

HOME FOR CHRISTMAS

Nina Kiriki Hoffman

Nina Kiriki Hoffman has earned a reputation as one of the best of the new generation of speculative fiction writers, with work that ranges from fantasy (like the following story) to darker stories of pure horror. Hoffman lives in Eugene, Oregon, and has published many stories in magazines and anthologies over the last few years. Her dark fantasy novel, *The Thread that Binds the Bones*, set in modern-day Oregon, is highly recommended, as is its sequel, *The Silent Strength of Stones*.

“Home for Christmas” is a poignant tale of contemporary magic, and Hoffman’s young heroine is a character who lingers in the mind long after the story is done. It comes from the January [1995] issue of *The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction*.

—T.W.

Matt spread the contents of the wallet on the orange shag rug in front of her, looking at each item. Three oil company charge cards; an auto club card, an auto insurance card; a driver’s license that identified the wallet’s owner as James Plainfield, thirty-eight, with an address bearing an apartment number in one of the buildings downtown; a gold MasterCard with a hologram of the world on it; a gold AmEx card; six hundred and twenty-three dollars, mostly in fifties; a phone credit card; a laminated library card; five tan business cards with “James Plainfield, Architect” and a phone number embossed on them in brown ink; receipts from a deli, a bookstore, an art supply store; a ticket stub from a horror movie; and two scuffed color photographs, one of a smiling woman and the other of a sullen teenage girl.

The wallet, a soft camel-brown calfskin, was feeling distress.—He’s lost without me—it cried,—he needs me; he could be dead by now. Without me in his back pocket he’s only half

himself.—

Matt patted it and yawned. She had been planning to walk the frozen streets later that night while people were falling asleep, getting her fill of Christmas Eve dreams for another year, feeding the hunger in her that only quieted when she was so exhausted she fell asleep herself. But her feet were wet and she was tired enough to sleep now. She was going to try an experiment: this year, hole up, drink cocoa, and remember all her favorite dreams from Christmas Eves past. If that worked, maybe she could change her lifestyle, stay someplace long enough to... to... she wasn't sure. She hadn't stayed in any one place for more than a month in years.

“We'll go find him tomorrow morning,” she said to the wallet. Although tomorrow was Christmas. Maybe he would have things to do, and be hard to find.

—Now!—cried the wallet.

Matt sighed and leaned against the water heater. Her present home was the basement of somebody's house; the people were gone for the Christmas holidays and the house, lonely, had invited her in when she was looking through its garbage cans a day after its inhabitants had driven off in an overloaded station wagon.

—He'll starve,—moaned the wallet,—he'll run out of gas and be stranded. The police will stop him and arrest him because he doesn't have identification. We have to rescue him *now*.—

Matt had cruised town all day, listening to canned Christmas music piped to the freezing outdoors by stores, watching street-corner Santas ringing bells, cars fighting for parking spaces, shoppers whisking in and out of stores, their faces tense; occasionally she saw bright dreams, a parent imagining a child's joy at the unwrapping of the asked-for toy, a man thinking about what his wife's face would look like when she saw the diamond he had bought for her, a girl finding the perfect book for her best friend. There were the dreams of despair, too: grief because five dollars would not stretch far enough, grief because the one request was impossible to fill, grief because weariness made it too hard to go on.

She had wandered, wrapped in her big olive-drab army coat, never standing still long enough for anyone to wonder or object,

occasionally ducking into stores and soaking up warmth before heading out into the cold again, sometimes stalling at store windows to stare at things she had never imagined needing until she saw them, then laughing that feeling away. She didn't need anything she didn't have.

She had stumbled over the wallet on her way home. She wouldn't have found it—it had slipped down a grate—except that it was broadcasting distress. The grate gapped its bars and let her reach down to get the wallet; the grate was tired of listening to the wallet's whining.

—Now,—the wallet said again.

She loaded all the things back into the wallet, getting the gas cards in the wrong place at first, until the wallet scolded her and told her where they belonged. “So,” Matt said, slipping the wallet into her army jacket pocket, “if he's lost, stranded, and starving, how are we going to find him?”

—He's probably at the Time-Out. The bartender lets him run a tab sometimes. He might not have noticed I'm gone yet.—

She knew the Time-Out, a neighborhood bar not far from the corner where James Plainfield's apartment building stood. Two miles from the suburb where her temporary basement home was. She sighed, pulled still-damp socks from their perch on a heating duct, and stuffed her freezing feet into them, then laced up the combat boots. She could always put the wallet outside for the night so she could get some sleep; but what if someone else found it? It would suffer agonies; few people understood nonhuman things the way she did, and fewer still went along with the wishes of inanimate objects.

Anyway, there was a church on the way to downtown, and she always liked to see a piece of the midnight service, when a whole bunch of people got all excited about a baby being born, believing for a little while that a thing like that could actually change the world. If she spent enough time searching this guy out, maybe she'd get to church this year.

She slipped out through the kitchen, suggesting that the back door lock itself behind her. Then she headed downtown, trying to

avoid the dirty slush piles on the sidewalk.

“Hey,” said the bartender as she slipped into the Time-Out. “You got I.D., kid?”

Matt shrugged. “I didn’t come in to order anything.” She wasn’t sure how old she was, but she knew it was more than twenty-one. Her close-cut hair, mid-range voice, and slight, sexless figure led people to mistake her for a teenage boy, a notion she usually encouraged. No one had formally identified her since her senior year of high school, years and years ago. “I just came to find a James Plainfield. He here?”

A man seated at the bar looked up. He was dressed in a dark suit, but his tie was emerald green, and his brown hair was a little longer than business-length. He didn’t look like his driver’s license picture, but then, who did? “Whatcha want?” he said.

“Wanted to give you your wallet. I found it in the street.”

“Wha?” He leaned forward, squinting at her.

She walked to the bar and set his wallet in front of him, then turned to go.

“Hey!” he said, grabbing her arm. She decided maybe architecture built up muscles more than she had suspected. “You pick my pocket, you little thief?”

“Sure, that’s why I searched you out to return your wallet. Put it in your pocket, Bud. The other pocket. I think you got a hole in your regular wallet pocket. The wallet doesn’t like being out in the open.”

