

Fellowship & Fairydust

A warm, dimly lit living room. In the center is a dark wood fireplace with a clock on top. To the left, a Christmas tree is decorated with lights and ornaments. To the right, a lamp with a beige shade is lit. In the foreground, a round wooden table holds a small candle in a holder. The candle has the letters 'F&F' on it.

CHRISTMAS
ISSUE

Fellowship & Fairydust

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Fellowship & Fairydust

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EDITOR'S NOTE

Embracing the Christmas season in a spiritually meaningful way often proves to be difficult in the face of near incessant commercial distraction. Too much stuff and too little substance clogs our senses and can give us a crippling case of holiday vertigo. But at the heart of even the most garish displays of flashing neon lights and synthetic sparkling snow, there is a wondrous enlightenment at work. Christmas, Yule, Hanukah, and many winter feasts and festivals across the spread of religions, cultures, and historical epochs serve as what the Buddha famously called “a finger pointing to the moon”, and bear testimony to the presence of a light that darkness cannot destroy.

In the womb of death, when our ancestors struggled for survival in freezing climates and starving times, we are drawn to celebrate rebirth. Mother Earth slumbers beneath the snows of introspection, as do we as the cold bears down upon our souls. And yet we are called to awaken from slumber and view the world through eyes restored to consciousness and a heart purified of egoism. We learn that we must lay ourselves down to pick ourselves up again. We must die to be reborn. Just as in nature, so it is within us. As above, so below.

Is not the fingerprint of the divine borne out, in so many different ways across the broad, sweeping snowdrift of time and space, at the cross-section of the ageless Chasm? Celtic bards called it “the fire in the head”, the pulse of man’s yearning, and “the spark in every creature’s eye”, as all of creation yearns for the return of the Green Man who lost his throne to the Holly King when the Wheel of the Year turned. And yet there is still hope.

“All is growing and expanding,” begins the Winter Solstice greeting. “Blessed be! The light has come!” It touches upon the spiritual expansion lying at the root of these winter festivals, that part of us which glories in light and warmth and longing and waiting. For Christians, this reality parallels with the coming of Christ into the world as a tiny infant shivering in a cattle trough, and a brilliant star that heralds the night of His coming. It this most vulnerable of forms, we unmask the divine. “I cannot fear a God who made Himself small for me,” said St. Therese of Lisieux.

But there should be more to Christmas than just the celebration of Christ’s birth. It should serve as the beginning of an epic that transforms our inner world, and the rituals of Advent serve as the prologue whereby we prepare for the first spellbinding chapter. There’s a thread running through Christmas that ties into so many other Christological elements, including that of the Divine Lover and Suffering Servant, in concert with the poetry of St. John of the Cross, whose feast aptly coincides with the Advent season on December 14. He speaks of night not as a thing to fear, but as a place where union with the divine may be sought out: “O night, thou was my guide! O night more loving than the rising sun! O night that joined the lover to the beloved one, transforming each of them into the other...”

This depth and dimension often gets overlooked in favor of an over-sentimentalized version of the season. It is a three-dimensional sort of depth, set against the backdrop of pain and poverty in a harsh landscape. It is brittle bleakness in the bleak midwinter, bearing up against the frosty wind, iron ground, and stone water. The elements have given up their ghosts, and seem to be suspended in a state of waiting, waiting for the light, the breath, the rush of some solitary stirring that speaks of life’s return. Humanity is led astray and held in bondage by the powers of evil, and yet God will submerge Himself in the darkness of a cave to be born of us in flesh and blood.

Some early Christmas carols can capture this stark freshness, like the sting of the winter air on our cheeks. English carols in particular hold the deepest resonance, seeming to be imbued with mist, and rain, and soil, and sea. It is freshness of light piercing dark for the first time, of song piercing the silence, and the sky being rent by angel trumpets and an infant’s wail. It is the town crier making his rounds: “Past three o’clock, and a cold frosty morning! Past three o’clock! Good morrow, masters, all!”

We are being called out of our comfort zone to go out and sing it alone into the night, and into the moon, and challenge the dark; to brave the winter chill and sing the old carols at the top of our lungs, talking to the emptiness of the night. “Darkness, you can’t frighten me; I’ll walk into the heart of you, and I’ll sing because

your reign is ending.”

That is the empowering aspect of the season. Making a reference to Disney’s *Frozen*, we feel the urge to banish our fears and cry out, “Let the storm rage on; the cold never bothered me, anyway.” But in our case, the cold really *has* bothered us, and our fears *are* ever so real. But we now unearth the sparkling treasure chest of grace, hidden in the hardened ground. Our souls are burning bright within us from anticipation as the lid opens.

We are drawn by the purple breath of flame, and the glinting steel of the snow with an intensity that gives us but a small glimpse of our yearning for a greater reality. We look to the evergreen and the holly to show us that the woods will turn green again. We keep vigil through darkest of nights to await the return of the newborn sun of fire and the infant Son of God. We light our candles round the Advent wreath or on the Menorah, one at a time, with longing licking at the stems and melting the wax of our hearts. We remember a star’s transcendence and the oil that would not run dry.

C.S. Lewis called this awe of something greater than ourselves something “numinous.” Christian mystics such as St. Teresa of Avila have encountered it in its most intense form as a transreverberation, that ultimate sense of finding heaven on earth, crossing time and eternity in a mystical marriage of agony and ecstasy with the divine. Hunter’s horn beckons, and angel’s dart pierces us through. “Deep is calling on deep in the roar of waters,” so the Psalmist says, who yearns for the divine presence as a deer yearns for running streams.

When the world falls silent, we can hear the surging of our own souls, and a trickling beneath the ice. We can strip off our superfluous outer garments and dive into the depths of ourselves. Like the Eastern Orthodox Christians of Russia and the Ukraine, we can bathe in the icy waters to melt our hearts. In the words of the Sufi mystic Rumi: “Be melting snow. Wash yourself of yourself. A white flower grows in the quietness. Let your tongue become that flower.”

And surely that is the only way to truly reclaim oneself, is it not?

Winter brings with it a need to reflect internally, to go deeper within ourselves, and emerge with the meaning of life. For it is when we are stripped from our exterior possessions, when we find ourselves becoming lean, that we discover the weight of what is left. We discover the worth of our interior treasure. We cultivate this through the telling of tales that wake us up and thaw us out and perhaps leave us something nourishing to see us to the spring. So it was within ancient long houses and tribal fires, where the deepest flames of inspiration were stoked and bards wove their yarns so the people would not be afraid of the dark.

And we continue the tradition of storytelling this holy season in the spirit of fellowship and communion with one another. I would like to extend my warmest good wishes and holiday blessings to all of our writers and readers who make this outpouring of creativity possible. I look forward with high hopes to another coming year of literary adventures!

Merry Christmas!
Avellina Balestri
Editor-in-Chief
F&F Publications





**Merry Christmas
& Happy Holidays
from all of us at
Fellowship & Fairydust
Publications!**



HIS GIFT TO ME

By Hannah Vincent

Every night a different traveler passes through the town,
Seeking out a place to lay his dusty and weary head down.

The inn provides an oasis from the dirty road
As men, women, and children relieve their shoulders of their
loads.

The simple fare we serve seems to keep their bellies satisfied,
But they never stay for long and my daily playmates always
leave my side.

I hear the men's raucous laughter and see a mother holding her
child,

And the mess these travelers leave causes my *eema* to be riled.

My *abba* laughs and presses a kiss to her cheek,





And I cover my eyes but sneakily take a peek.

Although there is excitement day after day at the inn,
I feel a sense of loneliness creep through my heart amidst the
din.





All these people pass on through and never stay
And I wish I could get to know them before they go away.





My soul longed for a playmate, a confidante, a friend,
And little did I know who that dusty road would send.

The sky was empty of stars on that gale-swept night
And the darkness was interrupted by stormy bursts of light.



And the darkness was interrupted by stormy
The folks in the inn crowded together,
Eating and drinking but never minding the weather.
We were completely full, every room occupied,
My *eema* bustled to and fro and I never left her side.
Later in the evening *Abba* answered a knock at the door,
Flinging it open, stinging rain pelted the dirt floor.
Just over his shoulder I could see a girl shivering,
The donkey she rode trying to stay strong despite his own
quivering.
I could not hear their voices, but her innocent eyes rose
And I saw in their dark depths that she knows...
She knows there is one more space, so I set down my platter on
the table,
And running to my *abba* I announced, "We have a stable."
He hesitates, but I push through and take the lead,
My parents' worried calls from the inn, I do not heed.
We stumble into the stable, disrupting the animals' sleep
And the man helps his wife down as she begins to weep.
"Thank you, thank you," she cries as her young hands clasp my
own,
And blessedly my *eema* arrives while the girl lowers herself
with a moan.
Abba attempts to make the stable an acceptable place
And the husband of the young woman has a smile on his face.
The girl labors quickly and pushes forth new life
And the squirming babe wails while the man gazes at his wife.





I watch in silent wonder as my *eema* wraps the baby
And the thought crosses my mind that possibly... maybe...
Maybe this infant can be my friend, as foolish as it sounds,
Then his newborn gaze catches mine and my heart firmly
pounds.

He radiates love, joy, and peace thirty seconds after birth
And bottomless joy fills my being as I sense his great worth.

"This boy is special, yet unknown to most of mankind";
This marvelous thought seeps through the back of my mind.

I know he will be my friend for all the years to come
And that notion causes my pulse to quicken and thrum
Without knowing this little one gave me the greatest gift
And nevermore would my heart suffer a painful rift.
I contemplated what the man and young woman would name
the boy

But I suppose only time would tell;
However, I heard a whisper of a name in the depths my soul:
Emmanuel.



Snowflakes

By Aconitum-Napellus

Flake after flake drifted down outside the clear aluminium window. Jim had said they looked like stars. They did not look like stars. Stars moved with predictable regularity, more precise than clockwork. If Spock looked at a star and closed his eyes, he would know exactly where it would be when he opened them. Admittedly, with the distances involved, it was unlikely the star would have seemed to have moved at all to the naked eye, but magnify the time to an improbable length even for the lifespan of a Vulcan, and he would still know exactly where that star would be.

If he looked at a snowflake and closed his eyes, there would be no telling where the snowflake would be when he opened them, or even which snowflake it was. The vagaries of air movement, temperature, pollution in the atmosphere—they would all have their effect on where that snowflake would be a few seconds later.

But all of these snowflakes were falling to the ground and together they were making a soft, chill blanket over the earth. For this was Earth. This was the North American continent—Canada, to be more precise, and in the room behind him McCoy was reaching up to hang baubles on a freshly cut green conifer, and Jim was in the kitchen making mulled wine. The scent was rather attractive to him, although he had not admitted that out loud. He had always been fond of Earth spices, not only because they were different from Vulcan spices, of which there were many, but also because they reminded him of his mother. He remembered her baking cinnamon cookies and gingerbread. He remembered her using cloves and nutmeg and paprika and allspice. The scents coming from the kitchen now brought him back vividly to a time when he had been eight years old, past the Kahs-wan already, bonded to T'Pring, a full member of Vulcan society, and yet still a child.

He remembered standing there in the kitchen in the big cool house outside of Shi-Kahr, his head about the height of his mother's elbow, watching her as she stirred ingredients in a bowl carved from soft stone. Outside, the desert heat shimmered against the windows, but inside a cooling breeze fluttered, directed through the thick-walled house by many artful vents and fans that were worked by the heating and cooling air. And his mother was making cookies, and reminiscing as humans seem to love to do.

'I remember when I first came to Vulcan, Spock. This was before your father and I were married, and I was staying in a small place in the city. It had such thin walls. It was one of those turn of the century apartments, and it was so hot inside. I didn't cook anything, couldn't face a hot drink let alone a hot meal. The very air was hot in my lungs. I yearned for a proper old-fashioned air-conditioning unit, and the landlord only told me that on Vulcan one must become accustomed to heat. That it was illogical to install air-conditioning when the temperature outside was so high. I would become ill going from one to the other. I could have slapped her, standing there without a bead of sweat on her face – but of course I didn't. I didn't realise then that Vulcans were just as capable of scamming as anyone else. She didn't want to pay for air-conditioning units. So I put up with the heat. I drank a lot of water. I survived on salad and fruit. And here I am now, making cookies. Do you want to taste the dough, Spock? Tell me if I've put in enough cinnamon?'

Of course he wanted to taste the dough. Had one of his colleagues from school walked in, he would have been mortified at being caught licking the spoon his mother handed him, but of course he wanted to taste the dough. Raw cookie dough was one of the great pleasures in life. That, and calculus.

Every snowflake that fell outside the window was made from smaller flakes, each of those smaller flakes unique.

Despite the depth of his understanding, it still seemed amazing to Spock that he could live a lifetime and never see two identical snowflakes. But then he thought of his mother, and it made sense. He had occasionally seen people who looked like his mother, some a little like her and some so much like her that he had given a second glance. The galaxy was filled with humanoid individuals. But never would he meet one who replicated her entirely. Never would one have the precise pattern of her irides, the precise tone of her voice, all of her memories and thoughts and potential, all packaged together in the same person.

Even though Spock had lived and died and lived again, he didn't think he would ever get used to the loss of his mother. He remembered her more strongly at times like this, at such human times, surrounded by human traditions here on Earth, the precipitation coming from the sky made of Earth water and falling on Earth ground. There was such a melange of traditions here. McCoy was decorating the Christmas tree, although he did not believe in God. Jim had placed a menorah on the windowsill and lit the candles, although Judaism was slightly overshadowed by a history of Christianity in his mixed family history. Humans seemed so capable of drawing all these things together, bending to change, encompassing other beliefs. They barely even remembered the pagan rituals that demanded the tree, the log, the fire.

Some humans, he reminded himself. There were still those humans who clamoured for the status quo, who argued that the Mars Colonies should only be open to settlers from Earth, that Starfleet was a human organisation. But the majority of humans bent and flexed and survived. Here were pagan traditions wrapped in Abrahamic traditions wrapped in atheism, all in the same house. He didn't have any Vulcan traditions to add, not for this time of year. There was not a cold season, as such, where he came from on Vulcan. There were no short days and long nights. There were no reasons to light flames and shoot off fireworks and to feast to

stave off the cold and dark. There were rituals for other times, for the driest times and the hottest times, mostly; rituals that no Vulcan would ever admit were illogical. But there was no Christmas, Diwali, or Hanukkah.

He remembered how his mother had been after his rebirth. Thin, elegant. She had reminded him of a crane, or perhaps a heron. She always seemed to wear greys and blues as if she were reminding herself of the Earth sky and the Earth seas. Her hands had been so thin and delicately boned. He remembered the sinews of her neck and the pouching of her skin that led down to a chest that had lost its fullness. That mother who had baked cookies had had full lips and breasts, smooth skin. She had been the picture of health and happiness. And after his rebirth she had been happy, too, but there was very little that modern medicine could do in the end about aging. In the end the body could go on no longer. Bones and skin thinned, became paper-like, brittle, tired. Hair lost its colour. Even the eyes seemed dull.

