

Fellowship & Fairydust



Festive Fandoms

A COLLECTION OF
STORIES, ARTICLES,
POETRY & ARTWORK



Table of CONTENTS

05. The Snow Queen's Lament
by Mike Flynn

07. Christmas in Sherwood
by Jo Sexton

10. A Purr-fect Christmas
by Lila Tulip

17. Light from Heaven
by Avellina Balestri

24. Did You Know at Christmas?
by Mark Wilson

27. A Walk Through the Winter Stones
by Raymond E. Lipinski

34. Sincerely, the White Witch
by Hannah Skipper

35. The Turning of the World
by Lawrence Hall

36. Brigid at Christmas Time
by Kenneth McIntosh

41. I Want Adventure
by Amanda Pizzolatto

42. Feasting and Fasting: Christmastide
in Medieval England
by T.J. Guile

48. The Travelling Troubadour's
Winter Collage

51. Legend of the Christmas Fae
by Arian Niwl

52. Every Christmas Eve
by BellatrixtheStar

54. The Eve Before the Feast
by Naomi Mottram

55. The Lantern and the Lamb
by Keren Dibbens-Wyatt

57. Father Christmas - The Curse is Broken
by Dean Maxwell

63. The Present
by Leah Fisher

67. Christmas 1836 - A Sweeney Todd Story
by Shila Tozier

70. Reflections on Home Alone at 30
by Wesley Hutchins

74. Original Art
by Mike Flynn

75. It's a Wonderful Life: Defending Eucatastrophe
by Edwin Woodruff Tait

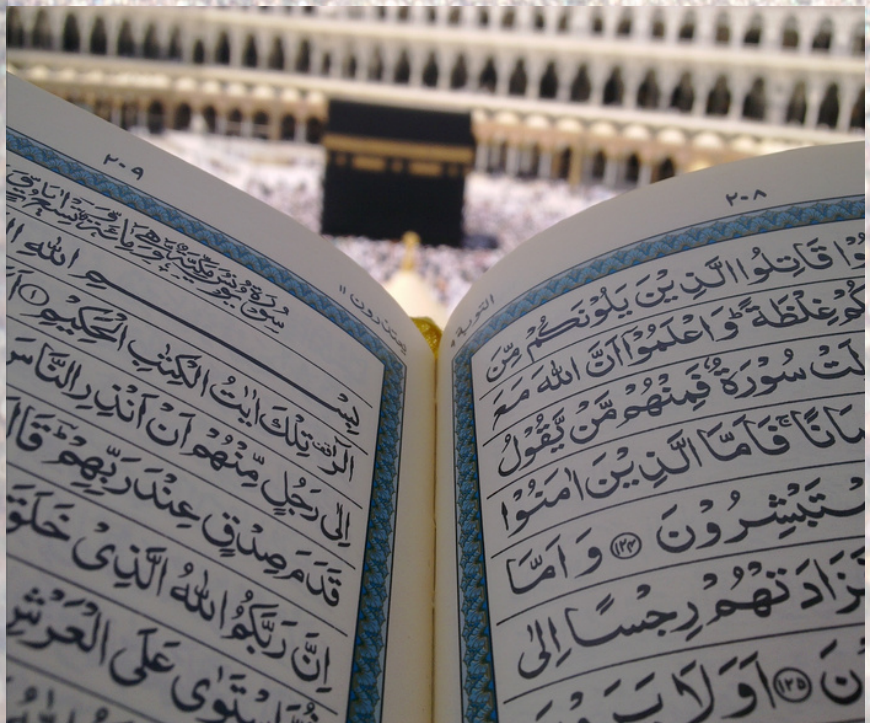
78. Star Wars Trivia

79. Salaam, Maryam
by Adeel Ahmed

89. The Islamic Perspective of The Virgin Mary and Jesus the Messiah
by Syeda Kausar

91. Eternity Begun a Meditation of the Trinity.
by Sean Earner

98. Spot the Difference Answers



Editor's Note

The past year has been challenging for everyone, as effects of Covid-19 are felt throughout the world, and we at F&F have been affected in ways great and small. From being sheltered at home to contracting the coronavirus itself to knowing people who have perished from it, we have all found ourselves struggling to make sense of and adapt to the realities of pandemic life. We have done our best to keep a stiff upper lip and hold our heads high, even while wearing masks and armed with Lysol.

Nonetheless, our creative endeavors have continued apace, and we have committed ourselves to maintaining the quality production that you, our loyal readers, have come to expect. It has helped to give us a sense of focus and purpose when coping with the roller coaster of not just the pandemic, but other seismic events on the socio-political scale which captured our collective attention (and of course, we can't forget the Bernie memes!). Together, we have weathered the course and kept each other strong.

As the end of the year approached, we began a process of transition which resulted in the departure of our hard-working and diligent No. 2 and No. 3 in command, the sister-and-brother duo of Beth and Mike Amos. During their time on staff, they contributed mightily to steering our vessel through choppy waters with improvements in organization and processes which have strengthened F&F and prepared it for future success. We wish them all the best as they embark upon other projects going forward.

Stepping up as second-in-command is Wesley Hutchins from deep south of Georgia. He has been a long-time staff member going back to the pre-merger days of The Fellowship of the King magazine and continuing to serve in technical and organizational roles post-merger. With his savvy astuteness, he will build upon the success made possible by Beth and Mike, while making the role of Managing Editor of this illustrious publication his own.

Additionally, as third-in-command, Byrnwiga from the wild north of Canada has stepped up as Associate Editor. He also has been a veteran of the staff, going all the way back to the earliest incarnation of Expressions magazine, before the name was changed to The Fellowship of The King. Over the years, he has served in various capacities, including cover design, technical support, and cyber security, and we look forward to working with him in his new role.

As Assistant Editor and Administrator of our Facebook Community, we have recruited Sean Earner to serve as the fourth member of our "top tier" of the staff. With a background in Latin language teaching and a penchant for classical philosophy, he brings a touch of erudite panache to our online parlor. Breaking up thread stramashes and speaking on our behalf with a good dram of Irish-American diplomacy, we look forward to his contributions to manning the tiller of this editorial ship of state.

These changes to the staff have understandably taken everyone a little while to get used to, with regards to picking up tasks and managing systems. As a result, this very issue entitled "Festive Fandoms" is only now getting out for mid-winter, even though it had originally been planned to be released for the Christmas season. However, all is not lost, for we consider this very much a "best of winter" issue, with some of our brightest articles, stories, and poems relating to the season, not just with fandoms, but through other expressions. We are especially thankful to Jo Sexton for her expeditious and stalwart work in leading the graphics team to diligently thread this issue together.


With this year of 2021 now underway, we are all very hopeful that it shall give way to new opportunities for all of us, and this issue may serve to bring us a little bit of cheer and optimism to see us through to new horizons. Blesses and Best Wishes to you all!

AVELLINA BALESTRI, EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

WESLEY HUTCHINS, MANAGING EDITOR

The Snow Queen's Lament

By Mike Flynn



I see the world as cold and clear
as my fellow seasons fall away.
A world of ice, snow, and frost
that blankets the world with crisp white.

The others do not understand
the beauty within my crystal world.

All they see is ice cold death,
where life is gone and nothing stirs.
But death is wrong, they only sleep,
recharging, waiting to emerge again;
snug and warm in their burrows and nests.

It's nature's cycle, strong and true,
to usher in a new dawn.

My season brings such joy and fun,
with children playing in the snow.

Families gather around hearth and flame,
singing songs to pass the time.

Decorations are hung, bringing warmth and cheer,
offset nicely by snow's white pallor,
which would be lost in Spring or Summer's bloom.

Families huddle in their homes,
warming themselves after a cold winter's day.

Decorative sculptures of snow and ice
line the streets, bringing joy.

Candles are lit and fires stoked,
shedding their warm glow across the snow,
reflected by a million crystals;

brightening, inviting, breaking up the dark.


Icicles hang from every eave like diamond decorations.


Lakes shine like mirrors, hard and stunning,
just waiting for skaters to begin their dance.

So many simple activities bringing such joy.

My sister seasons see only cold and death,
they wish that Winter would never come.

They view their seasons as full of life,
killed each passing year by my snows.





**But snow does not kill, it blankets and protects;
plants, trees, and bulbs all warmly nestled below.**

**They are tired after a year of work;
do they not deserve time to sleep as well?**

**I live alone, atop my mountain,
separated and shunned by those I love;
cold and snow my only companions.**

**All see Winter as a cruel mistress,
even my sister seasons think me cold.**

**I let the ice numb my heart,
take away the hurt and pain.**

**If only they could see my season properly,
see that my work is as vital as theirs.**

**Without me, many plants would not grow,
trees would fall ill and die,**

**animals would lose all purpose,
families would not find time to be close,
and the other seasons would not be appreciated.**

**Without cold, the world would be changed,
the cycle broken and balance upset.**

**It makes me sad to be seen as evil,
to be shunned and outcast to my frozen lands,
where Winter never sleeps, and snow is eternal.**

**I find solace in my unchanged world,
where the scorn of the other seasons cannot touch me.**

**As the years go by, the hurt fades;
ice numbing my heart and cooling my sorrow.**

I look forward to my season's time.

If my sisters hate my work then so be it.

My work is necessary. My work is true.

Without me, life would destroy itself.

Without my cold, the earth would scorch.

Without my snow, people would not thrive.

Without my ice, there would be no joy.


I know what must be done;

Winter should control all seasons.

Winter should rule all, and save life from itself.

**Winter should be the only season,
and I its Queen.**

I am the Snow Queen!



Christmas in Sherwood

By Jo Sexton



It was Christmas Eve in Sherwood Forest, and the greenwood sparkled with frost, caught in the tight grip of winter. Much was keen to decorate the outlaw camp in a seasonal fashion, and celebrate the Yuletide in the traditional way.


Allan A Dale scoffed at his attempts to string pretty baubles across the bed frames and pin holly and mistletoe overhead.

“Mistletoe?! I certainly won’t be kissing any of you,” he scoffed, but watched with interest as the area was enveloped in Christmas cheer.

Djaq, who, as a Saracen and a Muslim, did not celebrate Christmas, was nevertheless buoyed up by Much’s enthusiasm, and readily assisted him in prettifying the camp, laughing and joking with him as they worked.

Will Scarlett, never far from Djaq, joined in, recalling days at home as a child, when his father had built wooden toys for him and his brother, Luke, and his mother, God rest her soul, had cooked them a full goose, which had lasted them well into the new year.

Little John, having spent many a Christmas as an outlaw in the forest, became nostalgic as he thought of his son, Little Little John, who had moved away with his mother, Alice, to start a new life elsewhere. Christmas, for Little John, was a time for families, and he missed his wife and child with all his heart. But he had made his choice, and these people here, in the camp, were his family now. He gladly assisted with the frivolities, and even procured a goose from Clun, which Allan had named Godfrey, and who liked to sleep on Much’s bed. Little John was becoming doubtful that the bird would ever make it into their stomach’s on Christmas Day, as Much was already quite attached to it, but the sentiment was there, and the bird was actually very amusing.



Robin Hood sat back and watched his gang, revelling in their camaraderie and gentle bickering. He loved these people; his family. But there would be someone missing from his Christmas this year; someone special.


His Christmas wish was quite simple; that Marian, his love, would come to the forest and live with him in the camp. It would be the greatest gift of all, to wake on Christmas morning with her in his arms. But she would not leave her father, and he understood that. Sir Edward was not getting any younger, and it had been just him and Marian for so many years. Robin understood her loyalty to her father, yet he couldn't help but feel a touch wounded. Would she ever put him first? Or would he always be second best in her eyes? Pushing it to the back of his mind, he left his bunk and threw himself into the celebrations, if only to take his mind off his woes. He had his friends, after all, and it was more than some could ask for.


They spent the rest of the day handing out money and gifts of food to the surrounding villages, riches they had taken from the deliveries that passed through the forest on a daily basis, heading for Nottingham Castle. The Sheriff could afford to replace the spoils; the villagers would go without this Christmas, as he continued to raise their taxes, if it wasn't for Robin and his outlaw gang. The true meaning of Christmas, to Robin, was in the giving, and it warmed his heart to see the smiles on the faces of the peasants as they accepted their gifts and realised that their Christmas may not be as empty as they had expected.

The villagers gave their own gifts where possible, for they truly appreciated Robin's efforts on their behalf. Bread rolls and cheese from Nettlestone, two flagons of cider from Clun, and a brace of rabbits from Locksley. Godfrey, who had made himself at home in the camp, had been saved, with the promise of rabbit for Christmas instead.

Christmas Day dawned crisp and bright. The sky held a pinkish tinge with the promise of snow later that day. The outlaws were up early, excited for the day ahead.

Robin lay in his bed with his eyes squeezed shut, trying to cling on to the last remnants of sleep, but it was no use. He let out a sigh and allowed his mind to wander. He imagined Christmas at Knighton Hall. Sir Edward





always displayed a magnificently decorated tree, and had the cook prepare enough food for a large family. Robin would not be welcome there on such a day, not now that he had been outlawed. It wasn't fair to put the Knighton's at risk of recriminations from the Sheriff, just because Robin wanted to see Marian. With another sigh, he swung his legs out of bed and pulled on his boots, then went to join his gang.

"Merry Christmas, Master," Much sang out in greeting, and the rest followed suit, even Allan, who was the most cynical, and Djaq, who was only celebrating on the gang's behalf.

"We got you something," Will said, and handed Robin a beautifully crafted recurve bow, fashioned from yew, and a quiver full of arrows adorned with fletching made from goose feather. Godfrey had come in useful, after all.

"Thanks, lads," Robin said, pleased, and smiled around at his friends. Allan thrust a mug of cider into his hand and clapped him on the back.


"And there is another gift," Djaq said, with a small smile. Robin looked at her, questioningly, but the outlaws were all focused on something behind him. He heard movement at his left shoulder and two hands covered his eyes, soft against his skin.

"Happy Christmas, my love," a familiar voice whispered, and he turned to see Marian, resplendent in a red dress and the beautiful, embroidered cloak that he had gifted her, with the wolf-fur trimming.

"Marian!" Overjoyed, he threw his arms around her waist and lifted her, spinning her around. She laughed, delightedly.

"I can stay for a few hours until midday, and then my father is expecting me home," she said, her eyes sparkling. "I couldn't celebrate Christmas without seeing you." Holding her in his arms, surrounded by his closest friends, Robin couldn't imagine a happier Christmas. As Little John pushed another mug of cider into Marian's free hand - the other was tucked tightly around Robin's waist - Robin felt a huge, satisfied smile split his face in two. He raised his mug and cleared his throat.

"Happy Christmas, one and all," he said, loud and clear, and, as the gang raised their own mugs and echoed his sentiments, the snow began to fall, covering the forest around them, gradually transforming it into their very own winter wonderland.





A Purr-fect Christmas

By Lila Tulip

The delicate tinkling noise drew Kotek from his doze by the fire. Opening his eyes, he gazed curiously in the direction of the intriguing sound. His ears twitched as the tinkling was joined by the laughter of his new family.

Raising his head from the comfortable bed he was lying on (consisting of blankets and a dressing gown he had claimed), he watched as the two adults and two children entered the living room. The little girl ran to him with a cry of delight, her strange human kitten talk a rather bemusing, if sweet, tirade of love.

He agreeably responded by allowing her to stroke his head. Then he rose regally, if stiffly, and padded over to inspect proceedings.

He had noticed how, during the last few suns and moons, the family had become increasingly excited, with the delicious smell of food filling the house, and oh yesterday! This fantastic tree had arrived, the scent of fresh greenery vibrant and encouraging amidst this winter world, where he could sense the earth lying still and peaceful beneath his paws, with plants waiting to flourish once more and the sun to transform from pale cold yellow to bright golden warmth.

The tickling scent of the tree's sharp needle-like leaves was invigorating, making him desirous to run and leap about like a foolish kitten.

The boy and girl chattered away as the parents began showing him the colourful objects which tinkled against each other or glittered attractively in the firelight. He batted a couple to much mirth and observed avidly as they were gifted to the tree. He particularly loved the beautiful miniature angel which was placed on top of the tree. A shimmer seemed to exist around the angel, beautiful in how it resembled a rainbow. Fascinated and curious as to why this angel possessed this shimmer, Kotek looked at his family but they were oblivious.

Typical humans.

Instead, the parents were sending the children off to play while they entered the kitchen. Ah, now maybe he would be allowed some treats. Stretching, Kotek rose from his crouch to abruptly pause. What was that funny-looking house nestled under the tree?

Nosing at it, Kotek realised it was a little similar to the stables he used to visit on the farm he once lived upon.

Figures filled the stable, a human woman with a baby. A man stood beside them with his head bent - her mate, Kotek supposed. Animals were also present: a donkey and horses and a peculiar horse with a lump on its back.

Odder yet were the three men kneeling before the mother and child. One had a box full of yellow objects, another two bore jars. A shiver ran down his back as he contemplated the peculiar scene. His stables never had such an event play out! Yet...like the angel, the image conjured a presence of peace and joy.

Almost as if they were calling upon memories of events long ago and breathing life into them and the present. Pulling away, Kotek emerged from under the tree and shook out his coat. Licking his fur back in order, Kotek listened to the children watching their shows and playing their games. They were safe and well.

More importantly the sensation of a presence was not evil, but good.

Still, best to explore the matter more deeply. Just as he intended to enter the kitchen, the doorbell rang and the mother – his human mother, as Kotek called the lady – ran to answer. He followed and meowed loudly, (for humans were quite oblivious to normal cat interaction).

A group of humans - adults and children - had arrived. He recognised them and especially loved Wujek (Uncle) Jozef and Babcia Jadwiga (known mostly as 'Babi'). They offered him chewy biscuits and a warm lap respectively, with Babi always filling him on what was happening. He liked being kept informed and the grandmother always treated him seriously as a member of the household who ought to know the latest news.

Thus, he had gained his informant, so after twining about her legs, led her to the kitchen where he could have a translation of what special party appeared to be in the process of being prepared.

Fish and vegetables were the primary smells in the kitchen, with a rather noticeable absence of meat – an appalling situation, in Kotek’s opinion. However, the quiet call of Babi had him looking up at her and, following her gesture, he leapt onto the proffered seat. There, he sat upright on the cushion, absorbing the busy goings-on of his family. The glittery tinsel was everywhere now, hemming the window sills and adorning the backs of the chairs.

It shone prettily in the kitchen lights, but, for once, Kotek ignored the compelling distraction and focused on one of his favourite humans laying the table. The gnarled hands which stroked his fur so beautifully, were placing straw on the table! Astonished, Kotek meowed inquisitively.

Bright brown eyes met his from behind those shiny glasses his human grandmother wore. Her voice was cracked with age, yet full of a tenderness and sagemess Kotek appreciated in his own venerable state of life.

“Kochany Kotek, you must be quite surprised by my actions. Do not fret, we have not turned mad!” Kotek cocked his head, indicating Babi was being quite silly. Of course, he didn’t think she was mad. His human mother and father on the other hand...loving parents, but a bit silly with their love and actions, which he adored but naturally would never admit to, despite the many belly rubs he permitted or how close he must be to them at all times – he had his cat dignity, after all!

His Babi chuckled and continued speaking as she ensured the straw was spread in a thin, even layer over the polished wood table. “Today is a special day, Kotek. We celebrate the birth of God, through a maiden called Mary. She gave birth to a little boy called Jesus in a manger – a stable, similar to the ones on your farm. The straw is a reminder of the straw in the stable.”

Kotek considered this information and recalled the strange stable nestled under the tree. How curious! So, this human woman gave birth to this ‘Jesus’ and he was their God? Perhaps this presence of peace and joy was a memory of this event?

He wondered if there were spirits close by, for animals could see the spirits of birds and beasts, of humans and other beings while most humans appeared to be ignorant to this immaterial world. Glancing about, Kotek noticed that his human mother was placing a pot on the stove and filling it with a red liquid.

He recognised it as barszcz, a beetroot soup. He preferred the more pungent aroma of the mushroom soup already cooking on the stove and sniffed his disapproval

at the horrid soup that had stained his mother's hands red, frightening him soundly until he realised, after a cuddle, his human mother was alive and healthy.

His human mother caught his expression and came over to deposit a kiss on his head. Whiskers twitching at the reassurance, Kotek tapped her nose with a velvet paw, claws carefully retracted. Once his human mother's attention was on him, he jumped off the chair and hurried over to the kitchen counters now laden with various fish dishes and vegetable salads, interspersed with bread. Standing on his hind legs, mindful of the slight stiffness that always occasioned a stretch, Kotek uttered a tiny cry.

Understanding his complaint immediately, both his human mother and grandmother came to him. Lifted up by his human mother, Kotek surveyed them both with disapproval, hearing his human father laughing in the background at his antics. Babi spoke once more, her voice soothing. "We do not eat meat on Christmas Eve, Kochany. In Poland, we celebrate Wigilia on Christmas Eve, where we remember the birth of Christ Jesus. During the day, we fast and abstain from meat, only to begin our feast when the first star appears in the evening sky."

Carefully, Babi reached for a dish full of a sharp, fragrant vegetable and oil, under which Kotek recognised herring. This fish he did not mind so much, though he was only permitted the cooked version and not cured.

"Twelve dishes to recall the twelve apostles – followers of Jesus. Fish and soups, bread and salads, cabbage rolls – all finished with delicious pierniki, a spiced gingerbread."

Eyes dancing with mischief caught his brilliant green eyes. "The children enjoy most the events after the meal! The gift giving, with presents under the tree. We even have presents for inquisitive cats." Kotek was pleased to know he had a present under the magnificent tree. So, this tree not only spoke of spring through the cold frost of winter, but also offered fruits in the form of presents – all in commemoration of Jesus?

Curious and fantastic.

Squirming to be free, Kotek carefully checked his limbs were loose and wouldn't tense in pain when walking and decided to wait for the first star to appear. Padding over to the window, he jumped again on his chair, trod on the table now adorned with a white lace cloth over the straw and settled on his special fluffy red blanket on the windowsill, warmed by the radiator. He could return to the fire later once the gifts were being presented.

Until then, he observed proceedings, meowing whenever his Babi required guidance on setting a silver implement correctly, a crystal glass that also glittered like the silver

fish in the pond, or when his human father strung the fairy lights and switched them on. Meow!

The different colours were dazzling, yet not painful for his father had arranged them so it wouldn't hurt his cat eyes. In the growing darkness – for twilight had arrived, though the stars were yet to appear – they were cheerful counterpoints to the freezing gloom outside.

Satisfied, Kotek returned to supervising his Babi and human mother who were now laying the table with the food. His human Wujek Jozef had left the other adults and children in the living room and absconded to the kitchen. He, too, started helping with carrying the food and finishing off the soups stewing on the stove. The smell of food frying was pleasant though not convincing Kotek to devour the cabbage rolls stuffed with sauerkraut and mushroom.

Meanwhile, the table was complete and Kotek realised something. Meowing for attention, he flicked his tail towards the plate situated at the end of the table next to his seat.

“Ah, that is set for any uninvited guest,” said Babi, tweaking the decorated napkin next to the plate. “Traditionally, we keep a place free in case someone comes to the door seeking food or rest.” Hmm...well, that was kindness, yet Kotek would keep watch for strangers. He would not allow any harm to his new and beloved family.

As he made his decision on this aspect of Wigilia, Kotek became keenly aware of an abrupt hush that had fallen. His human family continued as normal, so Kotek turned his head to the window and the darkness beyond. Twilight had merged into night and the skies were as black as the inside of a stable without light.

Stillness wrapped around Kotek, hugging him like his red blanket, suffusing his spirit with an expectant anticipation. Thrilled beyond his understanding, Kotek rose to sit on his back legs, eyes gazing fixedly out of the window. Gradually, a pale light was revealed in the heavens, not in one location but in many.

Slowly, the stars began to appear, so slowly that any creature unused to the hunt – of waiting for hours for prey to appear – would become bored and walk away. However, Kotek had spent many years on a farm hunting, of trekking his prey, of the stillness and hush of the wait and then the sudden run and jump. Thus, he stayed put, aware of his family chattering behind him, drinking tea and coffee. White and remote the first star was as it revealed itself properly to human eyes. On the horizon, dark as a rat's nest, a nimbus of white heralded the moon. The gleaming star with its brethren slowly shining forth were the more important signals. Pawing at the window gained the attention of his human parents, as well as Babi

and Wujek who exclaimed in great joy at the vision of the stars. He was gathered up by his Wujek Jozef who held him close as the family gathered in a big crowd in the kitchen.