His eyes narrowed. “Just a second,” he said, keeping his grip on her arm. With his free hand he opened the wallet and checked the bulging currency compartment, then looked at the credit cards. His eyebrows rose. He released her. “Thanks, kid. Sorry. I’d really be in trouble without this.”

“Yeah, that’s what it said.”

“What do you mean?”

She shrugged, giving him a narrow grin and stuffing her hands deep into her pockets. He studied her, looking at the soaked

shoulders of her jacket, glancing down at her battered boots, their laces knotted in places other than the ends.

“Hey,” he said softly. “Hey. How long since you ate?”

“Lunch,” she said. With all the people shopping, the trash cans in back of downtown restaurants had been full of leftovers after the lunch rush.

He frowned at his watch. “It’s after nine. Does your family know where you are?”

“Not lately,” she said. She yawned, covering it with her hand. Then she glanced at the wallet. “This the guy?”

—Yes, oh yes, oh yes, oh joy.—

“Good. ’Bye, Bud. Got to be getting home.”

“Wait. There’s a reward.” He pulled out two fifties and handed them to her. “And you let me take you to dinner? And drive you home afterwards? Unless you have your own car.”

She folded the fifties, slipped them into the battered leather card case she used as a wallet, and thought about this odd proposition. She squinted at the empty glass on the bar. “Which number are you,” she muttered to it, “and what were you?”

—I cradled an old-fashioned,—said the glass,—and from the taste of his lips, it was not his first.—

“You talking to my drink?” Amusement quirked the corner of his mouth.

Matt smiled, and took a peek at his dreamscape. She couldn’t read thoughts, but she could usually see what people were imagining. Not with Plainfield, though. Instead of images, she saw lists and blueprints, the writing on them too small and stylized for her to read.

He said, “Look, there’s a restaurant right around the corner. We can walk to it, if you’re worried about my driving.”

“Okay,” she said.

He left some cash on the bar, waved at the bartender, and walked out, leaving Matt to follow.

The restaurant was a greasy spoon; the tables in the booths were topped with red linoleum and the menus bore traces of previous meals. At nine on Christmas Eve, there weren't many people there, but the waitress seemed cheery when she came by with coffee mugs and silverware. Plainfield drank a whole mugful of coffee while Matt was still warming her hands. His eyes were slightly bloodshot.

"So," he said as he set his coffee mug down.

Matt added cream and sugar, lots of it, stirred, then sipped.

"So," said Plainfield again.

"So," Matt said.

"So did you learn all my deep dark secrets from my wallet? You did look through it, right?"

"Had to find out who owned it."

"What else did you find out?"

"You carry a lot of cash. Your credit's good. You're real worried about your car, and you're an architect. There's two women in your life."

"So do we have anything in common?"

"No. I got no cash,—'cept what you gave me—no credit, no car, no relationships, and I don't build anything." She studied the menu. She wondered if he liked young boys. This could be a pickup, she supposed, if he was the sort of man who took advantage of chance opportunities.

The waitress came by and Matt ordered a big breakfast, two of everything, eggs, bacon, sausages, pancakes, ham slices, and biscuits in gravy. Christmas Eve dinner. What the hell. She glanced at Plainfield, saw him grimacing. She grinned, and ordered a large orange juice. Plainfield ordered a side of dry wheat toast.

"What do you want with me, anyway?" Matt asked.

He blinked. "I... I thought you must be an amazing person, returning a wallet like mine intact, and I wanted to find out more about you."

"Why?"

“You are a kid, aren’t you?”

She stared at him, keeping her face blank.

“Sorry,” he said. He looked out the window at the night street for a moment, then turned back. “My wife has my daughter this Christmas, and I...” He frowned. “You know how when you lose a tooth, your tongue keeps feeling the hollow space?”

“You really don’t know anything about me.”

“Except that you’re down on your luck but still honest. That says a lot to me.”

“I’m not your daughter.”

He lowered his eyes to stare at his coffee mug. “I know. I know. It’s just that Christmas used to be such a big deal. Corey and I, when we first got together, we decided we’d give each other the Christmases we never had as kids, and we built it all up, tree, stockings, turkey, music, cookies, toasting the year behind and the year ahead and each other. Then when we had Linda it was even better; we could plan and buy and wrap and have secrets just for her, and she loved it. Now the apartment’s empty and I don’t want to go home.”

Matt had spent last Christmas in a shelter. She had enjoyed it. Toy drives had supplied presents for all the kids, and food drives had given everybody real food. They had been without so much for so long that they could taste how good everything was. Dreams came true, even if only for one day.

This year... She sat for a moment and remembered one of the dreams she’d seen a couple of years ago. A ten-year-old girl thinking about the loving she’d give a baby doll, just the perfect baby doll, if she found it under the tree tomorrow. Matt could almost feel the hugs. Mm. Still as strong a dream as when she had first collected it. Yes! She had them inside her, and they still felt fresh.

Food arrived and Matt ate, dipping her bacon in the egg yolks and the syrup, loving the citrus bite of the orange juice after the sopping, pillowy texture and maple sweetness of the pancakes. It was nice having first choice of something on a restaurant plate.

“Good appetite,” said Plainfield. He picked out a grape jelly from an assortment the waitress had brought with Mart’s breakfast and slathered some on his dry toast, took a bite, frowned. “Guess I’m not really hungry.”

Matt smiled around a mouthful of biscuits and gravy.

“So,” Plainfield said when Matt had eaten everything and was back to sipping coffee.

“So,” said Matt.

“So would you come home with me?”

She peeked at his dreamscape, found herself frustrated again by graphs instead of pictures. “Exactly what did you have in mind, Bud?”

He blinked, then set his coffee cup down. His pupils flicked wide, staining his gray eyes black. “Oh. That sounds bad. What I really want, I guess, is not to be alone on Christmas, but I don’t mean that in a sexual way. Didn’t occur to me a kid would hear it like that.”

“Hey,” said Matt. Could anybody be this naive?

“You could go straight to sleep if that’s what you want. What I miss most is just the sense that someone else is in the apartment while I’m falling asleep. I come from a big family, and living alone just doesn’t feel right, especially on Christmas.”

“Do you know how stupid this is? I could have a disease, I could be the thief of the century, I could smoke in bed and burn your playhouse down. I could just be really annoying.”

“I don’t care,” he said.

