa relax, the wheezing outpuffed breath.

He said, half humorously, "I think she thinks I bumped her on purpose yesterday."

"She's not used to you yet."

"I know," Zozz said.

"I told her, Mother Bannano, it's their world, and they're not used to you."

"Sure," Zozz said. A gust of wind outside brought the cold in to replace the odor of the gog-hutch on the other side of the left wall.

"I tell you it's hell to have your husband's mother with you in a place as small as this."

"Sure," Zozz said again.

Maria announced, "Daddy's home!" The door rattled open and Bananas came in looking tired and cheerful. Bananas worked in the slaughtering market, and though his cheeks were blue with cold, the cuffs of his trousers were red with blood. He kissed Teresa and tousled the hair of both children, and said, "Hi, Zozzy."

Zozz said, "Hi. How does it roll?" And moved over so Bananas could warm his back. Someone groaned, and Bananas asked a little anxiously, "What's that?"

Teresa said, "Next door."

"Huh?"

"Next door. Some woman."

"Oh. I thought it might be Mom."

"She's fine."

"Where is she?"

"In back."

Bananas frowned. "There's no fire in there; she'll freeze to death."

"I didn't tell her to go back there. She can wrap a blanket around her."

Zozz said, "It's me - I bother her." He got up. Bananas said, "Sit down."

"I can go. I just came to say hi."

"Sit down." Bananas turned to his wife. "Honey, you shouldn't leave her in there alone. See if you can't get her to come out."

"Johnny-"

"Teresa, dammit!"

"Okay, Johnny."

Bananas took off his coat and sat down in front of the fire. Maria and Mark had gone back to their game. In a voice too low to attract their attention Bananas said, "Nice thing, huh?"

Zozz said, "I think your mother makes her nervous."

Bananas said, "Sure."

Zozz said, "This isn't an easy world."

"You mean for us. No it ain't, but you don't see me moving."

Zozz said, "That's good. I mean, here you've got a job anyway. There's work."

"That's right."

Unexpectedly Maria said: "We get enough to eat here, and me and Mark can find wood for the fire. Where we used to be there wasn't anything to eat."

Bananas said, "You remember, honey?"

"A little."

Zozz said, "People are poor here."

Bananas was taking off his shoes, scraping the street mud from them and tossing it into the fire. He said, "If you mean us, us people are poor everywhere." He jerked his head in the direction of the back room. "You ought to hear her tell about our world."

"Your mother?"

Bananas nodded. Maria said, "Daddy, how did Grandmother come here?"

"Same way we did."

Mark said, "You mean she signed a thing?"

"A labor contract? No, she's too old. She bought a ticket - you know, like you would buy something in a store."

Maria said, "That's what I mean."

"Shut up and play. Don't bother us."

Zozz said, "How'd things go at work?"

"So-so." Bananas looked toward the back room again. "She came into some money, but that's her business - I didn't want to talk to the kids about it."

"Sure."

"She says she spent every dollar to get here - you know, they haven't used dollars even on Earth for fifty, sixty years, but she still says it, how do you like that?" He laughed, and Zozz laughed too. "I asked how she was going to get back, and she said she's not going back, she's going to die right here with us. What could I say?"

"I don't know." Zozz waited for Bananas to say something, and when he did not he added, "I mean, she's your mother."

"Yeah."

Through the thin wall they heard the sick woman groan again, and someone moving about. Zozz said, "I guess it's been a long time since you saw her last."

"Yeah - twenty-two years Newtonian. Listen, Zozzy . . ."

"Uh-huh."

"You know something? I wish I had never set eyes on her again."

Zozz said nothing, rubbing his hands, hands, hands.

"That sounds lousy I guess."

"I know what you mean."

"She could have lived good for the rest of her life on what that ticket cost her." Bananas was silent for a moment. "She used to be a big, fat woman when I was a kid, you know? A great big woman with a loud voice. Look at her now - dried up and bent over; it's like she wasn't my mother at all. You know the only thing that's the same about her? That black dress. That's the only thing I recognize, the only thing that hasn't changed. She could be a stranger - she tells stories about me I don't remember at all."

Maria said, "She told us a story today."

Mark added: "Before you came home. About this witch."

Maria said: "That brings the presents to children. Her name is La Befana the Christmas Witch."

Zozz drew his lips back from his double canines and jiggled his head. "I like stories."

"She says it's almost Christmas, and on Christmas three wise men went looking for the Baby, and they stopped at the old witch's door, and they asked which way it was and she told them and they said come with us."

The door to the other room opened, and Teresa and Bananas' mother came out. Bananas' mother was holding a teakettle; she edged around Zozz to put it on the hook and swing it out over the fire.

"And she was sweeping and she wouldn't come."

Mark said: "She said she'd come when she was finished. She was a real old, real ugly woman. Watch, I'll show you how she walked." He jumped up and began to hobble around the room.

Bananas looked at his wife and indicated the wall. "What's this?"

"In there?"

"The charity place - they said she could stay there. She couldn't stay in

the house because all the rooms are full of men."

Maria was saying, "So when she was all done she went looking for Him only she couldn't find Him and she never did."

"She's sick?"

"She's knocked up, Johnny, that's all. Don't worry about her. She's got some guy in there with her."

Mark asked, "Do you know about the baby Jesus, Uncle Zozz?"

Zozz groped for words.

"Giovanni, my son . . ."

"Yes, Mama."

"Your friend . . . Do they have the faith, Giovanni?"

Apropos of nothing, Teresa said, "They're Jews, next door."

Zozz told Mark, "You see, the baby Jesus has never come to my world."

Maria said: "And so she goes all over everyplace looking for him with her presents, and she leaves some with every kid she finds, but she says it's not because she thinks they might be him like some people think, but just a substitute. She can't never die. She has to do it forever, doesn't she, Grandma?"

The bent old woman said, "Not forever, dearest; only until tomorrow night."