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The Lily-White Boys

THE Follansbees' Christmas party was at teatime on Christmas Day, and it was for all ages. Ignoring the fire laws, the big Christmas tree standing between the two front windows in the living room of the Park Avenue apartment had candles on it. When the last one was lit, somebody flipped a light switch, and in the hush that fell over the room the soft yellow candlelight fell on the upturned faces of the children sitting on the floor in a ring around the base of the tree, bringing tears to the eyes of the susceptible. The tree was strung with loops of gold and silver tinsel and popcorn and colored paper, and some of the glass ornaments—the hardy tin soldier, the drum, the nutmeg, and the Man in the Moon—went all the way back to Beth Follansbee's childhood. While the presents were being distributed, Mark Follansbee stood by with a bucket of water and a broom. The room smelled of warm wax and balsam.

The big red candles on the mantelpiece burned down slowly in their nest of holly. In the dining room, presiding over the cut-glass punch bowl, Beth Follansbee said, "You let the peaches sit all day in a quart of vodka, and then you add two bottles of white wine and a bottle of champagne—be a little careful, it isn't as innocuous as you might think," and with her eyebrows she signaled to the maid that the plate of water-cress sandwiches needed refilling. Those that liked to sing had gathered around the piano in the living room and, having done justice to all the familiar carols, were singing with gusto, "Seven for the seven stars in the sky and six for the six proud walkers. Five for the symbols at your door and four for the Gospel makers, Three, three, the rivals, Two, two, the lily-white boys, clothèd all in green-ho. One is one and all alone and evermore shall *be* so." And an overexcited little boy with a plastic spaceship was running up and down the hall and shouting "Blast off!"

The farewells at the elevator door were followed by a second round down below on the sidewalk while the doorman was blowing his whistle for cabs.

"Can we drop you?" Ellen Hunter called.

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"No. You're going downtown, and it would be out of your way," Celia Coleman said.

The Colemans walked two blocks north on Park and then east. The sidewalks of Manhattan were bare, the snow the weatherman promised having failed to come. There were no stars, and the night sky had a brownish cast. From a speaker placed over the doorway of a darkened storefront human voices sang "O Little Town of Bethlehem." The drugstore on the corner was brightly lighted but locked, with the iron grating pulled down and no customers inquiring about cosmetics at the cash register or standing in front of the revolving Timex display unable to make up their minds.

The Venetian-red door of the Colemans' house was level with the sidewalk and had a Christmas wreath on it. In an eerie fashion it swung open when Dan Coleman tried to fit his key in the lock.

"Did we forget to close it?" Celia said and he shook his head. The lock had been jimmied.

"I guess it's our turn," he said grimly as they walked in. At the foot of the stairs they stood still and listened. Nothing on the first floor was disturbed. There was even a silver spoon and a small silver tray on the dining-room sideboard. Looking at each other they half managed to believe that everything was all right; the burglars had been frightened by somebody coming down the street, or a squad car perhaps, and had cleared out without taking anything. But the house felt queer, not right somehow, not the way it usually felt, and they saw why when they got to the top of the first flight of stairs.

"Sweet Jesus!" he exclaimed softly, and she thought of her jewelry.

The shades were drawn to the sills, so that people on the sidewalk or in the apartments across the way could not see in the windows. One small detail caught his eye in the midst of the general destruction. A Limoges jar that held potpourri lay in fragments on the hearth and a faint odor of rose petals hung on the air.

With her heart beating faster than usual and her mouth as dry as cotton she said, "I can understand why they might want to look behind the pictures, but why walk on them?"

"Saves time," he said.

“And why break the lamps?”

“I don’t know,” he said. “I have never gone in for house-breaking.”

A cigarette had been placed at the edge of a tabletop, right next to an ashtray, and allowed to burn all the way down. The liquor cupboard was untouched. In the study, on that same floor at the back of the house, where the hi-fi, the tape deck, and the TV should have been there was a blank space. Rather than bother to unscrew the cable, the burglars had snipped it with wire cutters. All the books had been pulled from the shelves and lay in mounds on the floor.

“Evidently they are not readers,” he said, and picked up volume seven of *Hakluyt’s Voyages* and stood it on an empty shelf.

She tried to think of a reason for not going up the next flight to the bedrooms, to make the uncertainty last a little longer. Rather than leave her jewelry in the bank and never have the pleasure of wearing it, she had hidden it in a place that seemed to her very clever.

It was not clever enough. The star ruby ring, the cabochon emeralds, the gold bracelets, the moonstones, the garnet necklace that had been her father’s wedding present to her mother, the peridot-and-tourmaline pin that she found in an antique shop on a back street in Toulon, the diamond earrings—gone. All gone. Except for the things Dan had given her they were all inherited and irreplaceable, and so what would be the point of insuring them.