She said, “Bud, you’re asking to get taken.” Desperation like his was something she usually stayed away from.

“Jim. The name’s Jim.”

“And how am I supposed to know whether you’re one of these Dahmer dudes, keep kids’ heads in your fridge?” She didn’t seriously consider him a risk, but she would have felt better if she could have gotten a fix on his dreams. She had met some real psychos—their dreams gave them away—and when she closed

dream-eyes, they looked almost more like everybody else than everybody else did.

He stared down at his coffee mug, his shoulders slumped. "I guess there is no way to know anymore, is there?"

"Oh, what the hell," she said.

He looked at her, a slow smile surfacing. "You mean it?"

"I've done some stupid things in my time. I tell you, though..." she began, then touched her lips. She had been about to threaten him. She never threatened people. Relax. Give the guy a Christmas present of the appearance of trust. "Never mind. This was one great dinner. Let's go."

He dropped a big tip on the table, then headed for the cash register. She followed. "You have any... luggage or anything?"

"Not with me." She thought of her belongings, stowed safely in the basement two miles away.

"There's a drugstore right next to my building. We could pick up a toothbrush and whatever else you need there."

Smiling, she shook her head in disbelief. "Okay."

The drugstore was only three blocks from the restaurant; they walked. Plainfield bought Matt an expensive boar-bristle toothbrush, asking her what color she wanted. When she told him purple, he found a purple one, then said, "You want a magazine? Go take a look." Shaking her head again, she headed over to the magazine rack and watched him in the shoplifting mirror. He was sneaking around the aisles of the store looking at things. Incredible. He was going to play Santa, and buy her a present. Kee-rist. Maybe she should get him something.

She looked at school supplies, found a pen and pencil set (the best thing she could think of for someone who thought in graphs), wondered how to get them to the cash register without him seeing them. Then she realized there was a cash register at both doors, so she went to the other one.

By the time he finished skulking around she was back studying the magazines. It had been years since she had looked at magazines. There were magazines about wrestlers, about boys on

skateboards, about muscle cars, about pumping iron, about house blueprints, men's fashions, skinny women. In the middle of one of the thick women's fashion magazines she found an article about a murder in a small town, and found herself sucked down into the story, another thing she hadn't experienced in a long time. She didn't read often; too many other things to look at.

"You want that one?"

"What? No." She put the magazine back, glanced at the shopping bag he was carrying. It was bulging and bigger than a breadbox. "You must of needed a lot of bathroom stuff," she said.

He nodded. "Ready?"

"Sure."

On the way into his fifth-floor apartment, she leaned against the front door and thought,—Are you friendly?—

—I do my job. I keep Our Things safe inside and keep other harmful things out.—

—I'm not really one of Our Things—Matt thought.—I have an invitation, though.—

—I understand that.—

—If I need to leave right away, will you let me out, even if Jim doesn't want me to leave?—

The door mulled this over, then said,—All right.—

—Thanks.—She stroked the wood, then turned to look at the apartment.

She had known he had money—those gold cards, that cash. She liked the way it manifested. The air was tinted with faint scents of lemon furniture polish and evergreen. The couch was long but looked comfortable, upholstered in a geometric pattern of soft, intense lavenders, indigos, grays. The round carpet on the hardwood floor was deep and slate blue; the coffee table was old wood, scarred here and there. A black metal spiral plant-stand supported green, healthy philodendrons and Rabbit Track Marantas. Everything looked lived-in or lived-with.

To the left was a dining nook. A little Christmas tree decorated

with white lights, tinsel, and paper angels stood on the dining table.

“I thought Linda was going to come,” Plainfield said, looking at the tree. There were presents under it. “Corey didn’t tell me until last night that they were going out of state. You like cocoa?”

“Sure,” said Matt, thinking about her Christmas Eve dream, cocoa and other peoples’ memories.

“Uh—what would you like me to call you?”

“Matt,” said Matt.

“Matt,” he said, and nodded. “Kitchen’s through there.” He gestured toward the dining nook. “I make instant cocoa, but it’s pretty good.”

Matt looked at him a moment, then headed for the kitchen.

“Be there in a sec,” said Jim, heading toward a dark hallway to the right.

—Cocoa?—she thought in the kitchen. Honey-pale wooden cupboard doors wore carved wooden handles in the shape of fancy goldfish, with inlaid gem eyes. White tiles with a lavender border covered the counters; white linoleum tiles inset with random squares of sky blue, rose, and violet surfaced the floor. A pale spring green refrigerator stood by the window, and a small green card table sat near it, with three yellow-cushioned chairs around it. Just looking at the room made Matt smile.

—Who are you?—asked the refrigerator as it hummed.

—A visitor.—

—Where’s the little-girl-one who stands there and holds my door open and lets my cold out?—

—I don’t think she’s coming,—Matt said. She wasn’t sure if a refrigerator had a time sense, but decided to ask.—How often is she here?—

—Every time Man puts ice cream in my coldest part. There’s ice cream there now.—

Ah ha, Matt thought. She went to the stove, found a modern aqua-enameled teakettle.—May I use you to heat water?—she thought at it.

—Yes yes yes!—Its imagination glowed with the pleasurable anticipation of heat and simmer and expansion.

She ran water into it, greeted the stove as she set the teakettle on the gas burner, then asked the kitchen about mugs. A cupboard creaked open. She patted the door and reached inside for two off-white crockery mugs. A drawer opened to offer her spoons. The whole kitchen was giggling to itself. It had never before occurred to the kitchen that it could move things through its own choice.

—Cocoa?—thought Matt. The cupboard above the refrigerator eased open, and she could see jars of instant coffee and a round tin of instant cocoa inside, but it was out of her reach. She glanced at one of the chairs. She could bring it over—

—Hey!—cried the cocoa tin. She looked up to see it balanced on the edge of the refrigerator. She held out her hands and it dropped heavily into them, the cupboard door closing behind it.

“What?” Jim’s voice sounded startled behind her.

She turned, clutching the cocoa, wondering what would happen now. Though she couldn’t be sure, she got no sense of threat from him at all, and she was still in the heightened state of awareness she thought of as Company Manners. “Cocoa,” she said, displaying the tin on her palms as though it were an award.

