The snow fell heavily on the ground as the old man trudged onwards, wrapping his long hooded cloak around him to shut out the worst of the midwinter chill. The trees in the dark wood grew around him like a fence, walling him in from the outside world among the boughs. His feet left a trail blazed across the snow as he shuffled onwards, guided by the lamp hanging from his staff, the sputtering candle within casting a faint glow of pale yellow light on the ground.

The wind blew harder, sinking its icy teeth into him, threatening to tear his cloak from his shoulders. He shivered, and burrowed further into its warmth. As he did so, he felt the angles of the objects in his bulky sack dig into his spine, pressing upon him.

The nagging feeling only reminded him of his purpose.

It was very unlikely that anyone would be about at this time of night. And even more so on this day. Everyone would be in their homes by now, curled up in armchairs, or crouched beside a roaring log fire, their families close at hand, and food laid out on the table. They would feel calm, warm, safe at home.

He sighed, releasing a pale cloud of mist into the frigid air, which was soon billowed away by the wind and torn into nothingness. What he would give to live a life like theirs again.

But he still had a life. And he had a purpose. Something worth living for.

He found himself coming upon one of the houses. A small wooden hut, barely larger than a shed, its bare oak walls moist with rising damp. Snow hung upon its roof, ominously perched over the doorway, like a mischievous child waiting to drop from above onto unsuspecting passers-by.

He edged off the path leading up to the door. He didn’t want to leave any hints of his presence. It was all part of the game.

He shuffled towards the window as quietly as he dared, crouching low and tilting his staff so that the light would not show in the glass, which was already shimmering with some of Jack Frost’s artwork. He half expected to see a small signature, in spidery handwriting, scrawled upon the windowsill. He chuckled to himself. Still believing in fairies and Jack Frost, at his age.

He waited for a minute or two, crouched under the window, listening to the voices inside. From what he could hear, the whole family was gathered there. The
deepest voice, no doubt the father, was laughing and teasing, accompanied by the
delighted squeals of a higher voice: probably a baby or a young girl. A light pulsed
inside, most likely from a wood fire, as the hut was too shabby to have any gas lights.
Slowly, he raised his head, and peered through the frosted panes.

The inside of the house was made up of a few small rooms, with this one, the
sitting room, being the largest. A log fire blazed merrily in the simple stone grate, with a
large Saint Bernard lying almost in the flames, hogging the warmth as it dozed
contentedly. A large, heavyset man danced around the room with a young girl in his
arms, singing a song which made the girl squeal with laughter. To one side, the mother
stacked small platters and glazed pottery cups on a low table, helped by a young man
still in his work clothes, a freshly-plucked and roasted fowl nestled on a platter in his
arms. To the other side of the room, in a corner by the fireplace, a small fir tree stood
proudly, draped with clothes and glowing lanterns, and topped with a holly wreath that
cast jagged shadows on the wall with the fire’s light.

The man’s lined face broke into a wide smile beneath his chest-length beard,
white as fresh powder snow. It was such a heart-warming sight. For one night of the
year, in the depths of winter, all the family was gathered around the fire, putting their
troubles aside to enjoy a few hours of celebration and mirth with those who mattered the
most in the world.

As if a silent command had been given, the family sat around the table, pouring
mulled wine into their cups. The father stood up, raised his cup, and gave thanks for the
meal, before leading into a short prayer which ended with a call for everyone to tuck in,
which was loudly toasted and cheered.

While the family carved up the fowl and sang cheerfully for the joys of the day
and night, the old man crept back to the doorway of the house, swinging the large sack
from his shoulder. He rooted around in it for a moment, searching for something
specific, before pulling out four objects wrapped in individual white cloths and tied with
red string.

He laid them reverently on the doorstep, standing to one side of the doorway so
as to leave no tracks. A new hammer, a set of wooden kitchen utensils, a light wood
axe, and a wooden comb.

He looked up at the door, listening to the echoes of song and laughter from
within. He sighed once more as he shouldered his pack, picked up his staff, and shuffled
away towards the forest, stealing a look backwards once he reached the shelter of the
overhanging branches, before disappearing into the darkness of the woods in a swirl of snowflakes.

