

The Yule House

a tale of the season
for friends and family

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I'm not sure whether this is a proper story. It might be more of a legend; it might only be a rumor. I can only ask you to listen with an open mind. If, when I'm done, it feels true to you, well then.... it is.

Many years ago, in a time before engines and electronics, a hunter found himself in a part of the forest he had never visited before. In those days, the world was filled with places no one had ever seen, and this forest, vast as an ocean, was no different. Yet the hunter was not especially worried by the strangeness of the place, for he knew all of the tricks for finding the path home. No, what worried him was the absence of tracks or sign of any game, for he had vowed not to return home empty handed. The Winter Festival was nigh-- a time his people called "Yul" -- and he had promised his wife and children a feast to remember. Many times in the past year he had felt the stab of helplessness as his son and daughter cried in hunger, and he had suffered behind a mask of strength as he and his wife chose to forgo their own meals to give a bit more to their children. He loved them with all his heart, and could hardly bear the times he had brought too little to their table, but no matter how he yearned to provide, the world often had plans of its own. Desperate to change their luck, he had promised to bring them a Yul feast for the ages--yet here he was, with neither deer nor fowl nor even a single scrawny rabbit to fetch home!

As he puzzled over whether he should travel deeper still into the forest, he thought he saw a glint of light through the trees. As quickly as he had seen it, it was gone... but he moved carefully toward the direction from which he'd glimpsed it, and it came again, less bright than sunshine but more than the cold gleam of ice or polished stone. He walked more steadily now, and began to make out the frame of a house; no mere cottage like the one in which he and his family lived, but a large and impressive place of stone and timbers, with real glass in the windows. As he approached, he could see through that same glass the light which had caught his eye, and he gasped. Within the house was a dazzling array of candles, more than he could count, all shining with a soft and steady light--tall candles and short ones, slim and fat, as though the house held its own forest of brightly dancing beacons.

The hunter moved closer, borne upon the current of curiosity, but then stopped short. Such a house could only belong to a very wealthy person, and he knew that the rich were not like the rest of us. He might very well be apprehended as a trespasser, and dragged to some cell, to spend all of Yul as a prisoner. Thus he stood, poised upon the edge of discovery, peering at the house, until he noticed that it had no front door.... no, that wasn't correct, there! There was the door, but only in profile for it stood fully open to the forest.

To him.

A sense of welcome settled comfortably over his earlier doubts, warming them to vapor, and he quickly closed the distance until he stood on the threshold of the open door. Above him, carved into the lintel, he saw no family name, only the word "YUL." He walked into the house of light, and was quickly aware of an ease flowing into him, and not just ease but a flicker of that feeling from his own boyhood when entering the season of Yul, a feeling of excitement. He was

thoroughly, unaccountably happy, and he could feel upon his face a smile as broad as any he'd ever worn.

“Hello?” he called out, but no answer came. Surely the house could not be empty! It was too large, too grand, and someone must have lit these countless candles! And there must be a fireplace near, for he felt as warm as summer. “Hello!” he called again, moving from the entryway into a great room where yes, there it was, an enormous fireplace crackling merrily, its hearth decorated with the traditional Yul berries and bright green leaves. Still, he saw no other person, only chairs which looked so comfortable he feared to sit in them, knowing he would almost surely lose himself in slumber. In one corner was a gaming board, set with all the stones for a game of Hinds and Hares; in another, a lute and a deer's harp, their wood polished, their strings shiny. Though he was no musician, he knew that if he lifted them, they would be in perfect tune, might even play themselves, of their own accord!

The Hunter moved from room to room, and in each chamber there was warmth and light and the comforts of a home made ready for holiday. He thought more than once about the simple word on the entranceway, and felt that yes indeed, this house was the very essence of Yul... but he also felt the tug of his own home, growing ever stronger. He could sense how easy it would be to relax here and to stay here, but he feared that if he tarried any longer, he might never leave. He still had a feast to provide, or at least the effort to make.

As he turned to make his way out, he nearly stumbled over a large sack he was certain had not been there before. He lifted it cautiously—heavy, but manageable. He opened it to peer inside, and his eyes widened at this newest wonder; there in the sack were the makings of the finest Yul feast anyone could have imagined. Haunches of venison, dressed and seasoned; smaller sacks of every kind of nut and berry; wax-sealed crocks whose scents promised all manners of jellied fruits. There was a salt-cloth holding a large filet of salmon, and two loaves of bread, doubtless buttery and soft beneath their hard crusts. There was a small wheel of fragrant cheese, and a wineskin that no doubt held the finest vintage he would ever taste.

He looked around, knowing he'd see no one, yet needing to be heard. “I thank you! My family thanks you!” he called, and he was not entirely surprised to feel tears on his cheeks. He knew not the source of this goodness, but he felt he might be the luckiest man in the world, however his luck had come about. Lifting the sack with care, and settling it over his shoulder, he made his way out, and before he knew it, he was home.

In the days which followed, the hunter struggled to explain what he had seen and felt. His wife knew the difference between fresh-caught game and carefully prepared meats and cheeses, so she knew that their bounty had come from somewhere other than a glade or a glen. She knew further that her husband was a good man, and not prone to fancies. But this?