“Yeah, but—” He looked up at the cupboard, down at her hands. “But—”

The teakettle whistled—a warbling whistle, like a bird call. The burner turned itself off just as Jim glanced toward it. His eyes widened.

—Chill,—Matt thought at the kitchen.

—Want warmth?—A baseboard heater made clicking sounds as its knob turned clockwise and it kicked into action.

—No! I mean, stop acting on your own, please. Do you want to upset Jim?—

—But this is—!—The concept it showed her was delirious joy.—We never knew we could do this!—

Matt sucked on her lower lip. She’d never seen a room respond to

her this way. Some things were wide awake when she met them, and leading secret lives when no one was around to see. Other things woke up and discovered they could choose movement when they talked to her, but never before so joyfully or actively.

“What—” Jim said again.

Matt walked over to the counter by the stove, popped the cocoa tin’s top with a spoon.

“Uh,” said Matt.

“Can you—uh, make things move around without touching them?” His voice was thin.

“No,” she said.

He blinked. Looked at the cupboard over the refrigerator, at the burner control, at the baseboard heater. He shook his head. “I’m seeing things?”

“No,” said Matt, spooning cocoa into the mugs. She reached for the teakettle, but before she could touch it, a pot holder jumped off a hook above the stove, gliding to land on the handle.

“Design flaw in the kettle,” Jim said in a hollow voice. “Handle gets hot too.”

“Oh. Thanks,” she said, gripping the pot holder and the kettle and pouring hot water into the mugs. The spoon she had left in one mug lifted itself and started to stir. “Hey,” she said, grabbing it.

—Let me. Let me!—

She let it go, feeling fatalistic, and the other spoon lying on the counter rattled against the tiles until she picked it up and put it in the other mug. The sight of both of them stirring in unison was almost hypnotic.

“I’ve been reading science fiction for years,” Jim said, his voice still coming out warped, “maybe to prepare myself for this day. Telekinesis?”

“Huh?” said Matt as she set the teakettle back on the stove and hung up the pot holder.

“You move things with mind power?”

“No,” she said.

“But—” The spoons still danced, crushing lumps of cocoa against the sides of the mugs, making a metal and ceramic clatter.

“I’m not doing it. They are.”

“What?”

“Your kitchen,” she said, “is very happy.”

Cupboards clapped and drawers opened and shut. Somehow the sound of it all resembled laughter.

After a moment, Jim said, “I don’t understand. I’m starting to think I must be asleep on the couch and I’m dreaming all this.”

—Done,—said the spoons. Matt fished them out of the cocoa and rinsed them off.

“Okay,” she said to Jim, handing him a mug.

“Okay what?”

“It’s only a dream.”—Thanks,—she thought to the kitchen, and headed out to the living room.

Jim followed her. She found coasters stacked on a side table and laid a couple on the coffee table, set her cocoa on one, then shrugged out of her coat and sat on the couch.

“It’s only a dream?” Jim said, settling beside her.

“If that makes it easier.”

He sipped cocoa. “I don’t want easy. I want the truth.”

“On Christmas Eve?”

He raised his eyebrows. “Are you one of Santa’s elves, or something?”

She laughed.

“For an elf, you look like you could use a shower,” he said.

“Even for a human I could.”

He fished the toothbrush out of his breast pocket and handed it to her. “Magic wand,” he said.

“Thanks.” She laid it on the table and drank some cocoa. She was

so full from dinner that she wasn't hungry anymore, but the chocolate was enticing.

"All those things were really moving around in the kitchen, weren't they?" he said.

"Yes," she said.

"Is the kitchen haunted?"

"Kind of."

"I never noticed it before."

She drank more cocoa. Didn't need other peoples' memories at the moment; making one of her own. She wasn't sure yet whether she'd want to keep this one or not.

Jim said, "Can you point to something and make it do what you want?"

"No."

"Just try it. I dare you. Point to that cane and make it dance." He waved toward a tall vase standing by the front door. It held several umbrellas and a wooden cane carved with a serpent twisting along its length.

"That's silly," she said.

"I've always, always wished I could move things around with my mind. It's been my secret dream since I was ten. Please do it."

"But I—" Frustrated, she set her mug on the table, but not before the coaster slid beneath it.

"See, look!" He lifted his mug, put it down somewhere else. His coaster didn't seem to care.

"But I—oh, what the hell."—Cane? Do you want to dance?—

The cane quivered in the vase. Then it leapt up out of the vase and spun in the air like a propellor. It landed on the welcome mat, did some staggering spirals, flipped, then lay on the ground and rolled back and forth.

"That's so—that's so—"

She looked at him. His face was pale; his eyes sparkled.

“It’s doing it because it wants to,” she said.

“But it never wanted to before.”

“Maybe it did, but it just didn’t know it could.”

He looked at the cane. It lifted itself and did some flips, then started tapdancing on the hardwood, somewhat muted by its rubber tip. “If everything knew what it could do—” he said. “Does everything *want* to do stuff like this?”

“I don’t know,” said Matt. “I’ve never seen things act like your things.” She cocked her head and looked at him sideways.

With one loud tap from its head, the cane jumped back into the big vase and settled quietly among the umbrellas.

“I was wondering how you get things to stop,” he whispered.

“Me too,” she whispered back. “Usually things act mostly like things when I talk to them. They just act thing ways. Doors open, but they do that anyway. You know?”

“Doors open?” he said. His eyebrows rose.

She could almost see his thoughts. So: that’s how this kid gets along. Doors open. She met his gaze without wavering. It had been a long time since she’d told anyone about talking to things, and other times she’d revealed it hadn’t always worked out well.

“Doors open, and locks unlock,” she said.

“Wow,” he said.

“So,” she said, “second thoughts about having me stay the night?”

“No! This is like the best Christmas wish I ever had, barring having Linda here.”

Matt felt something melt in her chest, sending warmth all through her. She laughed.

He stared at her. “You’re a girl,” he said after a moment.

She grinned at him and set her mug on the coaster. “Could you loan me some soap and towels and stuff? I sure could use a shower now.”

“You’re a girl?”

“Mmm. How old do you have to be not to be a girl?”

“Eighteen,” he said.

“I’m beyond girl.”

“You’re an elf,” he said.

She grinned. “Could I borrow something clean to sleep in?”