Purring happily, Kotek was surprised to see everyone sharing this odd thin white wafer which broke with a clear snap. A small piece would be exchanged and kisses bestowed. The multitude of noise made it difficult to discern the meanings behind the mutterings. Understanding human speech was a special talent and human children were the hardest, oftentimes speaking nonsense like kittens. His human children he could just about comprehend, but their cousins were another matter.

It was only when Babi kissed his head that he caught the word “opłatek” in relation to the wafer. Thanking his grandmother with a kitty kiss, whiskers and all, Kotek was delighted by her giggle. Even oldies like them could be kittens on special occasions, such as celebrating the birth of this human child Jesus.

He was happily placed on his seat, discovering the extra cushions for his comfort. The children had insisted he join the family at the table and Kotek was smug when the parents acquiesced, especially once Wujek Jozef and Babi Jadwiga had added their voices to plea.

Cooked fish was served to him, soft and absolutely scrumptious. For a while, Kotek was busy with eating, licking his chops and cleaning his whiskers, listening always to his family whose jolly spirits and singing infused the room with a liveliness and awe he could hardly describe.

Pausing after drinking a little water from the bowl next to his plate, Kotek gazed at the fairy lights which hung above the wall opposite. Their various colours evoked warmth and he decided he would wait for his family in front of the fire. It would allow his bones to rest and for him to tidy his appearance, ready for the gift giving. Yet, upon turning to leave, he froze. The empty plate and seat beside him were filled.

A lady sat there, silent yet glowing with a joy that was infectious. Dazed, Kotek stood staring at the lady until she looked upon him. Dark eyes full of mirth and wonder captured him and Kotek swelled with love, because this lady was not here in the flesh, but spirit.

Her garments were old, similar to the scene in the stable under the tree. Her smile was wide, her eyes so happy and tender. The Lady's expression was one of compassion. Still, Kotek felt pierced by her stare. He knew this Lady understood everything about him, all his faults as well as all his joys and still he was loved.

Loved with a mother's love. Sudden comprehension burst upon him. This was Mary the Mother of God.

Now, Kotek could see another figure, beyond description. A babe at first in the Lady's arms then a man, and more than a man. Christ Jesus was present too and Kotek was too overcome with emotion to release any sound, so great was his awe and joy at the splendour revealed to his eyes, a mere cat.

Both mother and son, maiden and Lord, bestowed upon him sweet words of comfort, before vanishing.

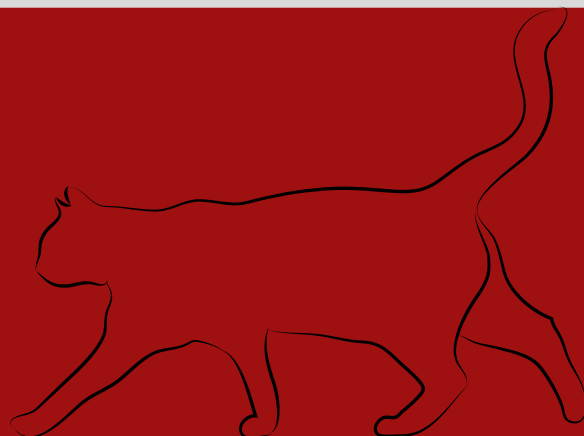
Oh, their presence remained, it was merely that they were no longer visible. They had visited them due to his humans celebrating their meal and singing in joy at the birth of Jesus.

In the distance, Kotek heard the singing of the beings he knew humans called angels. Conscious of time once more flowing, Kotek jumped down and went to the living room. It was dark with only the fire and Christmas tree lights offering light. The combined warm red-orange glow of the fire and the sparkling lights off tinsel and the decorations that tinkled occasionally against each other in a sudden breeze from an open window, seemed almost surreal after his experience

Yet, he was also at peace. The comforting presence of Jesus and Mary had reassured him he had found his proper place with his new family. Now, he would await them by the fire for the giving and receiving of the presents.

In the meantime, he would guard the stable and their home, whilst celebrating this joyful event.

Stretching out on his bed by the fire, Kotek allowed the singing of his family and distant angels to surround him in warmth and love.



LIGHT FROM HEAVEN:

A Robin Hood Retelling Excerpt

By Avellina Balestri

Author's Note: This is an excerpt from a chapter of a Robin Hood retelling series, featuring Robin Hood as a small child, and his complex relationship with his neighbor, Roger Cavendish... the future Sheriff of Nottingham! Lady Rosalinda is Roger's wife, and Lady Blanche his mother.

In the beginning of winter, Lord Philippe and Lady Sophie FitzWalter paid a visit to Cavendish Hall, as was the custom among the nobles of the shire. Lord Hugh was away in France tending to territorial affairs, and so Blanche served as the main hostess. Rosalinda, usually as silent as a mouse in the presence of company, was delighted when she noticed that Lady Sophie was expecting again, and chatted about all sorts of things to do with childbearing. Roger could not help but imagine Mother Mary visiting her cousin Elizabeth, their kinship fused stronger by their pregnancies.

But Sophie, who had always been a woman of strict social propriety, seemed mildly displeased by Rosalinda's lack of discretion. Her family had hailed from Surrey, a stone's throw from London, and southern breeding made her bristle at the coarseness of Midland manners. Rosalinda's family, though of high estate, seemed more convivial, products of the French countryside and its sun-warmed soil and sea-swept winds. There was earthiness in it, and true feeling that seemed lost to those restrained by courtly ceremony. But Lord Philippe, being an honest Midlander, just smiled in a humoring fashion, and joked to Roger that as gentlemen they were bound to "let the fairer sex have their hour."

In many ways, Lady FitzWalter was quite different from her usually affable husband, but Roger knew that, unlike his parents, the FitzWalters were a complementary match. He remembered watching them mounted upon sleek steeds, preparing to go hunting with the other lords and ladies of the shire. He was handsome and energetic; she was elegant and poised. He would beam at her like she was royalty, and she would smile very slightly in return, like a regal queen. The falcon perched upon her arm would shriek, and with a deft gesture, she would send it flying high into the sky. In his youth, Roger used to think she must be a goddess, embodying strength and dignity, and he rather hoped to have a wife like that someday.

But not anymore. Now he smirked as his rambling little wife declined an invitation from Sophie to join a rabbit hunt, on the basis that the poor harmless creatures looked so sweet

munching on grass, and she didn't like watching food being butchered. Sophie made some thinly patronizing remark about it being an acquired taste. Lady Blanche interjected blandly that Roger himself grew peaked during blood sports, so perhaps it was for the best, lest he vomit on another Italian-tailored doublet.

Rosalinda seemed to overlook the barbs flying around and just patted his hand sympathetically.

I hope my lady never becomes too terribly elegant. Perhaps I shall get her a rabbit for a pet. Yes, I think she might like that...

When Christmas Eve arrived, Rosalinda, of course, was delighted when the FitzWalter children were dropped off in their care. "I like helping care for babies, even more than helping make custards," she told Roger, scooping up three-year-old Catelyn and starting to talk like a toddler to her. "I shall spend time with my own babe like I shall with this little doll. You can spend time with the older two, to prepare you for fatherhood."

"Two?" he repeated, then turned to see a grumpy-looking Marian sitting on the stairs, her arms crossed over her fancy green dress, and that insufferable Saxon tag-along sneaking out of the bushes and sitting beside her.

"Blessed Trinity!" Roger groaned. "What in the name of the Virgin made you invite yourself here, you little leech?"

"She's the one who wanted me to come along so it wouldn't be so dull," Robin pouted. "But I'm too old to need babysitting anyway!"

"Tch, tch," Rosalinda clicked her tongue. "You think we are so very dull, little master?" He turned kind of red, and mumbled, "Well...I didn't mean you."

Roger huffed, and his wife giggled. "Take good care of them, husband," she reminded him, turning to enter the house.

"Well...just sit still and behave," Roger instructed his charges, wagging his finger.

Of course, they wound up doing the exact opposite. The little girl grabbed the "little boy's" hand and dragged him towards a clump of trees bordering the garden, now barren from the winter. "Come on, Robin, let's go climbing!"

"No, you don't!" Roger shouted, stomping after them. "You'll break limbs, and I'll be blamed!" But they paid him no heed, clambering up the branches, knowing full well he would stay on the ground rather than risk falling in the iced-over mud and ruining his clothes.

"Get down from there this instant, or I'll send my father's hawks after you!" he threatened.

"Hawks?" squeaked Marian. "You would really bring out hawks? They're so pretty!" Well, this didn't go as planned. Time to combat them with wits.

"If you're that keen on seeing them, perhaps I might take you to them...that is, if you come down from there, right now, and behave yourselves for the rest of the evening."

They reluctantly agreed, and Roger took them to the bird cages not far from the stables.

When Marian saw the graceful creatures, she broke into a grin, and Roger had the chief falconer bring out one of the tamest of the birds for her to pet. Marian even put on a glove and it sat on her hand. The way she was admiring it, he feared she would run off home with the creature.

The other birds were too hostile for the boy to play with, so he found himself wandering around in utter boredom, kicking at clumps of dirty snow. Rosalinda had earlier suggested that Roger bring out his old toys for the children, but at the time he dismissed it, still protesting the entire situation. But seeing the boy likely to get into some mischief without preoccupation, he decided it would be best to have a servant go rummaging through some of his old odds and ends in the attic. Granted, he hardly ever played with toys as a child, but he was willing to put whatever existed at the little ragamuffin's disposal to avoid worse calamities.

So the crate was brought outside, and the contents dumped unceremoniously in the courtyard. Yet again Marian struck, snatching up the wooden sword before the little boy could get at it. Robin of course ran after her, pounced on her, and began to struggle for it. Their high pitched screaming hurt Roger's head, and he snatched Robin by the collar to break it up. "Didn't anyone ever tell you stealing was wrong, you little runt? It was your fault for not having a quicker hand, or she'd not have nabbed it to begin with!"

Robin held his sword out towards his host, and declared boldly, "I challenge you to a duel!"

Roger rolled his eyes, then flicked away the tip of the sword with his thumb and forefinger. "Stuff it, you little home-wrecker."

"But there's nothing to do! I'll go crazy!" Robin lamented, as Marian tore the sword away from him and ran off with it.

Roger groaned as she swung her little weapon around like a warrior queen, pouring salt in the boy's wounds. Then he had a stroke of genius, and pulled out a toy bow laying at the bottom of the crate. "Didn't anyone tell you? Archers kill more Infidels than swordsmen in the Holy Land. And the Welsh gave your people fits before the Normans came, mostly through their skill as bowmen."

Robin pulled back the string a little. "But...there aren't any arrows."

"Well, there are, someplace, or at least they came with the set when I was a boy. But I'm certainly not letting you have any. You'd shoot someone's eye out, little monster, like your precious King Harold got his eye shot out on Hasting Field."

"But what's the fun of a bow with nothing to shoot?"

"Don't be so dense. Use some imagination."

Robin scowled, and let the string go with a twang sound.

"That's right, play a song on it. It's harmless enough that way."

Once he managed to herd them indoors, the children wound up roping Roger into playing a series of games, almost always involving them hiding and him being surprise-attacked by sugared almonds shot from a toy catapult, tackled, and taken prisoner like a Saracen outside

Jerusalem. He wasn't amused, especially when they tied his hands with a curtain cord.

At this juncture, Marian hopped on top of him and queried, "So, now that I've captured you, want to marry me?"

Roger stared at her blankly. "Have you completely lost your head, you obtuse little polygamist?"

"Shhh!" she put a finger to her lips, then whispered in his ear. "I want Robin to get jealous."

Things went rapidly downhill, however, when the children decided to lock their captive in a wardrobe, to hold for ransom. He shouted and swore for someone to come to his aid, and eventually, his wife and her handmaiden answered his cries. They were just a little too giddy for his frame of mind, and struggled to suppress their own laughter at his conundrum. The lady of the house, who was used to younger siblings, seemed to be getting on marvelously with little Catelyn, who was now wearing one of Rosalinda's dresses and a decorative tiara, dragging the skirts with a swoosh along the floor. He got the distinct impression they were playing princesses.

"She could trip on that, you know," Roger observed flatly, and right on cue, she tumbled into his wife's outstretched arms.

When they were finally beckoned by servants to come to a private Christmas supper, Roger noted with pleasure how fine the golden-brown roast goose looked, smothered in blueberry sauce, and decoratively surrounded by candied fruit and cheese. Roger observed Robin climbing into the chair next to his own, and he felt his appetite abandon him.

"Are you intent on plaguing me with your atrocious table manners for the entirety of the meal?"

Marian giggled as she took her seat across them, beside Rosalinda and her little sister.

"It's men on this side," Robin declared with a sweep of his arm, "and women over there."

"Men, eh?"

"Yes, noblemen of this shire," Robin replied proudly. "You and me."

Roger chuckled in spite of himself, then started to carve the bird. He gave Robin a nice juicy piece...he didn't know why such generosity had overcome him. Some time later, he felt Marian kick him from across the table, demanding another slice of fruit cake. He swore under his breath at the misbehaving moppet, but Rosalinda seemed to find it funny, and Roger felt obliged to give in and pass her the dessert board. Then Catelyn got her tiny hands onto her sister's platter, and both FitzWalter girls managed to get frosting absolutely everywhere.

Again, his wife giggled, and clapped her hands, as if she were watching the antics of a jester. She had told Roger some time ago that her family used to employ a court fool for entertainment, but he could not understand the appeal of such spectacles. He used to hate the ridiculous shows put on by his cousins' family in Normandy, especially when the jester would pretend to be clumsy and knock things down, and they would point at Roger and laugh their heads off at his expense. Still, seeing his lady happy made him feel a little less sad inside, even as he remembered the mockery. He knew in his heart she would never make a fool of him.

After the meal was finished, Rosalinda decided to tell the children stories about King Arthur before bedtime. Settling little Catelyn on her lap, she recruited Roger to serve as translator for Robin, since the poems she planned to recite were all in French. He did so with reluctance, but soon found himself strangely drawn in by the way she spoke. He had never heard words roll off her tongue as passionately as when she spoke of the quest for the Holy Grail and the angelic guardians of dreams and riddles that guided the lost knights, not unlike the winged messengers that appeared to the shepherds at midnight in Bethlehem, with the Glory of the Lord in their midst.

He felt sure he could hear the din of shield and sword, and the soft rustling of a nymph's sleeve as her white arm rose high above the skin of a lake, just as his wife's arm rose in the telling, and her silken white sleeve slipped down her wrist. He thought he could taste the wine from the grail, and feel the hilt of the sword in the stone. Nay, he could even feel the mortal wounds of Fisher King, of Arthur and Mordred alike, and thought she must be all three Queens in one who bore the fallen off to Avalon, and that destiny had sent her to him as a boon, to make him whole in a land apart.

By the time the story ended, Catelyn had fallen asleep in Rosalinda's arms, and was carried off to the guest room by her handmaiden. Robin and Marian, however, were still wide awake, and Rosalinda didn't have the heart to force them to go to bed just yet. She turned to her husband, resting her hand on his arm, and he felt a strange thrill run through him.

"We should teach the children how to dance," she decided, standing and clapping her hands together.

Robin knit his brows together. "Why?"

"Yes, why?" Marian concurred, crossing her arms.

"While I hate to agree with the urchins, they raise a valid point," Roger conceded.

"They'll have to learn sometime," she insisted. "Especially the little mademoiselle. She's going to be a fine lady at court someday, no?"

"No," the little girl retorted. "I'm going to live here in the shire with Robin forever and ever."

Rosalinda smiled as Robin reddened with embarrassment. "Then you will have to learn to dance with him." She turned to Roger. "Shall we show them?"

He blinked.

"What?"

"Dance with me, Rojer. You took lessons as a child, did you not?"

"Well, yes, but...I could be clumsy at it..."

"I imagine you were elegant!"

He snorted. "Really, my lady? Must you make an exhibition of me in front of these future ne'er-do-wells?"

She clicked her tongue and took his hand insistently. He saw a sparkle of mirth in her warm chestnut eyes as he relented, and found himself kissing her hand and slowly wrapped

his arm around her waist. They danced slowly in a circle and she started to sing, with the softness of falling snow, and Roger wanted to kiss the words off her lips. It was a carol about dancing, and the legend of God's play, knit into man's nature, and Roger thought he knew what that was, in her utter aliveness, like a living sacrament, and his substance was strung through her like a ribbon, growing in the form of their child.

Yes, he understood it now...she was his Holy Grail, her womb like a chalice, or a cauldron, or the cave in Bethlehem, or the the vessel of the Virgin Mary herself, some sacred, shrouded thing new life warmed and quickened, like the pulse of the land beneath the ploughing of the soil and the planting of the seed, and he thought it was like an echo of Eden, and of heaven wedding earth. It was the real within the worldly, the wild within the wise. And there was a wild green sprout with red berries tucked over the hearth, and he remembered hearing how the stag would mate with the doe near such symbols of fertility.

When the dance came to an end, Roger turned to see Marian had fallen asleep on Robin's shoulder, her arms clinging to his middle, and the boy's arm was wrapped around her back in return. It was almost comical how fast children got themselves tuckered out. Rosalinda went over and lifted the little girl into her arms to carry her to bed. She smiled at her husband, and murmured in French, "Ils sont amoureux."

Roger smirked as she left the room, and sat down in his chair by the hearth. "My wife may be proven right someday. You're uncommonly fond of that little miscreant, aren't you?"

The boy shrugged. "She's alright."

"I'll ask you again in some years, when she's grown bosoms," Roger chortled. He found himself starting to move the checkers across the board beside his chair, absently playing a game against himself. He noticed the boy was studying him intently, and queried, "Know how to play this?"

Robin shook his head.

Roger huffed. "You really should be in bed."

There was quiet between them for a while, but Robin made no move to leave. He just kept observing the way the pieces slid across the board. Roger cast him another look and raised an eyebrow.

"Oh, enough with your sad wolf pup eyes. Come here and I'll show you how."

Now Robin smiled a little, and went over to his chair.

They played the game for a full hour, in a circular ceremony of Roger trying to be an astute instructor, and Robin breaking the rules by moving the pieces every which way they should not have gone. Whether this was by accident or intention it was impossible to determine, but Roger would swear in English, then in French, and eventually in Latin. And the little sea wolf would have an odd little grin on his face. Yes, he was enjoying this far too much.

Then Robin said something unexpected.

"You're good at games."

“Oh?” Roger queried suspiciously.

“Yes. You’re smart about them. You’re smart about a lot of things.”

“Bloody hell, why are you trying to butter me up?”

“Well...I was just thinking...since you’re good with books and games and things, you don’t really need that old toy bow you never even play with...”

Roger rolled his eyes. “Take it. Burn it, for all I care.”

“Can I maybe...have one of the arrows from that old quiver you talked about? Just one, please?”

“I told you, I don’t even know where it is. Probably buried in storage somewhere.”

“I’m sure you could find it. You were good at finding us, so we could pounce you.”

Roger groaned. “Aren’t there any arrows at your miserable place?”

“Not fitting to the size, I’d wager. These ones would be made special to go with it.”

“Fine. Want to wager? Let’s wager. Turn your eyes down. Go on, no peeking.” Robin did as he was told, and Roger reached over to a bowl of sugared almonds. “Now you’re going to tell me which hand is holding the almond. It’s going to be winner take all.”

The boy bit his lip, gazing at Roger’s clenched fists held out in front of him. He took his sweet time deciding, then with a hesitant finger he pointed to the right hand. Roger slowly unclenched his fist, and Robin beamed.

“Beginner’s luck, you nasty little cheat,” the Norman grumbled. “Go ahead, eat it.”

“I won the arrows, didn’t I?”

“Yes, yes, now eat it, or I will.” Robin snatched the almond from his hand and ground it down with his back teeth. “I was lucky, wasn’t I?” he said proudly. “I’m getting good at games, like you. I’m sure I’ll be good with the bow too. Then I’ll enter contests, and win prizes, and--”

“Don’t let it go to your head.”

“Will you bet on me if I’m in contests? Will you?”

“Depends if I think I can make money off you. Now get off to bed this instant, before you run out of luck with me.”

“Maybe...we can play checkers again next Christmas,” Robin suggested. “I’ll not be so naughty with you the second time round, I promise.”

Roger chortled as the child ran off, and then, feeling rather like a mischievous little boy himself, he popped the almond clenched in his other hand into his mouth.



DID YOU KNOW AT CHRISTMAS?

By Mark Wilson

Did you know about what I'm about to tell you? Here is a good story with a Christmas connection that might teach you something you might not know. A long time ago, before you were ever born - any time before you were born is probably a long time to you - in the 4th century, in a place you never heard of called Patara, located somewhere within the Roman Empire, there lived a kindly, noble nobleman who lived happily with his wife and three lovely, beautiful, pretty daughters. However, the good Nobleman's wife got ill, and, seeing as there was not much good medicine in those days, his wife passed on into the next world. Not only did he lose his wife, he lost his business. He was an inventor, thus not a very good one, as if losing all his money didn't tell you something.

The nobleman's family moved from their middle class dwelling to a low-income dwelling. In spite of utter poverty, his daughters occupied their time with cooking, sewing, and cleaning. If things weren't bad enough, the time came when his daughters were of age to marry. In those days, money for weddings was needed more so than it is today. No beautiful, single girl could marry without dowries, money, and property. The nobleman had none. It was deemed important and necessary for women of this age to marry. It was important to have money to marry. No money, no marriage. Thus, a dilemma. There was not even enough money for food. The only solution that seemed to be possible, in order to get money; was to sell one or all of his daughters into slavery. YIKES! TALK ABOUT GETTING DRASTIC. Well, maybe at least one daughter would get enough for some sort of cheap dowry.

One night, while the family loomed in doom about the fate that



was to befall them, Grace and Mercy stopped by for a visit. The daughters finished their exciting task of washing their clothes. It's good to have fresh clothes when you're about to be sold as a slave. Daughter #1 was up to bid. They then hung their stockings over the fireplace to dry.

That night, while the nobleman and his daughters slept, a lone figure gleamed through the shadows and up to the roof of the house that the nobleman lived in. Three little bags dropped down the chimney. One into each stocking. The next morning, the nobleman, ready and unwilling to sell his lovely daughters to some dreadful slave trader, went to take down the dry stockings. Funny. The stockings seemed a little bit heavier that morning. It seemed as if someone's foot was in it still. He looked in. Stared. Wrinkled a face of puzzlement. Reached in. Felt the little bag. More puzzlement. Looked in. Complete astonishment. Questions entered his mind. It can't be real. He tested it. It passed. Then utter joy. The nobleman uttered a loud shout of joy that woke up his daughters. No, money may not grow on trees, but it did fall down the chimney that night and in other nights to follow. Daughter #1 was saved. But, WHO? He went over the list of his friends and business associates. None of them could possibly have given him this.

The nobleman and his daughters fell to their knees shouting praises to God, who had saved Daughter #1 from a fate most of us would not want to partake of. He then had enough money for daughter #1 to get married. There was even enough \$ left over afterwards to live on. WOW. The year passed and at the end of it, he was back to being cashless. It was time to sell Daughter #2 into slavery. But before she could be shipped off into chains of despair, another mysterious bag of gold was thrown through his window while he and his daughters slept. ??? Who??? Who in all the world is throwing away gold, while he slept? Daughter #2 was saved.

Well, the wedding was paid for and the rest like the last time lasted a year. Ever since that second night, the nobleman had been watching his window, waiting and hoping to catch whomever had been throwing gold through his window. And, sure enough, a bag was finally thrown through his window. No sooner had the gold come through the window, the nobleman took off after him. After a tiring trip around the city, the nobleman caught up with him. It was a young man. A young man who came from a well-known family



in the city. "Why? Why did you give us the gold?" the nobleman asked. "Because you needed it," the young man answered. "But why didn't you let us know who you were? I mean we, we, words can't describe how grateful we are." The young man responded with, "Because it's good to give and have only God know about it."

You may be wondering what this has to do with Christmas. Well, it turned out the motivation for the man's giving was his devotion to the love of God. His soul burned with love of Jesus. He eventually became a bishop of Myra. He lived out Matthew Chapter 25 (a verse you can look up if you are unfamiliar) with Holy Fervor. He went after the needs of the poor, the elderly, and had a fondness for the sailors who lived dangerous lives in the cruel, dark sea. More than anyone though he loved children. He always gave the little ones he met small gifts -- some type of candy or a toy. His giving away freely for the love of Christ became an inspiration to all. His spirit of giving was because of Christ.