Flake after flake drifted down, and Spock pressed his hand against the cold pane, thinking of his mother and how much she loved snow. They had spent a couple of vacations on America's east coast and Spock had experienced Earth winters, but mostly he remembered the sparkle in his mother's eyes and the red of her cheeks when she went outside muffled in scarf and gloves and hat, towing him behind her on a sled and promising him that snow really was fun. He remembered sitting on that sled in the biting cold, clenched between her thighs and with her arms on either side of him, shooting down a hill over the glistening snow, and hearing his mother whoop. She had never made a noise like that on Vulcan, never. She made him think of the flowers that come up in the desert after the rain. The snow had brought her to a peak of vitality.

His memory was odd and tattered after his rebirth, but some things he remembered so clearly that it was like watching a hologram in his mind. Snowflakes were not like stars, he thought. They were like his mother. Unique and beautiful, and so painfully short-lived.

Down in Yon Forest

By Michael J. Carroll

(Inspired by the Christmas folk song, "Down in Yon Forest", Bella Hardy, Martha Tilston, and Bernard Cornwall's *The Last Kingdom*)

A blanket of crisp yuletide snow caresses the hamlet. Smoke rises up from the chimneys of the wooden houses nestled in the Valley of the Teign. The dawn is breaking and there is light in the windows. Snowflakes caress every vestige of life, and the first of God's children rises from her slumber. Her soul stirs as she awakes, for she is profusely and profoundly in love, because today is the day when the gentle Christ Child reigns in all hearts. She kneels before her bed in pious adoration for her Lord Jesus. Her prayers ascend with the chimney smoke that floats heavenward like incense above the forest. In this corner of olde England, the pagans are put to flight as peace is laid upon the land. King Alfred's isle is won for the Christ Child this holy day. Throughout this sceptred realm, the Incarnation reigns as impious imps are turned into stone, and only love remains.

Her transcendent morning prayers are assumed into the vaults of heaven, as the Queen of Heaven looks down and beholds a small heart on fire with such sincere piety. The saints of the medieval age look on from the Throne of Grace and give praise for this blessing. God's loves shines upon her overflowing grace-filled heart as angels are dispatched to the forest to deliver the gentlest of consolations this yuletide morn. Soul ablaze with the love of the incarnate one, her heart is illuminated by holy fire. Aloud, she marvels, "Such a small Child in swaddling clothes is the hope of all mankind. I love my Lord Jesus above everything. How can it be that my Lord Jesus loves me? How can it be that my good Lord endows my soul with such sweet consolation this day?"

Purple is the colour of the King Child's robes this morning. White is the mantle of the land all adorned. Red is the colour of the maid's shawl as she runs through the forest floor. She hears bells of paradise and hurries to the church as angels flock gently down from the heavenly realm to assure her safe passage through the bough-laden path.

The valley is filled with the call to worship, while in the church sacristy, a priest vests in the precious 'chasuble of the Lord's Day'. Men and boys come to serve at the altar, in the presence of unblemished King. Our maid is radiant with a bride's love this Christian morn as she awaits the Lord Jesus at the Wedding Supper of her beloved Lamb.

All praise to the Lamb on this Christmas Day,
The Lamb who came to take my sins away.
St. Michael attends by the altar side
The bread to be transformed and sanctified.
Let pious hearts won by Christ sing,
"I love my Lord Jesus above everything."



Snow Daze

By Yatzstar

Christmas of 1998 was a raucous event at the Burrow. Molly Weasley had invited just about every wizard there was, it seemed, and that only added to the disorder that came with seven children.

Severus Snape stood outside, ankle-deep in the snow. He wasn't sure why he had come. Normally he spent the holidays alone, but there was a certain jovial air this Christmas that was inescapable, even by him. He attributed this to the fact that Voldemort was dead and gone for good, and the wizarding world was free. No longer was he bound in service to the Dark Lord, and no more would he risk his life.

He had only meant to step out for a moment to escape the organized chaos of the (admittedly well-made) Christmas dinner, but he found himself enraptured with the peacefulness of the winter snowscape. He had always enjoyed the stillness and quiet the snow brought with it, and even more so now with the loud atmosphere of the Burrow. The Weasley home did bring with it a strange homey feeling that he found himself enjoying, but regardless, it felt good to just step out of the whirlwind of Christmas and into the stillness of winter.

So there Snape stood, the cold biting at his cheeks as he took in the view.

Not more than a few minutes later, Harry Potter stepped outside the Burrow, intent on collecting bowls of snow to pour sugar over and eat. However, he was diverted from his task when he rounded the corner of the house and sighted Snape standing some distance away, a dark sentinel against the pure white snow.

Harry almost called out to him, but stopped himself as an evil plan began to form in his mind. A younger Harry Potter would never have dared to do such a thing, but he was older, and the animosity he once had with Snape was in the past. Smirking to himself, he deposited the bowls and set about his plan.

Ron stuck his head out the door. "Oi, mate! What's taking so long?"

"Shh!" Harry hissed at him. "Come here!"

Ron hurried over to where his friend crouched in the snow. "What are you doing?"

"Keep your voice down!" Harry gestured to the corner of the house. "Snape is over there, and I'm going to get him good with this snowball."

Ron took a quick glance at Snape's figure before looking back at Harry. "Have you gone loony? He'll use an Unforgivable on us if you do that!"

Harry rolled his eyes. "No, he won't. Besides, he needs to lighten up a little. It is Christmas." Before Ron could argue further, he rose, a snowball clutched in his hands. He snuck around the corner, inching a few feet forward so his chance of missing lessened. He poised himself to throw at the Professor's back.

Snape's hand shot out. "Accio Potter's snowball!"

Before Harry could process what was happening, the projectile had flown from his hand into Snape's. The dark man turned to face Harry, eyeing the snowball with something like contempt.

"A feeble attempt at a snowball, Potter," he said after a long moment.



Harry stared. Instead of saying something about the fact that he had obviously tried to pelt him with snow, Snape was critiquing his snowball as if it were a bad potion in class.

"I-it's not bad!" he spluttered.

Snape raised an eyebrow. "Really?" He tossed the snowball into the air and it immediately broke apart, resulting in a small shower of snow. "Contrary to popular belief, I was once a child, Potter, and I think I know a good snowball when I see one."

"Well, how would you make one, then?" Harry shot back.

Wordlessly Snape pulled forth his wand with one hand and stretched out an open palm with the other. He made a waving motion and a small amount of snow flew up from the ground, coalescing in his palm and forming a perfect sphere.

"Like so, Potter," he said tonelessly.

"Wow," Harry blinked. "That's—" He did not get a chance to finish his sentence, for his mouth was suddenly full of snow. Snape had thrown with deadly accuracy.

Ron nearly slipped and fell flat as he laughed at Harry's hysterical expression.

Even Snape's mouth twitched upwards. "If you learn nothing else from me, let this be the one thing you do," he said, sounding amused. "Never cross me when it comes to snowballs."

Harry scrubbed at his face, shouting, "You're on!"

As the snowy battle began, Ron ran forward, eager to join in. "Hey, I'm coming too!" Whap! Two snowballs hit him in the side of the head.

"Where are those three?" Molly Weasley clucked in disapproval. "It's time for dessert and Harry hasn't brought me that snow!" Muttering to herself, she bustled from the Burrow, promising woe upon the boys who were holding up her dessert.

As she stepped outside, the sounds of shouts and laughter drifted to her ears. When she rounded the corner, she was greeted with the sight of Harry, Ron, and Snape chucking snow at each other from across her backyard. Harry and Ron were doing most of the shouting and laughing, but Snape (encrusted with his fair share of snow) looked to be enjoying himself.

"Severus Snape!" Molly called, arms akimbo. "I never thought I'd see the day when you would be frolicking like a child!"

"I am not frolicking, Mrs. Weasley," Snape said, somehow managing to maintain an air of dignity though snow was all over his clothes and hair. "I am merely teaching these boys how to make proper snowballs."

She managed to keep a straight face. "And then throw them at each other, I assume!" Without waiting for an answer, she snorted as she took in their disheveled appearances. "Come inside. It's time for dessert, and it seems I'll have to get my own snow."

Harry and Ron started after her, still laughing to themselves, when as a final parting shot, one more snowball smacked against each of their heads.

Harry rounded on Snape. "That's not fair, Professor!"

"Life isn't fair, Potter," said Snape, though he was smirking as he dusted himself off.

"Whatever," Harry grumbled, though he was smiling.

They all went inside to the warmth and happiness of the Burrow and enjoyed the rest of their Christmas Day. Over the years it became a tradition, and it seemed that it wouldn't be Christmas without a snowball fight between them.



Light, Love and Laughter

By Vanessa Parry

Sam stood on tiptoe to ring the bell hanging beside Bag End's round green door. As he waited for what felt to the youngster a very long while, he studied the sky. It was overcast and he hoped Old Widow Rumble was right when she had told him that it would not rain today. A loud groan of hinges announced the opening of Bag End's door and he spun about to discover himself face to weskit with Mister Bilbo.

"Hello, Sam. What brings you out on this cold afternoon?"



"Beggin' your pardon, Mister Bilbo, but Da sent me to ask if you was needin' any greenery for the yule decoratin' in Bag End. Only me and Halfred and Da is goin' into the woods to collect some."

Bilbo smiled down at the lad. "How very good of you. But I wouldn't want to put you to any trouble. I bought a few sprigs of holly at market yesterday." He bent down to whisper, "Between you and me, they're a bit straggly, but they'll do in a pinch."

Samwise drew himself up to his full height to announce with some certainty, "Oh, my big brother, Halfred, knows where there's some mistletoe and Da always finds the best holly bushes. Nobody else knows about 'em. We can bring you some pretty stuff."

Bilbo considered for a moment. "Very well. If you think you can manage to carry enough for Bag End as well, yes, I would love some."

Sam beamed. "We're goin' to take the handcart so we'll be able to get lots." He spun about to race back down the hill, shouting over his shoulder, "Goodbye, Mister Bilbo!"

Bilbo closed the door, pausing once inside to chuckle at the exuberance of the very young.

Frodo stepped out of the parlour, hefting a set of ladders. "Was that Sam Gamgee?"

"It was. You had better leave those here, for it seems we are to have lots of decorating to do upon his return."

Frodo sighed with relief as he leaned them against the wall and blew hair out of his eyes. "I thought you had decided not to do too much decorating this Yuletide."

His comment was met with a sniff. "Well, I've changed my mind. Come and help me mix the Yule pudding. Then we need to put some oil on that door hinge."

Frodo grinned. There was just no telling what Burglar Baggins would do next. That was one of the things he liked most about his uncle. Bilbo could be infuriating, absentminded, even self-absorbed upon occasion, but he was never predictable.

It was dark by the time Sam, Halfred, and their father, Hamfast Gamgee, came ringing at Bilbo's door again. Light spilled out from the hallway to reveal a handcart piled high with the deep, glossy sheen of holly, the vibrant glow of red berries, blue green spikes of sweet scented pine, and pale green and white clusters of mistletoe.

"Oh my! You three must have worked like an army of beavers to collect all that in just a few hours."

Ham chuckled. "T'were a hard afternoon's work, I'll grant you, but 'twas worth it. Just let me know how much of this you've a fancy to, and me and Halfred will bring it in for you. No sense in all of us getting scratched." He held out his hands to show liberal smears of blood amongst the grime.

"Oh, dear. Holly does not like to be cut, does it? But shouldn't you find out how much Bell needs for your smial first? I know how she loves to decorate for Yule."

Ham and Hal began tugging at the holly. "Oh, she's had her pick, and Daisy and May are goin' to be busy tonight, I can tell you," Hamfast assured him. "No, Sam. Don't you go touchin' the mistletoe. Leave that to the grownups."

"Just pile it in the corner over there, if you would," Bilbo advised. "I think just one clump of mistletoe and perhaps half of the holly and pine that you have there." He stood back as Hamfast and Halfred began dragging branches into the hall. "How much would you like for them?"

Frodo appeared from the kitchen, blinking when he saw the green bounty. "Hello, Master Gamgee, Halfred. Surely that is not all for us?"

Hamfast paused to acknowledge the young master before adding a large clump of mistletoe to the top of the heap. "Bless you, Mister Bilbo. I don't want no money from you. Look on it as a Yule gift from the Gamgees to the Baggins."

Halfred winked. "We'll sell the rest at market tomorrow. There's always someone leaves it 'til last minute, and 'tis much better than the stuff Sandon Grubb was sellin' the other day. I reckon this were an afternoon well spent. Mayhap we should try it every year."

Hamfast tutted. "Not every year, lad. Give the poor trees time to regrow. It don't pay to be too greedy with nature." He touched fingers to his forelock. "We'll say goodnight, sir. My Bell will be waitin' supper on us and no doubt you'll be wantin' yours." He nodded to the wooden spoon in Frodo's hand and the lad grinned.

"Goodnight, Hamfast. And thank you for the gift. I'll see you at the celebration tomorrow."

Hamfast and Halfred headed back down the hill with their much lighter cart while little Sam Gamgee skipped on ahead to number three.

oooo

"Have you the kindling bag, Frodo?" Bilbo grunted as he made final adjustments to the huge oak log in the parlour fireplace, setting loose a soft expletive when one of the sprigs of holly decorating it scratched his wrist. "Here, Uncle. It took some finding. What was it doing in your study?" Frodo held out the small hemp bag and Bilbo opened it, scattering ashes and small lumps of charred wood from last year's yule log around the base of this year's.

"I seem to remember having an idea for a translation that I was working on at the time. I thought I'd better write it down before I forgot, so I set the bag on my desk." Bilbo shrugged. "Then things got away from me, and for the rest of the year I just kept moving it from place to place."

Frodo giggled. "You mean, from pile to pile."

Both Baggins stood back to admire their day's labour. The mantle and window sills were all but hidden beneath swags of holly and pine, with a few pinecones and some red ribbon bows for good measure. Sprigs of mistletoe hung on either side of the freshly scrubbed fireplace, and pale candles stood ready in every sconce. The room was filled with the scent of greenery laced with beeswax, mingled with the spicy richness of mulled wine and baking that drifted in from the kitchen.

Bilbo clapped his nephew on the shoulder. "Not a bad job if I say so myself. Is the bonfire ready down the hill?"

Frodo nodded. "I helped Mister Gamgee haul up the holly crown myself. It looks rather grand. We didn't have that tradition in Buckland. Is it true that everyone will be coming to the bonfire?"

"Oh, yes. All are welcome at the Yule fire." Bilbo glanced toward the window. "Speaking of fires, I think I see the first star, so we'd best light our own. Being top of the hill, so to speak, it all starts with us."