He blinked, shook his head. “Linda’s got clothes here, in her old room. She’s actually a little bigger than you now.” He put his mug down and stood up. “I’ll show you,” he said.

She grabbed her new toothbrush and followed him down the little hall. He opened a linen closet, loaded her arms with a big fluffy towel and a washrag, then led her into a bedroom.

—Hello,—she thought to the room. It smelled faintly of vanished perfume, a flowery teen scent. All the furniture was soft varnished honey wood. The built-in bed against the far wall had wide dresser drawers below it and a mini-blind-covered window above. A desk held a small portable typewriter; bookshelves cradled staggering rows of paperbacks, and a big wooden dresser with chartreuse drawers supported about twenty stuffed animals in various stages of being loved to pieces. On the wall hung a framed photographic poster of pink ballerina shoes with ribbons; another framed poster showed different kinds of owls. Ice green wall-to-wall deep pile carpet covered the floor.

—You’re not the one,—said the room.

—No, I’m not. The one isn’t coming tonight. May I stay here instead? I won’t hurt anything.—

—You can’t have his heart,—said the room.

—All right,—said Matt. This room was not happy like the kitchen.

It relaxed, though.

—Thanks,—Matt thought.

Jim walked to the dresser and opened a drawer. “How do you feel about flannel?” he said, lifting out a nightgown. The drawer slammed shut, almost catching his hand, and successfully gripping the hem of the nightgown. “Hey!” he said.

—*Our* things,—said the room.

Matt thought about the sullen teenager she had seen in the photo in Jim's wallet. Afraid of losing things, holding them tight; Matt had learned instead to let go.

"Maybe you better put that back," she said. "I can rinse out my T-shirt."

Jim touched the drawer and it opened. He dropped the nightgown back in and the drawer snapped shut again. "I've got pajamas you can use. Actually, my girlfriend left some women's things in my closet..."

"Pajamas would be good," Matt said.

He showed her the bathroom, which was spacious and handsome and spotless, black, white, and red tile, fluffy white carpet, combination whirlpool tub and shower, and a small stacked washer-dryer combination. "Wait a sec, I'll get you some pajamas. You want to do laundry?"

"Yeah," she said. "That'd be great." She wished she had the rest of her clothes with her, but they were still in the basement of that suburban house, two miles away. Oh well. You did what you could when the opportunity arrived.

He disappeared, returned with red satin pajamas and a black terrycloth robe.

"Thanks," she said, wondering what else he had in his closet. She hadn't figured him for a red satin kind of guy. She took a long hot shower without talking to anything in the bathroom, using soap and shampoo liberally and several times. The soap smelled clean; the shampoo smelled like apples. His pajamas and robe were huge on her. She hitched everything up and bound it with the robe's belt so she could walk without tripping on the pantlegs or the robe's hem. She brushed her teeth, then started a load of laundry, all her layers, except the coat, which she had left in the living room: T-shirt, long Johns top and bottom, work shirt, acrylic sweater, jeans, two pairs of socks, even the wide Ace bandages she bound her chest with. Leaving the mirror steamed behind her, she emerged, flushed and clean and feeling very tired but contented.

“I can’t believe I ever thought you were a boy,” Jim said, putting down a magazine and sitting up on the couch. Christmas carols played softly on the stereo. The mugs had disappeared.

“Very useful, that,” said Matt.

“Yes,” he said. She sat down at the other end of the couch from him. Sleep was waiting to welcome her; she wasn’t sure how long she could keep her eyes open.

After a minute he said, “I went in the kitchen and nothing moved.”

Matt frowned.

“Was it a dream?”

“Was what a dream?” she asked, before she could stop herself.

“Please,” he said, pain bright in his voice.

“Do you want things dancing? Drawers closing on you?”

He stared at her, then relaxed a little. “Yes,” he said, “at least tonight I do.”

She pulled her knees up to her chest and huddled, bare feet on the couch, all of her deep in the night clothes he had given her. She thought about it. “What happens is I talk to things,” she said. “And things talk back. Like, I asked the kitchen where the cocoa was. Usually a thing would just say, this cupboard over here. In your kitchen, the cupboard opened itself and the cocoa came out. I don’t know why that is, or why other people don’t seem to do it.”

“Like if I said, Hey, sofa, do you wanna dance?” He parted the seat cushions next to him.

—Sofa, do you want to dance?—Matt thought.

The couch laughed and said,—I’m too heavy to get around much. Floor and I like me where I am. I could...—And the cushions bounced up and down, bumping Matt and Jim like a trampoline.

Jim grinned and gripped the cushion he was sitting on. The couch stopped after a couple minutes. “But you did that, didn’t you?” he said. “My saying it out loud didn’t do anything.”

“I guess not,” Matt said.

“And things actually talk back to you?”

“Yeah,” she said.

“Like my wallet.”

“It kept whining about how you would die or at least be arrested without it. It really cares about you.” She yawned against the back of her hand.

He fished his wallet out of his back pocket and stared at it for a minute, then stroked it, held it between his hands. “This is very weird,” he said. “I mean, I keep this in my back pants pocket, and...” He flipped his wallet open and closed. He pressed it to his chest. “I have to think about this.” He glanced at the clock on the VCR. “Let’s go to sleep. It’s already Christmas.”

Matt squinted at the glowing amber digits. Yep, after midnight.

“Will you be okay in Linda’s room?” Jim asked.

“As long as I don’t steal your heart,” Matt said and yawned again. Her eyes drifted shut.

“Steal my heart?” Jim muttered.

Mart’s breathing slowed. She was perfectly comfortable on the couch, which was adjusting its cushions to fit around her and support her; but she felt Jim’s arms lift her. She fell asleep before he ever let go.

She woke up and stared at a barred ceiling.—Where is this?—she asked. Then she rolled her head and glanced toward the door, saw the ballerina toe shoes picture, and remembered: Linda. Jim.

The mini-blinds at the window above the bed were angled to aim slitted daylight at the ceiling. Matt could tell it was morning by the quality of the light. She sat up amid a welter of blankets, sheets, and quilt, and stretched. When she reached skyward, the satin pajama sleeves slid down her arms to her shoulders. She wasn’t sure she liked being inside such slippery stuff, but she had been comfortable enough while asleep.

She reached up for the mini-blinds’ rod and twisted it until she could see out the window. Jim’s apartment was on the fifth floor.