He tried many times to find the house again, not only to prove himself but because he wished to thank its owner for their generosity. His investigations became something of an obsession, as though with a twenty-point stag glimpsed but once upon a distant ridge. But wanting doesn't

always lead to satisfaction, and the hunter realized, over time, that he might never see the place again. Occasionally, when in good and trusted company, he might ask his fellows whether they'd ever seen or heard of such a house in their own travels, but none had. The queries cost him nothing, for these were still the days of occasional magic and miracles; all who heard him understood at once that the hunter was one of the few who brushed inexplicable fortune.

One day, when he was in the village having a new latch smithed for his door, an old man he'd not met before drew closer to the smith's forge. "I heard your tale in the inn when last you came to town."

"My tale?" asked the hunter.

The old man nodded. "You've been a guest of the Yul house."

The hunter's eyes widened. "You've seen it?"

"No, no, never I, never I," cackled the old man, and then his eyes narrowed. "But if you'll stand old Rink a pint of ale, I'll tell you what I can of the place."

The hunter looked at the smith, who was smiling but who indicated with a twitch of his head that there ample time. "Well then, Rink," said the hunter, rising to his feet, "follow me to yonder inn, and I'll hear your tale, and happily, too."

Here is what Rink said, between thirsty gulps:

"The Yul house isn't a place exactly, and that be why ye canna find it twice. Tis more an idea, a wish made real, a dream brough ooo for a night, or a day, when comes a man with ready heart."

Rink went on to explain that he had heard similar tales eight or ten times in his long life, certainly no more than a dozen, but enough to rule out madness or confusion as the tale's source. There were, in each of his hearings, things in common: Each featured someone who, in a wilderness of forest, or of marshland, or of arid, barren wastes, begins to feel they have lost their way, but this lostness is never the thing that most concerns them... for in every version, one thing stands above all the others: The teller of the tale had lost their way while in search of something they hoped to give to others, something they were entirely devoted to finding so as to make a loving gift of it.

Each of them, said Rink with a satisfied smile, came upon a house.

It was a house unknown to them, a house they had never seen before and would never see again. The house found by each teller was different. Some were vast, some were cozy; some, stone, others, wood. One was filled, floor to ceiling in every room, with books of every description, picture books and great novels that the guest felt he had surely heard of but he couldn't quite

remember where. Another was filled with toys, and not mere dolls or wooden blocks, but complex things that could move and change their shapes and follow a person about.

In one of the houses, its guest heard music, a different tune in every room, but without any sign of musician nor of instrument. In another, there was laughter; great, merry laughter of the sort that's heard after the very best and most startling of jokes. That guest felt very keenly that he was just as the edge of hearing whatever had provoked the laughter, and though he never quite heard it, he found the laughter so infectious that he laughed too, laughed until he couldn't breathe, until he couldn't stand... and although it sounds odd, perhaps you'll understand what he meant when he said the laughter he'd heard seemed to throw its arms around him, and hold him up, and welcome him as a long lost brother in merriment.

There seemed to be no end to the variety of the houses, but they all shared two things. The first was that at some point during their visit, every guest had felt that they'd best be making their way home, and it was at this moment that each of them found themselves in possession of the exact thing they'd set out to find for a loved one or loved ones—a box of a dozen delicate carvings for a man who'd hoped to find the wood and the time to carve a single bear, or a splendid fur for the woman whose child was always cold. In one house, the guest heard an eager bark, and turned to discover a young dog who was, without question, smiling, and who followed him back to his home, where he became the best friend of the guest's children, acting as their protector and playmate until they were grown.

The second thing in common? Every house had, over its entryway, the simple carving: YUL.

“Tis why I bear it the Yul House, and always found at Yul Time, too,” said Rink.

They drained their mugs, and the hunter left a coin of thanks for old Link, then made his way out, smiling, as though he'd found a long lost friend. For stories can be friends, when we welcome them.

The Hunter was always eager to hear any tale of the Yul House (which, in time, grew an “e,” becoming the Yule House in some of the later tales he heard.) I sat at the edge of one such telling myself, when I was only a lad of seven years, and I've sought my own stories of the place ever since. I've heard of a Yule House at sea, shining a guiding light toward a forsaken fishing vessel and guiding its lone remaining sailor to safety. I've heard of one with a bag of seed in its center for the farmer who'd ventured into it, and those seeds bore crops of such abundance that the entire valley was fed the following winter, through a famine others felt keenly.

Some of the stories felt impossible, but was there anything about the house that felt otherwise? There was the bard who lost his words, and mourned to never again bring pleasure to listeners, but who found inside his Yule House a bird which sat upon his shoulder and, when any song was begun, softly sang its next phrase into his ear. There was the mirror found by a father who brought it home to his pox-scarred daughter; in it, she saw only beauty (and 'twas no trick, for her beauty had never been lost, but only set aside to make room for grief.) There were houses

that provided a courage cap for a frightened son, and a bracelet that banished aches for a poor arthritic mother. There was even a memory lamp, for the aging father whose past was fading like frost from a window until the lamp was lit, then all came flooding back.

I? I have never found the Yule House, but it hasn't been for want of seeking. At any moment I can list ten things I'd like very much to be able to give to friends and family, and on my long walks, those people are never far from my thoughts, but my path never feels unfamiliar, and I return home only with the stories of others.

But I feel lucky even to have heard the tales... and isn't the searching as pleasant as the finding? Tonight, when I put down my pen, I shall bundle up tightly and walk once more into the woods, breathing the quiet and watching for the telltale gleam of candles or stars that cannot be explained. I may never find my Yule House, but on the other hand, perhaps I have found it already.

Perhaps it is you.

The happiness of Yule to you, and may we all be each other's gifts.