Half a dozen eager steps brought Frodo to the parlour window. Sure enough, although it was getting dark, not a candle showed down in Hobbiton. "Goodness. It looks so sad with no lights. But for the kitchen chimney smoke, you'd think it was deserted."

Bilbo took flint from his pocket and bent to the hearth, beckoning Frodo to join him. "Then let's make sure they don't sit in darkness for much longer." He struck flint to the kindling in the hearth and blew gently. The wood shavings caught first, their edges shimmering yellow as each curl burned from outside to centre. Soft wisps of grey smoke drifted through the larger twigs and soon they caught, spitting and cracking. The charred wood from last yule's log kindled next, its light more blue than yellow as it licked at the green of the holly leaves decorating this year's. Finally, the yule log began to char. It had been drying out for weeks so that it would burn well, but it was the bark that took first, whistling as steam escaped through cracks, followed by tiny spurts of yellow flame. Keeping another for himself, Frodo handed his uncle a twig of dry holly, its leaves curled and brittle, for it had been cut some days before.

"Time to say goodbye to the old year, lad." They knelt together before the fragrant fire for some time, each contemplating the events of the past year. Both smiled softly as they came to the independent conclusion that there had been more good than bad. It was Bilbo who leaned forward first, flicking his holly into the growing flames. Frodo followed suit only a moment later.

The older hobbit clapped his hands and grinned at his nephew. "Now that we've dispensed with the old year, let's start the new one." He selected a twig from the kindling basket, lighting it from the fire and then setting it to the wick of a large fat candle offered reverently by Frodo. As the golden glow began to light their faces, they recited the yule blessing together.

"May we have hearth to comfort, fire to cook, and candle to guide us home."

Frodo stood, shielding the delicate flame as he crossed to the window and placed it in a lantern set amongst the greenery; Hobbiton's first light of the new year. Bilbo brought another lantern and its candle was lit from the one in the window. Frodo ran into the hall to collect their cloaks as his uncle took a moment to place a wire guard before the fire.

As they made their way down the hill, Frodo saw folk drifting out of their darkened smials, to stand in their gardens. Someone from each smial held an unlit candle. Bilbo stopped at the gate of number three. "Yuletide greetings to you, Hamfast."

"And to you, Mister Bilbo."

Bilbo opened the door of his lantern and Hamfast reached in to touch his candle to the one burning warmly within. As the wick caught, Bilbo bowed, intoning, "May you have hearth to comfort, fire to cook and candle to guide you home."

Frodo saw now that the whole Gamgee family was standing in their darkened doorway. Bell stepped forward solemnly to light a candle from her husband's and, followed by the girls, took it indoors to light their own yule log and set a lantern in the window of number three's kitchen.

Hamfast stepped on down the lane, followed by Frodo and Bilbo, to where Harry Mugwort waited at the gate to number two Bagshot Row. Ham offered greetings, then repeated the blessing as he watched Harry light his own candle and pass the flame to his mother, Clover Mugwort. The yule log was lit at their home and the flame passed by Harry, to Arty Sedgeburry.

Slowly the yule flame passed from hand to hand. From their high point halfway down the hill, Bilbo and Frodo watched little pinpoints of golden light bob from smial to smial, spreading outward along all the lanes of Hobbiton. Frodo was reminded of a morning glory, spreading open her petals to the sun. Soon a candle shone in every window and a log blazed in every hearth.

Then the light merged from single points, to groups, and then lines as it contracted once more, converging upon the Party Field at the foot of the hill. The residents of the hill formed a golden river of their own that moved off to merge with others until there was a long candlelit procession, with Bilbo at the front. Excited fauns skipped along at their parents' side whilst others, too sleepy, were carried in fathers' arms. Kitchen chairs were dressed with ribbons and pressed into use to carry the old folk and, here and there, a good-natured jibe was muttered about dropping some particularly cantankerous aunty. There would be music and singing on the way home, but now there were only whispered greetings and the occasional reedy voice of a faun.

All Hobbiton formed a circle about the huge bonfire in the Party Field, waiting.

Once more it was Bilbo who stepped forward with his lantern. Lifting out the candle, he pushed it deep into the centre of the holly-crowned pile that stood three times as tall as a hobbit. Once more smoke curled, wood crackled, and an orange glow began to peep through the carefully stacked branches and logs. Youngsters cheered as the first sparks flew heavenward.

Other candles were lobbed into the growing blaze as folk joined hands about the fire. With one voice the cry went up,

"Tis the time of endings.

Tis the time of beginnings.

Health, Hope and Happiness.

Light, Love and Laughter.

Prosperity and Peace to all!"

Bilbo turned to hug those closest and found Frodo. "Health, hope, and happiness, lad."

Frodo's bright eyes brimmed with life and he grinned as he was released. "Light, love, and laughter, Bilbo."

Bilbo drew him into another hug. "Prosperity and peace to us all."

Behind them someone struck up a drum, and the first few notes of the Yule Circle sang out from a fiddle. Bilbo grabbed Frodo's hand, and Buttercup Rumble took his other as all around the fire a circle was formed. A chord was struck and the circle began to move as everyone's feet trod the age-old pattern.

His feet long-used to the ancient measure, Bilbo used the time to watch his nephew. The lad's face was filled with a light that had nothing to do with the glow of the fire about which they danced. Bilbo had to shout to be heard over the voices of the singers. "I'm so glad you're here to share Yule with me this year, Frodo!"

Frodo's face broke into a joyous grin. "Oh, so am I, Uncle! So am I!"

Their voices joined the chorus while, before them, the bonfire sent showers of golden sparks upward to blend with Elbereth's silver stars, wheeling in their own ageless circle about the night sky.

The Gift of the Wise Men

By Ariel Klay

More than gold, frankincense, and myrrh, the greatest gift the wise men offered the babe Jesus was their worship. In the hustle and bustle of the Christmas season, it can be so easy to get caught up in the frenzy and forget what this holiday season is all about, love come down from Heaven. So let us examine the method and focus of the wise men's worship and remind ourselves, in Charlie Brown's words, "What Christmas is all about."

The wise men gave the gift of time to Jesus. They did not come from around the corner, but from the East, about a two year journey away. There were many things these men could have been doing, but they felt that honoring the Babe was the most important thing, and in making the trip, they demonstrate their priorities. We can also worship God by offering our time to our loved ones. This is a time to honor the Babe by offering our time and undivided attention to our loved ones who need *us*, more than another sweater.

The wise men gave the gift of giving honor when no honor was required of them as gentiles. They were not Jews who would have been required to honor Jesus. They were most likely from the region known as Babylon, however, they probably knew about the God of Abraham, most likely through stories about the time of the Jewish exile in Babylon, such as those dealing with the prophet Daniel. So they respected the Jews and their God, and thus wished to give Him their worship. In this season, we can honor the Babe by offering respect to those who are different from us. We may not agree with what they do or what they believe, but we can respect the person and remember that God made and loves that person. What better time to demonstrate the love of God than when we celebrate how God extended His love to us in the form of His Son!

Finally, the wise men gave the gift of kindness by heeding a dream to avoid King Herod on their return journey, thus giving Jesus and His family time and funds to escape (remember the gold?). Thus Christmas is also a time to reach out to the vulnerable among us who need our compassion. Again we can show the same kind of care God gave us when He sent the Babe.

Worship is the gift of the wise men, which they extended in the form of time, respect, and kindness to God and humanity. Let us emulate these men from the East not only at Christmas, but all year long.



Glimpse

By Jonathan Francesco

My name is Daniel Jonathan Hall, but everyone calls me Danny.

And I'm dead.

Yes, literally deceased. I know, sometimes I still can't believe it myself. I was only eleven-years-old when a very bad man killed me. It doesn't matter why he did it anymore, or all the things that led up to it. He's been judged and I am at peace with what happened.

But not everyone is.

It's Christmas Eve again on earth. In heaven, we see things differently than everyone on earth does. It's clearer. But we can usually only help out everyone on earth by praying. People get so upset and make very bad choices because of only seeing part of the picture. I wish I could do more to help them, but Jesus often reminds me that every person is given everything they need to make the right choices, even if earth eyes are dimmed a little.

When I died and saw Jesus, all of the pain I'd felt my entire life felt like a bad nightmare I could barely remember. It was like this was how it was always supposed to be. I was even able to see my mom and dad again. But I still left people behind. Good people.

Some of my close friends were able to heal. They're growing up and doing good things. I get to watch them from afar and we still talk, even if I am just listening from beyond. But it's different for others. No matter how hard I pray, sometimes even my hardest prayers don't seem to help their anger. At the man who killed me. Even at God.

The doc saved me. When he found me, I was in a bad place. Like how he is now. I was angry, too, but he gave me a home. A family. He was a second dad to me. A second family. When I died, I think something in him died too.

His name was Doctor Charles Pepper. Yes, like the soda, but it wasn't planned. His parents just had the last name Pepper, and he became a doctor when he grew up. We always got a good laugh about it.

He married a great lady before I died, and she was going to have a baby. This is their second Christmas with him, but the first one where he actually is old enough to understand at least a little. Little D.C. is named after me and the doc—Daniel Charles. It made me feel good to have just a small part of me live on. The doc loves his new son. I can see that.

But even though this is a time he should be happy, he's still mad about what happened to me. Now it's almost Christmas and I am worried about him.
That's why I am back on earth.

I'm not a Christmas angel. Humans don't become angels when we die. But I am in heaven, so I guess that makes me a saint. In heaven, there is no more pain or sorrow. But sometimes, God lets me see the suffering of those I left behind. He says one of my gifts was a heart that could love and understand anybody, even the people so many can't or don't want to understand.

And while I am not an angel, and
it's true that people have to work
things out by coming to Him of their free
will, God knows that sometimes they need a little
help. That's where I can come in. Sometimes. Kind of
like what angels do in movies, only I'm just a boy.

I don't have a body anymore. They buried mine. I'll get it back one
day, but for now I sort of have some physical manifestation of my spirit.
People don't really have a word for it yet. But if God wants to, somebody
can see me and I look like a person, and you can't walk through me. You can even
kind of touch me, but not really. I don't quite understand it myself, but usually it's
okay. Last week, I visited a boy who was going to kill himself in England. I talked to him and
helped him realize that killing himself wasn't going to give him what he wanted. I could see in his
eyes that I got through to him. No matter how good somebody is at hiding stuff, eyes tell a lot if we
just know what to look for.

I have been down to help my best friends before, and even the doc a little. But this time, I've been allowed to get
a bit more involved. I don't know for sure if he'll be able to see me or not. I'm not even sure if it would be better if
he did. I just want to take away his pain. It's Christmas Eve, and he deserves to enjoy the life he's been given.

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I walk down the street to his house – the place that was my home for my last year alive. It's all decorated for Christ-  
mas like I remember it. Lighted garland down the posts. A beautifully illuminated life-sized nativity on our lawn. The  
only difference is a new wreath on the front door. It complements the cherry wood nicely. At least he still decorates  
for their sake, even if I know he doesn't want to.

As I walk up the freshly shoveled walkway, I see the front door open. For a split second I feel the impulse to duck  
aside to avoid being seen. Then I remember that nobody can see me unless God wants them to. Out walks one of my  
two best friends – Mason. He was there when I died. He was like a brother.

He's smiling his usual enthusiastic smile as he skips down the steps. He turns back to wave to the doc. "Merry  
Christmas! Remember, two o'clock tomorrow. Don't be late."

The doc smiles. "We'll be there." His voice is worn. "Promise."

Mason salutes and strolls down the walkway, brushing against me. I can't quite explain what it feels like to be  
touched when you don't have a body. It's not sensory but it's real.

He stops and turns to look right in my direction. I've visited him before, but can he see me now? I turn and  
look right in his piercing blue eyes. Those same eyes that my own were looking at when they stopped  
seeing.

"I know you're here," he smiles. "I don't know where, but I know you're here. I still check in  
on him for you, Danny. He misses you." His eyes well with just a hint of tears. "He's  
strong. He's going to be alright. Just keep watching over him."

"Thanks for checking in on him," I say.

But he walks away before I can finish. Even if he knows I'm here, he  
still can't hear me.

I see the doc standing by the door, watching until  
Mason is out of sight. I can almost see the  
thoughts going through his head, of when  
Mason and I used to go off to hang out  
together. His eyes tear up. He'll



never see us do that again.

He starts to close the door.

I hurry up the steps and squeeze in before it  
shuts.

He goes to his chair and takes a seat besides the Christmas  
tree. It's the only thing lit in the living room besides the fireplace.

I always loved Christmas trees. This one is especially nice, with soft,  
creamy colored lights from top to bottom, a valiant star on top, and keep-  
sake ornaments full of memories dangling between the glowing colors. Very  
little outside of a church on earth can capture a glimpse of what heaven is like. But a  
Christmas tree is one of the things that can.

D.C. runs into the room. I didn't even realize he started walking. The cotton feet of his sleeper rub  
against the carpet.

He drags along his stuffed puppy and shoves it on the doc's lap before hopping on himself. "Stowyttime."

The doc forces a smile. He pulls D.C. into a hug and strokes his ever-thickening auburn hair. "What story would you  
like to hear tonight?"

"Baby Chesus!"

His voice is so clear. And so innocent. The night before Christmas when most little kids only care about Santa, he's  
asking about what really matters. And he's not even two. They're teaching him well.

I smile as I watch the doc tell him the nativity story. For a few minutes, the sadness disappears. He's like he always  
was with me. D.C. is asleep before the magi even get to the manger.

The doc's wife comes into the room. Susan. "I better put him down." Her voice is still the prettiest thing I remember.  
She's still perfect for him.

She takes the sleeping child from his arms and wraps him in hers in a way only a mother could. Like Mary held Jesus  
that first night. In heaven, we can see everything so clearly. It's amazing how despite being God, His infancy was so  
much like everyone's. So pure.

The doc watches them as she climbs the stairs humming *Silent Night*. His eyes sparkle the reflection of the tree's  
lights. For a moment, I can see he can almost forget. Almost be as happy as I want him to be. As this beautiful family  
should make him every minute.

When they are upstairs, he gets up and walks to my picture on the mantle. He picks it up and stares out the  
window. "It's been over two years," he says aloud. "I thought I moved on." He strokes the picture gently.  
My face tingles a bit, a phantom memory of what it was like to have my face touched.

He picks up a picture of the three of them. "I love them so much and sometimes it feels like I  
have a normal life. But then when it gets quiet like this, just when I least expect it, it all  
comes back. And then I'm right there again, holding you, and wishing somehow  
you'd start breathing again. That I'd have you back. To be part of our family."

I reach out to touch him. "I am still here. I always am."

He puts the pictures back. "I thought I was past this..." He starts  
off down the hall. To his office. He closes the door behind  
us.

The office is so much plainer than I remember.  
No pictures. No decorations. Not even of  
D.C. and Susan.