Across the street stood another apartment building, brick-faced, its windows mostly shuttered with mini-blinds and curtains, keeping its secrets.

She put her hand against the wall below the window.—Building, hello.—

—Hello, Parasite,—said the building, a deeper structure that housed all the apartments, all the rooms in the apartments, all the things in the rooms, all the common areas, and all the secret systems of wiring and plumbing, heating and cooling, the skeleton of board and girders and beams, the skin of stucco and the eyes of glass-lidded windows.

Parasite, thought Matt. Not a promising opening. But the building sounded cheerful.—How are you?—she thought.

—Warm, snug inside,—thought the building.—Freezing outside. Quiet. It won't last.—

—Oh, well, just wanted to say hi,—thought Matt.

—All right,—thought the building. She felt its attention turning away from her.

—Aren't you getting up now?—asked Linda's room. It sounded grumpy.—It's Christmas morning!—

—Oh. Right.—Matt slipped out of bed, pulled the big black robe around her, and ventured out into the hall, heading for the bathroom. Not a creature was stirring. She finished in the bathroom, then crept into the living room to check the clock on the VCR; it was around 7:30 a.m., a little later than her usual waking time. She peeked at the Christmas tree on the table in the dining nook. Its white lights still twinkled, and there were a couple more presents under it.

—Coat?—she thought. It occurred to her that she had never talked to her own clothes before. Too intimate. Her clothes touched her all the time, and she wasn't comfortable talking to things that touched her anywhere but her hands and feet. If her clothes talked back, achieved self-will, could do whatever they wanted—she clutched the lapels of the black robe, keeping it closed around her. She would have to think about this. It wasn't fair to her

clothes.—Coat, where are you?—she thought.

A narrow closet door in the hall slid open. Looking in, she saw that Jim had hung her coat on a hanger. She put out a hand and stroked the stained army-drab. Coat had been with her through all kinds of weather, kept her warm and dry as well as it could, hidden her from too close an inspection, carried all kinds of things for her. She felt an upwelling of gratitude. She hugged the coat, pressing her cheek against its breast, breathing its atmosphere of weather, dirt, Matt, and fried chicken (she had carried some foil-wrapped chicken in a pocket yesterday). After a moment warmth glowed from the coat; its arms slid flat and empty around her shoulders. She closed her eyes and stood for a long moment letting the coat know how much she appreciated it, and hearing from the coat that it liked her. Then she reached into the inside breast pocket and fished out the pen-and-pencil set she had bought the night before. With a final pat on its lapel, she slid out of the coat's embrace.

—Anybody know where I could find some wrapping paper and tape?—she asked the world in general.

The kitchen called to her, and she went in. A low, deep drawer near the refrigerator slid open, offering her a big selection of wrapping paper for all occasions and even some spools of fancy ribbons. Another drawer higher up opened; it held miscellaneous useful objects, including rubber bands, paperclips, pens, chewing gum, scissors, and a tape dispenser.

—Thanks,—she said. She chose a red paper covered with small green Christmas trees, sat at the card table with it and the tape, and wrapped up the writing set after she peeled the price sticker off it. Silver ribbon snaked across the floor and climbed up the table leg, then lifted its end at her and danced, until she laughed and grabbed it. It wound around her package, tied itself, formed a starburst of loops on top. She patted it and it rustled against her hand.

She put everything away and set her present under the tree, then went back to Linda's room and lay on the bed, yawning. The bed tipped up until she fell out.

—It's Christmas morning—it said crossly as she felt the back of

her head; falling, she'd bumped it, and it hurt.—The one never comes back to bed until she's opened her presents!—

—I'm not the one,—Matt thought.—Thanks for the night.—She left the room, got her coat out of the closet, and lay on the couch with her coat spread over her. The couch cradled her, shifting the cushions until her body lay comfortable and embraced. She fell asleep right away.

The smell of coffee woke her. She sighed and peered over at the VCR. It was an hour later. A white porcelain mug of coffee steamed gently on a coaster on the table. She blinked and sat up, saw Jim sitting in a chair nearby. He wore a gray robe over blue pajamas. He smiled at her. “Merry Christmas.”

“Merry Christmas,” Matt said. She reached for the coffee, sipped. It was full of cream and sugar, the way she'd fixed it in the restaurant the night before. “Room service,” she said. “Thanks.”

“Elf pick-me-up.” He had a mug of his own. He drank. “What are you doing out here?”

“The room and I had a little disagreement. It said it was time for me to wake up and open presents, like Linda, and I hadn't slept long enough for me.”

He gazed into the distance. “Linda's always real anxious to get to the gifts,” he said slowly. “She used to wake me and Corey up around six. Of course, we always used to wait to hide the presents until Christmas Eve. We used to get a full-sized tree and set it up over there—” he pointed to a space in a corner of the room between bookshelves on one wall and the entertainment center on the other—“and we wouldn't decorate it until after she'd gone to sleep. So it was as if everything was transformed overnight. God, that was great.”

“Magic,” said Matt, nodding.

Jim smiled. Matt peeked at his dreamscape, and this time she could see the tree in his imagination, tall enough to brush the ceiling, glowing with twinkling colored lights, tinsel, gleaming glass balls, and Keepsake ornaments—little animals, little Santas, little children doing Christmas things with great good cheer—and here and there, old, much-loved ornaments, each different, clearly

treasures from his and Corey's pasts. Beneath the tree, mounds of presents in green, gold, red, silver foil wrap, kissed with stick-on bows. Linda, young and not sullen, walking from the hall, her face alight as she looked at the tree, all of her beaming with wonder and anticipation so that for that brief moment she was the perfect creature, excited about the next moment and expecting to be happy.

"Beautiful," Matt murmured.

"What?" Jim blinked at her and the vision vanished.

Matt sat quiet. She sipped coffee.

"Matt?" said Jim.

Matt considered. At last she said, "The way you saw it. Beautiful. Did Corey take the ornaments?"

"Matt," whispered Jim.

"The old ones, and the ones with mice stringing popcorn, and Santa riding a surfboard, and the little angel sleeping on the cloud?"

He stared at her for a long moment. He leaned back, his shoulders slumping. "She took them," he said. "She's the custodial parent. She took our past."

"It's in your brain," Matt said.