Lots of people remember his kind giving spirit but forget who he really was. He has inspired one of the most popular modern figures today. He comes at Christmas time from the North Pole flying on a sleigh with a bunch of reindeer. His name comes from the Dutch, Sinter Klass pronounced in English as Santa Clause, oftentimes referred to as St. Nick. Did you know that the fellow who saved the nobleman's daughters inspired this modern day figure? Did you know that his name was Nicholas? Did you know he was a man who loved God and wanted to spread the love of Jesus around. Did you know the real Santa Clause (Saint Nicholas)?

Well, now you do.

"He who sits upon the sublime and heavenly throne, now lies in a manger. And He who cannot be touched, who is simple, without complexity, and incorporeal, now lies subject to the hands of men. He who has broken the bonds of sinners, is now bound by an infant's bands." --St. Cyril of Alexandria



A WALK THROUGH THE WINTER STONES

AN OUTLANDER CHRISTMAS

TALE

-BY RAYMOND.E. LIPINSKI



The pass through the Stac Pollaidh mountains was treacherous this time of year but was always one of Jamie's favorite routes he loved to travel over. Thoughts of the many fishing and hunting trips he took with his father filled him with great nostalgia and he beamed a happy smile. Although now, trekking through the mountains with gold coin in his sack for the Jacobite cause rather than twine and river trout felt a bit strange, but Jamie was loyal to the cause with all the blood in his veins.

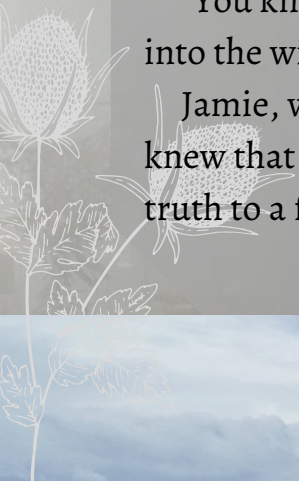
As a quick, cold wind rustled through his red locks, he shivered and only wished it were summer and not Christmas Eve. 1741 was almost over and Jamie was anxious to get back to familiar surroundings. Angus and he were making good time and with any luck, would be able to join Murtagh and his uncle at St Jerome's in time for midnight mass. Jamie looked back to see how far Angus had fallen behind, for he was always lagging. Angus was in his own world singing an old pub song badly off key. Suddenly he stopped, stood upright, and stilled his horse to a stop. Jaime rode up alongside him.


"Angus, what do you see, something got you spooked?"

Angus looked around, eyes wide, they had come down the mountain and around a pass with two very different landscapes on either side of them. To their right was a line of flat ridges that stretched for miles with patches of barren trees and dried out rock beds and to their left was the beginning of a steep decline leading into a cracked gorge filled with ravines, fishers and caves.

"You know where we're at Jaime, if we keep going south this way, we'll head right into the winter stones, I don't want such bad luck."

Jamie, who was one of the few Highlanders that had been given a formal education, knew that such warnings were superstition but he had to admit that there was some truth to a few of the old legends and tales of celtic Scotland.



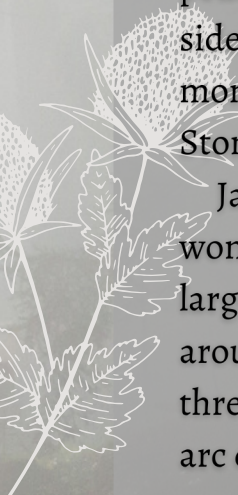


Scotland had many ancient stones, Clachan Chalanais, Craigh na Dun and Barc did Llor or commonly referred to as the Winter Stones. All those native to the land had a reverent respect for the ancient monoliths and one knew right at the age of walking out of your crib, that one never traveled near them during any of the season solstices or the high Christian celebrations of Easter, Pentecost or Christmas. Risking such danger, one could get caught in some purgatorial realm somewhere between the old world and the new, never to be heard from again. Angus was adamant and despite Jamie's best efforts to get him to stand to reason, Angus rode off along the ridge and would meet up with him at the Dog and the Waterhorse, the tavern in the next village.

An hour later Jaime was well into the gorge following a small stream. An umbrella of trees on either side created a natural canopy shielding the light and a whole new world opened around him. The stream reflected soft rays off the water almost looking like hot coals on a fire and the light from the trees reflecting from the branches giving the appearance of precious gems of gold, silver and rubies waiting to be discovered. Maybe Angus was right, this would be the perfect place for some fairy folk or a dragon to be hiding out. With that thought he laughed to himself at a memory of him and his sister Jenny playing in the woods near his home at Lallybroch; him, the fearless knight rescuing the young maiden from his uncle Murtagh the evil dragon. Suddenly he heard crying. He stopped his horse and looked around. The sobbing was coming from around the corner of the ravine. He walked slowly with his hand on the hilt of his sword.


"Is there anyone there?" he called out.

The sobbing continued. He rounded the corner and directly in front of him was the largest boulder he had ever seen, a luminous grey orb at least ten feet high and bigger than the coaches in Edinburgh that always seemed intent on running pedestrians over. At first, he did not think he could pass around it but on the other side revealed a barren trail where the trees gave way and once around the monstrosity, glaring like seven ominous giants were the great, benevolent Winter Stones.



Jamie gasped and was taken aback. First in astonishment and then in just plain wonder... they were truly something to behold. The seven stones looked more like large, oblong disks, all of them well over twelve feet tall and unlike the other stones around Scotland they had a dark greyish hue to them, like chimney stacks. The first three stones were spaced equally from one another and had been placed in a circular, arc direction, each one rising about five feet higher than the next.





The fourth, the middle stone, was the widest and tallest, settling back from the others and sitting on a man made earthen knoll built up about ten feet high, making the great stone itself appear to hover another fifteen feet in the air. The last three stones descended in an opposite circular direction, so all seven stones appeared at ground level to zig-zag like a snake. Leaning up on one of the stones was a pretty lass, no more than twenty. Freckles on both cheeks with strawberry locks tied in a bun and wearing a brown and blue pelisson with a green and white blanket wrapped around her.

She was still sobbing, holding herself. Jaimie approached ever more slowly.

“Mi lass...”

Leathia startled, jumped up and grabbed a nearby stone ready to throw.

“I mean ye no harm lass, are you hurt, injured, how can I help ye?”

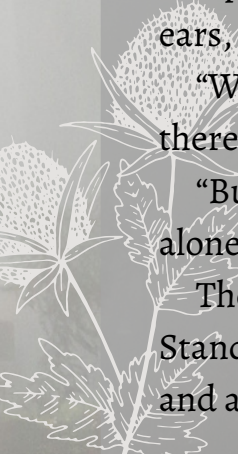
She looked at him at first with caution but then something about the look in his eyes, a soft, caring look, she knew at once this man meant no harm. They introduced themselves and she began to tell her tale. Her name was Leathia Campbell, in love with Duncan Douglass. Period. Two lovers caught between two family clans that had hated each other probably before Neolithic man and the discovery of fire. They had been courting in secret for two years until one of her brothers found them stealing kisses in a hay loft. It was the ultimate insult for a Campbell and an utter disgrace for a Douglass.

Arguments, fights, threats and even vandalism broke out over the couple before they had had enough and decided to flee to the Isle of Murray, where Leathia’s grandmother, a MacAlasdair, offered them safety. MacAlasdair was one of the oldest clans in Scotland and no one would dare challenge a grand matriarch whose family motto was “protector of all mankind” and both clans knew it. Everything with their plan was going without folly until at the town of Torridon, Duncan was cornered, beat to a pulp and was being held captive with his days numbered. Leathia had escaped with the words “the only good Douglass is a dead Douglass” ringing in her ears, so she headed north to seek help, her travels bringing her to the stones.

“Well, I’ll not lie to ye lass, the Campbells are a cankerous lot, no offense. Not sure there is a clan in Scotland that are friends with them.”

“But you are a Mackenzie, one of the greatest clans of the isles, which never travels alone, surely you have a band that can rescue poor Duncan.”, a voice cried out.

The voice came from the great boulder. Jamie turned around to see who it was. Standing in front of him now in a fur trimmed hooded cloak of ermine and garnet and a lavender tunic was a tall, broad woman. She had long, rich ebony hair with a





silver streak that was pulled back that ran down the length of her dress and tied at the end. Jamie could not believe his eyes.

“Am I dreaming? Your...not... you’re not... the Grey Mistress?”

The tall woman laughed out loud.

“I have not been called that in many a year, not since I left Burgundy. An educated Highlander we have here, our luck is improving Leathia.” the woman said.

“I am Corellia Keyshka Valdoma of Targu Frumos of Romania.”

Jamie had heard tales of the Grey Mistress during his travels in France. Born a gypsy in the region of Praca she was a favorite of the Duque of Chalet and a lady in waiting to his wife the Lady of Laurent. Despite knowing her husband’s frequent wanderings outside of their marriage and his relations with Corellia, the two became friends, accepting their circumstances that neither could change. When Lady Laurent died in childbirth, the Duque blamed Corellia for her death and banished her from France. Her grey streaked hair marked her from ever finding refuge, so she took to the forest and using some Scottish folklore and legends, became the magical “Grey Mistress “with enchanting spells and having the power to do good or evil depending on her bidding. In reality she just wanted to live out her life in peace. The Winter Stones had become her home and seeing a younger version of herself in Leathia, wanted to help the young lovers.

“So, will you help us?” beseeched Leathia.

“Aye, seems the right thing to do and I am itching for a little excitement, why not a little brawling with the Campbells, you’ll be safe here?”


“She has the protection of me and the stones, but you must ride fast, the Campbells anger grows more by the hour.” insisted Corellia.

“He has the most beautiful long brownish blonde hair and is wearing a green riding jacket. He promised to sing me the old wedding song as a Christmas present, for he has the most beautiful voice. Please bring him back to me.” Leathia pleaded.

“Don’t worry lass, I’ll bring him back unharmed and ready to sing.”

Jamie rode fast through the countryside hoping that the merriment of the tavern had interrupted the plans of the Campbell clan. A temperamental lot, Jamie knew they could slit a man’s throat as a show of honor and a second later be distracted by an old folk song or a regiment tune and forget the whole thing. He was counting on the latter. An hour later Jamie rode into Torridon and like every other village in Scotland the pub would not be hard to find. Two turns to the right past the smithy, a right past the baker and another left past an old curiosity shop that still had a few patrons in it buying last minute Christmas wares no doubt and at the end of the street was the largest structure,





the Dog and the Waterhorse tavern. Jamie dismounted and tied his horse and took note of his surroundings. Other than the tavern, with every window lit, the street was dark and abandoned. Jamie went around back and like he suspected was able to use the small kitchen door off to the side.

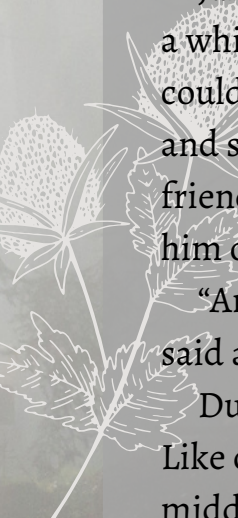
Once inside the sights and smells encompassed him and he had no doubt he was in a pub on Christmas Eve. The aroma of holly and spruce was everywhere. There were boisterous sounds yelling toasts and cheers and the clanging of mugs. Smells of roasted duck and quail roasting on spickets. A barmaid passed him with a platter of gooseberry pie and Jamie's favorite dessert, orange and clove cake with frosting. In the far corner of the tavern were four men embroiled in a chess game. The double-sided hearth in the center was brimming with a huge fire, the flames dancing as if on parade for Beelzebub himself. A violin player was playing Greensleeves on one side with a group singing along and on the other side, a storyteller with another captive audience being convinced that the famed creature in Lochness was just a very large cow, given the gift of immortality from the fairy folk.

Away from the fire and against the wall sat a lone man. He was tall, wearing a green velvet brocade jacket like Leathia had described, along with golden brown locks swarming around his face – Duncan. And behind him what looked like the whole clan Campbell. Jamie cursed to himself. He counted in all, sixteen Campbells, not very good odds but then to his surprise he saw Murtagh at a table close by with one of them and Angus laughing with another one up against the bar. He caught Murtagh's attention and walked over to him.

"Wondered when you'd get here. I'm guessing you know the situation and met the lad's lass." replied Murtagh, nodding over to Duncan.

"Aye, thought this was going to be hard, but with you and Angus I doubt I'll get even a scrape." chuckled Jaime.

"So, what's your plan?" asked Murtagh.



Jamie walked over to the violin player and the storyteller and talked to them both for a while. The storyteller, Odo he had recognized, an old friend of his fathers and he could still remember listening to the tales in that same tavern they were standing in and suspected that the violin player, Patrick, was his kin. Both were clan Mcleod, friends of clan Mackenzie. Jamie approached Duncan and introduced himself and told him of the day's happenings, meeting Leathia and his plan for rescue.

"And she said you are to sing her the wedding song to her when you see her." Jamie said assuredly.

Duncan laughed. "That's what the woman's worried about, sweet baby Jesus." Like clockwork the leader of Clan Campbell, Absalom walked up. An enormous man, middle age, arms like rowing oars and with a look on his face that said he was ready



to fight.

Step away from the lad, this is Campbell business, and of no concern for a Mackenzie.”

Jamie rose from the table and met Absalom’s stare.

“Aye, maybe I want to make it my business, this lad has asked for protection from Clan Mackenzie and I intend to deliver him back to his lady love before midnight, so if you kindly step aside, don’t wish to give a bloody eye on Christmas Eve, not even to a Campbell.”

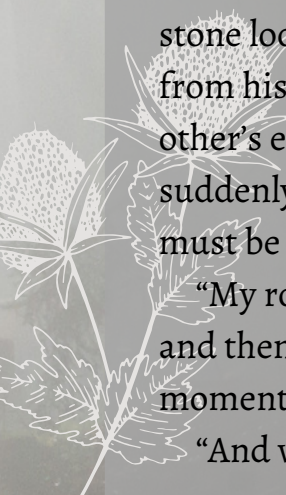
With that, four more Campbells approached the table, swords and fists were drawn. Murtagh stood at the doorway of the tavern. The music stopped, the conversation silent, you could hear a pin drop. Then Angus pretending to be drunk, let out a belch and said, “What’s all the fuss over a hairy legged, big arse, trollip like Leathia Campbell?” Later, Duncan would relay the tale to his children that everything happened in slow motion. The whole tavern erupted in mass pandemonium. Fists were swung, tables broken, and tartans were flying everywhere like an artist’s pallet turned upside down. Jamie grabbed Duncan and ducked under the table and made their way to the back door. Absalom seeing their plan was about to intercept them when Odo and Patrick with their band of followers came from behind the hearth singing the victory song of Robert the Bruce. At once the tavern broke into song, friend and foe helped each other off the floor and Absalom now had a wall of merry-makers between himself and Jamie and Duncan. Odo slapped Absalom on the back and ushered him back to join his other clansman and soon had a mug of ale in his hand singing along.

Jamie wasted no time riding out of town with Duncan towards the Winter Stones. A few miles away they heard galloping and were relieved when it was Murtagh riding up beside them.

They continued on with Murtagh leading the way. Heading across two streams, a thicket, a grove and across a narrow ford and then through some low hanging fog, the Winter Stones just seemed to magically appear. Leathia was standing near the highest stone looking in every direction when she saw Duncan approaching. Duncan jumped from his horse and the two lovers ran toward each other, falling on the ground in each other’s embrace. Jamie laughed, Murtagh rolled his eyes and Corellia who had suddenly appeared, helped them up and told them they had no time to waste and must be on their way. Duncan took Lethia’s hand, bent on one knee.

“My rose, I’m tired of running, I want to be wed, now, tonight. Hand-fast with me, and then when we’re away from here, we can be properly wed, but I want you at this moment, as my friend, my lover, my wife.”

“And with two Clan Mackenzie’s as witnesses, no one can contest your union,”



interjected Corellia.

Holding back tears, Leathia agreed. Lethia wanted both Jaime and Corellia to give them a blessing. So, holding a bouquet of holly, ivy, and thistle, Leathia and Duncan were handfasted with the Winter Stones as their cathedral. Corellia tied the bands together and Jamie did the cut and pressed their palms together for the blood mingle symbolizing the union of their body and souls.

Duncan sang his wedding song to a beaming Cecily and a stoic, almost teary eyed Murtagh. Corellia gave them an earthen blessing and Jaime read to them Psalm 34 and almost in unison when Jaimie closed the worn prayer book, a gift from his mother, that he always carried with him on his travels, it began to snow. Shortly afterwards the horses were packed and Murtagh volunteered to take them to the seaside village of Arbroath and see them safely off to the Isle of Murray.

“We will never forget you Jamie, for all that you and your kinsman have done” said Leathia, kissing him on his cheek.

“Aye, every Christmas Eve we will tell this tale to our children” replied Duncan. And with a smile and a handshake they were off. Jamie watched a good while as Murtagh led the newlywed couple past the great boulder and around the corner out of site. Corellia walked her horse up to Jamie and handed him a wrapped cloth with twine.

“Is it not customary to give a gift on this night?”

“Aye it is.”

Jamie unwrapped the cloth. It was a silver pendant of a bird nest and a rose.

“It was a gift to me from Lady Laurent who said I should pass it on to someone who was kind and noble and true of heart, now I give it to you.”

“Tis beautiful, and if I have a wife someday, I shall give it to her. I thank thee...happy Christmas and may...the Gods bless thee.”

“You’re a good man James Fraser, I see many happy journeys as you travel through your road in life.”

“Aye, did the stones tell you that?”

Looking around and back at the now dark, silent stones Corellia replied “Their smiling now, buzzing, you never know what the future will bring.”

And with that James Fraser started on the trail that would lead him to St. Jerome’s just in time for midnight mass. As a light Christmas snow began to fall once again, he rode on in happy silence, pondering just what that future would indeed hold for him.



Sincerely, The White Witch

~ by Hannah Skipper

To Father Christmas,

Okay, look, I'm gonna cut right to the chase and say that I know we haven't been on the best terms for the last hundred years or so, but I think we should let bygones be bygones now because I need a new wand and you're gonna have to deliver for me.

After all, some little punk broke my old one while I was trying to use it, and that's just not fair. I'd never done anything to that little jerk, but he just came up and broke my wand with his sword.

Of course, all that business about him being my king was just a joke. He should have understood that. Why would I pick a puny little brat like him to be my king? He didn't have to get all prudish about it and break my wand.

Now, don't be an insolent fool by putting me on the naughty list, because we both know Aslan wouldn't approve. We both know He expects you to turn the other cheek and bless those who persecute you so you can't very well claim to be His follower if you don't bring me a new wand.

*Sincerely,
The White Witch*

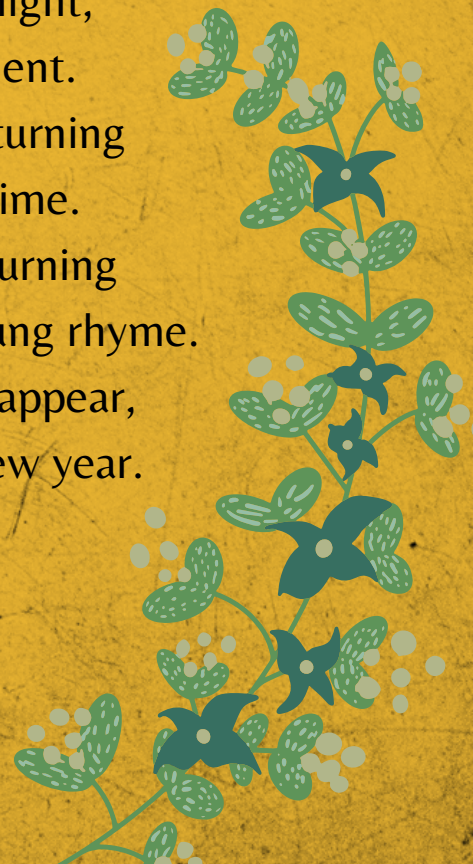
The Turning of the World: Advent Through Plough Monday

By Lawrence Hall



*God spede the plough.
-an English blessing for a good agricultural year,
numerous sources.*

In springtime, nature kisses the world with light,
And summer follows with work and merriment.
In autumn, she kisses the world good night,
And winter follows with frost and lament.
But first, we celebrate the great world's turning
With Advent and the holy Christmas time.
With liturgies followed by the Yule log burning
Through feasting and cheer, and each well-sung rhyme.
Six midwinter weeks 'til the Three Kings appear,
And then Plough Monday to begin the new year.



Brigid at Christmas Time

By Kenneth McIntosh

Constans Junius was cold and cross. “By the gods, what I wouldn’t give to be back by the shores of the Tiber tonight,” he muttered under his breath. This cold—while not freezing like that in Germany, where he had campaigned in years past—could nonetheless set one’s arms to shaking with chill. The weight of his steel cuirass and helmet didn’t make him any happier. He’d stood all night still as a statue, gazing with tired eyes into the moonlit wastes that marked the border between Herod’s Judean kingdom and the Aegyptian realm of Gaius Turranius.

His companion, Leos Verris, sighed sympathetically. Neither man would think of grumbling in the presence of an officer or in the presence of their more patriotic fellows, but here, in the bleak mid-winter, there was no one but the wind to hear them, so the two foot soldiers could be candid with one another. “There’s not been a soul passing through here all week. Merchants take the road, and no one is fool enough to risk getting lost in the sands,” Leos agreed. “Caesar’s money would be better spent on us doing anything—baking bread for mess hall, polishing the centurion’s armor, even—than standing here in nowhere.”

Constans squinted to see the flickers of light to both sides of them—the adjoining sentry posts, each a stadium away. If Constans and Leos kept a sharp watch, and the adjoining legionnaires did the same, then no one could pass this border unnoticed. But who cared? Nothing of importance was going to happen in this gods-forgotten outpost straddling barbarian realms.

“What’s that?” Leos suddenly blurted.

Constans peered where Leos was pointing into the dark on the Judean side of the border. There was a little circle of light, like a tiny constellation, bobbing and moving toward them.

“Who goes there!” Constans’ cry was more a warning than an actual question. “We are armed, identify yourself,” Leos demanded as they both moved into a defensive stance and pointed their javelins toward the light.

“It’s a girl,” Constans exclaimed as the illuminated figure drew closer.

Indeed, it was a maiden, wearing a long, loose white dress, and—strangest of all the things about this odd intruder—she had a crown upon her head with a circlet of flaming candles.

“She looks like a girl of the Picts, with red hair and skin that’s never seen the sun,” exclaimed Leos, who had fought those barbarians on a previous tour of duty.

“Stop right there,” Constans said in an even tone, leveling his pilum toward the young woman.

“Gentlemen of Rome, you need not be frightened,” she addressed them in oddly accented Latin, a tone that reminded Leos again of the wild Hibernians. “Is this night not long and cold? I bring you light and laughter to warm your hearts.”

So saying, she spun about as if dancing to music that only she could hear.

The soldiers stared at her, puzzled and mesmerized, as she danced, the points of light above her head weaving arcs of light in the night air. Then she took off her crown and set it on the sand in front of their sandaled feet, smiled brightly, turned, and ran away from them with speed they could hardly believe.

“Hey, come back here! You’ve got some explaining to…” Leos’ voice trailed off, because he had already lost sight of the girl in the darkness. The two warriors exchanged glances and then Constans reached down and lifted the circlet. It was brass, of rude workmanship, and the candles were sputtering in the wind. “I can hardly believe that happened,” he said.

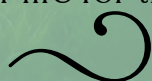
“Sooth,” replied his companion. “She seemed like a dryad of the desert.”