“In a way it’s a relief,” she said, in what sounded to her, though not to him, like her normal voice.

“Meaning?”

“Meaning that you can’t worry about possessions you no longer have.”

She opened the top right-hand drawer of her dressing table and saw that the junk jewelry was still there. As she pushed the drawer shut he said, “The standard procedure,” and took her in his arms.

The rest was also pretty much the standard procedure. Mattresses were pulled half off the beds and ripped open with a razor blade, drawers turned upside down, and his clothes closet completely empty, which meant his wardrobe now consisted of the dark-blue suit he had put on earlier this evening to go to

the Follansbees' Christmas party. Her dresses lay in a colored confusion that spilled out into the room from the floor of her walk-in closet. Boxes from the upper shelves had been pulled down and ransacked—boxes containing hats, evening purses, evening dresses she no longer had occasion to wear, since they seldom went out at night except to go to the theater or dine with friends.

When the police came she let him do the talking. Christmas Eve, Christmas Day were the prime moments for break-ins, they said. The house had probably been watched. They made a list of the more important things and suggested that Dan send them an inventory. They were pleasant and held out no hope. There were places they could watch, they said, to see if anything belonging to the Colemans turned up, but chances were that . . . When they left he put the back of a chair against the doorknob of the street door and started up the stairs.

From the stairs he could see into their bedroom. To his astonishment Celia had on an evening dress he hadn't seen for twenty years. Turning this way and that, she studied her reflection in the full-length mirror on the back of a closet door. Off the dress came, over her head, and she worked her way into a scarlet chiffon sheath that had a sooty footprint on it. Her hair had turned from dark brown to grey and when she woke up in the morning her back was as stiff as a board, but the dress fit her perfectly. While he stood there, watching, and unseen, she tried them on, one after another—the black taffeta with the bouffant skirt, the pale sea-green silk with bands of matching silk fringe—all her favorite dresses that she had been too fond of to take to a thrift shop, and that had been languishing on the top shelf of her closet. As she stepped back to consider critically the effect of a white silk evening suit, her high heels ground splinters of glass into the bedroom rug.

Its load lightened by a brief stop in the Bronx at a two-story warehouse that was filled from floor to ceiling with hi-fi sets and color TVs, the Chrysler sedan proceeded along the Bruckner Elevated Expressway to Route 95. When the car slowed down for the tollgate at the Connecticut state line, the sandy-haired recidivist, slouched down in the right-hand front seat,

opened his eyes. The false license plates aroused no interest whatever as the car came to a stop and then drove on.

In the middle of the night, the material witnesses to the breaking and entering communicated with one another, a remark at a time. A small spotlight up near the ceiling that was trained on an area over the living-room sofa said, *When I saw the pictures being ripped from the walls I was afraid. I thought I was going to go the same way.*

So fortunate, they were, the red stair-carpet said, and the stair-rail said, *Fortunate? How?*

The intruders were gone when they came home.

I had a good look at them, said the mirror over the lowboy in the downstairs hall. *They were not at all like the Colemans' friends or the delivery boys from Gristede's and the fish market.*

The Colemans' friends don't break in the front door, the Sheraton sideboard said. *They ring and then wait for somebody to come and open it.*

She will have my top refinished, said the table with the cigarette scar. *The number is in the telephone turnaround. She knows about that sort of thing and he doesn't. But it will take a while. And the room will look odd without me.*

It took a long time to make that star ruby, said a small seashell on the mantelpiece.

Precious stones you can buy, said the classified directory. *Van Cleef & Arpels. Harry Winston. And auctions at Christie's and Sotheby Parke Bernet. It is the Victorian and Edwardian settings that were unusual. I don't suppose the thieves will know enough to value them.*

They will be melted down, said the brass fire irons, *into unidentifiability. It happens every day.*

Antique jewelry too can be picked up at auction places. Still, it is disagreeable to lose things that have come down in the family. It isn't something one would choose to have happen.

There are lots of things one would not choose to have happen that do happen, said the fire irons.

With any unpleasantness, said the orange plastic Design Research kitchen wall clock, *it is better to take the long view.*

Very sensible of them to fall asleep the minute their heads hit

the pillow, said the full-length mirror in the master bedroom. Instead of turning and tossing and going over in their minds the things they have lost, that are gone forever.

They have each other, a small bottle of Elizabeth Arden perfume spray said. They will forget about what happened this evening. Or, if they remember, it will be something they have ceased to have much feeling about, a story they tell sometimes at dinner parties, when the subject of robberies comes up. He will tell how they walked home from the Follansbees' on Christmas night and found the front door ajar, and she will tell about the spoon and the silver tray the thieves didn't take, and he will tell how he stood on the stairs watching while she tried on all her favorite evening dresses.