

Extra Presents

by Tery Aine Griffin

Susan sips her wine and tries to concentrate on the sound of the minute hand moving around the face of the kitchen clock. It is not the same clock she learned to tell time on, with her father sitting where she sits now, finishing his coffee, smoking filterless Camels, his frown growing deeper as he watched the minute hand move. She'd studied that clock, unable to understand its language. "The numbers," he explained, pointing at the clock with his cigarette, "mean five minutes. Each little dot between the numbers, that's one minute. And," he finished loudly, "if many more minutes pass before your mother gets out here, sure we'll be late for Mass."

This is not the same clock; this is three or four clocks later, but it, like each one in between, hangs in the same spot on the kitchen wall. And Susan cannot hear the minute hand move, though she knows it makes a sound. She's heard it during family gatherings, when she'd lean against the sink below it. Mostly she's heard it late at night, when she'd sit at this table avoiding sleep, or lie in one of the bedrooms off the kitchen, waiting for sleep to come.

She refills her glass from the bottle on the kitchen table. The red wine is chilled and too sweet for her taste, but it is necessary. A glass and a half is what it takes to go into the living room behind her. If she stops listening to the clock, she can hear her older sisters. Margaret is arranging and rearranging the presents under the tree, sometimes exclaiming how very many there are, other times saying perhaps there should be more, perhaps she should check to be sure there is something for everyone, what does Hope think? Hope does not know. Hope rarely

knows. Life happens to Hope; she sits looking a little confused while everyone moves around her, then the activity stops and she is asked for her opinion, for that is the way they have of including Hope, since she will not include herself.

"I don't really know," Hope says, "but it doesn't seem quite right."

Susan tops off her glass, screws the cap on the bottle, and returns it to the refrigerator. In the living room, she finds Hope settled into the recliner, the small amber ashtray from the cocktail table in her lap. Margaret is wedged between the radiator and the artificial Scotch pine, pushing at some packages near the wall. Margaret's hair is dyed a tasteful brown, but the caution and stiffness with which she moves in small places give her age away. "Susan, I was wondering . . ." Margaret turns to Susan and catches sight of the wine. Her voice takes on a chill Susan pretends not to notice. ". . . where you'd gone." Margaret has one highball at the beginning of each party or holiday dinner, then switches to cups of black coffee she calls high-test. Margaret sees no reason why she, or anyone else, should enjoy alcohol.

She makes the last of a series of adjustments that seem to Susan to make no difference whatsoever, then sits back on her heels and sighs. "What do you think?"

Susan looks to see if Hope will answer, but she has turned away from the tree and is shaking a cigarette from her tan vinyl case. Susan knows what will come next: Hope will tap each end against the back of her hand, balance the cigarette between her fingers for a moment, then squeeze the filter into an oval shape before putting it between her lips. Hope's style of lighting a cigarette mirrors their father's.

Susan examines Margaret's handiwork. It's just not Mama, she thinks. The old air-conditioner is in the window behind the tree; Mama would've had it removed at the first sign of

cold weather. Margaret forgot to put the white drop cloth down, so the presents sit on the olive green rug. She has pushed Mama's portable TV out in front of the fireplace and turned the digital clock with the five-inch-tall numbers, "for an old lady's eyes," Mama had said, to the wall. And she has removed the throw covers from Mama's couch and draped a crocheted blanket, red with white snowflakes, over its back.

Susan crosses the room and turns the clock around. Nine-forty-four, it says, and she would bet it is still right; Mama was almost fanatical about her clocks. She studies the front of the tree. "Where's Dad's ornament?"

Margaret looks at her. "Dad's ornament?"

"The boot. The red Santa boot. Dad always left an extra present in it for me, a piece of candy or a pack of gum. So I'd have something to open as soon as I got up. It goes right here." She touches a green glass ball near the tree's center.

"Haven't seen it," Margaret says. "Maybe it's still in the box. How's the tree look?"

Susan moves a small blue pillow Margaret found God-knows-where out of the way, sits in the far corner of the couch, and looks at the tree. She wants to steal Hope's line--"I don't know. It doesn't seem quite right"--but she does not. That is not her place in this family. Susan is youngest; her job is, if at all possible, to agree. "Great," she says. She looks at Hope, who is lighting her cigarette. Susan leans back against the snowflake blanket. It smells of dusting powder and cedar; Margaret must have brought it from home. "It looks fine." Susan hates Christmas trees, has hated them for years. People drink too much and fall into them. And being alone in the house with one is like being all alone in the world. She looks away from the room and into her glass. "The kids will love it." . . .