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TRAM DRIVER HANS WAGNER HAD VOLUNTEERED TO WORK ON CHRISTMAS EVE even though Charlotte had bombarded him with accusations. "That's great!" she had cried. "I get to feed the whole family and *you* just swan off!"

It was dark already. Wagner crouched in his cab, wondering why families gathered together on Christmas Eve when they knew it would end in an argument. Ilse, his sister-in-law, had made a few cutting remarks about tram drivers' pay the moment she had arrived, and bragged about her Caribbean cruise, while his mother-in-law had snarled at him, "Well, *they* can afford that sort of thing."

He'd have loved to have treated Charlotte to a cruise. The three children brought her more than her fair share of stress. But grade 16 wages only just brought him enough for the pressure cooker she had asked for.

Wagner peered into the rear-view mirror. Ever since the last-minute rush at around 5pm, the city had been virtually deserted. The first Christmas trees were being lit in the suburbs. His tram was almost empty.

All that remained was the old man in the fur-collared coat on the back row who was already on his third circuit.

Max Gut kept checking the small mobile telephone that he had treated himself to six months earlier. He had given both of his sons the number. But apart from the time one of them had needed a signature to sell some land, the phone had never rung. This year, Patrick had warned him that he'd be skiing over Christmas and his brother would be accompanying him.

At the end of the line, the tram rattled into the reversing loop. Max Gut remained seated. Suddenly he found the driver standing next to him. "Happy Christmas," the driver said. "I guess you're alone." Hans Wagner was used to people who got on but didn't get off again. Most of them were just lonely. He sat down next to his passenger on the two-seater bench, unscrewed the lid of his thermos of coffee and passed Gut a piece of Christmas cake. "From my wife. She makes the very best."

"It isn't good to be alone," Gut whispered. "Especially on Christmas Eve."

"You can have a family and yet still be alone," Wagner replied. He told his passenger about the tensions at home. "I'd like to go on holiday with my wife once. Just the two of us." Wagner sighed. "That's virtually impossible with three kids. I occasionally do overtime or take on shifts that my colleagues don't want, like tonight. That's how I make ends meet." He laughed bitterly. "But there's not enough for extras, and that hurts. I'd love to be able to give my wife something special to show her how much she means to me."

Max Gut looked at the tram driver and smiled. "She has the best present of all," he said. "Someone who loves her dearly."

At one in the morning, the last tour and Wagner's shift came to an end. Gut said goodbye to the tram driver and handed him an envelope. They were now on first-name terms.

Wagner shook the old man's hand. "You'll come for dinner tomorrow night, won't you? We're having leftovers. Lotti is a whiz with leftovers!"

When Wagner got home, his wife was clearing up the living room. "How was it?" he asked, throwing his tram driver's cap towards the cupboard.

"Same as always," she replied. "Ilse gave me a suitcase. What do I want with a suitcase?" She put the remaining glasses onto a tray and picked it up.

Wagner took the tray out of her hands. "For once, Ilse has had a wonderful idea," he said. "Why don't we go away?" Charlotte managed a bitter laugh. "What with?" He hugged her. "That's my little surprise. Let's just call it something to go in the pressure cooker." She looked stunned as she saw the contents of the envelope he held out: three purple banknotes. "But Hans ... Hans ... That's ... Where did you get these from?" Hans Wagner stroked his wife's hair. "Miracles sometimes happen at Christmas. Believe it or not, Father Christmas was sitting

on the number 6 tram today."

Max Gut was feeling satisfied, almost happy, when he got home. It was a nice feeling bringing people joy. After all, wasn't *that* the idea behind Christmas?

He heard the phone ringing as he reached his front door. He quickly opened it. "Where have you been? We must have called you a hundred times! We were really worried!" It was his two sons calling excitedly down the phone. "We even tried to reach you on your mobile."

Max Gut felt a lump in his throat. He took the mobile phone out of his pocket. It was switched off. "I was sitting on the tram," he whispered. "ON THE TRAM?! And you haven't even commented on our surprise!" they shouted accusingly. "Didn't you get the express letter?"

Express letter? Max Gut had ignored the red note on his letterbox, convinced that it must have been a mistake. Who'd send him an express letter?

"There's a train ticket inside. We'll pick you up in Davos tomorrow and ... What's wrong, Dad?"

Max Gut wiped the tears away. "I'm OK. But you should enjoy your skiing holiday too. I'll gladly come, but I'll bring along a couple I recently met. The husband is a bit like the Father Christmas of the number 6 tram."

## A Christmas Journey

BY -MINU