He sits at his desk and opens a  
drawer. He pulls out a gun.

A sudden jolt. I never thought he'd ever even  
think of this. Of using that on himself. Not after he  
talked me down from taking my own life. Not when he  
has a wife and son he loves more than anything. But here he  
is, holding it, letting the barrel drift close to his heart.

I rush to him. I try to take the gun away. My hands slip right through it.  
It's still his choice. But if I'm here, there has to be something I'm able to do.

He starts crying as he waves the gun around. "I just wish this day would be over. This  
damned season."

"No, it's beautiful." I take his face in my hands, praying that somehow he would see me. "You  
should be happy about it. With D.C. and Susan!"

He presses the barrel of the gun against his chest. "Everything is just so heavy tonight." His breaths come out  
almost like heaves but with a sharp silence that makes them almost echo. "I don't know how to keep going like  
this."

"No! Doc. You have to stop it." I throw my arms around him. Tighter. He has to feel something. Anything.  
"Danny?"

His eyes widen. He looks around but doesn't seem to notice me.

I pull back and stare into his eyes. For a second, I see hope in there. Then it fades and they're dark again.

He exhales and closes his eyes. "I know you're watching. Somewhere." He opens the barrel of the gun. It's not load-  
ed. "I'd never do that to them. To you. That's why I don't load it. I'm afraid I wouldn't be strong enough if I did. But  
some days I want to. On nights like tonight when everything inside of me seems to be trying to strangle me, this  
seems like the only way to make it all stop. I know it's a lie, but it calls to me nonetheless. Sometimes I'm okay for a  
while. Even for months at a time. I can get so caught up in doing everything else. In being alive. But then I remember.  
And then breathing burns my chest. I don't know if I'm ever going to just feel normal again. I've been to church. I've  
tried praying so hard. I've done everything they've told me to and yet no matter how much I tell myself otherwise...I  
so feel abandoned. I just want to love them without missing you so much. But I don't want to forget you either.  
What terrifies me as much as not loving them enough is one day waking up and forgetting what your voices sounds  
like. Your face. My arms around you. I've prayed so hard, I don't even know what I'm praying for anymore..."

"I've been praying, too. For you to feel better. It was working. I thought you were doing good."

I hear a clink at my feet. I look down and see something shiny. The doc doesn't seem to hear anything.

I reach down and pick it up. It's a pocketwatch. My pocketwatch. The one the doc gave to me  
on our last Christmas together—our only Christmas together. It was his father's. They bur-  
ied it with me. Even though he had a blood son who deserved it just as much, he'd  
given it to me and made sure it would stay with me.

I can feel it in my hands again, like I was holding it for real. For the first  
time. Like I did that Christmas. I feel those emotions again. That  
feeling of true belonging. Like everything that had happened to  
me didn't really mean anything now that I was loved. If  
only I could make the doc feel that way again. And  
never let him stop feeling that way.

If only he could remember how blessed  
he was. He knows. I'm sure he  
knows. But the pain makes



him forget.

I take the watch and try to place it in his hand. If he could just see it, maybe he'd remember. Oh please God, if I'm here for a reason, let him see it.

I feel his hand take it from me.

I stand back and watch him examine the watch. "But... how? We gave this..."

He shoves the gun back in the drawer like it's on fire. "I'm sorry, Danny. You'd never want to see me like this." He runs his hands across the surface of the watch. "I don't know how this is here, or even for sure what it means. But somehow, I know you're behind it. This is totally you. You want me to be happy again."

"More than anything. You're alive. They're alive. Be happy. Remember me, but be happy." Tears roll down my face now. There are no tears in heaven, no matter how much we see. It all makes sense there. But here, even those of us who have been there can feel it. The reality of pain. Like Jesus felt all the pain in all of history when He became one of us.

I wrap my arms around him. Somehow, he has to feel me. "Doc... Dad!"

He turns to me. "Danny?"

"You can see me?"

He nods. "I think I can. I'm not even sure right now what I'm seeing. You look...I don't even know how to say it."

"I know it hurts. But you have so many gifts. Real gifts. I'm waiting for you. You can see me again one day. But don't waste any more of your life being angry."

"How could I argue with what I know? With what I've tried? Every time I think I've moved on... Christmas is just so hard."

"I know. But that's why I'm here, to remind you that it's okay. What happened to me was a bad thing, by a very bad man. But it happened. There's no way to change it. In the end, it didn't matter. We'll still be together. Forever. One day. You just have more work to do around here. D.C. is wonderful. Beautiful."

"I can't look at him without marveling at him. So young and he's already so advanced. But then I think about how good a big brother you would've been. How you would've loved him."

"I still do." I tense my lips. "Nothing I can say will make it better. You know everything I need to say. It just hurts so much. Right?"

"Will I ever feel better?"

"There's no pain where I'm at. You can come one day. But until then, you can still be happy. God has so many good things He wants to give you. If you can just let Him."

"I'm trying. I've been trying so hard."

"I know you have. And asking you to try harder is just...wrong. You're trying as hard as you can. All I can ask is that you keep trying. Maybe...when you least expect it. It'll hurt but the hurt will make you want to help."

The doc nods. "Maybe..." He looks down. "You have to go, don't you?"

"I think so."



"Are you really here? Or am I  
dreaming? Hallucinating. Going mad."

"Do you believe I am here?"

"I believe you are with God. I don't know what to believe about whether when I feel you, or even see you, if it's really you reaching out from heaven. Or just... me? Just wishing..."

I nod. "That's okay. You don't have to know. As long as you believe. I still love you. He still loves you. They love you. No matter how much it hurts, always remember that. Always live like that's true, and you'll always be able to fight the hurt. The pain. You showed me that. I hope one day I can show you, even if it is from a distance. Then again, it's not as far away as it feels. It's closer than anything you can get here. So much closer. Merry Christmas, Doc."

His eyes fill with disappointment. He can't see me anymore.

He gets up and walks out of the room. I follow him down the hall. Up the stairs as we run our fingers across the garland and the colored lights. To where D.C. is sleeping in his crib.

Susan is standing over him smiling. "He went out like a light. We should get the presents out soon. He'll be up early."

"I know," he says. "Just wait a little bit longer. I want to watch him a bit."

He stands next to her and gazes down at their sleeping child. "He looks so peaceful."

She turns to him. "You're thinking about Danny?"

"Is it that obvious?"

"It's Christmas. I think it's kind of a given."

"Sometimes I think about doing some very dark things because it hurts so much. All the progress I think I made..."

"I feel it too. When I least expect it. When I'm supposed to be happy. It's okay. It's to be expected, even."

"I think I saw him tonight. Like, not a hallucination. But, I don't know."

She smiles. "You don't have to explain. He wants you to be healed. Of course he'd try to reach out. That was Danny. Wouldn't surprise me if heaven has him always on assignment helping people."

The doc laughs. "Definitely."

"Merry Christmas, honey."

"Yes, it is." The doc smiles. He looks down for the watch. It's gone.

I look for it too, but I don't have it. Maybe I never did. I look up, worried that this will bring him down again. But he's smiling. He pulls her closer to him and he smiles. And in that moment, I know he's going to be alright. I can finally see Christmas in him. I turn to walk away. I'm back in eternity before my eyes leave him.

A father, a mother, and a child. I said how a Christmas tree is a tiny glimpse of heaven. But an even greater glimpse is that image: the one of the first Christmas night. Heaven may be outside of time, but tonight it's joined in the celebration of the moment love cried out in a quiet barn in a small town. Christmas in heaven doesn't need gifts, because we've already been given everything. And it all started with a family.



I think of what it was like to hang out with Mason. To spend time with the doc. To curl up under a Christmas tree with my mom. There was so much bad in my life, but so much good, too. And the truly good things don't go away in heaven. They get to stay forever. I may have to wait for those I left behind to come with me, but seeing them live their lives makes that wait joyful.

I hug my mom close and wish her a Merry Christmas as I return to the loving arms of my Creator this Christmas night. One day, I pray everyone I've ever loved will be here, too.





# *Hymn to the Winter Hunt*

By Rachel Schmidt



When the cold winds from the northwest blow,  
When the moonlight casts its silver glow,  
When the dark skies threaten snow  
T'is then I hear their call.

It echoes through dark forest and fen-  
A droning horn- and silence then  
That makes the wary traveler ken  
The truth behind the squall.

In the icy blasts of wind that cut  
Through clothes and doors kept tightly shut  
There is a pounding. Do you seek what  
Lies out there in the thrall?

The Horned Man on rugged beast  
That hunts the boar to make his feast  
Or maybe like some darkened priest  
Beckons you to heed the call.

To ride on winds above the ice,  
To give the greatest sacrifice,  
And surrender to that which does entice...  
Are you ready for the fall?

Or perhaps, in swirling dark  
You'll fly just like a meadowlark  
And find some light, a warming spark  
Of truth behind it all.

Take heed, take heed oh you who go  
To travel in the ice and snow  
For hunters harry you as you go-  
Death comes to us all.



# THE FIRST CHRISTMAS

BY JOSIE CARIOCA

Cokeworth

December, 1969

Severus shivered inside his worn-out coat, his feet scraping the fresh snow that covered the ground as the swing moved lightly back and forth. He looked down at the misshapen package he held on his lap, his little fingers starting to go numb from the cold. He was in such a hurry to get to the park, he had forgotten to put on his gloves. But they barely had fingers, anyway...wouldn't make a difference. The boy couldn't shake his disappointment in the package. He had tried to find a pretty wrapping paper, but all he could afford was a boring pink one with white polka-dots. Even worse, he couldn't ask his mother to help him wrap it, because if she knew he was about to give a Christmas gift to anybody when they hardly had any money to put food on the table, he'd probably hear a lecture. Not that Severus had spent any money on it, but that actually sorta made it worse...

"Sev! There you are!" a light and cheery voice called out as fast footsteps disturbed the snow.

He looked up to see Lily running his way. She was wearing a thick yellow coat that reached all the way to her knees, and her cheeks were as flushed and pink as the matching wool scarf and cap she wore, her long dark-red hair loose and flowing about her shoulders. She stopped in front of him and took a moment to catch her breath, puffing heavily, her eyes twinkling.

"You didn't come yesterday," Lily accused him, her voice sounding urgent.

"Sorry..." the boy mumbled, looking down again. Her red mary-janes were like rose petals blown over the snow as she shifted on her feet.

"Why?" she insisted, sitting on the swing next to him and taking her white gloves off. "I told you Mum was okay with you coming."

Severus stared at the worn and dirty toes of his shoes, frowning. Lily had probably begged a lot to get her mum's permission for him to spend Christmas with them. He knew Mrs. Evans didn't like him. Mr. Evans was nice, but Mrs. Evans and Petunia...they really didn't like him at all.





"I couldn't leave Mum alone on Christmas," Severus breathed out, his eyes still avoiding Lily's brilliant green ones.

"Oh, your dad wasn't home for Christmas?"

"No..." Severus lied.

His father had been home for Christmas...completely drunk, cursing at him and his mother. His parents had another argument...it lasted until about midnight...then his father left again, and Severus finally found the courage to leave his room and go to the kitchen, where his mother was crying, cursing, and breaking things. When she finally got tired of it, she saw him standing at the door. She held him tight and said she was sorry, over and over again. Severus didn't know what she was sorry about, but he knew he couldn't remind her that the Evanses had invited him to spend Christmas with them, or ask her to help wrapping Lily's gift. He decided to just stay there with her. She looked like she needed his company more than Lily. Lily had her parents and even stupid Petunia. Mum only had him.

"You could have brought your mum with you! Better than being alone, just the two of you."

"She wasn't feeling too good..."

"Oh, I'm sorry. How is she doing now?"

"Better, thank you."

"Here! I brought your Christmas gift."

Severus looked up and only now noticed Lily had something hidden under her coat. A box wrapped in nice red paper with golden arabesques on it. He stood up and carefully set the package he was holding on the swing, so he could have both his hands free to get the box and open it.

"Don't rip the paper too much; we can still use it for a collage. I got some new magazines at home," she told him.

"Don't worry, I won't." He unwrapped the box, trying to do as little damage to the paper as he could. Once the wrapping was all gone, Severus could hardly believe his eyes. "Wow! It's Action Man talking commander!"

"Dad helped me choose." Lily's smile went from ear to ear, almost as if she was the one getting the sought-after talking action figure.

"Thank you, Lils!" he beamed. But suddenly it hit him...he couldn't come back home with that.

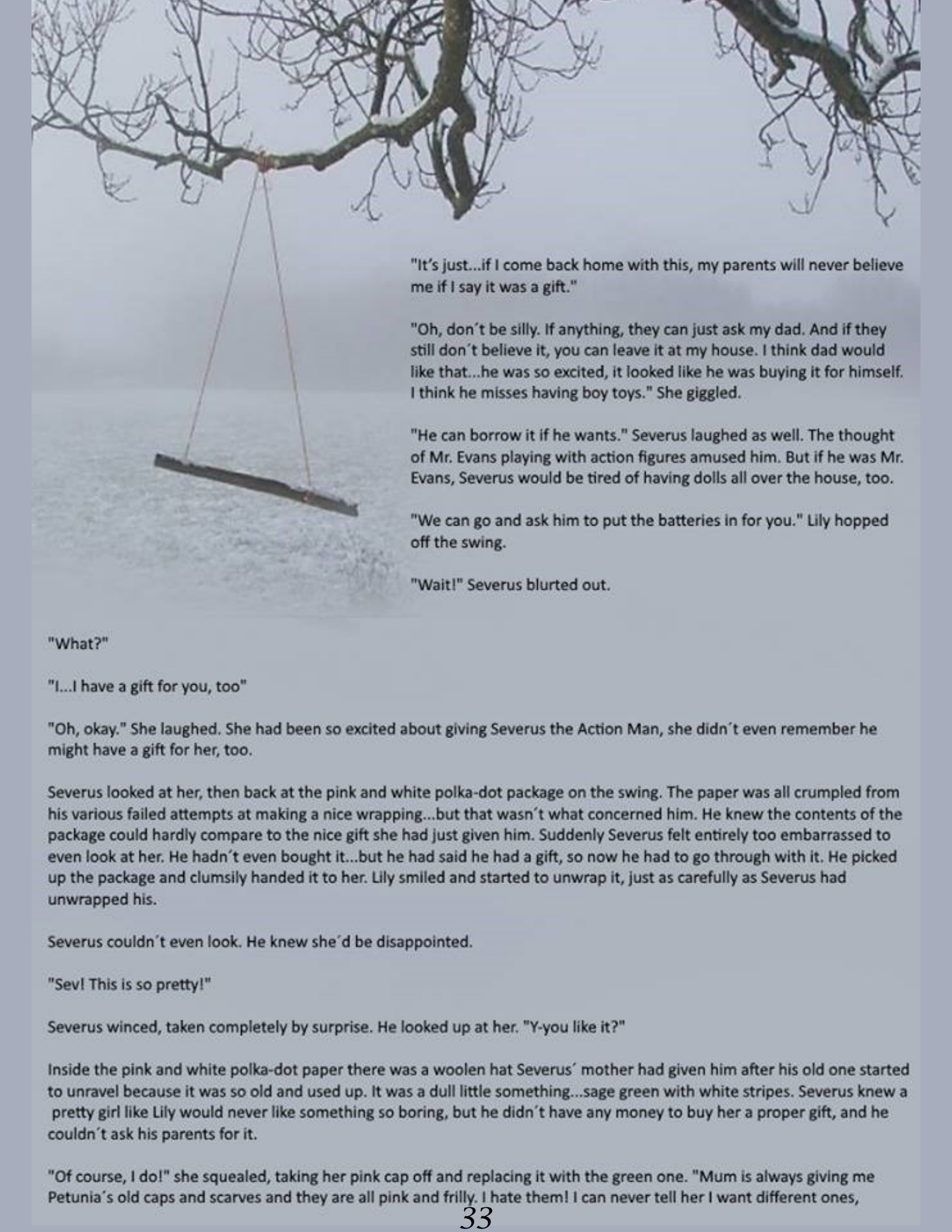
She immediately noticed his expression changing. "You don't like it?"

