

It's the Most Wonderful Time. . .

by R. Michael Burns

The little Victorian house sat nestled in the snow on the dark fringe of town, its tiny-bright fairy lights and holly wreaths awash in the porch lamp's glow, just lonely splashes of gaiety in the alpine twilight. Inside, Tommy Mueller lay stretched out on the rug by the crackling fire, propped up on his elbows with his chin in his hands, a plate of Santa-shaped sugar cookies forgotten at his side. He hardly noticed the melancholy tunes coming from the CD player in the next room -- Judy Garland singing "Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas" at the moment, the song nothing more than a cool tickle on the back of his neck, more felt than heard. He gazed long and lost at the gifts gathered under the tree, shining green paper and red ribbons, bushy gold bows -- mysteries, promises. He couldn't bring himself to smile.

His father stood at the front door, watching the last of the daylight die from the ashen sky. "Pretty soon," he muttered, maybe only to himself. The words made Tommy shiver.

In the kitchen, his mother banged around, noisily finishing the Christmas Eve

meal, now laying out the special china, the silver, the red-linen napkins. Even without looking at her, Tommy knew her eyes were bloodshot and puffy from crying. She cried every year on this night. But whatever strange emotions blew around inside her, Tommy couldn't share them. He felt only that creeping sense of dread, the growing certainty that there was something terribly wrong about all of this -- especially this year.

"Oh God!" his mother called, bursting out of the kitchen, twisting her apron in her prematurely-knotted fingers. "The cranberry sauce! Did you remember the cranberry sauce?"

Tommy's father glanced away from his watch at the door. "I -- No. I'm sorry."

His mother's face looked shattered, like a dropped plate. "Dammit, Ellis, how could you forget that? You know how much she likes cranberry sauce!"

Tommy's father ran thick fingers through his gray hair, sighed deeply. "Yeah, I know. I'm sorry."

"Fat lot of good *that* does!" Tommy's mother said, her voice rising almost to a shriek. "Friendlies is already closed! You'd have to drive all the way to Fort Collins to find someplace that's even still open!"

"Not going anywhere with the roads like they are," Tommy's father answered, facing out into the gathering dark again. "It'd take hours. And I want to be here when . . ."

Mom's words snagged in her throat. "It's just . . . everything is supposed to be perfect! We only get one night, just this one night. . ."

Dad turned, gathered her into his arms; she held him as tight as a drowning woman clinging to her rescuer. "Maybe not," he whispered. "Maybe not this time."

Tommy looked at them, then away again. It about drove him crazy, seeing them like that, weepy and so shaken they could hardly stand. Parents were supposed to be strong, strong as granite cliffs, keeping their kids sheltered and safe. And -- they looked so *old* these days, not just since that summer three years ago but since the Christmas after, and the ones after that, as if they aged three or four years for every Christmas Eve they spent together as a family.

"I'm sure she won't mind," Dad whispered. "I'm sure Sam won't mind."

Tommy shivered once more at the thought of seeing her, seeing his sister again.

Three years ago, a shadow had fallen over Fall Creek, Colorado. A half-dozen of the town's children had wandered into the black, and hadn't come back out. The mangled bodies found in the basement of that old building on Central Avenue didn't change the hideous reality -- everyone in town knew that the children had been lost to the darkness. Things hadn't ever gotten fully back to normal since then.

But then, things had never been *truly normal* in Fall Creek to begin with. That was something else everyone knew. Not that the adults ever talked about it, of course. That was left to the kids, huddling under the covers in darkened bedrooms or whispering in leaf-shaded treehouses, trading mysteries like baseball cards and wondering what about this little nowhere-town in the crook of the Cache le Poudre river valley drew the strangeness in and held it there, like dark water in a pool of unknown depths. They talked about ancient Indian curses and demonic powers accidentally released from the long-abandoned gold mines that dotted the mountain slopes, but it was all just so many words, clumsy attempts to explain why the shadows here all seemed too long, the empty places not quite as empty as they should be.