Some time later, the sack on his back was empty, and he turned for home, stowing the empty sack inside his cloak as he forged his way through the growing drifts of snow, the light from his lantern guiding him back.

His path took him out of the village, and back into the woods, towards a small, one-room hovel nestled deep in the forest, half-buried in the white banks of snow. He pushed the door open, almost falling over with the effort as the door swung on its rusty hinges. His faithful old Saint Bernard bounded off the bed and lollopped over to him, its tail wagging happily as he patted its head.

Closing the door, he shrugged off his cloak, took the lantern from the staff, and used the candle to light a small fire. The glow of the flames cast light upon a small room, with a bed and a wooden table as the only pieces of furniture. The floor around the table was covered with wood shavings, and a number of carving tools littered the table top.

He sat down on the bed, easing off his heavy boots, struggling with his lame leg as he let the boots clatter to the floor. The dog sat watching him expectantly, waiting for a tasty morsel of food, which the man soon produced.

While the dog happily chewed the few scraps of meat from the bone, the old man looked around his hut. He barely earned enough to feed himself and his faithful old mutt, with his woodwork and carvings. He only just managed to piece together enough to eat and keep his tools in good order: he couldn’t even find a fir tree for this night, let alone find any decorations for the tree if he got it indoors.

But he was happy. That was the most important thing. Every year, while he worked, he set about preparing his greatest achievement: building and designing things that the villagers needed the most for the next year. If someone wanted a new spade, he would chip a handle out of a tree and scrounge some iron for the head; if someone wanted an instrument, he would whittle out some branches to make a simple set of pan-pipes; and if someone wanted a carved image of a loved one, he would observe them, select his favourite pose, and carve an image in bark from memory. Then, at this time of year, every year, he would wander around in the dead of winter’s night, leaving his gifts on the doorsteps of the village while they feasted or slept, and would return home,
leaving them to happily enjoy their gifts and bless the kind, unknown person who had made them such wonderful items.

With this in mind, he turned to his bed. Underneath his limp pillow was a small bark carving. As he lifted it out, his eyes brimmed with tears. His fingers traced the outline of the woman’s face, forever frozen in time in the rough surface of the tree’s hard skin.

He sighed, his weak breath misting into milky spirals before his eyes. The simple fire’s warmth would soon fill the hovel, but it never seemed to be enough to rekindle the glow that had once dwelt in his heart.

The dog looked up from the fireplace, its ears springing to attention. Its jowls quivered as it sniffed the air. Its eyes locked onto the door. Curious about the mutt’s sudden interest in the door, he glanced up.

The door seemed ordinary enough: a few planks of wood bound and glued together, and bolted into the framework to make an entryway. He scratched his mane of thinning white hair, wondering what could have made the dog perk up.

Heaving himself to his feet, he hobbled over to the door, the dog strolling beside him and almost tripping him up again. He paused for a moment before opening the door, uncertain of who, or what, could be outside at this time of night. Surely everyone would be at home with their families now, tucking into a well-earned festive dinner –

The door opened out onto nothing. The snowflakes tumbled in the dark air, crystalline fragments of the clouds as they signaled the arrival of a new storm for the night.

He peered from left to right, bemused, running a hand through his long beard. Maybe the dog was jumping at shadows. It was getting on a little, but it wasn’t old enough to become senile. Perhaps the wind had rubbed it the wrong way. He made to close the door, to keep the fire’s building heat in.

His eyes widened as he caught sight of the objects lying on his doorstep. Lying nestled in the gathering snow, three bundles, wrapped with red ribbons. A large fowl, plucked and ready for roasting. A sturdy wooden crutch. A set of new wood-carving tools.

His mouth fell open, and he gave a small sob of wonder. He fell to his knees, the dog bounding around him, its tail wagging as it sniffed at the fowl. Tears of unbridled joy flowed freely from his eyes as he saw a trail of footprints leading away into the dark forest, already being wiped away by the snow settling silently on the frozen ground.