"I do! Of course I do! I really like it!"

"Then what?"





A swing hangs from a bare, snow-covered tree branch. The swing seat is a simple wooden plank, and the ropes are thin and dark. The ground is covered in a layer of snow, and the background is a pale, overcast sky. The overall scene is quiet and wintry.

"It's just...if I come back home with this, my parents will never believe me if I say it was a gift."

"Oh, don't be silly. If anything, they can just ask my dad. And if they still don't believe it, you can leave it at my house. I think dad would like that...he was so excited, it looked like he was buying it for himself. I think he misses having boy toys." She giggled.

"He can borrow it if he wants." Severus laughed as well. The thought of Mr. Evans playing with action figures amused him. But if he was Mr. Evans, Severus would be tired of having dolls all over the house, too.

"We can go and ask him to put the batteries in for you." Lily hopped off the swing.

"Wait!" Severus blurted out.

"What?"

"I...I have a gift for you, too"

"Oh, okay." She laughed. She had been so excited about giving Severus the Action Man, she didn't even remember he might have a gift for her, too.

Severus looked at her, then back at the pink and white polka-dot package on the swing. The paper was all crumpled from his various failed attempts at making a nice wrapping...but that wasn't what concerned him. He knew the contents of the package could hardly compare to the nice gift she had just given him. Suddenly Severus felt entirely too embarrassed to even look at her. He hadn't even bought it...but he had said he had a gift, so now he had to go through with it. He picked up the package and clumsily handed it to her. Lily smiled and started to unwrap it, just as carefully as Severus had unwrapped his.

Severus couldn't even look. He knew she'd be disappointed.

"Sev! This is so pretty!"

Severus winced, taken completely by surprise. He looked up at her. "Y-you like it?"

Inside the pink and white polka-dot paper there was a woolen hat Severus' mother had given him after his old one started to unravel because it was so old and used up. It was a dull little something...sage green with white stripes. Severus knew a pretty girl like Lily would never like something so boring, but he didn't have any money to buy her a proper gift, and he couldn't ask his parents for it.

"Of course, I do!" she squealed, taking her pink cap off and replacing it with the green one. "Mum is always giving me Petunia's old caps and scarves and they are all pink and frilly. I hate them! I can never tell her I want different ones,



because she says it's silly to spend money on new ones because Petunia's will suit me just fine. Now I have my own cap and it isn't pink. Thank you!"

"You really do like it?" Severus insisted, timidly.

"I'm telling you! Look! Don't I look much better in green than with this awful pink one?"

"You look great, Lily."

"Thank you, Sev!" she threw her arms around his slim shoulders and planted a kiss on his cheek that almost made him lose his balance. Before he could recover from the surprise, she began collecting the wrapping papers and folding them neatly to fit into her pocket. "Now let's go."

"Go where?" He felt dazed.

"Oh, Sev! You're silly today. Home, so my dad can put the batteries in your Action Man. And I have an idea for this polka dot paper, too"

"And what is that?"

"I got a new doll, but I didn't like her dress. I'll make her a new one with this."

"But, Lily...it's only paper."

"I know. But you can make clothes with paper. I saw it on TV the other day; some fashion designer did it. And dolls don't move like people, so it probably won't rip."

"I thought you didn't like pink."

"I don't like it for me. But my new doll has brown hair. Pink will look great on her. Let's go!" She got a hold of his cold hand with her warm one. "Blimey, Sev, your hands are cold. And why don't you have a hat on? Your ears are all red."

"I...forgot."

"Here, wear my new one." She put the green hat on his head

"When we get home you can give it back, so I can show mum how much better I look in it. Maybe she'll stop giving me Tuney's pink old things. Now, let's go. I have a new spell to show you, too."

She pulled his hand and started to run. It took a while for him to catch up with his ill-fitting boots, but eventually he did. It didn't matter how fast she ran, Severus would always find a way to keep up with her.

He'd never let go of her, ever.



# For Our Mothers on Christmas

By Lawrence Hall

Beyond all other nights, on this strange Night  
A strangers' star, a silent, seeking star  
Helps set the wreckage of our souls aright:  
It leads us to a stable door ajar.  
And we are not alone in peeking in:  
An ox, an ass, a lamb, some shepherds, too -  
Bright star without; a brighter Light within,  
We children see the Truth three Wise Men knew.  
For we are children there in Bethlehem  
Soft-shivering in that winter long ago;  
We watch and listen there, in starlight dim,  
In cold Judea, in a soft, soft snow.  
The Stable and the Star, yes, we believe;  
Our mothers sing us there each Christmas Eve.





# When You Wish

By Veronica Lynn

Morgon awoke with a start to find that she was, quite literally, left standing on the outside. She was all alone and in almost utter darkness. The only light present was coming from above her, from a lamppost that was bizarrely placed in the middle of a large forest.

Mouth agape, eyes wide open with panic, she whipped her head first to the left and then to the right, in a futile attempt to identify her surroundings.

“Where am I? What is happening?” her mind screamed. She considered the possibility that she was the victim of a kidnapping, but that seemed unlikely. Could she have been on the receiving end of a prank? Doubtful—for who would the culprit be?

The lone child of a serious-minded accountant and his scrupulous, safety conscious stay-at-home wife, Morgon’s only sisters were her fellow Kappa Gowns—the all-study, no nonsense sorority at Providence University. The Kappa Gowns were a sorority in name only, all of the members being too busy with their own burdensome class load to socialize as a group. Morgon knew that in the estimation of her sisters, there was only one appropriate spot for hazing and that was in the dictionary. As for her parents, Morgon knew their philosophy: “Everything in moderation, exception education. One can *never* have too much education.”

Honoring that creed was how Morgon had ended up nineteen, still residing in her childhood home, with neither a real friend nor an enemy to speak of. She hated how closely she resembled the nickname, Morgon Fun-None, that had plagued her throughout middle school. Even worse than the unflattering moniker was how ignored she had felt all through high school. The realization that she was too much of a loner to even be considered as the target of a practical joke did not sit well with her. Being super-studious and avoiding silliness may have kept her out of trouble, but it also kept her incredibly lonely. More than once she had wondered if being so perfect all the time was in fact a huge mistake.

But she was currently in no position to philosophize.

Fear overwhelmed Morgon’s heart. She realized it could be hours before anyone noticed she was missing. School was out for the weekend. Her parents would assume she was hard at work somewhere studying and not disturb her.

It was growing colder by the minute. Was she doomed to die of exposure—she who had yet to feel as if she had really lived? Then again, did it really even matter if she survived? It seemed as if her whole boring life was already completely mapped out for her. The entire world may be a stage, but



being cast as “Student” and only a student was a role she found distasteful. She was an excellent student, and in a way, that was the problem. Morgon longed for a challenge. From the depths of her soul, she wanted to break free from the norm—to be fun as well as smart, and to live an extraordinary life. But her strong sense of duty and a real affection for her parents kept her close to home. Going off in search of something more seemed like a slap in the face of the parents who had given her everything. She was convinced that attempting to move out on her own so soon after high school would devastate her parents. Little did she know that Mr. and Mrs. Tyler were looking forward to selling their home, purchasing an RV, and traveling the country, just the two of them. Morgon’s parents were staying put for Morgon, just like she was staying put for them.

A twig snapped. Something was with Morgon in the woods! And it was heading towards her! The wood dweller’s tread sounded too dainty to be a bear or a moose. The closer the creature came, the more its steps sounded like those of a human.

Morgon wanted to run, but was worried about losing her one advantage—the light. Standing her ground and taking charge was the best way to handle the situation, she decided. If she was going to go down, she would do so fighting.

“Who’s there?” she yelled loudly, trying to sound more in control than she felt.

“It’s me,” a feminine voice called back. “It’s Elsa of Arendelle!”

“Elsa?!” Morgon was incredulous. “Impossible! Elsa is a cartoon.”

“It’s entirely possible,” Elsa answered with a laugh. “For here I am.”

Elsa was emerging from the forest as she spoke. “What’s a cartoon?” she inquired.

Morgon need not have worried about sufficient lighting, for the odd wanderer brought light with her. The girl glowed, literally, and she *was* a dead ringer for the Elsa advertised in commercials for the newly released film, *Frozen 3*. This “Elsa” even had the same iconic braid and shimmering blue dress as Elsa from the movie posters.

“Okay, who put you up to this?” Morgan demanded with suspicion. “Why are you here? And where is here?”

Elsa was entirely unfazed, quite cool as a cucumber. “This is the Enchanted Forest. I am here because of you. You put me up to this,” she regally responded.

Morgon was shouting now. “Me?! What do you mean? How did *I* put you up to this?!”

“You wished it,” Elsa explained. “You wished upon a star.”

“NO, I DIDN’T!”

“You *must* have, for here you are! When you wish upon a star, your dreams come true!” Elsa smiled, looking as if she was about to break into song and dance at the mere mention of star-wishing.



“Jiminy Cricket!” Morgon muttered.

“Yes!” Elsa said, clapping her hands together in satisfaction. “You know him, then! Oh, isn’t Jiminy a dear? He always gives the best advice! Do you get to visit with Jiminy often? How is he? I miss him!”

“I don’t know Jiminy personally!” Morgon sneered. “No one does! Jiminy is a cartoon! Just like Elsa, whom you are impersonating! Now, who are you, really?” Emboldened by annoyance, she grabbed the girl’s delicate looking arm, intent on shaking the truth out of her.

Big Mistake! Whoosh! A burst of cold air mixed with actual snow flurries assaulted Morgon, knocking her to the ground and momentarily stunning her. When she came to, she saw Elsa hovering above her.

“Now then,” Elsa said, in a firm but pleasant tone to the still sitting Morgon. “Let’s try this again, shall we? I’m Elsa...and you are?”

Morgon stated her name, too flabbergasted to say anything else.

“It’s wonderful to meet you, Morgon,” Elsa responded. “Now get up, please, and come with me.”

Under the warmth in Elsa’s beautiful blue eyes, Morgon’s frustration and defensiveness were fast melting away. She reached out and grasped the welcoming hand that Elsa had extended. Elsa effortlessly pulled her to her feet. Elsa was apparently much stronger than her delicate face and slender build suggested.

“Where are we going?” Morgon wanted to know.

Elsa replied, “I am housesitting for my friend Lady Tumnus the Fawn. Her home is not far from here. We can talk there.”

Morgon silently nodded her assent and the two unlikely companions headed together in the direction from which Elsa had come. Within minutes, Elsa ushered Morgon inside a charming stone dwelling located in a valley. Lady Tumnus’ home had red walls and was carpeted throughout. Immediately adjoining the kitchen was a lovely parlor. The room was the focal point of the house and contained a mantle-covered fireplace, two sienna-colored chairs, and a filled-to-the-brim bookshelf which took up an entire wall.

“Make yourself at home,” Elsa said graciously, “Would you like some hot chocolate with cinnamon?”





“Okay,” Morgon responded absentmindedly. She was still trying to wrap her mind around Elsa, the strange surroundings, and everything that was happening to her.

As Elsa worked in the kitchen, Morgon perused Lady Tumnus’ impressive home library. There were at least one hundred volumes, covering a myriad of fascinating subjects. The books that Morgan found most appealing were the extensive collection of novels. She couldn’t remember the last time she had read purely for enjoyment’s sake.

“Here we are!” Elsa re-entered the room carrying two pewter goblets.

Morgon hastily returned the book she had been engrossed in to its place on the shelf, expecting Elsa to reproach her for having touched it. “Sorry about that,” she said.

“No need to apologize,” Elsa said kindly. “Books are meant to be held, read, and enjoyed. Now have a seat and try this cocoa.”

Morgon and Elsa each settled into one of the suede upholstered chairs. The sweet scent of cinnamon mixed with the sensation of warm, velvety chocolate on Morgon’s tongue caused her to sigh in pleasure. “This is delicious, Elsa. Thank you.”

“My pleasure,” Elsa answered, smiling. “Now, let’s discuss your reason for being here. First things first—tell me, Morgon, what prompted you to wish upon a star?”

“I didn’t wish upon a star.” Morgon insisted. “I told you that already.”

“And I have already explained to you that you must have.” Elsa countered.

Morgon just stared at her.

“How about you retrace your steps?” Elsa suggested patiently. “Sometimes taking a step back is the best way to move forward.”

Elsa reclined in her chair, the epitome of a lady-in-waiting.

“What do you mean?” Morgan inquired.

Elsa ignored the question and tried a different approach. “Tell me the last thing you did before you entered the Enchanted Forest.”

“I can’t remember,” Morgon said. “But chances are I was studying, since that is pretty much all I ever do.”

“And why is that?” Elsa asked.

Morgon did not bristle at the question. She could tell that Elsa was not being accusatory, but sincerely curious. “Scholastic achievement is really important to my parents, and pleasing them is important to me,” she explained. “And so, I study... and study... and study.” Not sure what else to say, she shrugged.

Elsa reached over and squeezed Morgon’s hand affectionately. “It is very honorable to want to please your parents, Morgon. I applaud you for it. But shouldn’t you do things that you like, as well?”



“I guess...”

“What would cultivate happiness in your heart, Morgon? If you could do anything in the whole wide world, what would it be?”

“No one has asked me that before,” Morgon said. “I guess I’d have to think about it.”

“Thinking about what you want is wonderful, Morgon, and doing what you want is even better.” Elsa leaned in towards her in a posture that suggested Elsa was about to reveal a precious secret. “I learned the hard way that when it comes to expectations, whether self-inflicted or society-inflicted, sometimes the very best thing to do is...”