And maybe that weird gravity was the reason for what happened here each Christmas Eve. The way those kids had died, their souls wrung from their flesh like so much juice squeezed from under-ripe apples. . . Maybe the town had held onto them somehow, kept them just alive enough for this season of longing and belief to work its peculiar magic and grant their parents' deepest wishes. . .

Really, though -- did the *why* even matter?

By the door, Tommy's mother disentangled herself from his father, saying, "I need to go check on the ham," and hurrying back into the kitchen. Tommy's dad watched her go, then turned again to his vigil.

Tommy glanced over at the table -- four chairs, four place settings, four of everything instead of the regular three -- then gazed again at the carefully wrapped presents, every fourth one with his sister's name printed on the card in cheerful green felt-tip. He'd been just eight when she vanished in the small hours of the night, leaving behind only her golden-haired doll, a creepy porcelain doppelganger to salt her mother's wounds each time she saw it. Sam was five that year -- and five that Christmas Eve when she appeared at the front door, pale as the snow and like a cold mist to the touch, but unquestionably his little sister whom he'd loved more than he'd ever dared say or show. And five again the next year, and five again the Christmas Eve after that, even while Tommy had given up eight for nine, left that behind for the glorious heights of ten, now eleven years old. But Sam was five, always five, five forever and ever.

Not that his mom cared, not one bit. Didn't care that it felt so damn creepy, so deeply wrong, Sam showing up like a shadow at dusk and fading away into the Christmas morning sunrise, and always the same little girl in the same nightdress she'd worn when

she vanished. Maybe his dad felt it a bit, sensed the unnaturalness of it all like a cool breeze pricking the hairs on the back of his neck. But if so he never said anything, never dared mention his fears to Tommy's mother.

But this year. . . This year things had gone much further -- too far. Tommy knew it in the pit of his stomach, in the pounding of his heart. His mother had crossed some narrow but terrible line, stepped out of the penumbra and into the black that had swallowed Samantha. And his father went along saying nothing.

Tommy felt his gut knot up with fear.

From the CD player, Louis Armstrong sang that he was dreaming of a white Christmas, just like the ones he used to know. Tommy cast his gaze again to the big polished-oak dining table, thought again of Christmases past -- Sam sitting across from him like she always had, a big plate of ham and sticky purple cranberry sauce set before her, a mug of hot chocolate at her elbow. And all of it untouched, of course, because the dead had no need of food or drink. She simply sat there with a tiny, tired smile on her frayed pink-ribbon lips, her eyes deep and wide and empty -- as if she were still looking at the dark inside her coffin, Tommy thought with a chill. Sometimes she tried to talk and what came out was a paper-thin whisper, dry and hollow, like the sounds that came from the heating vents late at night. Mom would beam and smile and laugh and cry and stroke Sam's misty hair, and Dad would nod and say loving things in a deep, confident voice. But Tommy could only stare and shiver deep inside himself, knowing that some huge, vital piece of Sam had gotten left behind and couldn't be brought back, not even in the peculiar winter magic of Christmas Eve.

Tommy shifted his vision outward again, into the here-and-now, and studied the

Christmas tree. So beautiful, dangling delicate glass ornaments, sparkling with miniature white lights. It almost made him feel safe and whole again, like he had when he was seven and Sam just four and Santa Claus the only visitor expected on Christmas Eve. When Mom still laughed and Dad still played HORSE with him in the driveway. When he had a kid-sister all the time, not just one night a year. He drank in the sweet aroma of baked honey-ham and cider spices, let the scents infuse him, warm him all the way through like the fire crackling in the hearth.

But then his focus drifted past the tree, to the curtains hiding the mullioned windows -- windows which no longer looked out on the blue of the dusk, the white snow splashed with the glow of Christmas lights. Windows which his father had, only that morning, painted over in midnight black. Struck blind once and for all.