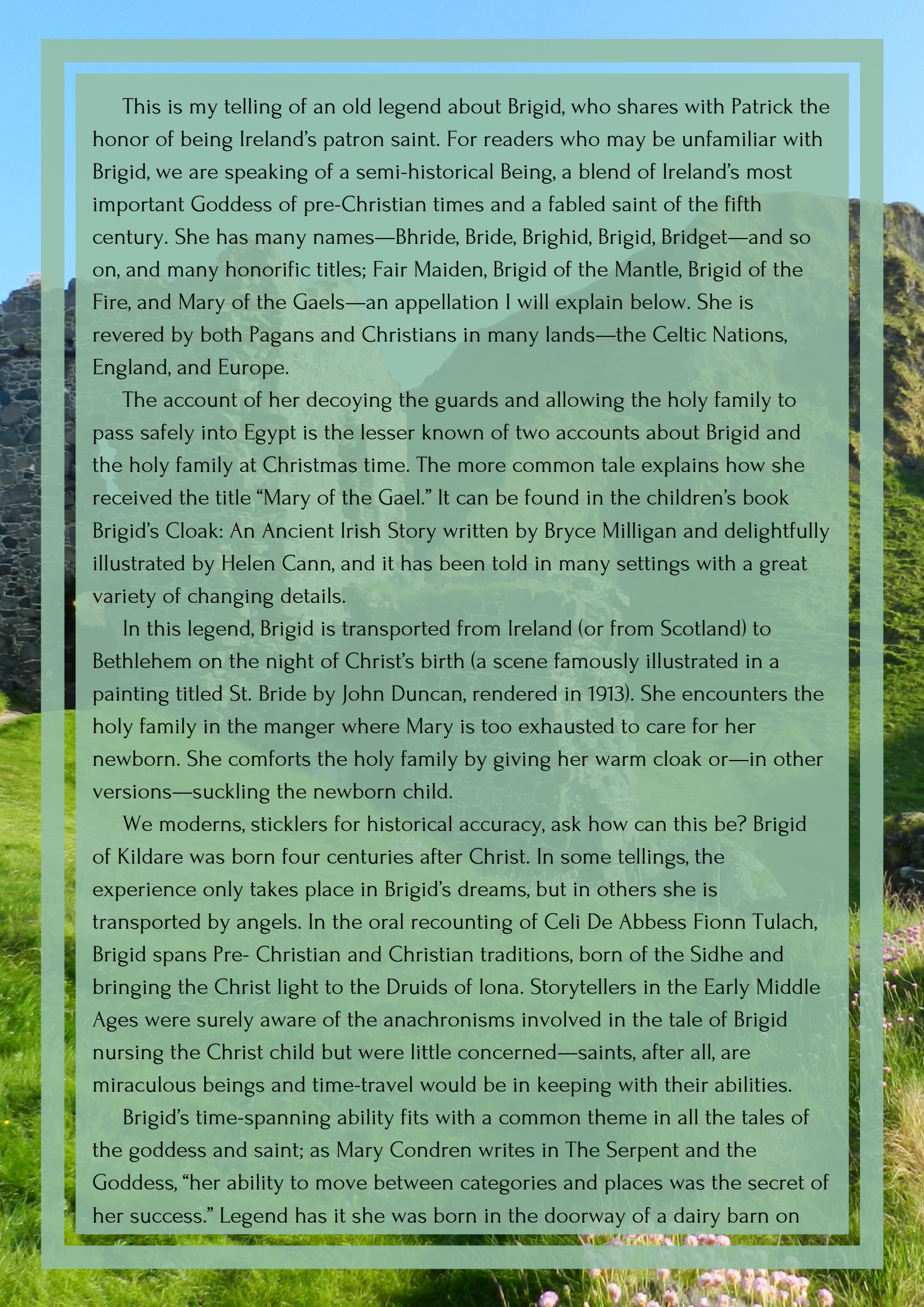
“Or a djinn that the tribesmen speak of,” agreed Constans.

As the sentries of Rome conversed, two figures dressed in black continued hurriedly and silently across the desert, now safely in Aegypt.

“Who was that girl? Where did she come from?” Joseph whispered to his young wife Miriam.

“I don’t know,” she replied, clutching her son to her chest. “Perhaps she was an angel? Surely Adonai sent her to save us from Herod’s clutches.” Gazing ahead the couple could barely discern a brightening on the horizon. God had opened a new chapter of life for them and their Divinely given son.





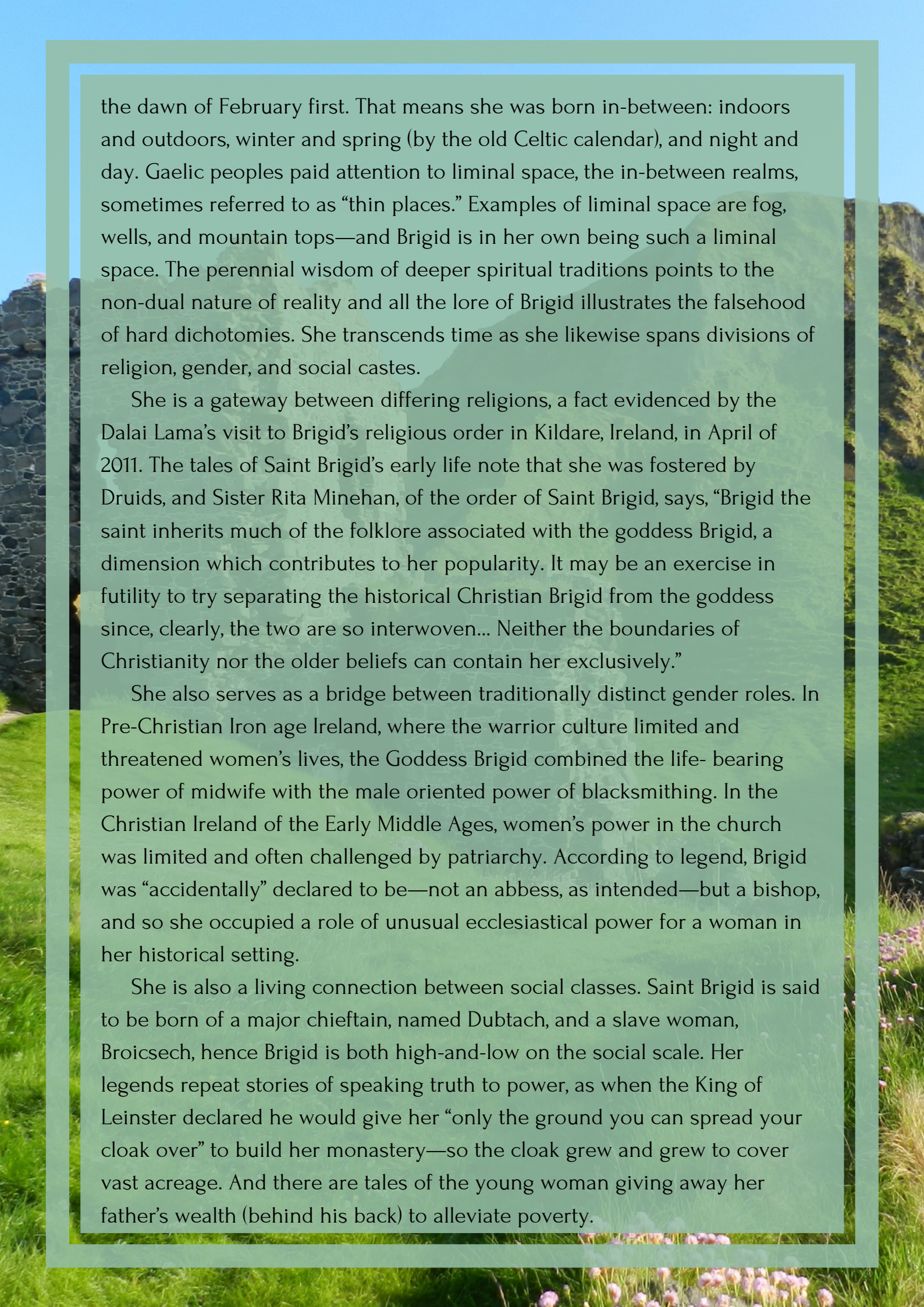
This is my telling of an old legend about Brigid, who shares with Patrick the honor of being Ireland's patron saint. For readers who may be unfamiliar with Brigid, we are speaking of a semi-historical Being, a blend of Ireland's most important Goddess of pre-Christian times and a fabled saint of the fifth century. She has many names—Bhríde, Bríde, Bríghid, Brigid, Bridget—and so on, and many honorific titles; Fair Maiden, Brigid of the Mantle, Brigid of the Fire, and Mary of the Gaels—an appellation I will explain below. She is revered by both Pagans and Christians in many lands—the Celtic Nations, England, and Europe.

The account of her decoying the guards and allowing the holy family to pass safely into Egypt is the lesser known of two accounts about Brigid and the holy family at Christmas time. The more common tale explains how she received the title "Mary of the Gael." It can be found in the children's book *Brigid's Cloak: An Ancient Irish Story* written by Bryce Milligan and delightfully illustrated by Helen Cann, and it has been told in many settings with a great variety of changing details.

In this legend, Brigid is transported from Ireland (or from Scotland) to Bethlehem on the night of Christ's birth (a scene famously illustrated in a painting titled *St. Bride* by John Duncan, rendered in 1913). She encounters the holy family in the manger where Mary is too exhausted to care for her newborn. She comforts the holy family by giving her warm cloak or—in other versions—suckling the newborn child.

We moderns, sticklers for historical accuracy, ask how can this be? Brigid of Kildare was born four centuries after Christ. In some tellings, the experience only takes place in Brigid's dreams, but in others she is transported by angels. In the oral recounting of Celi De Abbess Fionn Tulach, Brigid spans Pre-Christian and Christian traditions, born of the Sidhe and bringing the Christ light to the Druids of Iona. Storytellers in the Early Middle Ages were surely aware of the anachronisms involved in the tale of Brigid nursing the Christ child but were little concerned—saints, after all, are miraculous beings and time-travel would be in keeping with their abilities.

Brigid's time-spanning ability fits with a common theme in all the tales of the goddess and saint; as Mary Condren writes in *The Serpent and the Goddess*, "her ability to move between categories and places was the secret of her success." Legend has it she was born in the doorway of a dairy barn on



the dawn of February first. That means she was born in-between: indoors and outdoors, winter and spring (by the old Celtic calendar), and night and day. Gaelic peoples paid attention to liminal space, the in-between realms, sometimes referred to as “thin places.” Examples of liminal space are fog, wells, and mountain tops—and Brigid is in her own being such a liminal space. The perennial wisdom of deeper spiritual traditions points to the non-dual nature of reality and all the lore of Brigid illustrates the falsehood of hard dichotomies. She transcends time as she likewise spans divisions of religion, gender, and social castes.

She is a gateway between differing religions, a fact evidenced by the Dalai Lama’s visit to Brigid’s religious order in Kildare, Ireland, in April of 2011. The tales of Saint Brigid’s early life note that she was fostered by Druids, and Sister Rita Minehan, of the order of Saint Brigid, says, “Brigid the saint inherits much of the folklore associated with the goddess Brigid, a dimension which contributes to her popularity. It may be an exercise in futility to try separating the historical Christian Brigid from the goddess since, clearly, the two are so interwoven... Neither the boundaries of Christianity nor the older beliefs can contain her exclusively.”

She also serves as a bridge between traditionally distinct gender roles. In Pre-Christian Iron age Ireland, where the warrior culture limited and threatened women’s lives, the Goddess Brigid combined the life-bearing power of midwife with the male oriented power of blacksmithing. In the Christian Ireland of the Early Middle Ages, women’s power in the church was limited and often challenged by patriarchy. According to legend, Brigid was “accidentally” declared to be—not an abbess, as intended—but a bishop, and so she occupied a role of unusual ecclesiastical power for a woman in her historical setting.

She is also a living connection between social classes. Saint Brigid is said to be born of a major chieftain, named Dubtach, and a slave woman, Broicsech, hence Brigid is both high-and-low on the social scale. Her legends repeat stories of speaking truth to power, as when the King of Leinster declared he would give her “only the ground you can spread your cloak over” to build her monastery—so the cloak grew and grew to cover vast acreage. And there are tales of the young woman giving away her father’s wealth (behind his back) to alleviate poverty.

As a bridge-person, she can also be revered as a peacemaker. According to Condren, “Brigid’s fame as peacemaker was such that the future abbess of Kildare would be known as a woman who turns “back the streams of war.” The Christmas season is traditionally associated with the angels’ declaration of “peace on earth.” Brigid collapses the separations between religions, sexes, and social classes, and therefore incarnates Jesus’ beatitude, “Blessed are the peacemakers.” In the Advent season of 2020, a year that has been so sadly characterized by divisions, fear, and anger, we can seek comfort in Blessed Brigid’s mantle of peace.



Kenneth McIntosh is the author of [Brigid’s Mantle: A Celtic Dialogue between Pagan and Christian](#), and [Water from an Ancient Well: Celtic Spirituality for Modern Life](#).



I Want Adventure

By Amanda Pizzolatto

Dear Santa,

It's been a while since I've written to you, but I have no one else to talk to. I don't even know if you're real. If you are not, oh please, be real. If you are real, well, I need your help.

I wish for a change, I wish for someone to understand me and what I want, which is more than what everyone around me has got planned. Well, mainly what one man in particular has got planned. For him, I'm his poster wife, the perfect woman to keep his house and have his children, and only because I'm beautiful. That's it. He doesn't care about me or what I think, he just sees another prize and, because I'm the only woman who has ever turned him down, I'm the crazy one. What I think is crazy is how anyone can think I would want to marry that boorish, brainless brute is beyond me.

Now, don't get me wrong, I do want to have children one day, but with a man who I love and who loves me. That being said, that's not what I'm writing for this year. Santa, this year, I want adventure in the great wide somewhere.. I want it more than I can tell. Don't get me wrong, this small, provincial town is quiet and is familiar. Every morning is the same since the morning that we came. But I would like a change, a little adventure, just something more than this provincial life. Who knows, maybe I might meet my prince charming while on this adventure and I can't tell because he's in disguise, just like my favorite book. Anyways, an adventure is all I ask for, Santa, if you can give it.

Many thanks,

Belle



Feasting and Fasting: Christmastide in Medieval England

BY T.J. GUILLE

Everyone loves Christmas. It's a time for gifts, singing, merrymaking and feasting. It is a time for family, friends and community. The central focus of the festival is of course the commemoration of the birth of Jesus, celebrated on the 25th December. It is a tradition that has been borrowed, rather than invented, by the Christian faith and is still celebrated by Christians and non-Christians alike today. Whilst singing "Adeste Fidelis" by candlelight at midnight mass, one could almost imagine what our medieval ancestors may have experienced. We all know that many Christmas traditions actually have their origin in Victorian times or even later. But what was it like for people in medieval England long before the advent of Christmas trees, stockings, Santa Claus and expensive presents?

Of course, Santa Claus was in reality a monk called Nicholas born around 280 AD near modern-day Myra in Turkey. He became known as a protector of children, hence his connection with presents for them, but he is associated with the twentieth century for the most part. Winter festivals have been a popular fixture of many northern European cultures throughout the centuries. A celebration in expectation of better weather and longer days as spring approached, coupled with more time to actually celebrate and take stock of the year because there was less agricultural work to be completed in the winter months, has made this time of year a popular party season for centuries.

We sometimes romantically think that medieval Christmas must have been filled with royal banquets in green-decked halls, with minstrels singing songs of festivities, with royal personages, nobles, lords and ladies dancing with glee. On the contrary, if we go back far enough, Christmas itself was not a time of fun and merriment; it gradually developed as a time of great merrymaking and jollity as the middle ages went on. England at that time was very much a Catholic country and a proud member of the wider Christendom communion with the Pope in Rome. The word Christmas was

derived from Cristemasse, a Middle English name for the festival. Before this it was known as Yule or Mid-Winter by our Anglo-Saxon ancestors. The Welsh name for the festival is “Nadolig,” which comes from the original Brythonic tongue spoken in this country long ago. Crist was from the Greek “Khristos,” which means anointed. Whilst the term “Christmas” first became part of the English language in the 11th century as an amalgamation of the Old English expression “Christes-Maesse” meaning festival or mass of Christ, the influences for this winter celebration go back into the mists of time. Our Norman over-lords in the middle ages would have referred to the festival as Noel, from the Norman French referring to the birth of the Saviour.

The Roman celebration of Saturnalia, in honour of Saturn the harvest god, and the Scandinavian festival of Yule and other pagan festivals centred on the winter solstice were celebrated on or around this date. As Northern Europe was the last part of the continent to embrace Christianity, the pagan traditions of old had a big influence on the Christian celebrations. The official date of the birth of Christ is notably absent from the Holy Bible and has always been hotly contested. Following the adoption of Christianity as the official religion of the Roman Empire in the latter part of the fourth century, it was Pope Julius I who eventually settled on the 25th of December.

Whilst this would appear to be in agreement with what the third century historian Sextus Julius Africanus had said, that Jesus was conceived on the spring equinox of the 25th of March, the choice has also been seen as an effort to Christianise the pagan winter festivals that also fell on this date. Early Christian writers suggested that the date of the solstice was chosen for the Christmas celebrations because this is the day that the sun reversed the direction of its cycle from south to north, connecting the birth of Jesus to the “rebirth” of the sun. This, however, is not certain. The medieval calendar was dominated by Christmas events starting forty days prior to Christmas Day, the period we now know as Advent, from the Latin word “adventus,” meaning “the coming,” but which was originally known as the forty days of St. Martin because it began on 11 November, the feast day of St Martin of Tours, a very important medieval saint.

In England in the early middle ages, Christmas itself was not as popular as Epiphany on 6th January which celebrates the visit from the three kings or wise men or Magi, to the baby Jesus bearing gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. Almost everyone went to mass and other church services on high days and holydays. Indeed, Christmas was not originally seen as a time for fun and frolics

but an opportunity for quiet prayer and reflection during a special mass. But by about the 1300s, Christmas had become the most prominent religious celebration in England, signalling the beginning of Christmastide, or the Twelve Days of Christmas as they are more commonly known today. It followed forty days of fasting after the 11th November, St Martin's Day. The word 'tide' was used originally to denote hours, the passage of time or a festival.

We still use the terms Eastertide, Passiontide, and of course the tide on the beach. Festivals and holy days (which is the origin of our word holiday) were, during the medieval period, determined by the Church either centrally by Rome or locally by bishops and archbishops. As you can imagine, Christmas in medieval England was very different to modern day Christmas. It was the church that ensured that it was celebrated as a true religious holiday instead of just being a simple feast for peasants to enjoy themselves. It was, inevitably given the central role of the Catholic church in medieval England, very much controlled and defined by church authorities.

Food is a very important part in any festival. This has always been the case in Jewish festivals such as Pesach and it is also true in the case of Christmas for Christians and non-Christians alike. It is not surprising that for a largely rural population who mainly lived off the land, food was a major part of a medieval Christmas. The holiday came during a period after the crops had been harvested and there would be little to do on a farm. If animals were not to be kept over the winter, now would also be a good time for them to be slaughtered for their food. This could leave a bounty of food that would make Christmas the perfect time to hold a feast. Medieval Christmas food was varied depending on what the people could afford. For rich people would have prepared exotic foods such as goose and swan for Christmas. Sometimes, they also cooked woodcock. Medieval cooks prepared roasted birds for Christmas and sometimes covered them with butter and saffron and served them with a golden colour.

Meanwhile, the poor normally could not afford to have such lavish preparations for Christmas. If they could, the church would sell a regular cooked goose, while uncooked ones might be cheaper. King John held a Christmas feast in 1213, and royal administrative records show that he ordered large amounts of food. One order included 24 hogshead of wine, 200 head of pork, 1,000 hens, 500 lbs of wax, 50 lbs of pepper, 2 lbs of saffron, 100 lbs of almonds, along other spices, napkins and linen. Christmas had become a time of excess dominated by a great feast, gifts for rich and poor and general indulgence in eating, drinking, dancing and singing.

Medieval feasting

Even at a slightly lower level of wealth, the Christmas meal was still elaborate. Richard of Swinfield, Bishop of Hereford, invited forty-one guests to his Christmas feast in 1289. Over the three meals that were held that day, the guests ate two and three-quarters carcasses of beef, two calves, four does, four pigs, sixty fowls, eight partridges, and two geese, along with bread and cheese. No one kept track of how much beer was drunk, but the guests managed to consume forty gallons of red wine and another four gallons of white wine. Feasts were also held among the peasants, and manorial customs sometimes revealed that the local lord would supply the people with special food for Christmas. For example, in the 13th century a shepherd on a manor in Somerset was entitled to a loaf of bread and a dish of meat on Christmas Eve, while his dog would get a loaf on Christmas Day. Another three tenants on the same manor would share two loaves of bread, a mess of beef and of bacon with mustard, one chicken, cheese, fuel for cooking and as much beer as they could drink during the day.

Mince pies were also common in the medieval era. As the name suggests, they were baked and filled with different kinds of shredded meat, fruits and spices. It was only as recently as the Victorian era that the recipe was amended to include only spices and fruit. The pies were originally baked in rectangular cases to represent the infant Jesus' crib and the addition of cinnamon, cloves and nutmeg, which were long ago costly ingredients, was intended to symbolise the gifts bestowed by the three wise men or "Magi." Similar to the modern mince pies we see today, these pies were not very big, and it was widely believed in medieval England to be lucky to eat one mince pie on each of the twelve days of Christmas.

They also had Christmas puddings called *furmenty* or *figgy pudding*, which was considered a real treat for the not so rich people. They began as a kind of thick porridge or pottage with currants, dried fruits and eggs. Some had spices added to them, such as cinnamon. It might be served as a fasting meal in preparation for Christmas and originates in the fourteenth century. The word *plum* was often used to describe any dried fruit. Sometimes, beef and mutton as well as raisins and prunes, wine and spices could be added as a preservative. When grains were added to make it into a kind of porridge it was known as *frumenty*. In the early fifteenth century it became known as *plum pottage* and could be packed into animal stomachs and intestines like a sausage. It kept well over a prolonged period. By the end of the sixteenth century, when fruit became more readily available, it morphed from a savoury to a sweet dish eaten after the meat course.

While the most popular choice for Christmas dinner today is undoubtedly turkey, the bird was not introduced to Europe until after the discovery of the Americas, its natural home in the sixteenth century. It is believed by some people that East Yorkshire man William Strickland acquired six turkeys by trading with native Americans on an early voyage around 1526. He is said to have sold them at Bristol market for tuppence each. He certainly made money from the trade, which enabled him to buy a manor house near Bridlington where his descendent still live today.

Sadly, there is no real evidence for this story, so it is unclear from sources how the turkey got to England. In medieval times however, the goose was the most common option. Venison was also a popular alternative in medieval Christmas celebrations, although hunting in forests was strictly controlled and the poor were not allowed to eat the best cuts of meat. However, the Christmas spirit might entice a lord to donate the unwanted parts of the family's Christmas deer, the offal, which was known as the umbles. To make the meat go further, it was often mixed with other ingredients to make a pie, in this case the poor would be eating umble pie, an expression we now use today to describe someone who has fallen from a proud state to a more modest one.

Christmas then was very different from the modern way Christmas is celebrated. Nevertheless, Christmas time in the Middle Ages still involved children. December 28th was called Childermass Day, more commonly known as Holy Innocents Day. This was when King Herod ordered that all children under two years old must be killed. The Christmas crib originated in 1223 in medieval Italy when Saint Francis of Assisi explained the Christmas Nativity story to local people using a crib to symbolise the birth of Jesus and has been popular ever since. The day after Christmas day is known as St Stephen's Day. He was the first Christian martyr. This day, later known in England as Boxing Day, has traditionally been seen as the reversal of fortunes, where the rich provide gifts for the poor.

In medieval times, the gift was generally money and it was provided in a hollow clay pot with a slit in the top which had to be smashed for the money to be taken out. These small clay pots were nicknamed "piggies" and thus became the first version of the piggy banks we use today. Unfortunately for tenant farmers, Christmas Day was also traditionally one of the quarter days, one of the four days in the financial year on which payments such as ground rents were due, meaning many poor tenants had to pay their rent on Christmas Day. St Stephen's Day was a day of fun, jollity, and reversal of roles and could however, be less controlled than the authorities wanted: in 1523 at London's Inns of Court, a 'lord of misrule' was

responsible for an accidental death.

Some of us enjoy the sound of carolers on our doorsteps but the tradition for carol singers going door to door is actually a result of carols being banned in churches in medieval times. Many carolers took the word carol, which might mean to sing and dance in a circle, meaning that the more serious Christmas masses were being ruined and so the Church decided to send the carol singers outside.

Mumming was an ancient pagan tradition. During the medieval era, it was a diversion in disguise. Men and women swapped clothes and don masks while visiting their neighbours. They would dance, sing and sometimes act out plays with hilarious and silly plots all for the fun of the celebration.

