

Silent Night

David had no particular liking for Christmas, although he could never think why. He always found somewhere to go, where there was food and drink and a place to stay at nights. It's just those few days seemed to be filled with such sadness even if there was had nothing he could associate that sadness with. All his memories were no more than two years old. His life seemed to have begun in a hospital two, or was it three, years ago. After that, there was a hostel for a while, then a period of wandering, sometimes sleeping out at night, of being hungry but never so hungry to turn, as others did, to begging or stealing.

David found the most relief in walking. Sometimes walking to a new place sometimes just walking the streets of the latest town he'd made his temporary home. Walking was best. If you sat on a bench in the town centre, people knew what you were, but when you were walking, you were one of them, one of the people with somewhere to go.

He'd noticed the lights and Christmas trees had begun appearing weeks ago. There always seemed to be one house in every street that put up their lights far too early and then others would follow, one by one randomly peppering the streets with colours and lights. Finally, as now, every single house would have glowing lights and dark green trees, all looking welcoming, but all behind doors locked shut.

It was late as David walked along yet another anonymous suburban street in the dark and he noticed how cold it had become. A frost had descended, coating everything in white, almost as if had snowed. He could feel the ice crystals crunching under his feet.

As he turned into a tree-lined street, he found his way blocked by cars which were parked all over the road and pavement with two or three on every drive. He looked around for what had attracted them all and he noticed the church all lit up despite it being late in the night.

From inside he could hear the singing

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He approached the church, pulled the door open a little and looked in. The church was brightly lit and the aisles and altar were glowing with tiny candles. Every seat was taken and there were people crowded at the back. He could easily have slipped in and joined them. There was no doubt he would have been welcomed, but he knew that being there with these people would only make him feel more alone. Better to watch them from where he was. And listen

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He pushed the door to and walked back along the pathway and stood for a moment under the roofed gate looking across the road at a house bathed in yellow streetlight. Fixed to the front of the house were two large butterflies, one bright orange with

black stripes and one red, and then a little further along was a satellite dish. As he looked at the pattern of the three together, something in his memory stirred and he found himself saying out loud. 'That's a funny looking butterfly' and with a sureness he hadn't felt in years he realised he had seen these three things before and at some time in his past he had spoken those exact words. But when and to whom?

In a moment, things had changed. Two butterflies and a satellite dish had opened a door and let in the slimmest sliver of light . Was this tantalising glimpse of his past to be all or was his memory at last going to spill out its secrets?

He walked out from under the porch and stood in the road. Should he turn right or should it be left? It was left, definitely left. Suddenly he found himself walking with purpose. He had become one of the normal ones. He had somewhere to go. He reached a T junction. Where now. Left? Right? He mustn't just guess. He had to know. And he did. It was left.

He walked on through the streets following an invisible trail that was at once familiar and yet no different from the dozens of suburban streets he tramped along the last few years. Perhaps all that walking had not been random at all. Perhaps, without knowing, he had been searching, searching for the kind of house that stood before him now. He knew that he'd arrived and yet there was nothing familiar about the place. It was just another large semi-detached house in a row of houses looking much the same. He reached into his pocket and pulled out the key.

The key had been the one and only thing that linked him with what he was now and what he had once been. The nurse at the hospital had given it to him. They'd found it near his bed and assumed it was his. He'd taken the key and then, as if it was all he needed to find his way home, he'd walked unnoticed out of the hospital.

If the key fitted the lock in the door of this house then he might finally discover who he was. If not, the people inside would huddle in their beds knowing outside was a burglar, a thief, a creature of the night and he would run away, throw the key into the bushes and disappear forever.

He pushed the key into the lock. It turned and when he pushed the door swung open. He felt the warmth greeting him as he entered. The lights were off but the twinkling lights from the Christmas tree in the living room lit the hallway enough for him to make out the pictures on the wall, the old dresser and the stripped pine stairs. His heart sank. Nothing looked familiar. He didn't know this place. He'd never been here before.

He began to close the door and then a new thought filled his head. The Christmas lights on the tree. They shouldn't be left on. There could be a fire. People could be killed. Before he could leave, he needed to know everything was safe. He'd turn off the Christmas tree lights and then go. He knew they would haunt him if he didn't.

He started to walk towards the tree, but then a light flicked on and he was caught in the glare. A small girl walked across the landing carrying a glass of water. She saw him, screamed in shock and dropped the glass which fell and smashed, sending glass shards tumbling down the stairs.

David ran out the door. He tried to retrieve his key from the lock but it was jammed. He tugged at it but it wouldn't come out. So he left it and ran. He didn't know how long he was running, but he was not a fit man and after a few hundred yards turning this way and that, he'd run out of breath. His chest hurt and his lungs were aching. He slumped to the ground his mind filled with fear. The police would come for him. He'd be arrested.

But that fear soon faded. So what if they did. What had he got to lose now? His fear subsided but then he was overwhelmed with a feeling of terrible disappointment. He'd learned in the last few years how dangerous it was to allow hope into your life, to hope he'd find his old life, to become a real person again. Better the dull ache, than the disenchantment of another dead end. He lent against a wall feeling the cold of the pavement biting into his legs.

Then he heard music. Was it real? Was it coming from somewhere or was it just in his mind: a mournful soundtrack to his empty life

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And then he looked up. He saw the trail of footprints through the frost leading to where he sat. He saw the three bedraggled figures standing underneath the streetlight. They were wearing coats and Wellingtons with night clothes underneath. There was a woman, a small boy, with a teddy dangling from his hand, and the girl he'd seen on the landing. They stood staring at him saying nothing.

The small girl detached herself from her mother's hand and came and stood directly over him. He looked into her eyes longing for the faintest sign of recognition. She was saying something but he couldn't quite make it out. The same word over and over again. And then he realised what it was.

She was saying, 'Daddy.'