



The Doorbell

A Short Story by W. Mark Whitlock



Julie looked up at the house and sighed. Christmas lights blinked red, green, yellow, and blue in the same pattern they had since her family moved into this house her ninth-grade year.

“Some things never change,” she said, reaching over to flip on the Uber light. Her ten-year-old Sentra was parked on the curb two houses away from the place she used to call home, but she didn’t want anyone to think she didn’t belong. She watched as two more couples walked to the door in an annual pilgrimage to the Scott family Christmas Eve party hosted for neighbors, friends from church, and her parents’ co-workers. She wondered if her dad was playing DJ with his vinyl collection or using a Spotify playlist.

Julie hadn't been at the party the last two years and wasn't expected this year. They had fought so much. About so many things. Over too many weeks. When she drove off three years ago—on this night and in this very car—she intended never to return. But here she was debating whether or not to ring the doorbell or drive away.

She closed her eyes and leaned into the headrest, trying to will herself to grab the packages in the seat next to her and move. The all-Christmas music station played “Heirlooms” by Amy Grant. When she sang the line, “My precious family is more than an heirloom,” she punched the off button and growled.

She leaned forward, looked at the front window, and imagined the tree in the same spot near the fireplace. The Santa ornament she made from construction paper and wooden ice cream spoons during third-grade art class won't be hanging there. She had torn it up in front of her dad's face in the middle of their last argument.

She stroked the cellophane sealing the bowl next to her. Every year, since she was old enough to operate the stove, she had made the “puppy chow” for the party. Keeping with tradition, she’d made a big batch for this year.

She shoved on the brake and slammed the car into drive. She’d just go home and eat the puppy chow herself while watching *The Holiday*. But her right foot was frozen. She clicked the gearshift three spaces back into park and exclaimed, “Let’s get this over with.” She grabbed the bowl and opened the driver’s door in one motion, and stomped up the sidewalk.



“Are you here for the Scotts’ party?”

She froze. “Uh, no. No, I’m delivering Uber Eats for, uh, 825.” She pointed at her home, her window, her bedroom, her memories, her family, and choked out, “Is that it?” She looked at their faces hoping she didn’t recognize them nor they her.

“No,” the couple dressed for the party said. “That’s 847.”

“Thank you.” She turned and hugged the bowl on the way back to the car.

Once inside the tears burned her face like popping grease from Christmas-morning bacon as she watched the couple go to the door. Her mom greeted them both with giant hugs and an even bigger smile and invited them in with a wave of her hand. She imagined her mom taking their coats and laying them on the piano bench where she had practiced hundreds of hours.

Was she right? Had the argument been worth leaving home for? Last year she sat in this very spot on the curb and answered herself with a resounding yes.



She turned the radio back on. Kenny Loggins was belting out “Please, celebrate me home...” She punched it off again.

She loved her parents. She did. They believed in her after the broken leg and drove her to every therapy session and then drove her to return to the team senior year. They had shared tears and knowing smiles after the state volleyball championship. They supported her every whim from watercolors to Pampered Chef, through two college-major changes and the break-up with Chase. Why had they not supported her three years ago? Why had they let that argument drive her away?

She looked at the clock and knew what was happening inside. Everyone was gathered in the great room—ugly Christmas sweaters, hairspray, and all—for Dad’s speech. For Dad’s prayer. The same prayer every year.

Dear God, thank You for our family, these friends, this food, and this time of year. Thank You for those far away and for those held dear. Bring us peace, kindness, and a brave new year. And may we know Your love more than we know fear. In the name of the Child born on a midnight clear, Amen.

She picked up the bowl again and walked up the sidewalk past the handprints she and her brothers had made that summer the city fixed the crack. She placed the bowl gently on the front porch swing, hoping not to let it squeak and draw attention. Facing the door, she stared at the doorbell while fidgeting with the ring her dad gave her when she turned sixteen. With a deep breath, she stood up straight, smoothed her dress, and reached out her trembling finger to the doorbell.



For more from W. Mark Whitlock,
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Special thanks to:

[Joseph Baldwin](#) for prompting me to write

[Carlton Hughes](#) and Phil Newman for your thoughts and edits

The [photographers](#) for offering their creativity and work at no additional cost.

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