Christmas as we know it today is a very different experience to that which our ancestors knew and loved. Theirs was a simple affair of eating, drinking, attending church and having fun. Perhaps we have lost some of that simple, innocent pleasure and filled our festival with things rather than people. After all, Christmas is about family, friends, and community. Our medieval Catholic ancestors got it right.

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The Travelling Troubadour

Winter Collage



Bird on the briar



Brotherly love



Cardinal with
Berries

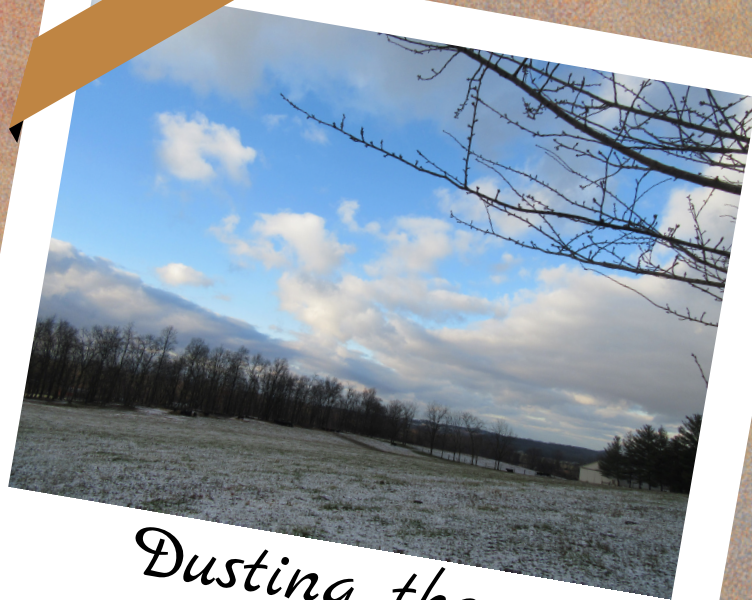




Orb in the woods



Fiery red sunset



Dusting the fields



Dalmation lamb





Snow clouds



Sunset Pond



*The Travelling
T troubadour by Winter
stream*



*Twelve birds of
Christmas*




Winter's road



Legend of the Christmas Fae

BY ARIAN NIWL



Oh, when the Savior was born on Earth, we have heard the tales how shepherds came from tending herds in the hills to worship at the stable dim. Of how wise men from far away came to offer this glorious king rare gifts though he was but of humble estate. We have heard that the angels sang through the night in glorious song to herald the blessed event. That even the animals of that place knew that they were witness to something special and kept silent. What you do not know is that another group came. All but silent and invisible to mortal eyes.

For you see the fairies as well drew close to see this wonderous rose. They whispered one to the other that they could not out sing the angels, that already rare gifts had been given and yet they wished that there was something that only fairies could offer. Then a voice came as though from that shining star, and it was one only they could hear. “Ah ye fair ones, I have a task for you, and it will be your gift to all. For when the snows are deep and the cold is all around, with each sprig of green from your woods is brought, come you with it and bring good cheer for each person and family wrought. Your magic employ to bring love and joy that the promise of the green woods mean. For the green will always be a promise of life as my son is a promise of life eternal. Thus, your gift will be to remind all of the special gift given this day. So, to this day, each bit of holly, each bit of pine or green that decorates the house and hearth brings with it the magic of the fairies to bring joy of the special gift given, and though it seems that days are cold and life has drained away, that there is a constant reminder that life is always with us. And maybe, just maybe if you are very quiet, and listen carefully, you just might catch a glimpse or hear a bell or a snatch of song not normally where there should be for no reason. For the fairies keep their trust and bring magic to the season.

Every Christmas Eve



BY BELLATRIXTHESTAR

Patience, a man, a horse, and a mouse waited near one of the fallen Christmas trees.

The man wore red and gold, a military uniform, with a gilded helmet and simple sword. His deep brown eyes, echoing the colour of his skin, gazed expectantly at an opening within the horizontal and hollow trunk.

What was he waiting for, you ask? He would easily tell you if you asked him, but I don't suppose you can, can you?

He was waiting for a girl.

She always came on this day. Christmas Eve, she had said they called it in her realm. She says a lot of things. The Nutcracker is always happy to listen, and she likes to talk. It didn't really matter what was discussed; a particularly tricky invention; something that had happened recently; or even the type of cake her godfather had served at the party, just as long as they were both interested in it.

She had told him after her first visit that missing a person would eventually make him smile. He hadn't quite learned that trick yet, but it was hardest when the wait seemed almost over.

He tapped his foot impatiently, then sighed, stilling it. Jingles, his horse, moved restlessly from side to side and the Nutcracker soothed him. "There there, Jingles, she'll be here soon. We just have to wait a little longer."

Some conciliatory squeaking filled his left ear as the mouse that stood upon his left shoulder offered his opinion.

"I know, I know. It's not like she'll come any earlier if I think about it hard enough." The Nutcracker looked at the sky, snowflakes flurrying all around, "The people in the Land of Snow will be overjoyed, but if this goes on much longer, we'll be snowed under!"

"I certainly hope not!" Came a young voice from the fallen log. "It will make it awfully hard to travel anywhere and I always enjoy my yearly visit to The Four Realms."

"Clara!" The Nutcracker's face lit up with a smile as he stood to attention.

"Oh, relax, Phillip!" Clara smiled, "You don't need to stand at attention."

Giving him a quick hug, she added, "I missed you."

"I missed you too," The captain admitted.

A loud squeaking interrupted, running down Philip's arm to pat Clara's cheek.

"And you too, Mousericks. I haven't forgotten you!" Clara exclaimed, smiling warmly at the little rodent.

"Like he'd let anyone forget him!" Philip chuckled, pulling away.

The squeaking changed tone until the soldier could swear it sounded like scolding. "With the noise you make, it'd be a wonder if anyone in the Realms wasn't aware of your existence!"

The squeaking got louder, and Clara giggled softly, snowflakes beginning to bedeck her eyelashes and hair.

"Shall we go, Phillip?" She asked with a smile.

"As you wish," the Nutcracker said with a matching expression, and the squeaking slowly subsided. The Nutcracker helped Clara mount Jingles and they began walking towards the bridge.

As they walked, they talked, and another Christmas Eve passed slowly by.

If you were worried, Clara had already spent some time with her family.

In fact, she had been trying to spend all the time she could with her brother, sister and father. But Christmas Eve was reserved for The Four Realms in memory of her mother, and for all the living occupants.

"So, how was your year?" Phillip asked.

"Wonderful!" Clara said with a wide smile and began to describe Fitz's antics, her father's promotion, and Louise's suitor.

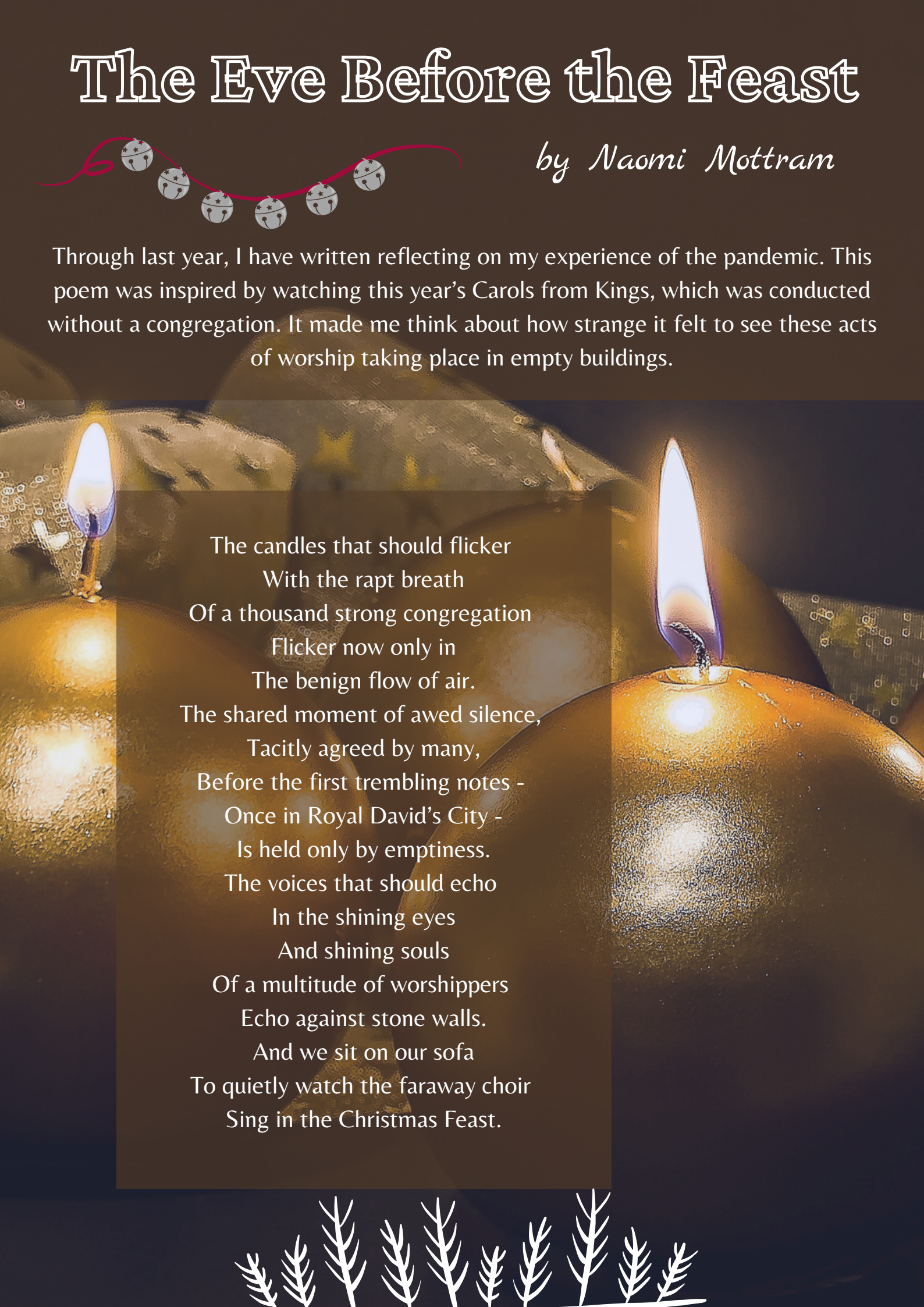
It really was the season of hope, joy, and waiting rewarded.



The Eve Before the Feast

by Naomi Mottram

Through last year, I have written reflecting on my experience of the pandemic. This poem was inspired by watching this year's Carols from Kings, which was conducted without a congregation. It made me think about how strange it felt to see these acts of worship taking place in empty buildings.



The candles that should flicker
With the rapt breath
Of a thousand strong congregation
Flicker now only in
The benign flow of air.
The shared moment of awed silence,
Tacitly agreed by many,
Before the first trembling notes -
Once in Royal David's City -
Is held only by emptiness.
The voices that should echo
In the shining eyes
And shining souls
Of a multitude of worshippers
Echo against stone walls.
And we sit on our sofa
To quietly watch the faraway choir
Sing in the Christmas Feast.



The Lantern and the Lamb

by Keren Dibbens-Wyatt

The lantern wound its way up the hill, three figures hunched around its meagre light. One of the shepherds held something swaddled tight in his fleece jacket, along with the warm stones they'd brought from around their campfire. They were good to stop your hands freezing in the dead of night.

The dark seemed deeper than usual, despite the star being bright, the skies now bereft of the chorus they'd just seen. Was it only an hour since? And the reverberations of that great light echoing out still on their retinae, as it might do always. No-one witnesses something that holy without scarring.

The little lamb might make it, might not. The shepherd rubbed its cold body as they hurried onwards, fearful of being too late. It was the nearest a man could get to being a mother, holding that small body that might live or die in his coat. Willing it to warm up and breathe. Carrying the possibility of life or death and the not-knowing.

The streams of silver light touched the roof of the small house, and they looked at one another before knocking on the door. As it opened, they recognised the same golden glow that had shone out of heaven onto their unspectacular fields, light catching like wool on the thorn bushes. Every ordinary thing was aflame with the sacred tonight. And then they saw him.

The dried blood on the newborn didn't faze them, they were used to such things. Nor did his raucous cries,



full of life, nor the loving gaze of his parents as they carefully washed him and wrapped him in warmth. What held them dumbstruck was the light, the presence in the room of something so softly alive and full of grace that they unconsciously held their breath in awe.

They fell to their knees, all three, setting the lantern down carefully away from the straw. Eventually something more was needed, but they felt words would be inadequate somehow, so just kept their heads bent when they could tear their eyes away from him, this new, tiny King of All. And then there was a strange bleating sound.

The little lamb wrestled and kicked from within its confines and the shepherd had no choice but to let it go free in the small room. They watched amazed as the small creature, so perfect and new, bounded amongst Joseph and his family, making everyone laugh, nudging the two oxen and the ass stood calmly by their mangers.

A dark possibility arrested the shepherd's thoughts. That they might mistake the lamb for a sacrificial gift. Seeing it now, dancing in the glow of love, the baby gurgling quietly, he had to speak.

"Please, don't kill it," he blurted. The holy mother smiled.

"We won't."

"Every lamb of God is welcome here and safe," said Joseph.

The lantern wound its way back down the hillside a little later, swinging carefree. Three figures walked beside it, free of burdens, a lightness in their steps and a new joy blazing in their hearts.

~

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FATHER CHRISTMAS - THE CURSE IS BROKEN

BY DEAN MAXWELL

“He comes – the brave old Christmas! His sturdy steps I hear,”

Many of us will remember Father Christmas in Mr Lewis’ fine chronicle “The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe.” Some of us may have scratched our heads, wondering what the merry old gentleman was doing in Narnia. I hope you’ll come to see that there’s no reason why he shouldn’t be there.

Although Narnia knows a great light, is there not darkness too? Father Christmas is not the light in the darkness but he does reflect that light. Think of him then as a mirror. Why, you ask, does he call himself Father Christmas when in Narnia? Well, does he not appear in various guises to different people in other cultures? That is a part of his magic. Echoes of him resound through many lands. Sometimes his magic and nature is even attributed to other, more local heroes. If Narnians are happy with the name ‘Father Christmas’ then who are we to gainsay them?

I hope you will agree with me that there is no reason to doubt Mr Lewis.

Father Christmas does indeed visit Narnia.

In comes I, Father Christmas, Welcome or not,
I hope Old Father Christmas, Will never be forgot.

Picture the frozen ‘north-twixt-the-worlds’, at a time when the days shorten and the nights lengthen. Can you imagine a great Long-house of wooden boards, fifty metres in length? Snow lay all about it. Do you see it’s golden, thatched roof? It is a strange magical roof on which snow never settles. A few paces from the doors, two huge torches burn in iron holders.

To its people, the hall was simply called “Sael”, for that was their name for such a thing. Inside, it was supported by two rows of wooden pillars, each decorated with pairs of huge reindeer antlers. Above each pair was engraved the name of a deceased, faithful beast.

On this particular night, there was a host of small people at the board. The aelfe (1) folk were particularly merry as there was ‘something in the air’ which stirred their blood. An old but beautiful woman sat on a throne overlooking the court. She was somehow ancient yet ageless (this is very hard to explain!)

Her white hair was in two long plaits that reached down to her knees.

For those of you not familiar with aelfs, I had better tell you that they are small, magical beings. You may not have seen them because they are generally invisible in other worlds. On occasion, one will let himself be seen; sometimes to provide a salutary lesson to someone who deserves it.

The aelf on duty heard the thunder of a staff on the door. He lifted the bar and swung the door open. A tall figure entered the Sael. He was well over six feet in height with a barrel chest and powerful arms. He was clad in a green mantle over a brown tunic with russet breeches. His long, white beard was tightly bound at the end with a leather thong. The chatter in the hall died down, expectantly.

“I have studied the skies, my faithful ‘aelfe-folc’. The time is nearly on us again. Can’t you sense it in the air? The nights grow long and soon it will be time for me to fly. Christmas is coming!” The last words were bellowed and there was a chorus of approval from the small people.

The man took the vacant throne and his wife filled his goblet.

“You are as bad as ever; you cannot wait to leave me” she scolded.

He smiled and snatched her hand to kiss it chivalrously. “It is only one night, my sweet. See how excited are the ‘aelfe-folc’. I must decide who is to accompany me”.

“That is a lot of nonsense and you know it. Magically, it may only seem one night. You know full well that the ice will be breaking before you return. What is a woman that you forsake her?”

With affectionate mockery she took an instrument and sang “The Harp Song Of The Dane Women”. (2)

Leaning back in his throne, her husband said “Beautiful. There’s nothing like the old songs, Mother.” (3)

“Come home safely, Father (3). Come home swiftly.” She sighed. “I suppose you will try to enter Narnia?”

“Of course, I must try. Even though a century will have gone by since I last got in. The land lies under a curse but somehow this year feels... significant. It’s as if I can feel change coming”. Father Christmas gave a profound nod.

Mistress Christmas rang her fingers over the harp-strings:
“My man will face the witch’s spite, while I sit by the hearth.

Should I keen (4) or silently wait,
for one that might never return?”

To be fair, she was improvising and it sounds much more lyrical in its original language than it does in modern English.

“That Christmas day again may rise, and we enjoy our Christmas pies.”

An aelf held the leaders’ bridles; not that it was really necessary. It was a very obedient and experienced team, used to working as a single unit. Father Christmas drove ‘eight-in-hand’ – meaning four pairs of reindeer would pull his heavy sleigh. A large company of aelfs – those who weren’t going – stood around waiting to see their friends off.

The sleigh was large and had room for half a dozen companions plus a couple of full sacks. The bulk of the gifts weren’t stored in the sledge: they would be produced when required (for that was a part of the magic). The harness was strung with wide, jangling bells. There was a name painted gaily on the side (it read simply ‘sledd’).

The crew of six approached the sleigh. The chief aelf carried a wooden bowl full of cider. “Waes hael, Father”. (5)

Father Christmas carefully took the bowl and drank. “Drinc hael,” (6) he said in reply. He passed the bowl back and the aelfs all drank solemnly in turn.

The aelf captain glanced up to the sky, looking for two particular stars,
“Aethelwold and Aster (7) are about to kiss.”

Father Christmas put his arm around his wife’s waist and drew her in for a kiss too. “Farewell, my dear. I will be back when the night is over.” She rested for a few moments in her husband’s embrace.

“Aye; when the seas soften, for me!” she replied. “Fare you well, my darling.”

Determined to put a brave face on it, she smiled and strode back into the
'Sael'.

Christmas clapped his hands. He sniffed the air expectantly, like a dog that finds
itself suddenly free. "Is there anything special this time?"

The head elf, named Earpwald, gestured towards two bulging sacks stowed at the
rear of the sled. "We have something very special. These are destined for Narnia."

"Narnia! Aslan has spoken? This is a great day indeed".

"Aye, Father," Earpwald nodded. "Aslan has spoken. The Witch's spell will be
broken. There are gifts for the future kings and queens of Narnia. You will know
them, when you see them."

"Four gifts then? The thrones at Cair Paravel are to be filled at last."

"Aslan says so – so must it be," Earpwald replied.

Father Christmas banged his hands together in satisfaction. He tugged his thick,
red robe tight and adjusted the broad leather belt. He never carried a sword but
had a great staff that he could wield for protection. "Then let us board 'sledde' (8)
, my friends, and away to Narnia first!"

All safely aboard, Father Christmas took the reins and suddenly the sled was
underway, sliding across the compacted snow. As the reindeers began to go at full
pelt, the sledge began to lift. Soon they were flying through the night sky, singing
as they went:

"Sing lads, sing, as we fly the gulls' way,
Though the air is chill or wet,
Trying not to lose our way,
Or the bairns will surely fret!" (9)

Mistress Christmas sat in the nearly empty hall and felt utterly alone. A snatch
of the song - carried on the wind and down the chimney - reached her ears.



The aelfs outside stood and cheered as the sleigh disappeared into the night sky.

“Cast away the dreams of darkness, O ye children of the day”

The sleigh burst into the sky at the edge of the western waste, near to the Narnian boundary.

“Good aim, Father,” Earpwald approved – and the other aelf-folc cheered.

“Not so rusty!” Father Christmas exclaimed, “Even after a year.”

The rocky hills that formed the said border were on the leaside. He tacked and just reached them when an icy wind blasted him. He held his course. For the first time in a century, he was speeding over the border.

“Above and aft!” screamed Leofric, the observer in the stern of the sleigh. “It’s a hag!”

“Hag, above and aft!” went up the cry from the others. Father Christmas pulled at the reins and the reindeer swiftly began to turn in a half circle. An icy blast narrowly missed the rear of the sled. He drove straight at the hag. She was a small, crooked figure riding a broomstick. She screamed in frustration as she dived to avoid the oncoming threat.

Christmas deliberately nosedived; the sled hurtled down in pursuit of the Winter Hag. She was a creature now wholly controlled by the Witch Queen. The powers of the hag - and her weird sisters - had been harnessed to keep the land in a perpetual winter. Always winter and yet never Christmas, can you imagine?

“Curse you,” screeched the crone, using a wand to direct an icy, white jet up at the sledge. Father Christmas knew that he couldn’t be thwarted that year for Aslan had spoken. He veered sharply starboard and the spell flew past harmlessly.

With incomparable precision, Christmas turned his craft and dived once again. The Winter Hag lost her nerve and shot off westwards some hundreds of feet. Father Christmas levelled the sledge and turned towards Narnia. He was over the hills in a matter of moments and into Narnia proper. “We’re in,” he called triumphantly, “death to the witch!”

Coming up fast behind them was the Winter Hag. “She’s behind us!” Leofric warned.

“Take them,” Father Christmas said, passing the reins to Earpwald. “Hold her steady!” As the sled held a level course, Christmas rose in his seat and took his staff from the floor. Once again the hag tried to send a frosty blast at him but his magic staff parried the shot.

Their attacker spun her broomstick around and sped straight towards them. This time her shot surely could not miss! She was just three yards away when she fired an ice-white blaze from her wand, straight at Father Christmas. Coolly he tipped his staff forward; it connected with the jet that rebounded back at the hag. Her ugly face was momentarily frozen in horror. She went white as she then became literally frozen. For a second she seemed suspended in mid-air before her body fell to the ground.

“Narnia,” bellowed Father Christmas, “Christmas is upon you!” With that he began to sing;

“Oh, he is a fine old fellow,
His heart’s in the truest place,
You may know that at once by the children,

Who glory to see his face.
For he never forgets the children,
They are all dear to him,
You’ll see that with wonderful presents,
His pockets are crammed to the brim.” (10)

The end

Notes

1. Middle-English for ‘elf’
2. Actually written by Rudyard Kipling
3. Until fairly recent times, married couples could still be found in England who referred to each other as “mother and father”.
4. Keen: to wail in grief about the dead
5. “be thou hale” e.g. “be in good health”
6. Meaning “drink and be healthy”
7. For more information, see my short story “The star-bride Aster and
8. Middle-English meaning ‘sliding’ or ‘glider’
9. “Or the children will surely worry”
10. Poem by Mary Howitt, 1850.
Aethelwold”

I make no apology for mixing Viking culture with Anglo-Saxon names and Middle-English words; they all have the same northern-European background.

