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Guilty Money

by Candida Lloyd

The children were only just in bed when the doorbell went. Who would come over unannounced at this hour? All Liz's friends would be at home enjoying wine o'clock just like her.

She recognised her father's giant silhouette through the stained-glass window of the front door and wondered what was wrong. They would be seeing him at the school nativity on Friday and it was unlike him to just drop by. Liz opened the door and he bent down to kiss her.

"I am just on my way to the airport", he said, "I wanted to stop by and say hello".

They squeezed past the buggy in the narrow hallway and Liz kicked the children's shoes away to clear a path for her father. In the lounge there were toys scattered all over the floor and plates of the children's leftover tea on the coffee table. The room glowed with the lights of the Christmas tree and SpongeBob SquarePants maniacally smiling face paused on television screen.

"Do the children watch a lot of television" her father asked. Liz ignored the question and reached for the remote control.

"I thought you'd only just got back from Milan", she said, holding it up to the screen and making the image disappear.

“I’ve been asked to conduct a gala performance in San Francisco at the last minute. Their resident conductor has had a heart attack, terribly sad, and it’s a tremendous honour to be asked. The dress rehearsal is the day after next and it’s rather a grand occasion. There will be a late dinner hosted by the benefactors, so I’ll be singing for my supper well after the performance is over……but what have you been up to?”

Liz began to tell him about how Teddy had thrown all the toilet rolls down the loo earlier that day and Noah had had a cold but she sensed that she was losing her father’s interest, so she said brightly, “...and they’re super excited about Christmas of course!”

Her father had kept his coat on during his visit and slipped his hand in the inside pocket as he stood up.

“That reminds me I wanted to give you this”, and he placed a cheque on the coffee table next to the cold fish fingers. “Christmas is on me this year.”

Liz paused and then said “Thanks.”

Out in the hall Noah appeared at the top of the stairs in his pyjamas. “Hi grandpa”, he said, “raise your hand if you’re going to be the angel Gabriel”, and put his own hand in the air “only two more sleeps until the Christmas show”, and ran back to his room.

Liz opened the front door to show her father out and said “So we won’t be seeing you on Friday then. I hope the gala goes well.”

She returned to the living room and looked at the cheque wondering if cashing it would make her complicit in her Father’s guilt. They could really do with the money.