“Let it go?” Morgan interrupted.

“Why, yes,” Elsa exclaimed. “How did you know?”

“Lucky guess,” Morgan grinned.

Elsa smiled and then sat quietly, allowing Morgon time and space to process all she had heard.

Eventually, Morgon found her voice and spoke up. “Elsa, I really appreciate what you shared with me. You hit the nail on the head about handling expectations. I’ve mastered how to be considerate of others, now I need to learn how to create a life that I feel is worth celebrating.”

Elsa smiled her encouragement. “And what would you like more than anything else in the world?”

“Options! I want options,” Morgon replied.

“You have options, Morgon. You’ve always had them,” Elsa responded. “All that remains is for you to avail yourself of the endless options available to you.” She rose to her feet as she spoke. “You are smart and you are fun, and you are going to have an extraordinary life. Promise me you will always be true to yourself.”

“I will,” Morgon said, also standing.

Elsa pulled her new friend into a hug and told her, “I wish you every happiness.”

“Thank you, Elsa!” Morgon exclaimed, startling herself awake.

She was in her bedroom, hunched over her desk. Her head was resting on top of an open textbook. Across the room on her dresser, a digital clock flashed the time: 1:23 pm.

“What a strange dream,” Morgon muttered to herself. “It felt so real.”

She sat up slowly and regarded the book in front of her. “Nap time is over, Morgon. Get back to work,” she chided herself. “Now where was I? That’s right, astronomy... I was studying astronomy.”

Suddenly, it all came in a flash. The events of the day played out like a movie in her head, every sequence in freeze frame. Morgon remembered everything: the same boring old drive home from the university library, the billboard for *Frozen 3*, lugging her ridiculously heavy book bag upstairs, locking herself away in her room to study, feeling chained to her desk, hating her life, feeling oh-so-tired and valiantly striving to fight off sleep. In her mind’s eye she saw how she had finally succumbed to weariness, resting her cheek on top of an image of the North Star inside her open text book. She even



recalled uttering, “I wish I had time to go see Elsa. I wish...” right before everything went dark. A smile found its way onto Morgon’s lips, spreading until it filled her entire face. “Thank you, Elsa!” she said again.

She was finally wide awake and knew exactly what she needed to do. Abandoning her textbooks, she went downstairs and found her parents sitting in the living room.

“Hey, Mom and Dad,” she said, feeling alive and full of energy for the first time in ages, “I’m going out to see a movie. Do you guys want to join me? It’s my treat!”

Morgon’s parents did not hesitate.

“Don’t mind if I do,” her dad said with a good-natured smile.

“What a wonderful idea!” her mom exclaimed. “I’m so glad you thought of it.”

“So am I, Mom,” Morgon grinned. “So am I!”





# PEACE ON EARTH, GOODWILL TO MEN

By Sarah Levesque

*It's the most wonderful time of the year!*

Don't you think? This song just about always put a big smile on my face, which can only be topped when I hear "Feliz Navidad". What is it about Christmas music that that can steer our emotions so effectively? Sure, all music can do this, but I feel it most deeply with Christmas music. Whether it's excitement from "The Most Wonderful Time of the Year", or yearning from "Merry Christmas, Darling", or that deep peace when I have a gentle instrumental version of "Silent Night" and others playing in the background, it affects me profoundly. It is this the same peace I feel while staring at the slowly blinking tree lights in the semidarkness, or when I hear that great line "Peace on Earth, goodwill to men," for in that moment I am relaxed, unworried, supremely joyful and feeling a great love for all.

This is what Christ came into the world to bring – peace, love, and joy. But it's hard to experience this in these modern times when Christmas seems to be about getting presents and giving people items that make the *giver* feel good. Thankfully, family and friends are still emphasized in modern Christmas, but I'm always reminded of Alfred's line in *Miracle on 34<sup>th</sup> Street*: "There's a lotta bad 'isms out there, but one of the worst is commercialism. Make a buck, make a buck. Even in Brooklyn it's the same!" Now, I have no idea why Brooklyn should have been any different; it seems the same everywhere in America, if not beyond.

It is my sincerest wish that for this one season this year – Advent through Epiphany (if not longer!) – that we try to do as my mom did when I was growing up. By planning in advance, she tried to make sure that during the Christmas season, we could relax and be peaceful, without running around shopping and trying to squeeze in activities all day. No, at Christmastime we stayed home, especially in the evenings, and we read, played quietly, watched the slowly blinking lights on the tree, and listened to the peaceful music. If we were lucky, we might have gotten to watch one of the classic Christmas cartoons – Rudolph, Frosty and the others. The peace of those nights was profound, and I shall never forget it. The only other place I find that peace is in Eucharist Adoration, where I'm sitting silently at the feet of Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament. This cannot be a coincidence – who can give peace better than God himself, whether it is from the manger or from the Eucharist? May we seek Him this Christmas season, and may we find Him and allow Him to still us, to silence us, and to wrap us in His glorious peace.



# WOOLY'S TALE

By Elizabeth Fust



Wooly was having a bad day. All day long people had been traveling to Bethlehem. Lots and lots of people. Wooly didn't know why so many people were coming to Bethlehem all of a sudden, only that it had something to do with the king. Wooly didn't like people; he was just a small little lamb, and humans were so big and scary. The only human Wooly liked was his shepherd.

All of the other sheep in the flock made fun of Wooly because he was scared of humans, bumblebees, and wolves. Wooly was even afraid of the dark.

As the sun set, all the other lambs laughed at Wooly and tried to frighten him with scary stories.

"Leave Wooly alone, you sheep." Wooly's kind shepherd said, and all the mean lambs wandered off to find a comfy spot in the flock to fall asleep.

Wooly didn't go with the other lambs. When Wooly's shepherd lay down in the gateway of the pen, so none of the sheep could get out during the night, Wooly curled up by him. Wooly was never afraid of scary things when his kind shepherd was there to keep him safe.

Wooly slept very well that night, and he didn't know why until he was woken by his shepherd. All the shepherds kept looking at the sky. Wooly knew then why he had slept so well. A beautiful star lit up the night, and it wasn't even very dark at all. Wooly really liked the star.

Something appeared in the sky, like a person with bird wings! Wooly hid behind his shepherd while the rest of the flock slumbered on. Then the birdman spoke! Wooly didn't understand most of what it said, until the end.

"You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger."

More birdmen appeared and filled the night sky. Then they started singing.



“Glory to the newborn King,” they sang.  
“Peace on earth and mercy mild, God and sinners  
reconciled! Christ is born in Bethlehem!”

Wooly trembled behind his shepherd. What  
were they? And what did they mean?

“Angels! Look at all the angels!” said his shep-  
herd.

So the birdmen were called angels!

“They want us to go and follow that star!”  
said the shepherd.

The shepherds woke up the flock and started  
herding them along, following the star.

“Where are we going? What’s going on?” all the sheep were asking.

“Didn’t you see all the angels?” Wooly asked. But none of the other lambs had.

The shepherds walked all the way to Bethlehem. Wooly was scared of all the people, even though it  
was night. There were so many people, one shepherd said, that there were no more rooms left in the inns!

Then the shepherds finally stopped. There was a stable filled with many animals, a kind looking man,  
and a very pretty lady.



Wooly’s shepherd spoke to them, and then the  
shepherds all looked inside a small wooden man-  
ger. Wooly’s shepherd looked so happy with what-  
ever he saw, Wooly had never seen him so happy.  
All the  
shepherds were excited.

“What’s in there?” asked one lamb.

“I don’t know, you look!” said another.

All of the sheep were too scared.

“I’ll go look!” Wooly said.

“No, Wooly. You won’t look. You’re always too  
scared!” said all the lambs.





Wooly didn't listen to them. What could be in a manger that would make the shepherds so excited? Usually mangers were used for food. Maybe there was something good to eat.

Wooly slowly peeked his head over the side of the manger, and he saw it. A baby! A happy little baby. Wooly nuzzled the baby with his nose, and the baby laughed. Wooly liked Him. He wasn't scared of the baby human. The baby reached out and touched Wooly's head.

Seeing the happy baby made Wooly happy, too. He was glad that he hadn't let his fears stop him from coming to see this treasure, the baby. Even if he was usually scared of everything and the other lambs laughed at him and made fun of him, it didn't matter because right then Wooly had been very brave. Wooly was so joyful that he wasn't scared of anything, anymore. Playing with the baby, Wooly felt happy and safe, just like he felt when he was with his shepherd.





# The Tree That Fell

By Joshua David Ling



Nature groaned like Paul foretold,  
Winter was everlasting.  
Dead men drunkenly stumbled in the dark,  
And in Hesse, troubled times weren't passing.  
Or so it seemed in ancient Germany,  
With broken and splintered tribes,  
But in the coldest, bleakest winter,

Hope began to thrive.  
Boniface, a Man of God,  
Had his heart pricked by the Lord of Love.  
He came to proclaim to his Germanic brothers  
That Salvation came from Above.  
But one thing stood in the way of Boniface  
And his Missionary Brothers;  
As long as the Thunder Oak stood in Hesse,  
They would never trust in something so 'Other.'

"Tree of Death,  
Tree of Life,  
Give to Thor,  
He'll win your fight."







That is what the Gothi's said  
All those years ago.

“Darkness, Injustice,  
Political Control!  
Death, Death, Death,  
Fear for your soul!”  
Was Boniface's counter  
As he read from his scrolls.

Yet none would hear the sacred cry  
From The Baptizer of the Germans.  
They served their Thor and Odin well,  
And only wanted to be heathens.

Then Boniface approached the Thunder Oak  
And he challenged Thor's strength and might:  
“Nothing but death will come from this tree—



Until it falls this night!  
I hereby defy the god of thunder!  
May Thor strike me down!  
Or else I will fell his thunder oak!”



Then the world shook with the sound  
Of the axe-head wielded by Boniface,  
Striking deeply into the trunk  
Of that mighty symbol of their god,  
One by one the axe-blows sunk.

Said he, “Choose now to serve the Lord of Heaven!  
The Christ Child comes to you!  
Bow down and worship his almighty glory!  
All of you, right now! Do!”



The People began to gather around  
And the Chieftains and Gothis protested,  
But then they began to confer for a moment  
About who would most likely be bested.

“Surely Thor will strike him down!”  
Many began to think,  
And the thought of seeing such a mighty sight,  
Began to settle and sink.

The head Gothi stood and declared to Boniface,  
“This must be some sort of joke!  
But if you want to commit suicide,  
Continue chopping the Thunder Oak!











“Thor will rend the heavens open,  
And strike you with his bolt!  
Then all of Hesse will surely know  
You were nothing but a dolt.  
Your God is fairy tales and myth!  
And nothing more than that!”

Just then the Thunder oak buckled  
And it began to crack.

Chop went the axe for the lives sacrificed,  
Chop went the axe for every lie told,  
Chop went the axe ending the Gothi regime,  
Chop went the axe against sins bold,  
Chop went the axe against sorcerers  
Who had kept the land in fear,  
Chop went the axe and the whole land shuddered,  
For a new spring was finally here.  
No eye or ear could scarcely believe,  
But their unbelief melted inside;  
The Thunder Oak fell as Jehovah’s wind blew—  
The Long Winter had finally died.

And then good Boniface cried,  
“You are all as broken as your ‘sacred’ oak,  
This tree is a symbol of that,  
But forgiveness is something God offers you freely;  
You will not die from lack.”  
He chopped through the rubble at the base of the tree,  
And a small oak sapling stood there intact.





“Now let this small tree be a symbol  
Of your new God who is without flaw;  
Though do not leave it outside in the cold;  
Take it, and let its fragrance divine  
Inside your homes every year on this day;

And may God’s endless love entwine  
Your hearts together and toward Him,  
And instead of sacrificing men,  
Give thoughtful gifts to one another;  
From this new custom you will learn

Of God’s never-ending love  
In winter or in spring,  
And that He will one day come again.  
And to Him, let us sing!”

And so, though the Hessians created gods  
For reasons they didn’t know,  
The True God found them once again  
And washed their sins white as snow.  
He melted their hearts of stone and ice,  
And grafted them back on the tree of life.



# A Wonderful Miracle

By Amanda Pizzolatto

Featuring characters from *It's a Wonderful Life* and *The Miracle on 34<sup>th</sup> Street*.



"Susan, sit down, please. They'll get here when they get here!"

But Susan kept pacing, "I know, Mom, but what if he's not there? I don't know what I'd do if he isn't."

Another woman took Susan's hand. "Don't worry about a thing, Susan; I'm sure everything will be alright."

Susan sat down next to her. "Mary, how can you be so optimistic when he's your son?"

Mary Bailey smiled. "It's exactly because he is my son that I know everything will be alright. He was only missing in action, Susan, not killed in action."

Susan stood up. "But he could have been killed while he was missing! Oh, the wait is killing me!"

"Not literally, I hope—wouldn't want my son to come home and find his wife dead!" remarked one of the men who walked over to where the two women sat and Susan paced.

"George, be nice! Susan's just as worried as we are about Peter!"

"Well, of course she should be; he is her husband and he's been in a war, off showing the same bravado as his Uncle Harry," quipped George Bailey, somewhat bitterly.

"George, really, you should be proud of Peter!" exclaimed his wife.

"Well, I am. I'd just be even more proud if he came home alive like his Uncle Harry. This will be one of the best Christmases if he does."

"Oh, George." Mary smiled as she hugged her husband. "I'm sure everything will be alright."

"Everything will, if Susan doesn't walk a hole into the floor," remarked the other man.

"Fred, really."

"I'm serious, Doris. She's going to make me go crazy if she doesn't stop pacing like that," quipped Fred Gailey.

Doris Gailey sighed, shaking her head, though she was smiling. "Alright, Fred. Susan, can you please sit down?"

Susan finally sat down, but she was so nervous that she began twiddling her fingers and twisting her hat into knots. Fred opened his mouth to say something else, but a noise from the PA system stopped him.

“Ladies and gentlemen, the five o’clock train has pulled into the station. I repeat, the five o’clock train has pulled into the station. Let’s hear a warm welcome for our returning troops. Welcome back, and thank you for your service!”

A cheer went up all around the train station from the various families who were waiting for the return of their loved ones. Soon, soldier after soldier walked onto the platform, and many families were reunited joyfully. Others received a notice that their loved ones were not able to make it, as they were still recovering from injuries. But as the train emptied, there was no sign of Peter Bailey, nor any notice that he was recovering. The five waited for a couple of hours, until every man was off the train, before they decided to return home disappointed, Susan most of all.

“Oh, something’s happened. Why didn’t anyone tell us?” muttered Susan as they left the station.

“Oh Susan, maybe he’s still missing; they might not know what’s happened to him,” remarked Doris as they piled into the car.