His mother appeared at the kitchen threshold, looking out across the small living room to the open front door, the winter's chill sighing in over everything like a promise of the visitation to come. "Is she -- ?"

Dad shook his head. "Not yet."

Mom nodded quick, and again, like her neck was full of strong tense springs. Still nodding, she disappeared into the kitchen.

Tommy munched at a cookie, bit Santa's boots off and swallowed without tasting the white icing, the vanilla crumbs. His thoughts kept wandering the house, snagging on all the sharp things -- the extra plates at the table, the extra gifts under the tree, the blacked-out windows, the clocks all stopped so as to give no hint of the passing of time. The trap they'd set for Samantha's restless spirit.

He sighed, long and deep. The tree lights, the fire flicker, the false candles

shimmering in the dining room chandelier gave the whole house a mellow sepia glow that should've made him feel cozy, warm and contented as only a child can feel, and only on this one rare night. But tonight he felt nothing but the shadows lingering at the edges of the light, clinging to the corners, hiding behind the curtains.

Mom hurried out of the kitchen, placed the big cut-glass bowl full of nutmeg-dusted eggnog in the center of the table. She paused a moment to assure herself that it sat just right, then looked over at the door, eyes wide, lips pinched in a tight smile.

"Any minute now, any minute now," she whispered, wringing her hands like dishrags.

"Any minute now," Tommy's father echoed, nodding ever-so-slightly.

"She won't leave us this time," Mom said, staring at the sparkling tree, or at the gifts beneath, or at nothing at all. "We won't lose our baby again. Not this time."

"No," Dad answered, so soft Tommy barely heard him above the sighing of the wind through the front door, the melancholy carols from the stereo. The house had grown icy cold over the last half hour as his father stood watching the sun sink and the shadows rise, but the door now afforded the only view of the outside world, so Dad kept it open. Tommy doubted the house would ever be warm again.

From the squat black speakers on either side of the sofa, Bing Crosby sang that old familiar yuletide promise: "I'll be home for Christmas, you can count on me. . ."

Tommy rubbed hard at his eyes, bit his lower lip. If only he could cry, he might at least bleed some of the ache from his heart. But he felt too thick, too solid, like clay someone had wrung all the moisture from, lifeless and cold.

"Dad," he said, a tiny hiccup of a word as if he'd tried to swallow it even as it

came out. But his father half-turned to look at him, raising a gray eyebrow, forcing him to continue. "Maybe . . . I mean, maybe this isn't right, what we're doing."

His mother's voice sliced in, clean and dry as a paper-cut. "Don't you *dare* say that."

"But --" Tommy stopped, shut his mouth. What *could* he say, how could he express that blizzard of fears storming around inside him, make her understand? He caught his father still gazing his way, a strange expression on his face, eyebrows knitted together. Almost like -- what? But even at his age, Tommy recognized that look -- hope. Dad wanted him to talk her out of it, to talk them *both* out of this mad black plan. Tommy clenched his jaw, frowning with the futile effort to conjure the right words, to say what had to be said. It wasn't fair -- *they* were the grownups, *they* were supposed to be the ones who knew what to do, what to say.

He felt their eyes on him, Dad's so expectant, Mom's so sharp.

"I'm scared," he said, not looking at either of them, not able to say anything more important, more powerful. "I'm scared of what we're doing."

"Don't you want your little sister back, Tommy?" his mother asked, her voice perfectly reasonable, even gentle. But those dulcet tones didn't fool him; he knew that somewhere behind them she was screaming, clawing frantically at her hopes. He felt her desperation in the air between them like a cloud full of lightning.

He didn't answer her, and saw his father turn to face back out into the lawn.

"Do you suppose this will change things for the others?" his father asked, breath fogging the air. "If it works, I mean? Do you suppose that Jason Barnhill will go back to his parents' place next year? Or Tim Hughes? Denny Anderson? Or the Kingsley kids?"