The Present

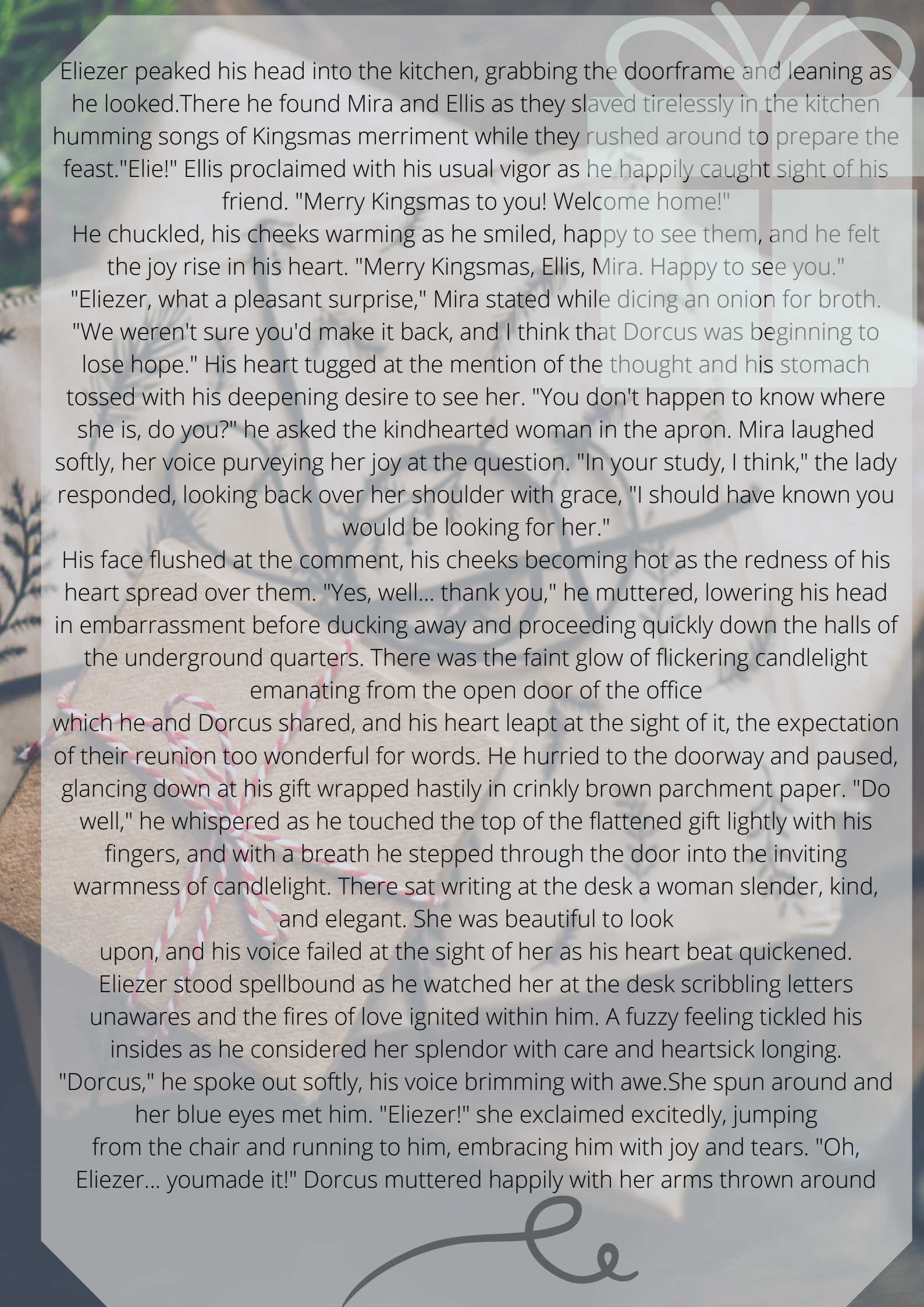
By Leah Fisher

Summary: The following is a fantasy short story intended to capture the spirit of Christmas while exploring the themes of love, kindness, and hope during this peculiar time of separation and longing for loved ones and home.

Kingsmas in Pyre
15 Tevet, 3124

It was unusual for it to snow in Pyre, but on that particular night the intricate flakes of bright white fortune wafted down from light grey heavens and gathered on the ground beneath his feet, clothing the earth in a dusting of wintry beauty as Eliezer walked wearily home. The city was always beautiful this time of year, bright and bustling with the strings of lights and decorations set out for the festival. The people of Pyre hurried about in search of the perfect gift for a loved one and the Kingsmen found their spirits lifted with the remembrance of their King. That night he walked as many men did with his feet a little lighter and his heart softly aflutter in hope. Despite his weariness, he was happy to be home and far removed from the haze of the city. He felt the cold on his hand as it clutched the covered package with a shoestring bound to wrap it like a gift, but it was hardly a thought to him because of the warmth he felt gathered in his heart at the hope of its purpose. He lifted his eyes to the dim light of the library in the distance and smiled. It wasn't always that he was able to return from the city, but this was one day he was especially glad to come home. He hurried in his pace, the thoughts and cares of obligations lifted by the light which he beheld in the distance as it brought with it the promise of warm fellowship and greetings, friends, and a steaming cup of hot tea. Certainly, there was no better place for him to be this blustery night than there with them. His glasses fogged as he opened the door to enter into the warmth, and he stopped to rub them on his coat, clearing the condensation. He breathed in the sweet smells of Mira's cooking and made his way stealthily to the kitchen, careful to remain quiet as he was mindful of the hour.





Eliezer peaked his head into the kitchen, grabbing the doorframe and leaning as he looked. There he found Mira and Ellis as they slaved tirelessly in the kitchen humming songs of Kingstmas merriment while they rushed around to prepare the feast. "Elie!" Ellis proclaimed with his usual vigor as he happily caught sight of his friend. "Merry Kingstmas to you! Welcome home!"

He chuckled, his cheeks warming as he smiled, happy to see them, and he felt the joy rise in his heart. "Merry Kingstmas, Ellis, Mira. Happy to see you." "Eliezer, what a pleasant surprise," Mira stated while dicing an onion for broth. "We weren't sure you'd make it back, and I think that Dorcus was beginning to lose hope." His heart tugged at the mention of the thought and his stomach tossed with his deepening desire to see her. "You don't happen to know where she is, do you?" he asked the kindhearted woman in the apron. Mira laughed softly, her voice purveying her joy at the question. "In your study, I think," the lady responded, looking back over her shoulder with grace, "I should have known you would be looking for her."

His face flushed at the comment, his cheeks becoming hot as the redness of his heart spread over them. "Yes, well... thank you," he muttered, lowering his head in embarrassment before ducking away and proceeding quickly down the halls of the underground quarters. There was the faint glow of flickering candlelight emanating from the open door of the office which he and Dorcus shared, and his heart leapt at the sight of it, the expectation of their reunion too wonderful for words. He hurried to the doorway and paused, glancing down at his gift wrapped hastily in crinkly brown parchment paper. "Do well," he whispered as he touched the top of the flattened gift lightly with his fingers, and with a breath he stepped through the door into the inviting warmth of candlelight. There sat writing at the desk a woman slender, kind, and elegant. She was beautiful to look upon, and his voice failed at the sight of her as his heart beat quickened. Eliezer stood spellbound as he watched her at the desk scribbling letters unawares and the fires of love ignited within him. A fuzzy feeling tickled his insides as he considered her splendor with care and heartsick longing. "Dorcus," he spoke out softly, his voice brimming with awe. She spun around and her blue eyes met him. "Eliezer!" she exclaimed excitedly, jumping from the chair and running to him, embracing him with joy and tears. "Oh, Eliezer... you made it!" Dorcus muttered happily with her arms thrown around

him and her face pressed against his neck. Eliezer grinned, his cheeks a perfect rose. He wrapped his arms around her and pressed his face affectionately into hers, gently nuzzling the side of her head. His nose sank into her soft silvery hair, and he took a deep breath, cherishing the sweet scent of his beloved friend "I am so very happy to see you," he told her, leaning in to kiss his loved one's cheek. "And I you," she anxiously assured him, blushing at his kiss. "Oh, I know you sometimes run into problems leaving the city, and while I'm glad you are so careful not to put us all in peril, I do so wish to see you home," she admitted.

It wasn't always that she was so free and honest with her feelings, but he was glad for these times that she did tell him all that she had hidden away inside of her; so he held her in his arms and took her words to heart as he cherished the touch of earnest longing. "You know I couldn't possibly allow myself to be separated from you," he told her, squeezing her body tighter, "not tonight. I want to spend these days with you. You know that... as much as I am able, but especially tonight." Dorcus breathed in deeply, seeming to calm, and he left his face pressed against her until he was confident that she was no longer trembling with the weight of tears and fallen expectation. "I have something for you, a present," he whispered, easing back and looking into her glimmering eyes with a hopeful anticipation of her coming joy. "I hope you find it suiting to your taste. You know how I love to see you happy," he said, presenting her with the square and spineless package. She turned her bright eyes up and smiled at him. "Eliezer, you shouldn't have," she said, pecking his cheek with a kiss.

Eliezer sighed, his heart suddenly overcome with a flood of joy filled tenderness. He couldn't have loved her more if he tried. "Open it up," he anxiously encouraged her. "But it isn't tomorrow yet," the lady reminded him. "Actually, it is. I'm afraid it's gotten so late that it's early," he informed her, laughing. Dorcus smiled, amused by him.

"Well, I suppose I'll just have to open it, then," she said, taking the package and carrying it over to the desk.

She pulled at the shoestring bow with her long, delicate fingers, gracefully untying it, and the paper became loose without its string to keep it in its place. She peeled back the wrapping to the appearance of the dress which he had bought for her, and she smiled. Eliezer quietly watched her as she reached out her hand to touch the gift and ran her fingers lightly over the soft blue fabric



"Do you like it?" he asked, the fire of the lit candle catching in his orange-brown eyes. "Oh, Eliezer, it's beautiful! It looks just like the ones they make back in Rivdul," she told him, marveling at the loveliness of the gift. "But how ever did you get it?" I took advantage of the recent church conference in Tyra as an opportunity to meet with Samuel in Sa'ar."

She looked at him with a rush of astonishment. "Sam? You've seen him?" "Yes," he chuckled. "He is doing very well, and he was, also, very happy to help me find a reliable seamstress to make a dress for his sister while I was in town. "This really is from home, then," she said, looking back at the dress with her mouth agape. "It is." "Oh, Eliezer!" she said, hugging him. "That is much too sweet." He held her head close to his chest and hugged her. "Merry Kingstmas, Dorcus," he said, touching his nose to her hair. "I know you've been homesick lately. I thought this might help. That... and the letter from Sam I have for you." Her head popped up and her eyes stared at him with eager expectation. "Do you really?" He nodded, pulling from his coat pocket the envelope which Samuel had addressed to her. It was a little wrinkled from the travel and wet from the snow but still well preserved and just as legible as it had been when he got it.

Silently, she took the letter from him and opened it, delicately unfolding the subtly damaged page as she anxiously read with tearing eyes the warm words of Kingstmas greeting which her brother had carefully scribed for her.

"Merry Kingstmas, my dear," he said once she had finished reading. "I'm sorry I was so late in coming." "Eliezer, you..." she paused, shaking her head at him in admiring disbelief. "You, Mr. Webber, are right on time, and you have made this a very happy Kingstmas for me," she said, throwing her arms around his neck and looking into his eyes with cheerful appreciation.

"Thank you." So it was that Kingstmas in Pyre went on as it always did with joyful anticipation of the coming King, with families gathered round their tables then to dine, and loved ones come to celebrate together, with tokens of love being passed along from one to another in holiday cheer and brotherly charity, all in remembrance of the gift of a life which was given freely in the light of hope, joy, and restoration for all that was lost.



Christmas 1836: A Sweeney Todd story

By Shila Tazier

Five years after he is taken, what is Christmas like for Benjamin Barker and his loved ones? He'd long ago given up fighting. Solitary confinement was its own hellhole. It taught him his lesson, and now he just wanted to be free. To be free of the blasted island they sent him to in the first place. Benjamin laid awake, staring up into the thin strands of white light from the upper cell grating. He was buried underground in a dank space. It smelled of stale water, dead rats and human waste. It was also cold, so unbearably cold he could be chilled right to the bone. Gooseflesh was permanent on his arms and on his body. The cold, he feared, would forever become a part of him. The echoing, jovial laughter of the sentries above was mocking. A flash of hot anger jolted him to get off the old metal bunk chained to the wall.

He looked directly up through the grating and ignored the pain in his neck as he strained to see them. Johnson and Pierce, the two wicked brutes who consigned him in here. He was lifting, his entire body screaming in agony as he lifted the rocks up to build the wall. His knees were buckling...his back ached, begging for sweat release. He was shaking. If you drop these now, he thought, there'll be hell to pay! He was right. He strained to put the rocks on the wall, accomplished it, and collapsed. "Barker!" Pierce had shouted. The sound itself was a smack to his face and a punch to his skull. "You weren't s'posed to fall, boy!" He tried apologizing, but Pierce, the stout fool he was, already began beating and kicking him. Likely to make an example to the other prisoners out there. Benjamin's back was struck when he tried to stand. "Johnson! Help me get 'im up!"

Perhaps it was mercy. But it wasn't. They'd beat him further and threw him, gasping for air with his chest burning, into solitary confinement. He'd begged and pleaded at first, but they'd ignored him. They laughed. How long had it been since he was in here? How long had they enjoyed torturing him? Malicious bastards. Years ago, he would have never dared think such things. But five long, hard years in prison was enough to change a man. He fought fellow inmates over meager rations, imagined all the horrid ways he could harm the guards, and felt his heart be hardened daily over the sufferings of those in here with him. Men just like him. Innocent. "Let me out o' here!" Benjamin yelled. "I think I've had enough!" If they put him in here three years ago, he would have begged and cried like the naïve fool he was. Now, he never forgot their cruelty; it made him who he was.

He never forgot, never forgave.

"You wish, Barker! Maybe we'll let you out for New Year's! Enjoy your Christmas while it lasts!" Johnson gave a full belly laugh as his boots echoed on the gratings of other cells. The sound got fainter. Benjamin's rage, the hot anger now ever-beneath the surface, grew stronger. "Let me out, damn you!" he cried.

No response. Benjamin growled and threw his fist at the smooth brick. Pain exploded up his arm like an oven burn, but he did not care. He just wanted to hurt those sick vultures who threw him in here. Then the sentry's words sunk in. Christmas. He'd been in this place six days. He felt the familiar splitting burn in his throat. His chest suddenly ached. His head felt like fists were pounding on it. Cold tears fell, splattering like pitiful drops of rain onto the concrete. He choked on a sob, her name so close on his tongue he might scream. He was yet again missing Christmas.

After minutes that he swore felt like hours, the burning in his nose and chest did not subside. He sank to his knees and allowed to cold wall and floor to relieve his burning body. Did he dare say it? Perhaps if he said her name, he might crack in two, break, and never get to see them again. But he had to. His heart was aching, yearning for her—"Lucy..." It hurt, but there was some release. Lucy, I'm sorry. I'll try, I'll try to come home. I want to get home to you and Johanna... Johanna. The little babe he loved so much. Now she was six years old, undoubtedly a little beauty just like her mother. Yellow hair that bounced in curls and bright blue eyes, all smiles and laughter. His happy, merry child. Something cold sinks into his gut. His little lamb...who wouldn't even remember him. He growled, punched the wall again, and laid his weary head against the smooth brick. He sighed, frustrated against the truth he could not change. Johanna would have no direct memories of him.

Only Lucy's stories would tell her of her father. Lucy, his angel, his everything, has only spent two proper years together with him as his wife.

The little happiness all three of them had together only increased the pain and dullness in his chest. Soon, they were there. Their apartment was bright and warm and happy, covered in tones of sunny yellow and earthy brown. Little Johanna with her bouncing yellow curls shimmering in what little light London had. She raced to her mother with a wide smile and open arms, and his wife all too eagerly scooped her up and covered her face with kisses.

Lucy...



Her lovely face was still there in his mind, with her kind brown eyes, china doll features and shining yellow hair. Oh, she was still so beautiful, even after five years apart. He imagined her in a soft white gown, her appearance still more similar to an angel. She danced around their little apartment after Johanna opened her presents.

She told their daughter Christmas stories. "And your papa is out there, too," he heard her whisper. Yes! She was standing by the window as night fell, and snow began to dust London streets. "He's celebrating Christmas right now in some faraway land...and he'll come home to his girls! He'll tell us of all his wild adventures." She reached up a hand and stroked Johanna's hair as their sleepy child lay her head on her mother's shoulder. Her golden wedding band shining in the candlelight, as though winking at him. "Merry Christmas, Benj—"

Bang! Lucy, Johanna, their home, the London twilight—gone. A scream ripped through the cells, threatening to destroy his already fragile mind. Lucy, no! Johanna, my lamb, come back—! They were gone. Vanished into the night.

He cursed the sky, the night, the prisoners, the sentries, the captains...all the lot of them. They were the ones who tore innocent men away from their families. They were the sadistic ones who deserved to be locked up for their crimes. They were the ones with power. They were the ones with families.

They deserve whatever hell comes to them. All of them. Yes, they deserve it. He looked up after heaven-knows-how-long of sitting there. Lucy's smile, Johanna's laugh, and the guard's cruelty weigh on his chest heavier than the stone he worked ever could. The dull, agonizing pain was ever-constant. It began to churn his mind to dark thoughts, things he never would have imagined before coming to Botany Bay. As if a heart of flesh was being replaced with one of stone. His mind was cracking. Thoughts of anger, twisted rage and power were beginning whispers in the back of his head.

He traces his fingers over his right hand, once more feeling the absence of his own wedding band. Lucy had it. They'd taken it from him when they arrested him. They'll get what they deserve some day. And soon, my Lucy, soon, I'll come home to you and our girl. He looked up at the grating again, at the moonlight coming through to light his darkened, damp, and dingy cell.

It was silver.



Reflections on HOME ALONE

by Wesley Hutchins

at 30

One of the defining features of the Christmas season is the plethora of films centered around it, and my personal favorite among them is Home Alone. Released in 1990, the film quickly became a hit at the box office and went on to become a classic among other holiday movies, with its melodic blend of slapstick comedy, child's play, and Christmas values.

Now having marked its 30th anniversary, the film is as timeless as ever with how it evokes the spirit of the season with the focus themes such as family, love, and togetherness. This is similar to many other Christmas films, though Home Alone – with its tagline “A Family Comedy Without the Family” – does so in an oblique manner.

The main character, eight year old Kevin McCallister – played by Macaulay Culkin – is the runt of the family who gets no respect, and he in turn, acts like a brat toward them whilst in the midst of preparing for a Christmas trip to Paris. After getting banished to the attic, he wishes for his family to disappear, and due to overnight high winds, a tree branch falls on the power lines which knocks out the electricity and results in the family oversleeping. During the rush to get to the airport on time, they forget Kevin, and he believes his wish has been granted, but his euphoria of unsupervised freedom gives way to the reality that he is home alone, lonely, and scared – especially with the “Wet Bandits”, Harry (Joe Pesci) and Marv (Daniel Stern), lurking around.

He comes to miss his family and once they realize he's been left behind, they realize they miss him too. Kevin's mother Kate (Catherine O'Hara) scrambles to get back to him in Chicago, but not before the robbers realize that Kevin is by himself and believe they can take advantage of the situation to rob the McCallister house. However, Kevin resolves to defend his house and rigs it with a battery of booby traps to keep the burglars at bay, often with a great deal of pain, and they are eventually arrested and taken to prison. On Christmas Day, Kate finally returns home (with the help of a traveling polka band) and she and Kevin apologise to each other before the rest of the family arrives and they are reunited.

In short, the film demonstrates the meaning and value of family by showing what

life can be like without it, because there are times when many of us wish for our families to not be around. Every child wishes that their parents could go away, and every parent wishes their child could go away, but in reality, these feelings mean actually that at times, we just don't want to be bothered and also seek better treatment. Kevin got what he wanted when he said "I never want to see any of you jerks again!", but calls for his mom when he gets scared and when he really believes he's wished them all away for good, he resorts to asking Santa Claus to bring them back. In the end, they are all too happy to be back together, reconcile, and enjoy Christmas safe and sound with each other.

This spirit of family reconciliation extends to the McCallister's neighbor, an elderly gentleman known as Old Man Marley. In the beginning, he is said to be responsible for he slaughtering his whole family and half of his block with a snow shovel, becoming known as the "South Bend Shovel Slayer", which makes Kevin scared every time he encounters him. However, it turns out that Marley is a kind man, about whom an urban legend has been perpetuated for years, and when he and Kevin do sit together in church on Christmas Eve, he reveals that he and his son have had a long-running feud which has kept him from having a personal relationship with his granddaughter. After bonding over their respective family issues, mutual fears and anxieties, Kevin suggests that Marley just bite the bullet and call his son, so that if nothing else, he can at least say he tried to reach out. Sure enough, as the McCallister's are reunited on Christmas Day, Marley and his son have reconciled, and the old man his finally able to hug his granddaughter, for which he shows gratitude toward Kevin by waving at him as the film concludes.

All of this is indicative of the spirit of Christian love and redemption, where by following the path of Jesus, we may be able to overcome that which divides us and have greater appreciation for the people and things in our lives. Kevin, Marley, and their respective families are able to make this journey through seeking the outcome they desired. For Kevin, that meant asking Santa for his family back (in lieu of material gifts) and desiring to reverse his original wish, and for Marley, it meant making a phone call to his son. In either case, it is a demonstration of what is spoken in Matthew 7:7-8.

7 Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you:

8 For every one that asketh receiveth; and he that seeketh findeth; and to him that knocketh it shall be opened.

Meanwhile, Kate McCallister's determination not to be held back by booked airline holiday flights in the quest to return to Kevin showed the depths of a mother's love. She gave away personal possessions to get on a flight out of Paris to Dallas, ends up in Scranton, and accepts a ride with a polka band on the way to Milwaukee. Going out of her way in this manner went a long way in redeeming her for the way she treated Kevin in the beginning, which again, is a core part of the Christian faith.

This comes back to the spirit of Christmas itself being at the core of the film. The season of togetherness and love takes on a special meaning because of the desire to be with our loved ones and share in the joy and perpetual hope which have made Christmas a special time for many people, whether they be Christian or not. Home Alone demonstrates how acutely meaningful this becomes when the family isn't there because of estrangement, geographical distance, or as we've experienced in our lives, due to the pandemic.

The film creates a setting that is evocative of Christmas, especially with regard to the use of greens and reds in the clothing choices and the interior decoration of the McCallister house, which results in a timeless warmth that cements its status as a holiday classic. For that matter, the house itself, a three-story red-bricked Georgian located in the Chicago suburb of Winnetka, Illinois, became a sort of character in the film because of its perfect external proportions, as well as for the fact that it radiated warm and welcoming feelings that made you want to live there, which is testament to its selection by writer/producer John Hughes and director Chris Columbus.

Another stand-out element of the film is its music, which was scored by the legendary film composer John Williams. The main theme, *Somewhere in my Memory*, captures Kevin's loneliness and the desire for his family to return, whilst the secondary theme, *Star of Bethlehem*, is a modern-day Christmas carol which is at once menacing and hopeful in its spirit of hopefulness and light out of despair and darkness. Both of them, with lyrics provided by Leslie Bricusse, are now as much synonymous with the Christmas season as they are with the film, becoming seasonal standards which are performed by bands, orchestras, and choirs at all levels and competencies throughout the world.



All of this ties into my personal love of Christmas. Home Alone and its sequel, Home Alone 2: Lost in New York, were the first films I remember watching, and as such, they left an impression on me, especially with regard to the meaning and importance of the Christmas season, which is my favorite time of the year. Putting up exterior Christmas decorations was inspired by how the McCallister house

was decorated with lights, and when there was a rare snowstorm in my hometown of Savannah, GA, it brought about the full effect of the “Home Alone look”, which brought joy to my heart. The soundtrack – featuring a mix of classic carols, complementary music, and John Williams’s score – is the foundation of my vast Christmas music playlist. The overall sense of warmth, magic, religious significance and family which flow from the film have informed how I feel about the holiday and why I always loom forward to it with greater anticipation than my birthday.

Intertwined with the somber and joyful themes of Christmas are the comedic elements which give the film some of its most memorable moments, from the running gag of the lawn jockey being knocked over by vehicles, to the severely pain-inducing booby traps set by Kevin to ensnare the Wet Bandits, which themselves are reminiscent of a standard Looney Tunes cartoon. There was old-fashioned slapstick humor, much of it driven by Culkin’s mannerisms, wit and smart alec ways, which were full of mischief and provided much laughter. There was also the fake 30’s-era gangster film, *Angels With Filthy Souls*, which was used to great effect three separate times to make an otherwise brutal murder scene into a hilarious sequence which has been parodied many times over.

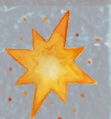
The film also featured the late John Candy as Gus Polinski (the “Polka King of the Midwest”), who provided light-hearted moments, as well as wholesome solemnity as he and his band helped Kate McCallister on the journey back home. Though his screen time was only about ten minutes, he provided a sweet and helpful reassurance as the good Samaritan, which gave the role an enhanced significance and added another layer of Christian teaching and the Christmas spirit in the film.

