



The Silver Stalking

by Nina Kiriki Hoffman

Amy woke on Christmas morning knowing this Christmas was going to be different from all eleven that had gone before. She and her mother were living in an apartment instead of in the house she had grown up in, and her twin brother Nate was in another apartment across town, with their father. No waking up way early to sneak downstairs with Nate and scope out the tree and the presents, then sneaking back up to their rooms to wait for the wake-up call from the grown-ups. No immediate toy swapping when they found out some dumb relative had again given her a stuffed animal and Nate a toy truck. No buried grins as they watched their parents open the gifts the twins had made for them, waiting for the inevitable joy and thanks.

And Grandma was here. That was different, too. Grandma and Daddy had never gotten along, so Grandma had never before come to Christmas morning.

This Christmas, it was just going to be Grandma and Mom and Amy together, under their little tree (all the lights were white; Nate and Daddy had the colored lights that flickered, and Mom had bought all white, saying she never had liked the other lights). In the afternoon Mom would take Amy to Daddy's new place, so Amy and Nate could compare gifts, and give each other presents. But of course that wasn't the same either.

The one thing that should be the same was the stocking, Amy thought, staring at the ceiling of her new room. Mom had put up her favorite mobile of cardboard birds, so that Amy could lie on the bed and puff a breath upwards and watch the birds spinning my night lights as she fell asleep. Now she stared up at the birds, visible by watery dawn light that seeped in through her white curtains. There should be a stocking full of little things, games, toys, candy, sitting in lumpy splendor on the end of her bed. Every year since she could remember there

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had been a stocking, with ribbon candy, and chocolate bells in colored foil wrappers spangled with stars, and strange little toys from Japan and Taiwan still in their plastic wrappers with the cards attached at the top announcing what they were and how to use them, and showing weird children doing unlikely things with the toys. Some years Amy and Nate got exactly the same toys in their stockings, but most years they got different things and swapped until they were happy.

There should be a stocking. Mom wouldn't have changed that, would she? Amy stared up at her birds and felt with her still-blanketed foot for the weight of her stocking, fuzzy red with a green felt Christmas tree glued on it and with *AMY* in stick-on letters on the white-fur rim.

Nothing.

She closed her eyes and lay still under her covers.

Nothing. Nothing was going to be the same this year.

All the sweet hot syrup of Christmas joy disappeared from her bloodstream in that moment, leaving a salt taste of tears in her mouth. How many times since Daddy and Nate moved out in June had she thought, maybe this thing or that will be all right, only to decide it wouldn't be but there was nothing she could do about it? Too many times to count. But Christmas. For some reason she had thought Christmas, the most important day of the year, would be different by being the same at least in this one little detail.

How stupid could she be?

She sat up and sighed. She looked at the bottom of her bed and saw something softly gleaming in the pale light.

For a moment she just stared. Then she leaned forward, holding out a hand. She touched the thing. It felt cool and sleek, slipping away from her fingers. She grabbed it.

It was a silver sock, knee high or higher. The material was thick, almost puffy. It didn't feel like any cloth she'd

touched before. It felt like it was made of metal and air and silk.

She turned it upside down and shook it, but nothing fell out.

What kind of a stocking was this? What was the point?

She reached up inside and her hand tingled.

She pulled her hand out again.

She dropped the stocking, feeling tears thicken the back of her throat. Like Christmas morning without Daddy and Nate, the sock was empty.

She put her other hand inside it, reaching deep. Maybe in the toe there would be something, maybe, maybe. Her fingers scrabbled without finding anything. The tingle grew and grew, itching her arm. Then the stocking shone bright, white and silver, and it tightened around her arm, trapping her hand inside, clinging to her till she was silver light all the way up to her elbow. Her hand throbbed, and then...

Then she felt as if she had another skin on. The sock melted into her arm until she could barely see it. It glittered like Halloween makeup as she turned her hand in the light. She could see her fingers, even. She wiggled her hand, and all her fingers moved separately. She reached out with her covered hand and touched her quilt.

But instead of touching her quilt, her hand reached through it into someplace dark. She felt warmth against her fingers, and shapes. It looked like her hand dived down through the quilt into her bed, but what she felt wasn't like springs or mattress. She closed her hand around something round, and lifted her arm.

Clutched in her hand was a smooth green rock with white veins running through it.

She dropped it on her bed and stared at her arm. She scratched around the rim of the sock where her arm stopped

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looking silvery, and after a minute she found the top of the sock. With her fingernail she pried it up, and suddenly the stocking peeled off her arm and fell to the bed.

She left it lying there like a skin shed by a snake and picked up the green rock. Where had it come from? Inside her bed or what? It felt warm. The white veins in it looked alive. She cupped it in her hands, then released it. It stayed a rock.

She picked up the stocking again. Where had it come from?

She sat a moment with the stocking in her hands, staring at the wall, and thinking about Christmas not being Christmas anymore. Then she slid her feet out from under the covers and slipped the stocking onto her left foot.