I think Kurt Kingsley didn't have anything in the world except those kids. . ."

"I don't know if it will change things for anyone else," his mother said, still pulling at her fingers. "Does it matter? If we can have our daughter back, back *to stay*, back *forever*?"

"I guess not."

*Back forever*, Tommy thought with a chill that rose from the very core of him and froze its way outward, raising goosebumps along his arms that even the crackling fire couldn't chase away. Samantha's misty ghost always around, pale and nearly silent and not-quite-there, like an icy echo, a too-persistent memory, all sallow gold locks and faded pink cheeks and big round eyes that never caught the light. And always five years old, while he turned twelve, fifteen, twenty. Or -- would she somehow hold him back, anchor him in time, keeping *him* from growing up, just as she would never grow up? It was what his mother wanted, after all -- to stretch this one black-magic Christmas Eve out to eternity, to freeze all the clocks and even stop the world spinning toward dawn if she could, or at least prevent the sun from rising on the Mueller house. To keep her little girl forever close, forever young. And would it make any difference to her if it imprisoned her husband and son in this endless night along with Samantha's lost spirit? Would it make any difference that the child haunting the endless twilight of their home wasn't really Samantha at all, was nothing but an empty shadow, a lie they kept telling themselves long after they should have let it rest?

Tommy only had to look into his mother's eyes to know it wouldn't, didn't.

At the door, his father tensed, sucked in a breath.

"Is it -- ?" Mom asked.

"I think --" Dad answered. "Yes. Oh Sam, oh my little girl. . ."

Tommy moved fast, bursting from his place like Jack from his box, pushing past his father even as the man stepped out to meet his daughter. Tommy bounded down the snow-drifted porch steps, seeing everything in pools of light and shadow, the world made vague, the edges dulled with coats of white, the guardian trees, the black skeleton of the wrought-iron fence, the rainbow colors of the Christmas lights reflected from a billion crystals of ice. And at the open gate, that shadow, so familiar, so strange, gliding up the buried walk, leaving no traces of its passage in the virgin snow. Her lace-trimmed nightdress, her sweet round face floating above in a nimbus of golden hair. That broken smile, and those big wide lightless eyes.

"Tommy -- *no!*"

He barely heard his mother's scream above his own.

"Run, Sam!" he cried, loping through the drifts toward the gate. "Run away fast! You can't come back! You can't come back ever again! She won't let you leave! She'll *never* let you leave! Please Sammy -- run!"

The figure didn't run, didn't move at all. It hung utterly still in the gateway, half-in, half-out, caught on the threshold.

And then, silent as the fall of dusk, it shimmered away into darkness.

The walk, the gate stood empty.

From somewhere behind him, Tommy heard a wail of misery. It was the worst sound he'd ever heard, as if all his mother's anguish -- the horror of Sam's disappearance, the brutal shock of finally finding her mangled body, and all the gutted, lost hours since -- had torn free in a single devastated cry. Then she fell into shrill sobs, choking out the

same hopeless word over and over, "Sam . . . Sam. . ."

Tommy could picture them, his father standing dazed and stone-still in the porch lamp's glow, crushing Mom to his side but completely unable to comfort her, too broken and stunned and secretly relieved to find any words at all. The image was starkly clear in Tommy's mind, but he couldn't turn to look at them, couldn't see them so broken, so naked with grief. He didn't know if he would ever be able to meet his mother's gaze again, if he would find anything but anger in her eyes after tonight. Could they ever be a family again, just the three of them? Could anyone recover from pain that cut so deep, heal wounds that left their souls in tatters? It seemed impossible . . . but then, so did ghostly sisters and all Christmas Eve miracles, both dark and bright.

Tommy Mueller took a last look at the empty gate, then collapsed into the snow and wept with grief, and wept with relief, and wept until he couldn't tell one from the other.

After a time, a light snow began to fall.

-- The End --