He closed his eyes, leaned his head against the seat back. "Can you see inside my brain?"

"Not usually. Just when you're looking out at stuff, like the tree. And Linda. And I'm not sorry I saw those things, because they're great."

He opened his eyes again and peered at her, his head still back. "They are great," he said. "I didn't know I remembered in such detail. Having it in my brain isn't the same as being able to touch it, though."

"Well, of course not." She thought about all the dreams she had seen since she first woke to them years before. Sometimes people imagined worse than the worst: horrible huge monsters, horrible huge wounds and mistakes and shame. Sometimes they imagined beautiful things, a kiss, a sharing, a hundred musicians making

music so thick she felt she could walk on it up to the stars, a sunset that painted the whole world the colors of fire, visions of the world very different from what she saw when she looked with her day-eyes. Sometimes they just dreamed things that had happened, or things that would happen, or things they wished would happen. Sometimes people fantasized about things that made her sick; then she was glad that she could close her dream-eyes when she liked.

All the time, people carried visions and wishes and fears with them. Somehow Matt found in that a reason to go on; her life had crystallized out of wandering without destination or purpose into a quest to watch peoples' dreams, and the dreams of things shaped by people. She never reported back to anyone about what she saw, but the hunger to see more never lessened.

She had to know. She wasn't sure what, or why.

"In a way, ideas and memories are stronger than things you can touch," she said. "For one thing, much more portable. And people can't steal them or destroy them—at least, not very easily."

"I could lose them. I'm always afraid that I'm losing memories. Like a slow leak. Others come along and displace them."

"How many do you need?"

He frowned at her.

She set down her coffee and rubbed her eyes. "I guess I'm asking myself: how many do I need? I always feel like I need more of them. I'm not even sure how to use the ones I've got. I just keep collecting."

"Like you have mine now?"

"My seeing it didn't take it away from you, though."

"No," he said. He straightened. "Actually it looked a lot clearer. I don't usually think in pictures."

"Mostly graphs and blueprints," Matt said.

He tilted his head and looked at her.

"And small print I can't read."

"Good," he said. After a moment's silence, he said, "I would rather you didn't look at what I'm thinking."

“Okay,” she said. For the first time it occurred to her that what she did was spy on people. It hadn’t mattered much; she almost never talked to people she dreamwatched, so it was an invasion they would never know about. “I do it to survive,” she said.

“Dahmer dudes,” he said, and nodded.

“Right. But I won’t do it to you anymore.”

“Thanks. How about a pixie dust breakfast?”

“Huh?”

“Does the kitchen know how to cook?”

She laughed and they went to the kitchen, where he produced cheese omelets, sprinkling red paprika and green parsley on them in honor of Christmas. He had to open the fridge, turn on the stove, fetch the fry-pan himself, but drawers opened for Matt as she set the table, offering her silver and napkins, and a pitcher jumped out of a cupboard when she got frozen orange juice concentrate out of the freezer, its top opening to eat the concentrate and the cans of water. She had never before met such a cooperative and happy room. Her own grin lighted her from inside.

Jim’s plates were egg-shell white ceramic with a pastel geometric border. He slid the omelets onto them and brought breakfast to the table. She poured orange juice into square red glass tumblers, fetched more coffee from the coffee-maker’s half-full pot, and sat down at the green table.

“I’m so glad you’re here,” Jim said.

“Me too,” said Matt.

“Makes a much better Christmas than me quietly moping and maybe drinking all day.”

Matt smiled and ate a bite of omelet. Hot fluffy egg, cheese, spices greeted her mouth. “Great,” she said after she swallowed.

Jim finished his omelet one bite behind Matt. She sat back, hands folded on her stomach, and grinned at him until he smiled back.

“Presents,” she said.

“That was my line. Also I wanted to say having you here is the

best present I can think of, because all my life I've wanted to see things move without being touched. It makes me so happy I don't have words for it."

"Did you design this kitchen?"

He glanced around, smiled. "Yeah. I don't do many interiors, but I chose everything in here, since I like to cook. Corey did the living room and our bedroom."

"This kitchen moves more than any other place I've ever been. I think it was almost ready to move all by itself. I bet your buildings would like to take a walk. I wonder if they're happy. I bet they are."

He sat back and beamed at her. Then he reached for his coffee mug and it slid into his hand. His eyes widened. "Matt..."

She shook her head.

"Gosh. You *are* an elf." He sipped coffee, held the mug in front of him, staring at it. He stroked his fingers along its smooth glaze. He looked up at Matt. "It's beautiful," he said.

"Yeah," she said. "Everything is."

For a long time they stared at each other, their breathing slow and deep. At last he put the mug down, but then curled his fingers around it as though he couldn't bear to let go.

"Everything?" he said.

"Mmm," she said. For a moment she thought of ugly dreams, and sad dreams, and wondered if she believed what she had just said. Some things hurt so much she couldn't look at them for long. Still, she wanted to see them all. Without every part, the balance was missing. Jim's image of a Christmas Linda was intensified by how much he missed her. Cocoa tasted much better on a really cold day, and a hug after a nightmare could save a life...

After a moment, she said, "I got you something." She stood up. He stood up too, and followed her into the dining nook. She picked up the parcel she had wrapped that morning and offered it to him. "I had to, uh, borrow the paper."

"How could you get me anything?" he said, perplexed. "These are for you." He handed her three packages. "I didn't know what to get

you.” He shrugged.

“Dinner, cocoa, conversation, a shower, laundry, a place to sleep, coffee, breakfast,” she said. She grinned and took her packages to the couch, where she shoved her coat over and sat next to it. “Thanks,” she said.

He joined her.

She opened the first present, uncovered a card with five die-cast metal micro-cars attached, all painted skateboard colors: hot rods with working wheels. Delighted, she freed them from their plastic and set them on the coffee table, where they growled and raced with each other and acted like demented traffic without ever going over the edge.

Jim sat gripping his present, watching the cars with fierce concentration. “I got them for the teenage boy,” he said in a hushed voice after a moment. Two of the cars seemed to like each other; they moved in parallel courses, looping and reversing. One of the others parked. The two remaining were locked bumper to bumper, growling at each other, neither giving an inch.

Matt laughed. “They’re great! They can live in my pocket.” She patted her coat. “Open yours.”