Her foot tingled and burned the way her arm had. After shining for a minute, the puffy silver stuff melted into her leg. She got off her bed and stood a moment, wondering if her left foot would fall through the floor, and what that would mean to the rest of her body, but she didn't fall through. She felt the warm tingles spreading from her left leg up through her body, interrupting her breathing with tiny shudders. Then the tingles faded, leaving her feeling warm and strange. She clenched her hands around fistfuls of her flannel nightgown, which still felt real. The rest of her didn't, somehow. She peeked into the mirror on her dresser and saw a silvery self inside her nightgown.

Christmas. This was Christmas. Every year she and Nate had known, more than they knew almost anything else that Christmas was a time when wishes might come true, when magic might be real.

She took three steps toward the door and reached for the doorknob, but her hand did not stop. She walked through the door, and it was like walking through a shadow, a brief darkness. She stood in the hallway a moment, closed her eyes,

waited to understand what had just happened. Her breathing slowed eventually.

Walking down the hall toward the living room, she thought about last Christmas, the Christmas of big presents that almost made her and Nate not bear it when Mom and Dad argued. Lego kits to build castles, scooters, a big Gund bear for Nate and a Tonka caterpillar dozer for Amy. The magic had been in the first half hour when Daddy passed out the presents and she and Nate ripped into the wrapping paper, the tree's lights flickering beside them. Mom sat on the couch with her feet tucked up, sipping hot chocolate and watching them open presents with a little smile.

Amy walked down the hall picturing last Christmas, and when she came to the living room (the wrong living room, with the new red couch in it instead of the big white one, which now lived in Daddy's apartment) instead of the skinny tree with white lights, she was their last-year's tree, paper chains she and Nate had made from pieces of paper they colored with crayons in school, a host of colored lights, Mom's paper angels and Daddy's little stuffed animals. The tinsel was scattered in lumps on the tree (Nate was patient, putting it on strand by strand, but Amy liked to just throw it by the handfuls). There was Nate, and there was –

There was Amy, sitting next to Nate. She wadded up some wrapping paper and threw it at him, and he laughed and threw it back.

Standing on the threshold of the living room, Amy watched last year. An ache opened in her chest. She wanted to walk into last year. Maybe there was something she could say or do to stop the divorce, or something Nate could do. Why did everything have to change?

Silvered, Amy stepped over the threshold, and last year disappeared. Her hands clenched into fists. She stared at the

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tree with its white lights. All the presents under the tree were wrapped in the same kind of paper, green with silver snowflakes.

A sun flared inside her, as hot tears ran down her cheeks. For a moment she wanted to run over and stamp on all the presents and tear the decorations off the tree, smash the silver balls, pull the wings off the angel on the top.

She turned away and walked through the front door.

The hallway outside the apartment was lit only by a night light and the dawn light coming in the window at the end of the hall. She stood for a moment in her flannel and her silver. What she really wanted was to walk to Nate and Daddy's apartment and stay there forever and ever; but they lived all the way across town. She sat on the hall carpet with her back against the front door for a while, thinking.

A little while later she heard Mom's voice through the door, calling, "Amy? Amy? Amy!"

Her first impulse was to run down the hall, hide by the elevators. She thought about just sitting where she was. Mom would probably open the door. Instead she got up. She peeked through the door. Mom wasn't in the hall, but Grandma was, staring straight at her, but not looking frightened. Amy stepped back through the door.

"Amy!" cried her mother, coming out of the bathroom. "Oh. There you are. Where have you been?" Mom caught her breath, smiled weakly, and said "Merry Christmas, Darling."

"Thanks, Mom," said Amy. She bit her lip and looked at her grandmother.

"We're having blueberry pancakes for breakfast before we open the gifts," Grandma said. "Maybe you would like to change first?"

"Oh, Oma," said Mom, "we never dress before Christmas breakfast!"

“Everything is different this year,” Amy said, and slipped past her mother. Grandma opened the bedroom door for her and Amy went in, listened to the door close behind her. Grandma must know something. Amy couldn’t have gotten into her room without help or without going through the wall. For the first time Amy thought about where the silver stocking must have come from. Grandma, she guessed. Grandma hadn’t been surprised that Amy could go through a closed door.

She sat on the bed and peeled the stocking off, then dressed in jeans and a red T-shirt. She tucked the stocking into her pocket; it stuffed down real well.

By the time she finished brushing her teeth the whole apartment smelled of the warm buttery cooking scent of pancakes.

She had resolved to stay frozen and not to like anything Mom said or did or gave her, but with the stocking in her pocket, and the knowledge that she could walk through walls and peer into the past, a little flame of warmth started somewhere down near her stomach and spread through her. By the time they finished breakfast, she was ready to tear into her gifts, thinking about all the things she would tell Nate when she saw him that afternoon. Mom’s trembly grin had strengthened into a real smile.

Grandma, unwrapping the shawl Amy had bought for her with Mom’s help, nodded to Amy, her smile small and strong.

Amy touched her pocket where the stocking nestled and smiled back.