The ride home was quiet, each deep in their own thoughts, for the most part. Doris could hear Susan muttering under her breath, “I believe, I believe.” She smiled, because the last time Susan did that, she got a new home and a new father. Maybe it would work yet again; they just had to get home and find out. When they arrived, the door was opened by a very straight-faced Tommy Bailey, causing Susan’s spirits to sink.

“Tommy?”

“Sue, there’s a guy here to talk to you about Peter. He’s waiting in the living room.”

Susan’s mind panicked, but she kept her cool and walked to the living room. A man was sitting with Tommy’s sisters and their husbands, but he rose when Susan walked into the room.

Susan gasped, “Peter!!” She rushed into her husband’s arms, and the two kissed lovingly.

“Tommy Bailey, you little sneak!” quipped Fred as he grabbed the young man and ruffled his hair.

Even George had to laugh as he and his wife came forward to welcome their son home. Tears of relief mingled with smiles of joy as the family was finally reunited for Christmas.







## Christmas Poem

By Martina Juričková

Listen to this Christmas poem;  
wonderful, the warmth of home  
when mum's baking cakes and more  
while just beyond the festooned door  
Winter sits upon her throne.

Everything outside is white;  
you await a snowball fight.  
Let's make some snowmen now or go  
walking in the crunching snow.  
No one here should be forlorn.

Love's everywhere that you can see,  
even under the Christmas tree.  
Kids are sledging down the hill.  
For all people of good will,  
Jesus Christ today is born.



*Christmas.* It's an old word from an old world. Oh sure, some people still celebrate smatterings of it in Panem, but it's not as if they remember much of the story that started it all, not really. It's just old-fashioned nostalgia, some antique card or decorative glass ball, maybe a stocking hung up by the fireplace, God knows why. For over seventy years, the Capital suppressed any outward festivities of this kind in the Districts. Now the old regime has fallen, and even those who could not have cared less about the old holiday are wanting to do something about the day, simply because they'd been told they couldn't, and now they can. And I, who was once the Mockingjay, have been asked if I have anything special planned.

I snorted at first when I heard that. Do they think I am the type to be throwing grand parties for the cameras? I am sick to my stomach at the thought of it. I just want everyone to leave me and Peeta and the kids alone. It's been years since the war's end, and yet the reporters still show up every so often to ask such stupid questions and try to snap pictures of us when we least expect it. They'd love for me to throw a jamboree for high society, wouldn't they? Well, this isn't the old Capital in its heyday, is it? No, no, it's just broken down little District 12, still bearing the scars of annihilation and trying to rebuild itself from the bottom up.

But Peeta doesn't let me off that easily. He wants to do it for the kids. They are young enough to still appreciate such things. Celyn is six and Hazel is four, and I suppose they would like to look at the shiny lights and fancy ornaments and get to tear open presents under a decorated tree. There was some old tradition about socks too, wasn't there? Hanging them by an open fire? And a fat man stealing cookies after clambering down the chimney...

Peeta has set about baking. It is a skill that has kept him sane these past years. Whenever he seems nervous, edgy, he goes down to the kitchen and plies his old trade. It is an art to him, making delicious, warm things emerge from the oven. It's his way of reminding himself it's good to be alive. Lucky for me, because this girl on fire would no doubt have burned the house down had she tried her hand at it.

And so we get fruit cake and pumpkin bread and gingerbread cookies. Celyn licks the batter out of the bowl and Hazel gets icing in her hair as they help Peeta decorate the gingerbread men. We know that the traditional colors for frosting this time of year should be green and red...but Peeta avoids the red. Even seeing red food coloring brings back too many unwanted memories for him. When Celyn asks why daddy won't use red, he says it's because he wants to use more green...because it's mommy's favorite color. Then he changes the subject and sets about making a chocolate cream Yule log.

Who is going to eat all this stuff, I wonder? The kids certainly won't be downing it all; they'd be bouncing off the walls. Time to invite some guests, I suppose. Of course, the first person I have over is Mom, for our personal preparations. Even though she doesn't want to stay for the planned party, still too flighty around other guests, I have grown to be less hard on her, more understanding, and the moments we continue to share are priceless to me. Although still in a haze sometimes over the loss of Dad, of Prim, I think her work as a nurse is helping her to move on, if not forget. She will never forget

# GLO

## a Hunger C

### By Avellin





# ORIA

## Games tale

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forget them. And neither will I. We wouldn't be worthy of them if we ever could.

When she and I are up in the attic, looking for odds and ends to help spruce the place up, we run into an old memory. It's a snow globe with an angel figurine inside. It used to belong to my long dead grandmother, and was then passed down to Prim. She was the only one who kept even the faintest glimmer of Christmas in our home those days. Every midwinter, when she was a child, she would get it down and then turn it over and watch the little white flakes and sparkly bits dance through the liquid. And she would wind up the little music box at the bottom and sing along to the very old song:

"Angels we have heard on high, sweetly singing o'er the plains, and the mountains in reply echoing their joyous strains...Glo-ooooo-ooooo-ooooo-ria...in excelsis Deo..."

She never could manage to sing the "Gloria" part all in one breath, no matter how hard she tried. Her efforts were adorable, nevertheless. And I can't help but hum the tune as it plays. I doubt I shall ever want to sing it, for fear of all the grief being brought back to the surface. But I decide to put the globe up on the mantle anyway. It certainly beats hanging socks there...

When mom leaves, and the party itself begins, Effie Trinket is the first one through the door, dressed in her usual gaudy style and reeking of rich perfume. She's busy helping the kids drench the tree in tinsel, so eager to please these days, knowing too well the part she played in the Games and wanting to put it out of her mind, and everyone else's minds, the best she can. I know she doesn't have a vicious bone in her body, not really, but she still helped prepare the sacrificial offerings, preened the feathers, and relished in the fanfare until the tributes were sent in to massacre each other.

Her job was mostly preliminary pickings, the promotional footage and introductions to Capital society, but looking back, could anyone be blamed for viewing her with a leery eye around their children? She was all caught up in the ceremony of it back then, all shallow show and blind stupidity, but now it seems both sides of the old divide have no use for her. In the remnants of the Capital, she is an outcast traitor. In the districts, she is a forever marked accomplice to Snow's atrocities. She has no home, not really.

It's sad to watch her sometimes, how desperately she wants the kids to like her, their self-proclaimed "Auntie Effie." She succeeds in making Celyn and Hazel thrilled to see her, at any rate. She brings them expensive presents in lots of fancy paper and makes a grand fuss over every little thing they do. She even gets down on the ground and helps them unwrap it all, grinning from ear to ear. I tell her she shouldn't have gone to such expense. I know she doesn't have the money to live as she once did. But she earnestly assures me that she most certainly *should*, that she *must*. What fun would Christmas be if she didn't?

I know what she really means. She thinks if she doesn't come through that door with just that many gifts, the kids will treat her like most people do, like a social pariah, like a plague-carrier. She seems to forget that almost everyone in this house, in one form or another, is just such a person. We're simply shifting as best we are able, hobbling with our

mental crutches and hoping we don't crumple to the ground in front of the next generation who

deserve their time of innocence and fun.

Johanna Mason is also here. At first I wondered if I should invite her, as her bitterness seems to have only hardened over the years, and I worried she might ruin the party for everyone. But I've heard it whispered this might be her last winter. And I can believe it. Her cough is ever deepening, her eyes sunken into the sockets, and there is bruising beneath them. She's constantly smoking these days, or drinking, or sticking herself with the needle, anything to numb the memories and shut down the body. And it will shut down, soon enough, if she keeps pounding on it this way.

But it seems she, too, has some strange soft spot for the children, even if she mocks their innocence at times. "Sweet fool kids," she calls them, a cigarette half falling out of her mouth, a hand roughly tousling their hair. She showed up early for their sakes and helped hack down a pine tree in the woods with her ax. She thinks they need to be toughened, even as she seems amused by their naiveté. Part of her seems to want to swear around them, to see what she can get away with, and the other part of her catches herself, restrains herself from going too far. For she, too, has no home. And for all her crass pluck, she doesn't want to die alone.

As soon as Haymitch Abernathy came in the door, he made a beeline to the punch bowl. Even after all our years of friendship, he seems to always be hiding some part of himself. He cannot be fully transparent, even around me who can read through him, and him through me. And I can say without a doubt that we are, in some inexplicable way, soul-bound to each other. We share a certain natural cynicism mixed with a begrudging recognition of our part as revolutionaries for a "greater cause". We did what we had to do, and yet it can never undo what was done to us, or what we did to others. Haymitch never speaks of it, but I know too well of the dark underworld that gave men like him favors from desperate teenagers as a drug, like the drink. And when he was young, a tribute in the games, they made him do things, horrific things, that covered his hands with blood for their amusement. Everything became a meaningless game to him then. Well, almost. And yet he was not all gone. He...cared about us. No matter how he taunted us in the beginning, he came to care, to be our mentor. He wanted us to win, to live. And now I want him to live, to have a life, so very badly.

And now he and Effie are arguing as usual, this time over decorating the tree. She is insisting it needs more tinsel; he's insisting it needs more popcorn. Somehow he turns to commenting on her over-the-top choice of clothing, and she's yelling about his slobbish dress and dribbly sweater, and then the whole thing devolves into a food fight with popcorn and tinsel flying everywhere and getting stuck in each other's hair.

The two of them have grown in their fractious bond over the years. They are both outcasts in their own ways, almost polar opposites, but they've been through hell and back together, and gotten comfortable with each other, with their complaining and squabbling and moments of unexpected affection. After their short-term theatrical pouting and stewing, they are already managing to calm down and make up. Now they're occupied, her getting the tinsel off his sweater and him picking the popcorn out of her hair.

In the midst of all this, I hear a knock at the door and go to answer it, hoping against hope that it's not some newscaster looking for a last minute story for the holidays. When I open it, my eyes flash in a panic before my face goes blank.

"Gale."

He's still in his soldier's uniform with his cap in his hands and his hair tussled by the snow-speckled wind kicking up. His eyes dart down and then up again uncomfortably. "I-I was just... Peeta knew I would be on leave, and left a message..." He swallows. "Something of an open house, he said..."





Before I can figure out how to respond, Peeta comes up from behind me and shakes Gale's hand. "Hey, glad you came," he greets him. "Best get in out of the cold."

I eye Peeta angrily, and he is quick to pull me off into the kitchen before I make a scene.

"Katniss, listen..."

"What's he doing here?" I demand in a harsh whisper. "How could you do this, without even asking me?"

"You're just hurting yourself by hurting him," he exhales.

"I don't need you to tell me what's hurting me!"

"He's got nowhere to go to even try and celebrate Christmas. His family is all dead. He doesn't have anyone else. But this place is still his home. He's come home, full of the worst kind of memories..."

"And we don't have memories enough?" I retort. "He wasn't even in the games..."

I try to turn away, but Peeta grabs me by the shoulders. "Katniss, you know full well that if he could have taken your place, he would have in a heartbeat." He turns his eyes down guiltily. "Look, by all rights, when I was...I was out of my head, you should have been his."

"Peeta..."

"It's true, you know it is." He exhales. "But he didn't push to the end for it. He just wanted you to be happy, Katniss. He wanted what you wanted, and was willing to let you make that decision, however the cards fell. And...sometimes I think...well, when push came to shove, he was decent to me, and..."

My heart is pricked, and I reach up and touch Peeta's face. "It couldn't have been any other way. You have to believe that."

He closes his eyes. "Is that because...of what happened with...with Prim?"

I draw my hand away awkwardly and run it over my arm, as if cold. "It doesn't have anything to do with that."

"Then make peace with him, Katniss," he implores me. "He needs that to go on. Can't you see it in his eyes? And you need it, too. We all need it."

I clear my throat. "Better get another tray of crackers out to them, if you keep invited unwanted guests." I hurriedly kiss him on the cheek to shush him, and then am on my way.

I go back into the living room, set the cheese and crackers on the coffee table, and try to distract myself, threading popcorn absentmindedly. The kids take to Gale quickly. They are mesmerized by his uniform, and the fact that he brought a few small trinkets to give them. They are obsessed with the sparkly, flashing balls and Gale is bouncing them on the wooden floor to their squeals of delight. He also brought them army candy bars, as if they didn't have enough sugar in their systems already. But I can't seem to find it in my heart to snatch them away.

Sooner than later, they are calling him their "uncle."

"Uncle Gale, you wanna gift now?" Hazel asks him, bright-eyed.

"Uh, sure," he chuckles somewhat awkwardly.

To our shock, she heads right over to the mantle-piece, stands up on tiptoes, pulls down Prim's snow globe, and proudly presents it to him. All mouths in the room are agape.

Gale swallows hard. "I...I can't take it," he croaks. "I...well, it's something special...special to your mom, and I..." He eyes me, apologizing over the awkwardness of the situation.

I stare at that angel in the globe, and as much as I want to snatch it away from him, all of a sudden it seems to have Prim's face. And I know she wants to go with him. Yes, Prim always knew where she was needed, even up to the very day of her death. She was always trying to heal someone



someone who I didn't think deserved it.

"It's alright," I hear myself saying, and to my shock I keep going, "...she'd want it like that."

He looks shocked beyond belief. "You...sure?"

I nod abruptly, then feel my resolve faltering. "I...need a smoke," I mutter, and head out to the porch to escape all the feelings tossing about inside me.

I stand outside, thankful that the wind has died down, listening to the silence of the winter twilight and the way the stars prick through the sky, brightening the snow as the orange glow of the dying sun melts into a dark purple. It is so beautifully golden, I wish I could touch it, could bathe in it. I am almost sorry to see it swallowed up into the night, and my cigarette lighter the only gleam left. And I notice my hand is shaking.

And then a hand is on mine, steadying it.

"Catnip."

I look into Gale's eyes, then turn my own back out to the star-speckled snows. "Sometimes I think I can see her, outside in the yard, gardening in the spring or putting out birdseed in the winter. I want her to be there so much, and sometimes I try to convince myself she is there, just in a way I can only see with my mind. But memory isn't real, is it? Just compression on the brain..." I shudder.

"Do you believe she's still out there somewhere?" he asks me.

I shrug. "If she were here, she would tell me...tell me to have some faith, whatever that means. I don't even think she always knew, it was just...part of her, I guess, without too much thought behind it."

"I dream about her, all the time," he whispers.

"And...you. And that time we talked about running away, before the Games. And how I would have done it, risked anything, even losing our tongues just to get you and your family away from..."

"Gale," I blurt. "You said...I was strong. That I could handle it, and not...run away."

He nods shortly. "Yes, you've always been strong. Stronger than me."

"No, we were evenly matched." I smirk a little, in spite of myself. "Don't you remember how we used to hunt together? You never stopped teasing, still thinking I was in two tails, and just learning how to shoot. But I think I hit the mark pretty well, don't you?"

He snorted. "Except for that time you nearly shot my ear off when you were ten!"