He touched the ribbon on his package and it shimmered with activity, then dropped off the package and slithered from his lap to the couch, where it lifted one end as if watching. Eyebrows up, he slid a fingernail under the paper, pulled off the wrapping. He grinned at the pen and pencil, which were coated with hologram diffraction grating in magenta and teal, gold and silver. “The office isn’t going to know what hit it,” he said. “Thanks.”

“I bought ’em for the architect with a green tie. Not a whole lot of selection in that store.”

“Yeah,” he said, tucking them into the pocket of his robe. “Go on.” He gestured toward the other two presents.

She opened the first one and found a purple knit hat. The second held a pair of black leather gloves. She slid her hands into them; they fit, and the inner lining felt soft against her palms. “Thanks,” she said, her voice a little tight, her heart warm and hurt, knowing

he had bought them for the homeless person. She smiled and leaned her cheek against the back of her gloved hand. "Best presents I've gotten in years."

"Me too," he said, holding out a hand to the silver ribbon. It reached up and coiled around his wrist. He breathed deep and stroked the ribbon. "God!"

Matt tucked the hat and gloves into a coat pocket, patted the coat, held out a hand to the little cars. They raced over and climbed up onto her palm. "Look," she said, turning over her coat. "Here's your new garage." She laid the coat open and lifted the inner breast pocket so darkness gaped. The cars popped wheelies off her hand and zipped into the cave. One peeked out again, then vanished. She laughed. She had laughed more in the last twelve hours than she had in a whole month.

The phone rang, and Matt jumped. Jim picked up a sleek curved tan thing from a table beside the couch and said, "Merry Christmas" into it.

Then, "Oh, hi, Corey!"

Hugging her coat to her, Matt stood up. She could go in the other room and change while he talked to his ex-wife. Jim patted the couch and smiled at her and she sat down again, curious, as ever, about the details of other peoples' lives.

"Nope. I'm not drunk. I'm not hungover. I'm fine. Missing Linda, that's all... Okay, thanks."

He waited a moment, his eyes staring at a distance, one hand holding the phone to his ear and the other stroking the silver ribbon around the phone-hand's wrist. "Hi, Hon. Merry Christmas! You having fun?"

A moment.

"I miss you too. Don't worry, your presents are waiting. When you get home we can have a mini-Christmas. I hope you're someplace with snow in it. I know how much you like that... oh, you are? Great! Snow angels, of course. What'd your mom get for you?"

Matt thought about family Christmases, other peoples' and then,

at last, one of her own—she hadn't visited her own memories in a long long time. Her older sister, Pammy, sneaking into her room before dawn, holding out a tiny wrapped parcel. "Don't tell anybody, Mattie. This is just for you," Pammy had said, and crept into bed beside her and kissed her. Matt opened the package and found inside it a heart-shaped locket. Inside, a picture of her as a baby, and a picture of Pammy. Matt had seen the locket before—Pammy had been wearing it ever since their mother gave it to her on her tenth birthday, four years earlier. Only, originally, it had had pictures of Mom and Dad in it.

"I'll never tell," Matt had whispered, pressing the locket against her heart.

"It's supposed to keep you safe," Pammy said, her voice low and tight. "That's what Mom told me. It didn't work for me but maybe it will for you. Anyway, I just want you to know... you have my heart."

And Matt had cried the kind of crying you do without sound but with tears, and she didn't even know why, not until several years later.

"That's great," Jim said, smiling, his eyes misty. "That's great, Honey. Will you sing one for me when you get home? Yeah, I know it will feel funny to sing a carol after Christmas is over, but we're doing a little time warp, remember? Saving a piece of Christmas for later..."

"Me? I thought I was going to miss you so much I wasn't going to have any fun, but I found a friend, and she gave me a couple presents. No, not Josie! You know she's at her folks'. I know you don't like it if she's here when you come, so we set it up before I knew you weren't..." He glanced at Matt and frowned, shrugged. "No, this is a kid. Actually, an elf."

He smiled again. "I wish you could have been here. She made the kitchen dance and the couch dance. I gave her these little cars, because I thought she was a boy, and she made them run all over the coffee table even though they don't have motors in them. I think she works for Santa Claus."

Matt slipped her hand into a coat pocket and touched the hat he

had given her. It was soft like cashmere. Maybe *he* worked for Santa Claus. It had been a long time since she had had a Christmas of her own instead of borrowing other peoples', and this was the first one she could remember where she was actually really happy.

"You're too old to believe in Santa?" he said. He sighed. "I thought I was, too, but I'm not anymore." He listened, then laughed. "Okay, call me silly if you like. I'm glad you're having a good Christmas. I love you. I'll see you when you get back." He laid the phone down with a faint click.

Matt grinned at him. She liked thinking of herself as an elf and an agent of Christmas. Better than thinking she must be some kind of charity project for Jim, the way she had been at first.

Stranger still to realize she was having a no-peek Christmas, alone in her own head.

She thought of families, and, at long last, of her sister, Pammy. How many years had it been? She didn't even know if Pam were still alive, still married to her first husband, if she had kids...

"Can I use that?" she said. He handed the phone to her. She dialed information.

"What city?"

"Seattle," she said. "Do you have a listing for Pam Sternbach?"

There was a number. She dialed it.

"Merry Christmas," said a voice she had not heard since she had lived at home, half a life ago.

"Pam?"

"Mattie! Mattie? Omigod, I thought you were dead! Where are you? What have you been doing? Omigod! Are you all right?"

For a moment she felt very strange, fever and chills shifting back and forth through her. She had reached out to her past and now it was touching her back.

She had put so much distance between it and herself. She had walked it away, stamped it into a thousand streets, shed the skin of it a thousand times, overlaid it with new thoughts and other lives and memories until she had thousands to choose from. What was

she doing?

“Mattie?”

“I’m fine,” she said. “How are you?”

“How am I? Good God, Mattie! Where have you been all these years?”

“Pretty much everywhere.” She reached into the coat’s breast pocket and fished out one of the little cars, watched it race back and forth across her palm. She was connecting to her past, but she hadn’t lost her present doing it. She drew in a deep breath, let it out in a huge sigh, smiled at Jim, and snuggled down to talk.

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[scanned anonymously in a galaxy far far away]

[A Proofpack/3S Release— v1, html]

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