In the final analysis, I believe that the film has stood the test of time because of its perfect blend of Christmas spirit, Christian values, and comedy. This durability is marked by how ubiquitous it is as a “must-see” film during the holiday season, the extent to which parts of the film are memorized and reenacted, and the extent to which people who were kids 30 years ago are now sharing the Home Alone experience with their own kids. If the film has an ethos, it is perfectly captured in the lyrics to the main theme, “Somewhere in my Memory”.

 *Candles in the window*
Shadows painting the ceiling
Gazing at the fire glow
Feeling that gingerbread feeling
Precious moments, special people
 *Happy faces, I can see!*



Somewhere in my Memory
Christmas joy all around me
Living in my Memory
All of the music
All of the magic
All of the family home here with me!





*Original
Art
By Mike
Flynn*



It's a Wonderful Life: Defending Eucatastrophe

By Edwin Woodruff Tait

It's a Wonderful Life has been in my mind a lot recently. Not least because a few weeks ago I had the privilege of playing George Bailey in the climactic scene, as part of a "Christmas Showcase" put on by Spotlight Playhouse in Berea, Kentucky. My wife's been talking about the movie a lot as a metaphor for our lives, and she was really upset that it got voted down in a poll of Christmas movies one of our friends ran on Facebook. And, of course, it was on TV on Christmas Eve.

My FB friend and fellow ASP member Carlo Mariano recently posted a link to an article by K. B. Hoyle on It's a Wonderful Life making the case that the popular understanding of the movie as a joyful affirmation of the meaningfulness of life doesn't really express what makes the film so great. According to Hoyle, the "better message" of the movie is about self-denial and self-sacrifice for the sake of the community: "Die to yourself, daily. Die, and die again."

Hoyle points out that George spends most of the movie making decision after decision that sacrifices his own desires and dreams for the sake of what is good for his family and his town. Tellingly, she invokes Macaulay's ballad retelling of the Roman story of Horatius at the bridge (a poem I loved in my childhood), offering his life in defense of his city. Similarly, she concludes, we should live lives of "civic virtue," offering ourselves up on behalf of our communities instead of trying to be "true to ourselves" in an individualistic fashion.

I think this is all true, but at the same time I think that dismissing and denying the uproarious joy of the ending as not really central is a mistake. God created us for joy. Just telling us to keep plugging the gap and sacrificing ourselves creates people with gritted teeth and set brows who as often as not wind up turning into self-righteous prigs who hate and despise the people they are sacrificing themselves for. So I think the apparently superficial happy ending is also essential to what makes this a great movie. Yes, the "angel earns his wings" theme is silly (and for some reason typical of mid-century Hollywood movies about angels, probably because they were created by people whose lives were dominated by the studio system and who imagined heaven as a sort of idealized MGM). And to be sure, we can't be assured that if we ever get in

real trouble the people we have helped will turn out and rescue us. It's nice if they do, but George would have been doing the right thing even if Mr. Potter had been right and the people he had helped had ridden him out of town on a rail.

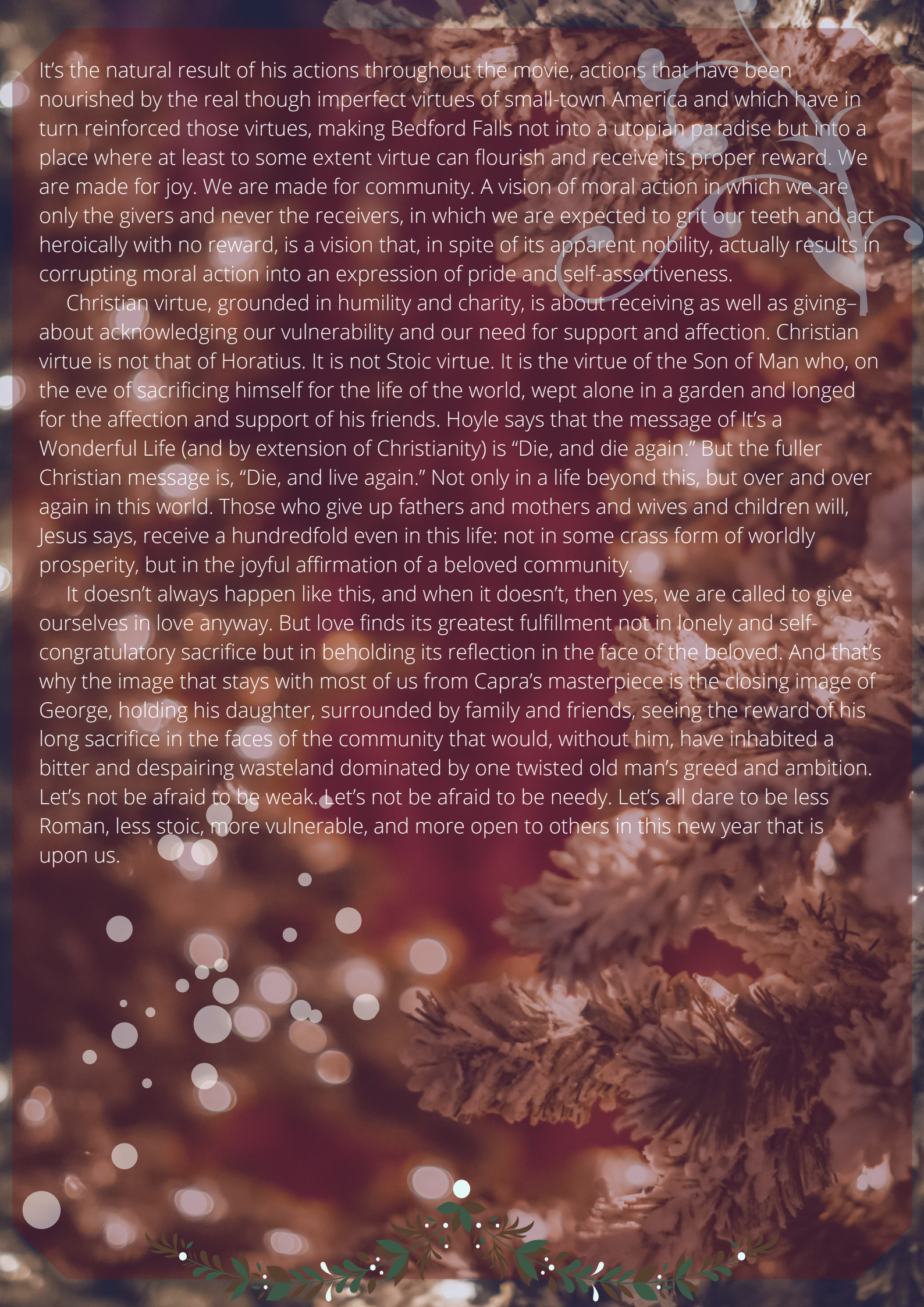
And yet, the ending of *It's a Wonderful Life* isn't just a bit of Hollywood sentimentality. It's a shining example of what another mid-20th-century storyteller, J. R. R. Tolkien, called "eucatastrophe." It's the fitting ending, the ending that should happen but doesn't, in our broken world, always happen. It's the moment when George's long obedience finally gets the response it deserves, as the people he has helped turn out to save him from disgrace and acknowledge what he has meant to them.

I'm a big fan of what many people consider "depressing" movies. I've been watching the three-part film series by Masaki Kobayashi (set, as it happens, around the same time as *It's a Wonderful Life*), called in English *The Human Condition*. The films tell the story of Kaji, an idealistic young Japanese man during WWII, who tries to act morally in a society consumed by imperialistic, nationalistic madness. In the first film, he works for a factory in Manchuria that uses forced Chinese labor, seeking to make conditions better for the workers while still trying to produce the efficient results that will meet his superiors' approval and keep him out of the army. It doesn't go well, either for him or for the Chinese he is trying to protect. In the second movie he is in the army, where the same pattern repeats itself. He tries to stand up for fellow recruits who are being brutally hazed, and again, he fails. At the end of the film, as the Japanese are being overrun by Russian tanks, Kaji kills one of his fellow soldiers with his bare hands because the other man has gone crazy and is giving their position away to the Russians.

And the third movie doesn't get any brighter—it ends with Kaji dying alone in the snow. It's an unsparing, bleak masterpiece. The bleakness of the films comes not only from the vicious opposition Kaji faces from his fellow Japanese, but from the way he gradually crumbles under pressure, continually making compromises, seeking to preserve his own life, and even at the end of the second movie confessing himself a "monster" after he brutally kills a comrade. At one point in the first movie, one of the Chinese laborers tells him "you have less faith in humanity than you want to believe you do."

And of course the same could be said of George Bailey, though he shows it in more minor ways, as when he lashes out verbally at his daughter's teacher. Hoyle recognizes this, speaking of George's "brokenness." Tolkien, too, describes Frodo "failing" at the end, a failure that Tolkien seems to find pretty much inevitable. Sometimes trying to be faithful results in being broken. Sometimes it really is an impossible task. And often, as with Frodo, we have to depend on others in order for our broken faithfulness to have its effect. *The Human Condition* demonstrates how hard—perhaps impossible—it is to act morally and effectively in a society where pretty much everything militates against you. It's a sober, realistic deconstruction of our fantasy of the lone hero against a corrupt culture.

But on the other hand, the ending of *It's a Wonderful Life* shows the proper goal and result of moral action: the formation of a community where people build each other up and affirm each other's dignity. George's reward, at the end, is not merely an arbitrary plot device to make us feel good (though it is a plot device and it does make us feel good).



It's the natural result of his actions throughout the movie, actions that have been nourished by the real though imperfect virtues of small-town America and which have in turn reinforced those virtues, making Bedford Falls not into a utopian paradise but into a place where at least to some extent virtue can flourish and receive its proper reward. We are made for joy. We are made for community. A vision of moral action in which we are only the givers and never the receivers, in which we are expected to grit our teeth and act heroically with no reward, is a vision that, in spite of its apparent nobility, actually results in corrupting moral action into an expression of pride and self-assertiveness.

Christian virtue, grounded in humility and charity, is about receiving as well as giving—about acknowledging our vulnerability and our need for support and affection. Christian virtue is not that of Horatius. It is not Stoic virtue. It is the virtue of the Son of Man who, on the eve of sacrificing himself for the life of the world, wept alone in a garden and longed for the affection and support of his friends. Hoyle says that the message of *It's a Wonderful Life* (and by extension of Christianity) is “Die, and die again.” But the fuller Christian message is, “Die, and live again.” Not only in a life beyond this, but over and over again in this world. Those who give up fathers and mothers and wives and children will, Jesus says, receive a hundredfold even in this life: not in some crass form of worldly prosperity, but in the joyful affirmation of a beloved community.

It doesn't always happen like this, and when it doesn't, then yes, we are called to give ourselves in love anyway. But love finds its greatest fulfillment not in lonely and self-congratulatory sacrifice but in beholding its reflection in the face of the beloved. And that's why the image that stays with most of us from Capra's masterpiece is the closing image of George, holding his daughter, surrounded by family and friends, seeing the reward of his long sacrifice in the faces of the community that would, without him, have inhabited a bitter and despairing wasteland dominated by one twisted old man's greed and ambition. Let's not be afraid to be weak. Let's not be afraid to be needy. Let's all dare to be less Roman, less stoic, more vulnerable, and more open to others in this new year that is upon us.

STAR WARS TRIVIA

- George Lucas' third draft of *Star Wars: Episode IV* included a dialogue exchange taken directly from J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Hobbit*. Given the popularity of Tolkien's works in the 1970s, Lucas would not have gotten away with the plagiarism, and the exchange was removed by the fourth draft.
- A number of *Star Wars* actors have struggled repeatedly with the habit of adding their own sound effects while acting out fight scenes. This has required entire scenes to be re-shot, as it is apparent the actors were making the sounds.
- The lyrics of John Williams' "Duel of the Fates," a musical piece written for *Star Wars: Episode I*, were Sanskrit that had been translated from a fragment of an archaic Welsh poem *Cad Goddeu* (*Battle of the Trees*).
- In the *Star Wars* Expanded Universe, there is a Darth Vectivus, who initially was a businessman running a mining operation but, after experimenting with the Force, ultimately became Dark Lord of the Sith for intellectual reasons.

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Salaam, Maryam

by Adeel Ahmed



It was a simple clay building, with little pomp or decoration. A single girl dwelled within, and the locals called her Blessed Maryam for her piety.

Now, at the dawning of the day, she held her hands up, pressed together in prayer and contemplation. She had done all the recitations and readings as were fitting for her station in life. But In truth, she felt God more in silence. He was everywhere to her, in every sight and every sound, and she found in silence she could simply feel the Almighty flowing into her, filling her very being.

She had been consecrated to the service of God in the Temple of Jerusalem at a young age, and had stayed there until her first menstrual cycle, when tf ritual cleanliness prevented her from remaining. She had been set aside for this reason, in a structure built alongside her father's home in Nazareth, where she could continue her devotions.

Her parents thought she went too far sometimes, stating that if she didn't come out to get food and water she would starve. They were not wrong. She had fainted several times before, only to have her mother find her. Then and only then would she pause in her devotions to take nourishment. Though she enjoyed her mother's cooking, she sometimes grew weary of the constant maintenance of her body. Her soul found it's sustenance in the worship of the God of her Fathers.

Now, as the morning light filtered through her chamber window, she felt her body growing listless. No! Not now! She was in the throes of ecstasy, her very being swimming in forces her mind could not comprehend, yet her heart felt perfectly at home with them.

Oh, please, Lord, she prayed. I don't want to leave my prayers. She stood up, swaying on her feet. She took a step, hitting a clay jug, shaking it. Some water fell from it. She looked down to see the jug, a cup, and an enormous platter of food in front of her, meats, breads, and fruits. She couldn't possibly finish it alone. Maybe someone left it here, and I never noticed, she considered.

Sometimes when connecting with God, she would become lost in a world apart, especially when reciting the Shema.

Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. You shall love the Lord your God the Lord is one. You shall love the Lord your



God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.

Afterwards, when the ecstasy subsided, she would feel the oneness of all things around her, sustained by the Source of all. In such moments, she would feel God's presence through her senses, becoming hyper aware, and she was in such a state just a moment before. How could someone sneak up on her when she was like that? And these didn't even look like her mother's plates. Ordinarily, she would give it little thought, intent on continuing her meditations. But she had never smelled anything this good.

Maybe eating isn't such a bad idea.

She poured some water into a cup. As soon as she took one sip, she realized just how thirsty she was, and ended up downing it in one gulp. As the water entered her belly, it groaned, her hunger kindled along with her thirst.

She lifted a piece of flatbread. It was warm to the touch, and steamed when she tore a piece of it off, as if it were just taken from an oven. She took one of the thin slices of meat, placing it on the piece of pita, then smeared hummus over it.

The savory flavour of her meal was unlike anything she had experienced before. She ate slowly, passively enjoying all she consumed, and thanking her Creator for her daily bread she had been provided through mysterious means. She was still astounded someone would have spent such a great deal of money to have all this prepared for her, especially during hard times such as these. Word had it that the Romans were planning to levy yet another tax.

Her hunger having been satiated, there were plenty of dates and grapes leftover. Most of this would lose its flavour if she saved it.

Someone took the time to bring this to me. It's only proper I do the same. There are many hungry mouths to feed in Nazareth, just as there were in Jerusalem.

She lifted the platter and headed out into the streets.

Yusuf smiled to himself as he strolled along the dirt road. He often smiled out of mere habit, not any particular joy. These days, however, his smiles carried more meaning, more heart. It was because of her.

He didn't have a bad life; he felt blessed that he had been born into a family of carpenters, a vocation he most heartily enjoyed. His work was an end to itself. He didn't brag on his skill. The joy was in building, not the talking. He didn't even charge very much for his wares. Over time however, he realized there was something else he yearned for: companionship.



He had his family, it was true. He loved his parents, siblings, and cousins. But this wasn't the same. He found himself dreaming at night about talking to someone female, not of his immediate family, to complete half of his faith and his life.

And so Yusuf began saving his money to marry of course. His cousin Achem bartered on his behalf, since Yusuf always had a hard time negotiating prices for his wares. He thought all of them simultaneously priceless and cheap, for he put so much love into his works, but wanted them spread wide.

Achem, however, was positive his handiwork was worth a great deal, and very soon Yusuf had more than enough money to provide handsomely for a bride. Achem seemed to try to suck as much coin from patrons as he could, even though Yusuf was uncomfortable with it.

He knew who he would ask, but was all too afraid he would be rejected. She was fifteen years old, and had served in the temple in Jerusalem. He met her parents, and they seemed satisfied with him. Then he had been allowed to speak to her, and she accepted him. His joy was boundless. She was like no other person he had met. She carried herself with such dignity, and her manners were impeccable. But as he spoke to her, he felt more sure of his choice. She wasn't just devout, but also honest. She didn't talk much, but when she did, she would most often reflect upon matters of the soul. At least that was before she met Yusuf, then she would talk about him and his work. She often asked him to build things. He would do so, then she would marvel at his craftsmanship, only to give it away to someone in need. Yusuf didn't mind this at all. The fact she could part with something she materially loved for the sake of others was a blessing.

Transcendent, that was the best way to describe her, always looking upward to the heavens, always seeking something beyond the confines of the world as they knew it. Was her heart like the harp of Da'ud, forever playing psalms to her Lord? Sometimes he wondered why she even bothered marrying him. God was her Beloved.

But then she would see him, and her eyes would brighten. He felt as if he were special, that aside from her family and the poor, he was the only reason she would ever pause in her devotions. She always seemed to make time for him, as if she saw a piece of the heavens within him. In those moments, he saw a special love of life in her, experiencing the goodness of the world in its fullness.

And so Yusuf smiled, intent on seeing his future bride as she spent her life near God. She must be thirsty, he thought as he passed by the well near the gates.

And then he saw Maryam, not in her secluded dwelling, but outside, surrounded by street children, holding a near empty tray



of food.

But of course she would be here, giving things away, he thought.

"Do you know why you're always so thin?" Yusuf strolled up to her. "Because you never keep anything to eat for later."

"Yusuf, it would have been a waste to let it grow stale," she stated, handing out the last loaf of bread to a little girl. "So maybe some people who need it could enjoy it."

"You shouldn't give away your mother's cooking like that," he lectured. "She wants you to keep your strength up."

"It's not my mother's cooking," she replied, cleaning her hands on her smock. "I'm not sure who brought it. But it was very fresh. Very good. Just what I needed at the moment."

"At least you're eating something, I suppose," he sighed.

"Anyway...I made you something. Please don't give it away too."

He pulled out a necklace strung with wooden beads and a pendant at the end inscribed with Hebrew lettering.

"This smells nice," Maryam remarked, taking it from his hands. "Is it sandalwood?"

"Yes. And it's for you. It even has your name on it. So please keep it, will you?" Maryam smiled. "Of course, I will. Thank you."

"Now I'm going to take you back home, and I am then going to bring you more food for later, to save your mother more time in the kitchen. Please avoid the temptation to give that away."

"Says the man who laments the fact he has to charge people for his work, lest he starve. You give away your time and possessions just as much as me," she observed.

"At least I still end up charging for it," he countered. "Besides, beggars often take advantage of you. They pretend to ask for blessed bread at the temple for healing, but it is only for the bread."

"I know," she said softly. "They still needed it all the same." She grinned teasingly. "Besides, I could say the same thing about you. Don't pretend you aren't generous. Elad hasn't paid you for that table since what? Last winter? And then you made him some chairs, which he also didn't pay for."

She kept smiling, and he could swear he saw a light surround the face of his betrothed, as if the sun focussed its rays just onto her.

"I'm thankful you came into my life," he blurted. "He didn't mean to say it out loud, it just happened."

"I am too. I feel a kindred spirit in you, Yusuf. We look to something greater than ourselves, just in different ways. You're so much older than me, but I don't feel so young and inexperienced when I'm with you."

"I'm surprised you ever felt young," Yusuf smiled, "You're like an old lady..."

"I am not!"



“Don’t worry, Auntie Maryam, I’ll make sure to mash up all your food into a nice paste so you can eat it with all those missing teeth.”

Maryam kicked him in the shin.

At the end of the day, she returned to her hut, intent on more prayers and meditations. But an overwhelming exhaustion filled her. Try as she might, she couldn’t pray. She just wanted to sleep. She lay down on the floor of the hut, slipping into deep slumber. Then she saw something. She didn’t usually dream very often, or if she did, she rarely remembered what they were about. But this time it was as clear as utterly vivid. She was not in the desert. It was too green, and the air felt moist. She felt perfectly at home, even though there were trees and plants she had never seen before and a river a beautiful shade of violet. Was it the soil beneath that caused this colour, or was it the rocks?

She knelt down and touched the flowing water, scooping it into her palms and bringing it to her mouth. Only that it wasn’t water, it was wine, the finest she had ever tasted. Maryam usually abstained from strong drink as a part of her routine fasting, and therefore had not developed a taste for it. But she wanted more of this, she wanted to drink of its depths for all eternity.

“Salaam, Maryam.”

She raised her head up, her body stiffened. She was not alone.

“This is but the lowest level of the garden of pleasures which the Almighty

Lord reserves for His faithful servants,” said a voice. “The higher you ascend, the less the mind can process God’s gifts, but it’s sweetness is felt all the same.”

She turned to see a man. No matter how hard she looked at him, she could not get a clear image of his face. All she knew was that he was impeccably attractive in both visage and form. Not in the way the other girls talked about the soldiers and athletes of Nazareth, but in a different way, as if the beauty of an Oasis were put into corporeal form.

All she knew was that it was male. She was not supposed to be alone with one in her chambers. Even Yusuf had never traversed this fair into her dwelling. She now felt fear. Often the worst evil comes in the most loveliest of forms.

“Stay back!” she cried in panic. “I was consecrated to the Lord and served in His holy temple. You will not touch me!” She looked up and lifted her hands. “I seek refuge in the Most Merciful from you, so leave me, if you be fearing of God!”

“Be not afraid! I have been sent by the Lord of Worlds!”

“Are you...an angel?” she gasped.



"Yes. I come to you in the appearance of a man, for our natural form brings terror and madness to mortals who gaze upon it."

"What message do you bring, O servant of the Source of All?" whispered Maryam, her breath quickening.

"It is the will of your Lord that you should bring forth a pure boy, who will be a light of truth to all existence."

"But how can this be, for no man has touched me, nor have I ever been unchaste!" she replied in confusion. "I am dedicated to the Lord alone."

"Nothing is impossible for the One," he responded. "He says 'be' and it is, and all things are decreed according to His purposes. Your offspring will be a sign to the people and a mercy to the worlds."

She prostrated and put her face to the ground. "Behold, I am the handmaiden of the Lord. Be it done unto me according to your word!" She remembered a psalm of Daud she had learned as a tiny child. "The Lord is my light and my salvation, of whom should I be afraid? The Lord transcends existence itself, the One for whom I dream, for whom I long! As the deer pants for running streams, so my soul thirsts for you, My God!"

Mary opened her eyes with a gasp, sitting up in bed, sweating profusely. She felt as if she had been running, her lungs burned, her body hot. She stood up and staggered outside into the cool night air.

"What was that?!" she thought aloud, to no one in particular. She wanted to hear her own voice to ground herself. She knew it had been a dream, but it felt so real. It didn't feel as if she had awakened, but rather the world around her now seemed less than real.

Am I losing my mind? She thought to herself, trembling all over. She got the impression she was locked in a cage with a pack of hyenas, her instincts telling her to run or fight. She felt a warmth in her belly, like there was a comet slowly driving inside of her. Perhaps it was a result of a good omen. Dreams had meanings, many of them from God. She had no idea what this one meant, but she sensed that answers would come if she was patient.

She could not go back to sleep, so she sat down in the courtyard, looking up at the clear starry sky, her hands resting on her flat belly, hoping she would see a comet, like the one she felt inside her.

As the month wore on, Maryam was beginning to believe in the reality of what she had promised in her vision. She had missed her period. At first she didn't know what was happening,



then when it wore on, she became worried. But a whispering in her heart reminded her of the dream. The words of the angelic figure came back to her. This was a gift.

What greater gift is there than a child?

And yet her heart sank. She knew no one would believe her. People saw her piety and simplicity as stupidity, but she knew what everyone would say, what they would think. What would Yusuf think? Dread filled her at the thought of him rejecting her, his soft eyes turning cold and hard. All her life she paid little mind to what others said or thought about her, focusing strictly on her devotions. But then she met Yusuf, and he became the only person who's opinion truly mattered to her, the one she had pledged herself to, the one who had devoted his very being to her. She never thought she could feel so strongly about anything in the world, yet she did. There was a knock on her door.

