

Aglow

by September Herrin

The Thompson family took to the mountains for the holidays to escape their small town's annual Christmas embarrassments: the tree lighting ceremony, caroling, photos with Santa in the town square.

It was a three-hour drive to the cabin and the family passed the time by mocking tacky motifs of lighted homes along the way.

When the family arrived at their destination the cabin windows were aglow.

"Who's here?" Son asked.

Mother looked to Father, a fear of the unknown reflected in her eyes.

"No one," said Father.

Father told his family to sit tight and stepped out of the car. Fresh snow covered the cabin roof and a small path had been shoveled leading toward the steps. Strings of flickering bulbs twisted along the porch railing.

Father turned the doorknob and stepped inside.

A man stood in the glow of multi-colored lights that were strung along the window frames and mantelpiece. He was the spitting image of Father.

"You've got air in your lungs, but you refuse to sing!" said Father's doppelganger.

Father's chest tightened.

"What I mean is," Other-Father leaned in closer. "Why are you here if not to celebrate?"

Father's last breath smelled of peppermint. A fire crackled in the hearth as Other-Father dragged the body into a closet and washed his hands in the bathroom pedestal sink.

Mother and Son's voices grew louder as they approached the front door.

"Merry Christmas!" said Other-Father, his arms open wide to greet his new family.

Twinkling lights spiraled up a noble fir in the center of the room. The tree sagged with shimmering tinsel that Father would've likened to the vomit of a deranged Christmas monster trapped in its branches.

Son's smile beamed as he beheld the sight of the tree, the star on top reflected in his eyes.