

Trimming the Tree

by Keith West

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Evelyn hung the glass ball on the Christmas tree and looked at the empty chair in the reflection on its surface. She sighed. If he were coming, he would surely have been arrived by now. It was their tradition to trim the tree on Christmas Eve.

She hung another ball as the clock on the mantle began to strike twelve. This time the chair in the reflection was occupied.

“Lawrence! You made it.”

The young man sitting in the chair smiled a sad smile.

“Have I ever disappointed you by not spending Christmas Eve with you, Mom?”

A confused look passed across Evelyn’s face for a moment.

“No, not that I can recall,” she said.

Lawrence stood up from the chair. He was lanky young man, dressed in wool trousers, an Oxford shirt, and a sweater vest. A shock of unruly black hair hung down over his forehead.

Evelyn opened her arms. “C’mere. You aren’t too big to give your mother a hug, are you?”

If she saw Lawrence’s hesitation, she didn’t show it. “Sure.”

Lawrence took her in his arms gently, as though she were fragile and he might break her.

Evelyn shivered as she broke their embrace.

“Brrr. There’s a draft in here.”

She put another log on the fire.

Lawrence didn’t say anything.

“Well, aren’t you going to help me? You can’t have any eggnog or cookies unless you help, you know. That’s the rule.”

Evelyn moved back to the tree and selected another ball from the box.

“Of course I’ll help, Mom.”

Lawrence stepped up to the table and selected an ornament from a box. For the next little while they worked silently together until there was only one ornament and the angel left.

Evelyn handed the ornament to Lawrence. It was golden retriever wearing a Santa hat.

“Here. This is your favorite ornament. You said it looked like Dusty.”

“You go ahead and hang it, Mom.”

She put the dog on a lower branch while Lawrence placed the angel at the top. Another puzzled look crossed her face.

“Whatever happened to that dog?” she asked.

“He’s doing fine.”

“Oh, you took him with you.”

Lawrence started to correct her and stopped. “Yes, Mom, he’s with me.”

They ate cookies and drank eggnog and talked for hours.

At last Lawrence stood up.

“Do you really have to go?” Evelyn asked. “It’s almost Christmas morning.”

She waved at the window, where the sky was beginning to turn pink.

“Yes, I do. My time is up.”

“At least let me give you your present.”

Evelyn took a package from beneath the tree. The wrapping was rubbed thin, with several small tears, and the tape was yellow and cracked with age.

“Thank you,” he said. “Goodbye, Mom. Merry Christmas. See you next year.”

Evelyn wiped a tear from her eye. When she looked up, the room was empty, the present sitting on the table. She put it back under the tree for next year.