"Come in," she said.

"Mary?" Yusuf stepped in. "You summoned me?"

"Yusuf, I-yes. I want to talk. Please sit down."

"Is something wrong? Do you need anything?"

"Yusuf, my monthly impurity has not happened for a long time.."

"Isn't this something you should discuss with a woman instead?" he asked awkwardly. "I'm sure your mother can help..."

"No. You don't understand. I'm pregnant. I know I am."

He stared at her for a long moment. "But...that's not possible."

"It should be. But I am. And I know why. I had a dream, Yusuf. A messenger of the Most High came to me. He said that God willed that I bear a son, a pure boy who would bring spirit back to the law. I have to nurture and protect him. But I can't do it alone." Maryam looked into his eyes. "I need your help."

Yusuf simply stared at her for long moments. "I need to think," he got up.

"Please. I need you!" She went down on her knees, hugging his legs. "I can't bear it if you turn away from me!"

"I need to think!" he snapped in frustration.

He walked out the door, and Maryam began weeping.

Yusuf stormed through the streets. He was not an angry person by nature, but now villagers swerved out of his way as he walked through the street. He walked out of the town gates, and kept walking a half hour deep into the desert until he came to a collection of palm trees, a place only he knew about. It was where he would go to seek solitude.

How could she do this to me?

His pride, something that was never an issue with him, was wounded. But more than his pride, his heart was broken. And yet



he still could not believe it in his heart, she was too focussed, too perfect. She did not like to touch wine, and she was almost never alone with any man, save for tonight. Until this day, the closest Joseph had to being alone with her was delivering food, and even then it was out in the open at the entrance of her little prayer hut. And she was Maryam! The purest of woman in all of Judea! The answer to his prayers, a gift from the heavens granted only to him, a bride who's beauty could not be contained within a body, the light of her soul more blinding than the desert sun.

Am I holding her in too high a standard?

But he could not help it. If he could not trust in her, then he would not be able to trust anyone again. If she was not holy, then nothing was holy. And he simply could not look at her and see anything even close to capable of deception or betrayal. And so an even more painful thought came to mind. What if some man had hurt her? He had heard of such stories in the Torah. Mary was never alone, but she was not surrounded by guards either. His imagination took him to terrible places. The images of a burly man dragging her into a barn assaulted his mind, and he felt anger pulse through his veins.

Why didn't she tell him? Perhaps she was ashamed. Perhaps...

"Yusuf?" said a shaky female voice from behind him.

"Maryam?" He turned to see her. Her face was streaked with tears and her cheeks and eyes were puffy. Her lip quivered as she looked at him.

"Do you hate me now Yusuf?" she whimpered.

"No," Yusuf wrapped his arms around her. He wanted to wait until marriage to embrace her, but now he felt she needed him, his protection.

"Who hurt you?" he whispered into her ear. "Who did the unthinkable?" He stroked her head. "My poor beloved Maryam, my light."

"No one hurt me, Yusuf," she insisted. "I told you, God gave me this child. God has protected me. No evil has touched me. "I just want you to believe me. Please, I need you. Please..." He knew then she was telling the truth, for no lie or manipulation has ever been uttered from her petal-like lips.

"I will take care of you," he said at last, holding both sides of her face. "You are to be my wife. You are my responsibility." She leaned her head against his chest, crying tears of relief.

Before her belly started to show, Yusuf built Maryam a small hut to live in at the little oasis, regularly bringing food and supplies for her. She felt more grounded to the things of the earth than ever before, as if heaven were breaking into the



mundane world and sanctifying it in a wholly new way. She looked forward with great anticipation to the moment when this precious life growing inside her would be brought forth, and she would hold him in her arms. She found her thoughts often distracted by speculation. What colour would his hair be? What about his eyes? She marveled at the thought of seeing herself in this singular gift from God. The months passed, and her time drew near. Yusuf was busy in town, and Maryam sat beneath a palm tree, tired from walking about the desert. She had heard once that the more fit she was, the better it was for the little one inside her. It kicked her as she sat beneath it, such a strange sensation.

And then there was pain, as if she were having cramps from her period, something that had only rarely happened during her months with child. She touched her belly, felt the child kick within. Then sighed with relief. Another wave of pain. Another cramp. She felt the baby kick. Good. It did not matter what pain she was in, as long as her precious child was safe. And then her skirts became wet. Frantically she checked if it was blood, only to find it as something more akin to water. The child was coming. There was another cramp, and then even worse pain, so overwhelming she cried out.

"Oh Lord, I am alone," she whispered. "Am I going to die?" It wasn't supposed to be like this. She was supposed to be inside her hut, with Yusuf by her side, holding her hand, giving her water, talking to her and soothing her as it all happened. But she was outside in the middle of nowhere, alone with the sun beating down over her under a tree that barely gave shade. She was completely vulnerable, a hyena or wild dog could easily come at her, and there was nothing she could do. She couldn't even run.

There was another contraction, and she screamed. And when it was done, she found herself sobbing. She knew another one was coming, and then More and more. She wondered if she had the strength to take it. She was so thirsty. She moved her hand to find water bubbling up from the sand beside her. Strange. She did not remember it there before...

She gave it little thought, bringing the cool liquid to her mouth, panting as spasms slowly built up in her. She moaned as her whole body began to shake.

"Please, ease the pain," she prayed, "or strong me strong enough to endure it."

Then her brow cooled as the shadow of the palm tree was cast over her. A gentle wind stirred softly over her, cloaking her body as a mother soothed a child. A sense of peace filled her heart. The pain was temporary. The joy would be eternal. It seemed as if one of the branches had lowered itself just for her, and grabbed a date off the tree. She had everything she needed right here. She closed her eyes. She would cry out still,



but not as loudly, letting the pain undulate without any fixation on it. Her heart focussed on the child within her, this living comet with it's bright light and shining tail of light, this shooting star. Humanity went their whole lives wondering what God had intended for them, what God's gifts truly were. But she knew, and she would endure.

She didn't remember what happened, or how many hours passed. But the contractions ended, and she heard the cries of her child. When she lifted him up, he stopped crying. He recognized her. It knew her smell and her heartbeat. She had heard babies did not see very well after being born, but he seemed to gaze at her as if he recognized her. She did not know where she gained the strength, but she carried her child back to their shelter, and found a knife to cut the umbilical cord. She winced from the pain of moving so soon after birth, then sat down on the bed. The baby patted her lightly with its hands.

Then there was a surge within her, a new vitality. The parts of her body torn and injured from childbirth had been mended. She put the baby down and parted her clothing to look at her belly. The skin once loose had tightened, her belly flat as if she had never been pregnant in the first place. Then she laid down on her cot, and brought baby Isa's tiny mouth to her breast. He latched on in a strong and healthy manner. And as her beloved baby boy fed, he looked up at her with love.

He healed me, she thought. Perhaps that is a gift bestowed upon him from the Almighty. This gift must be shared with the world.

She stood up and headed back for town.



The Islamic Perspective of The Virgin Mary and Jesus the Messiah (Peace and Blessings of Allah be upon them)

BY SYEDA KAUSAR

The Holy Personages of the Virgin Mary and Jesus the Messiah are highly revered in Islam, so much so that a heart devoid of belief of them, invalidates the faith of a Muslim. The Holy Quran, the Muslim Holy book states the name of Jesus, 25 times, and there is a whole Chapter named after the Virgin Mary. The Virgin Mary is highly praised for her piety and chastity in the Holy Quran:

“And [mention] when the angels said, “O Maryam, indeed Allah has chosen you and purified you and chosen you above the women of the worlds. O Maryam, be devoutly obedient to your Lord and prostrate and bow with those who bow [in prayer].”” (Al Qur’an 3:42 – 3:43)

There is a narration in relation to the Verses of Chapter Mary which were read to the Christian King of Abyssinia. At the time of Prophet Muhammad (Peace be upon him), life in Makkah had become intolerable due to the campaign of hatred by the Tribe of Quraish. An envoy, Jafar e Tayyar son of Abu Talib was sent to Abyssinia to highlight the persecution being suffered at the hands of the Quraish. The Quraish emissaries were also present at the court of the King Negus, presenting disparaging statements against the new Muslims.

King Negus beckoned the envoy Jafar e Tayyar to present his case before his court. The King was impressed and was eager to hear more. He asked Jafar:

“Do you have with you something of what your Prophet brought from God? Please read to me”. Jafar, in his rich, eloquent voice recited for him a portion of Chapter Mary.

In the Name of God, The Merciful, The Compassionate

And mention in the Book ‘O Prophet, the story of’ Mary when she withdrew from her family to a place in the east, screening herself off from them. Then We sent to her Our angel, ‘Gabriel,’ appearing before her as a man, perfectly formed.

She appealed, “I truly seek refuge in the Most Compassionate from you! ‘So leave me alone’ if you are God-fearing.”

He responded, “I am only a messenger from your Lord, ‘sent’ to bless you with a pure son.” She wondered, “How can I have a son when no man has ever touched me, nor am I unchaste?”

He replied, “So will it be! Your Lord says, ‘It is easy for Me. And so will We make him a sign for humanity and a mercy from Us.’ It is a matter ‘already’ decreed.”

The King Negus was very impressed and in awe upon hearing the Noble Verses and invited the new

Muslims to live in the land of Abyssinia in peace as long as they so wish.

The Holy Quran also mentions how the Virgin Mary was slandered by the community by the birth of Baby Jesus.

So she pointed to the baby. They exclaimed, “How can we talk to someone who is an infant in the cradle?”

Jesus declared, “I am truly a servant of Allah. He has destined me to be given the Scripture and to be a prophet. He has made me a blessing wherever I go, and bid me to establish prayer and give alms-tax as long as I live, and to be kind to my mother. He has not made me arrogant or defiant. Peace be upon me the day I was born, the day I die, and the day I will be raised back to life!”

The Holy Quran -19:29-19:33

The status of Jesus , son of Mary is one of veneration for the Muslims and cannot be truly magnified in this brief perspective.

Not only does the Holy Quran state the miraculous birth of Jesus the Messiah , but also numerous Hadith (Oral Traditions) from Prophet Muhammad (Peace be Upon Him), state fine details of the Return of Jesus the Messiah.

The Return of Jesus the Messiah will be at a time when the entire world will be in a dire situation and will return to defeat the Anti-Christ and will restore Peace and Justice on Earth.



Eternity Begun

Meditation of the Trinity

By Sean Earner

The dead can be our friends and mentors, perhaps even more fundamentally and intimately than those we live and work with everyday. We have many invisible brothers and sisters who watch us serenely and compassionately, household gods of the spirit. Such is the glory of the communion of saints. Life and words do not perish in the moment they are done, but resound from immense to immense. The holiness of those who have already gone behind the veil is not of a merely ghostly memory that haunts the present like a guilty conscience. Rather, it is a light of companionship which both warms and cools the heart, preparing it for war with the powers, readying it for love in the interior palace of the mind that all legends and fairy tales gesture towards.

St. Elizabeth of the Trinity, a lioness God, like Teresa of Avila, Catherine of Siena, and Edith Stein, is such a person. Her time was short, cut off in her youth like Therese of Lisieux, but it bore much fruit. Separated from the world by her vows to the Discalced Carmelite Order, her distance made her more aware of the essential foundations, choices, possibilities of life. Having become nothing to herself, she could do everything in Christ for those who struggle along the way in all walks of life. The daughter of a soldier, like the centurion who encountered Jesus in the Gospels, she knew the finality and weight of commands, and knew how to answer each silent order with joy and greatness of spirit. Elizabeth of the Trinity, again like Therese of Lisieux, remained a child of God despite knowing how dark the night of the soul could be. But she did so in a manner that provided a voice that was noble as well as trusting. She found the "heaven of our soul" where God delights to dwell, and in self-knowledge she could bear any suffering and believe all things.

I discovered her 6 years ago just before Christmas while visiting the Carmelite monastery of Holy Hill in Wisconsin as part of the process of discernment. I already had spent several years examining various orders and dioceses, looking for a home and a calling, often feeling much disappointment, but persistently rising to try again. Drawn by the delight in the writings of the contemplatives of the Carmelite order, I turned in that direction with a new sense of expectancy. In my heart of hearts, I was too bruised by prior rejection to be overly enthusiastic, but I remained hopeful. And something in the air and in my soul at that time seemed to promise an unlooked for boon. The words of St. Paul in Romans, then and now, often came to mind: "We know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose."

And perhaps I was just beginning to understand what that verse meant truly for the first time. The communal peace of the brothers, the beauty of the surrounding Midwestern landscapes, and the order of regular prayer in the upper chapel where the faded but unconquered sun peeked through the glass at noon during the short winter days put me in a mood of receptivity. There was holiday preparations happening throughout the monastery and surrounding grounds, imparting a new ease and cheerfulness to all routines. It was one of those moments in which the world seemed to cohere in a blessed unity of thought and action, personal time and collective time, full of promise and hope. The silence facilitated the ritual acts, and the ceremonies in turn summoned me into the presence of a God I had too often forgotten, and still forget again and again. Above each visitor's door the friars had put a seasonal quote. Mine was one from St. John of the Cross; "The Virgin, weighed with the Word of God, comes down the road: if only you'll shelter her."

I intuited the meaning of this mysterious phrase with giddy excitement, buoyed up by my routine devotion to Mary, in whose person I had so often seen the high calling of all of humanity according to the new dispensation. Mary was not just the Mother of God in history, but the ever present, ever fruitful openness of all our race to the divine rain that has been so long in both arrival and departure. God the Eternal could manifest now, without delay, if only I could greet Him with my own Ave and Fiat. It was in this mood that I discovered Elizabeth of the Trinity, still three months away from her canonization. Her collected writings were a part of the Carmelite library in all the rooms for guests. Among the familiar writings of the Little Flower, John of the Cross, and Teresa of Avila, I noticed her unknown but evocative name. It was like discovering by chance a treasure of great price in a field. But also as if it had always been meant for me, and me alone, with all my humanity, hopes, and fears. I had already fallen for St. Therese of the Little Flower; with Elizabeth I found a similar spiritual beauty, the same mark of the Carmelites.

But she brought out news depths of the nature of God, with a military sense of la gloire, stripped of the personal details of her more famous contemporary. She had truly left the domestic scene of father, mother, and siblings behind and had wandered deep into the woods of contemplation. And chief among the things revealed to her was the living, present reality of the Triune life of God.

The Trinity is a doctrine which seems often to only be a negative framework in which we mainly learn the ways in which to not talk about God. But with Elizabeth the domgas became a part of a positive, ecstatic discourse of worship of the threefold divine life that with Christ Himself had come down from Heaven to give joy to our earthly condition. Elizabeth wished her title in Heaven. to be *laudem gloriae* (praise of glory); she spoke with such eloquence about the depths of she makes the reader herself want to join in the festival of charity. And thus Elizabeth revealed herself to me in those quiet December hours in between prayers with the brothers, Mass, and interviews with the vocations director. The dramatic poetry of Claudel, the philosophy of Edward Feser, and the last words of St. Therese mixed in and further deepened this new found friendship with the dearly departed.

I read her words greedily and with excitement. But what struck me most was the a passage from *The Last Retreat*, her final work before her death:
"Nescivi.' 'I no longer know anything. This is what 'the bride of the Canticles' sings after having been brought into' the little cellar.' It seems to me this must also be the refrain of a praise of glory on the first day of a retreat in which the Master makes her penetrate the depths of the bottomless abyss so that he may teach her to fulfill the work which will be hers for eternity and which she must already perform in time, which is eternity begun and still in progress."

In particular the passing phrase "time...is eternity begun and still in progress" resonated in my ear like a melody I had always known but had forgotten. The latent monologue that I had carried on with myself, spun from years of accumulated joy and pain, was given words. I was suddenly permitted by the words of a saint to take seriously what in myself I had considered a dubious sentiment at best. This statement sounds, on the surface, more like a gnomic formula from a German Idealist philosophical treatise than something a cloistered nun would write. But in reality, Schiller or Hegel could not have written such a line, or if they did, they would have meant in the opposite sense. They would, despairingly, want eternity merely to become immanent in becoming as its Golgotha, its death, instead of remaining faithful to the hope that the temporal itself is being raised up into the glory of the incorruptible. Instead of the levelling equality of the atheistic theologians of Germany, Elizabeth intended an equality that elevates.

Instead of an auto divinization (and thus, in effect, secularization) of worldly human reality as the “real” sacred, what is celebrated by Elizabeth of Trinity is a marriage in which the two parties of Godhead and humanity marry, becoming one without ceasing to be two. And this spousal union of a pair is itself sustained by the higher economy of three in one found in the Trinity.

Understanding each person of God relates itself in time, guided by the spirit of Elizabeth, helps us to understand better how the eternal can coexist with the finite without one swallowing up the other. The life of the Trinity reveals the manner in which time is eternity begun. The Spirit assembles the Church into a living witness to the infinity of the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, set to gather the lost sheep with the blood of the lamb. The Son ties together mankind and the Creator by taking on our flesh. Finally, the Father’s generosity is reflected back by the world and humanity alike as in a mirror where a face can be seen, however darkly. The temporal is sacralized without the destruction of the consecrating power. The Pope blesses the Emperor, without either bending the knee to him, or annexing the latter to himself.

As with many of the sayings of the mystics, we find much confirmation of Elizabeth’s words by just taking seriously the ordinary content of orthodoxy and orthopraxy. The clearest case for how the eternal is made in the case of the Holy Spirit as presented by the testament of Scripture and Tradition. From the fire that has been poured out into the Church on Pentecost to the flames, however small, that are kept alive around the world by the faithful, the kingdom is made manifest on earth.

The brotherhood of believers makes the Lord present and visible, despite the distance of the Father and the pre-apocalyptic occlusion of the Son.

Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us. (1 John 4:11-12)

The ethical life of neighborly care and mutual aid is not a mere afterthought in the economy of salvation. It is an essential part of how God’s love is given, returned, and known. The brotherhood and sisterhood of the saints clearly imitates the self-giving of the Trinity. They forever share the good freely and find neither satiety nor lack.

But this divine charity also is made concrete in the sense that we can relate to the sinful and the forlorn as members of the body of Christ. Wherever the least amongst us is present, and wherever the elect dwell, God can be found. The person of Jesus that walked through ancient Palestine has been taken from our eyes, hidden behind and within the sacraments of bread and wine. But through the Church the long siege of the eternal against the city of the Prince of this world can be continued.

The Son is the ring that binds Heaven and Earth. He is the most open and yet most mysterious sign of the work of the Trinity in the realm of time. Through the incarnation the temporal was fully made eternal while we remain still distinctly creaturely beings, swimming like fish in the sea of divine peace. The incarnation is the climax of the process that was set in motion by the primordial revelation of the Father in creation and continued in the work of the Spirit in the Church. As St. Paul said so eloquently in his letter to the Colossians:

The Son is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For in Him all things were created, things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities. All things were created through Him and for Him.

This union is not the modernizing heresy of Hegel and company that portrays the descent of the Messiah to man as the abandonment of the divine to the world, revealing that God was dead from the beginning all along. Rather, it demonstrated how the divine wine maintains its distinctiveness without being lost or diluted by the contents of the world. Rather it has the miraculous power to turn ordinary bland water into itself. The corruption of the grave did not conquer Jesus, but Jesus overcame death itself. And in doing so He has shown the way to live like a god in the world. The philosophers of the Greeks sought to make themselves impervious to pain by focusing on the citadel of finitude that could defy the endless hordes of suffering through self control, either through virtue or pleasure. But Christ took up the unending task of self-giving so that the endlessness of pain in this world can be surpassed by the greater infinity of glory. And this is not a task too great for us, but one that is easy and light when done with our Lord.

Highest, perhaps, of all such mysteries is the manner in which the eternity of the Father is revealed by time. The Father is commonly thought of as the most untouchable member of the Trinity. Hence there is the common presentation of Him in artwork as a monarch, a lordly patriarch, in relation to His incarnate Son and the dove. But we should not forget that we who have seen the Son have seen the Father, and thus the common divine life was also present at the Birth, Cross, and Resurrection.

The Father did not take on human flesh, He did not come down in Power upon the Apostles and the Mother in Jerusalem. But in His giving of the Son and the Spirit, He has manifested Himself as the One in time who shines with indifference upon the good and bad alike, expecting nothing in return. His impartial generosity shines through creation and salvation history. This points to the saving separation between His transcendent life and our own which allows a gift to be given. He knows our frailty, yet He loves us anyway. And in this, the Father allows us to be

nothing in relation to Him, but also to be free to love and loved in return. As Jean-Luc Marion said eloquently in his brilliant work of negative theology *The Idol and Distance*:

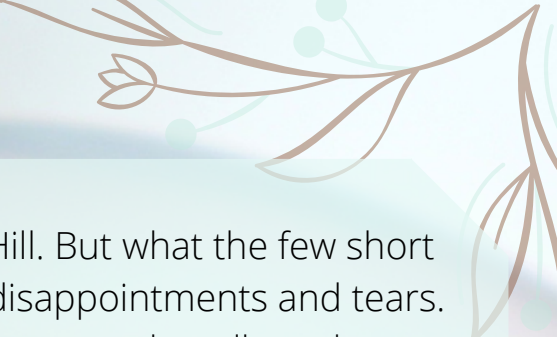
To for-give Being it's inanity is to abandon to it it's proper field as a gift which receives itself. Being has no more 'why' than the rose-but only forgiveness can grant it that one not impute that absence to it as a fault. Only the distance that gives for nothing, unless for the pleasure of a grace, forgives Being it's inanity, and gives it the chance to abandon itself to a game without reason. That vanity should become a gift without reason-only distance can give this to Being, because distance alone, which abandons itself to these gifts, knows how to recognize in Gelassenheit an icon of charity.

Vanity of Vanities is the world and its ways; yet in the divine permission that it be such an airy light and insubstantial thing we find a mercy that is sweeter than life itself.

Whenever we recite the Lord's prayer, we ask again and again for the empty breath on which our existence depends, and which we can not provide for ourselves. We are known, and in this knowledge the Father Himself is known.


Thus, with the inspiration of St. Elizabeth, we are drawn to see how eternity already dwells in the temporal in a way that honors the threefold nature of God, through the Church, the Incarnation, and the Paternal gift of life. Each element of our existence in time corresponds to the persons of the Trinity. God is beyond the world, but emptied into all the richness of His interior life.

This finding of the Trinity in the world under modern circumstances by Elizabeth of the Trinity had and has implications for the wider life of the Church. The sacralization of everyday life in the 20th century throughout post-Tridentine Catholicism can be traced in part, strange as it may seem, to the influence of Carmelites, particularly via Therese of Lisieux, but also through our dear Elizabeth. By making their simple sacrifice the center of their life, with their little ways, inconspicuous in the eyes of the world, the conception of Catholic sanctity was democratized. You don't need to flee to a monastery to become like Therese or Elizabeth. You only had to read their words with a sincere heart and a willing mind to enter into the chamber of the soul that the dear nuns had prepared before you had even known it was there. The honorable reputation of the contemplative life raised the value of the mundane, while the holiness of the mystic love of God increased the dignity of love in general. To this we can thank a deeper appreciation and integration of the Trinitarian life. The heights of theological speculation led the soul to the strength to live the ordinary, apparently unheroic life well.



I was not ultimately accepted by the Camrelietes at Holy Hill. But what the few short days that I spent with them gave was a prize worth many disappointments and tears.

My latent trust in divine providence was given a noble language that allowed me access to the secrets of the heart as well as the mind. Whether I became a monk or a chaste layman, a father in the order of the spirit or the father according to the order of the flesh, God would be with me. I remain open to the trumpet sound, regardless of which direction it comes from. The Trinity is within me and around me, and the world is a theatre covered with grand sets and whispering symbols in which the King of Kings can manifest His glory. Let me only be a good actor who can answer gracefully to each cue, and I can join Elizabeth in an eternal act of praise.



Spot the Difference Answers

Below are the answers to
the 12 differences in our
spot the difference game
from the Winter Newsletter
- did you find them all?



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The next themed issue will be on the subject of Life, Death, and Rebirth. If you would like to submit a piece for consideration, we are looking for non-fiction, fan-fiction, original fiction, poetry, literary & media analysis, artwork/photography on any topic. Each piece must be a maximum of 3500 words long and must also subscribe to our submission guidelines - which can be found on our website;

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**...AND, AS ALWAYS, THANK YOU FOR
READING!**