"It was an accident, and you know it!" I punch him in the arm automatically. "And a few other 'accidents', like someone trying to be a big man and scare off my game."

Now he genuinely laughed. And then we fell quiet for a long time.

"I miss it," he says. "The way it was back then."

"Everything was different back then, Gale," I allow him. "For better or for worse."

"That's why you're stronger than me," he says. "For all that's happened, there's still something about you...something I don't think will ever go away."

I inhale on my cigarette, and blow out the smoke as I talk. "Don't know what you're talking about."

"Yes, you do." He shuffles his boot in the snow. "We've both been soldiers, Katniss, but you never let the soldier part of you outweigh the human part of you. I did."

I sink my teeth a little too hard into the cigarette, and have to quickly spit out a piece. "You're still a soldier," I tell him flatly. "No changing that, at this late date." I turn to head back into the





house.

“*Katniss.*”

His voice sounds so broken, so lonely, I turn back to him. He’s rubbing his partially fisted hand across his face awkwardly. “You know...you *have* to know...I never wanted...I would have cut off my arm before...”

“I know.” It is a simple statement of fact, one that I have known for a long time. “She was like a sister to you, too. She...loved you.”

“Those Capital scum didn’t deserve her out there, sopping up their blood,” he ground out.

“The world didn’t deserve her. Maybe that’s why she left it so soon. She had too good expectations, too good inclinations. She needed...to go somewhere where she fit in better.”

The edge of his mouth turned up a little. “Like the angel in the globe?”

I nod. “I hope they have snow. She...she always liked...snow...”

The thought somehow overwhelms me. I don’t know why. And I can’t follow the cross-section of moments when the tears start to fall, and Gale buries my face in the shoulder of his uniform and runs a gloved hand over my hair.



“Catnip, shh...it’ll be okay...shh...” He snuggles me close. “Maybe someday we’ll look back at all this, and it’ll make sense...I don’t know when or where... but I think...she’d want us to get through, you know?”

I nod. Of course Prim would. She’d want us to live our lives to the fullest, for all who were called away far too soon. And I know she’d want something else, too.

“She would want us...to be friends again,” I mumble. “She’d want me to forgive you.”

I feel him tighten. “I don’t suppose either of us is too good at forgiving, huh, Katniss?”

I shrug. “You don’t get good at something unless you try.”

At last, I pull away from him and we’re both quiet for a small passage of time.

Finally he asks, “How...how’s Mellark been? Has he...well, any lapses, or...?”

“No, nothing too severe. I mean...sure, he has bad days, his panic attacks and edginess sometimes, but it’s not like...he’s not dangerous. That’s been put in the past long ago.”

“I’m glad to hear it. Truly.” He breathes out a cloud of vapor in the cold. “I think he needed you more than anything to find himself again. And the kids...well, they’re great. You should both be proud of them.”

“We’re just glad they can grow up...different than we did.”

“Well, you made that possible.”

I turn to him sincerely. “And so did you.” I see the blush rising in his cheeks and clear my throat. “Better get inside before it’s completely dark. We’re supposed to have a toast to the longest night.”

When we come back inside, Peeta is already pouring out the eggnog. “Perfect timing,” he says cheerfully, handing us our mugs.

“The baker boy has drowned this in cinnamon,” Johanna notes dismally.

“I had a lot left over from the buns,” he explains.

“Best served with Effie’s marmalade,” Haymitch chimed in slyly.

“That was *alabaster*,” she chides him, and we all laugh at her expense.

Gale lifts his mug. "Cheers to the company."

"To the longest night," I say, mug held high.

"And the new year," Peeta adds.

We all clink our mugs together, only two at a time, making the ceremony longer, and more personal. The children join in this as well.

"Sing something, Mommy," Celyn implores.

I blush. "Eh, not tonight, honey."

"But you always sing to us before we go to bed," Hazel chimes in.

"Go on, make the crowd happy, Katniss," Peeta encourages me.

"They don't want to hear me," I mumble, glancing furtively at the others.

"Always the modest one," Johanna twits in her semi-mocking way.

"Of course we do, dear," Effie insists, clasping her hands.

"Yeah, give it a go, sweetheart," Haymitch jumps in.

Gale smiles a little. "Show them what you're worth, like at the river."

I know what he means, from the time back in the war, when I sang the song none of us will ever forget. But now it is time to sing another song. I clear my throat. It's been a long time since I've sung in front of anyone but Peeta and the kids, and usually that half-absentmindedly. But I hear Hazel winding up Gale's new snow globe, and I fight back the lump in my throat as the words emerge:

"Angels we have heard on high, sweetly singing o'er the plains, and the mountains in reply echoing their joyous strains..."

I fight back the tears as I start the chorus, and I hear the other voices join in slowly, hesitantly, for somehow in their dreams of memories and memories of dreams, they know the words from ancient days...and I see a sorrowfully joyful tear in Gale's eye as well:

"Glo-ooooo-ooooo-ooooo-ria...in excelsis Deo..."

As late night shadows creep up on us, Peeta busies himself cleaning up in the kitchen. Haymitch has fallen asleep on the sofa as usual, a half empty punch glass still on the end table. Effie has the kids on her lap, and she's reading them *The Nutcracker*. Evidently Hazel decided to burrow into her dress-up trunk and put on her costume to be the sugar plum fairy or some such figure from the story, complete with wire wings and a glow-in-the-dark wand.

Seeing them nodding off, I say they should probably go to bed. Effie looks absolutely stricken by this notion. I know how it is. I know she doesn't want Christmas to ever end. I wonder, was the origin of the holiday supposed to teach people how to be all the time? To give without counting the cost and view everyone else as something just so special you'd never want to cause them pain or shunt them aside, for all their past faults and failings?

But as I start to scoop up Hazel, she sleepily opens her eyes and flings her arms around Effie's neck. "Luvs you, Aunt Effie," she mumbles.

I know there is a trickle of a tear carving a path down her mascara, but she is quick to cover it. "Well, well..." She forces on a smile, and touches the wires poking out from Hazel's back. "Take good care of your wings, little fairy."

"C'mon, Effie, think you and me are overstaying our welcome just a tad, hmm?" Haymitch jabs at her, stretching and yawning from his prostrate position on the couch. "Better be hitting the long





road home..."

Effie looks positively downcast. Going back to the Capital is like a sentence of excommunication for her, some strange wandering place between worlds in which she is viewed as a turncoat by both parties. I don't imagine she'd fare much better in the districts, but I still hate to be sending her back into the belly of the beast.

"Are you two ever going to make something of yourselves?" Peeta teases good-naturedly.

"That's rather personal, young man," she chides him, still pouting.

Haymitch shrugs, standing up. "He's got a point, you know."

Effie huffs. "You think I'd be wanting to sabotage my social schedule, wasting away with you?" She opens her compact kit and starts to powder her nose.

"Oh, enough with the feather-dusting," he grumbles, and to all our shock pulls her into an impromptu kiss by the doorway, where a spring of mistletoe is most appropriately placed.

"Well..." She's obviously trying to come off of this without looking pleased. "Well...do compose yourself, and learn to better hold your liquor!"

"Oh, here," he exhaled, pulling something shiny out of his pocket. "This better fit..."

"Whoa..." Peeta breathes, seeing the ring placed on Effie's finger.

"He's finally gone and done it," I process, stunned.

"You...you got...opal...my birthstone..." Effie trails off.

"I knew you'd hound on me if I didn't," he retorts, "and sorry, but that's the last bit of fancy trappings you're getting out of this. I'm not bending the old knees in this cold weather. So what's it gonna be?"

She looks absolutely blank for a moment, then a rosy color comes to her cheek. She extends her arm. "Walk me back to the hotel, darling?"

Haymitch rolls his eyes at us over his shoulder in triumph, Effie blows us a bunch of kisses, and the two of them file out the door, arm-in-arm,

Johanna prepares to join them. "Well, it's been a blast of honey and heart-shaped cereal, kiddies, but the big girls have things to do," she snarks, slinging her bag over her shoulder. "We'll have to do it again some time, if I'm not dead..."

For once, I decide to catch Johanna off guard, to do the unexpected, and I overtake her on the doorstep in a hug. The suddenness of it jolts her, makes her tighten, makes her cough. She is weaker than she wants to be seen. "What you trying to do, Mockingjay?" she scolds me. "Want me to ax an arm off you, huh?"

But I don't let go immediately. And strangest thing, she doesn't pull away, either.

"You should visit more," I tell her. "For the kids, at least."

She snickers. "Don't tell me you don't think I'm a bad influence?"

"They've got tributes for parents, how much worse could things be?"

She cracks a crooked smile. "They left that mark on us all right well, didn't they?"

"We hit a few ourselves."

"Yeah, a president or two." She laughs roughly, then coughs. I pat her on the back and she shrugs, but not quite so bitterly now. "Go on, don't need to take care of me."

"Hey, get that checked out, okay?"

She snorts.



“No, I’m serious, you need to do that, or I’ll call you every day and swear at you, and you’ll swear back and threaten to finish me off like you should have at the arena clock.”

She laughs. “That sounds kinda like fun, Mockingjay. Wanna make a date of it?”

“I might even show up at your house if you lock yourself up again without sign of life.”

“Do that unexpectedly and you might have a dagger at your throat,” she warns me.

I exhale, and then hand her something I’d been waiting to give her all day. It’s my gift to her, handmade from leather, a sheath for the weapon she always sleeps with. “Well, at least you have something to put it in now,” I tell her.

She looks genuinely surprised by the gift, and a smirk comes to her lips when she sees the words carved into the leather: “Make Him Pay for It.”

“And how do you expect I do that, little bird, hmm?” she challenges, looking at me with death-darkening, bruise-circled eyes.

I meet her gaze. “Live.”

“Trying to pull me back from the edge?”

“You did it for me once. I think you can do it for yourself well enough.”

She cracks the slightest of smiles. “We’ll see.” And I give her a final farewell hug. And this time, ever so briefly, she hugs back, then disappears down the dark, snow-laden path.

Gale is the last to go. His eyes look sad and happy at the same time as I wrap up his Christmas globe in tissue paper and put it in a box for him to take back to his barracks. He has spent too much time in the service, and yet seems too full of painful memories to remain in District 12 for long.

“Where will you go when your enlistment is up?” I ask, walking him out to his military motorbike.

“I haven’t thought it all out yet,” he admits. “I suppose you can never come home again. Or at least, some of us can’t.”

“But we can find other homes.” I look over towards the handle of his bike, and see a chain with a camera pendant dangling off of it for decoration. “That’s from Cressida, isn’t it?”

He chortles. “Gave it to me for holiday good luck. She told me to give you all her best. She would have liked to visit, but her news casting work has her hands tied.”

“She admires you a lot,” I tell him pointedly.

He raises an eyebrow. “Trying to match-make me, huh? With a Capital girl?”

“You could do a lot worse,” I remind him. “You and her, you share something. Call it guts or gumption or that stuff that sticks to the ribs and won’t let go. You’ve both got it.”

He smiles with slight fondness. “Maybe so.”

“Maybe you needed to come here to have me tell you that.”

“Tell me what?”

“That...you’re free.”

He pauses, turning his helmet over in his hands. “Okay,” he says very quietly, and I know he takes it to heart. I know that it’s what he needs to know, deep inside himself.

“And that also means you’re free to come back and visit anytime you want,” I add, and give him a final goodbye hug, and he hugs back. Then he securely ties the snow globe box on the back of the





the bike with some sturdy wire he carried with him, gives me a somewhat darkly teasing Mockingjay salute, which then turns very sincere, and then he is gone, his motor fading down the road...

With the last of the guests gone, Peeta and I finally go to bed. It's chilly, so we get out a double blanket and curl together under it. We're quiet for a long time, just comforted by each other's presence. But I know something is stirring inside him.

"Glad he came?" he asks me.

"I think he'll be okay now," I tell him.

"And you? Will you be okay?"

I smile and nod. "I'm okay as long as we're together. You know that." I blink. "My God...with all the action, I forgot to even make you a Christmas present. I'm terrible..."

"Katniss," he murmurs, rubbing my shoulder a little. "You're the only Christmas present I've ever wanted, or ever need."

I nuzzle up against him in bed, like I have done during the hardest moments of my life, when the nightmares assail me. "Merry Christmas, Peeta," I whisper. And our faces grow near, and our lips grow close and we kiss in hopes of all the Christmases to come.

And somehow I feel as if all will be well. Yes, somehow, amidst all the brokenness and sickness and fear, my list keeps growing. It's the list that wards off my nightmares, of every good thing I've ever seen done, every moment, every sunset, every star. Maybe they are all the notes of an angel's song. Maybe they are all little "Glorias", which sung together are too long to get out in one breath. Maybe each of us is a precious breath taken in between, and listening back we will hear ourselves all together, and think it is as beautiful as a memory dancing on sun-tinged snow.



# GIFTS

## A STAR TREK STORY

**By M.C. Pehrson**

This story is one of many that precede “Testament”, which is posted at Fellowship & Fairydust. It has been edited for use in this magazine.

“Gifts” takes place after Spock’s return to life in “ST: The Search for Spock”, and before he heads back to Earth with Admiral Kirk and crew. Not yet fully recovered, he had taken his teenage daughter on a promised trip when Klingons kidnapped them from a starliner. At this point, Spock and T’Beth have been rescued and are back on Vulcan.

*...The door was massive, crafted entirely of Klingon kharaz. Spock knew something of the wood—its tough, impenetrable bark, the devilishly twisted fibers that defied splitting, the iron-like core that chipped and shattered axe blades. It spoke to him of grueling labor, of blisters and sweat, of rank humiliation. It spoke to him of slavery and betrayal. He hated the sight of it.*

*And now, through the heavy wood came faint but unmistakable sounds of distress. His daughter’s voice pleaded, “No, no...leave me alone!”*

*It was happening again. Spock could feel the dark dream-current sweeping him along, to an underworld murky with violent emotion. He had to save her, somehow. Like always he applied all his Vulcan strength to the door lock. For long moments he strained harder still...and failed once again.*

*“Father,” came the young voice. “Father, where are you?”*

*Throwing himself at the door, he pounded the unyielding wood until his bearded face was spattered with the blood from his own hands.*

*“Help me!” came the choked, despairing cry.*

*He answered with the outraged roar of an animal, a primitive sound that tore at his throat, shattering the kharaz and piercing the dreamscape...*

...Spock found himself in darkness, in bed, with a damp sobbing face buried against his neck. He touched his chin. The beard was gone, his hair cut short. The skin on his hands felt undamaged. With a sense of relief he remembered that he was back on Vulcan, safely recuperating before he returned to Mt. Seleya for more training.

He reached behind him for the light control and his bedroom filled with a soft, comforting glow. He tried to sit up, but the movement sent T’Beth into fresh panic. Lying flat, he gently stroked her heaving shoulders and dark tumble of hair. The actions felt forced and awkward. If only the girl



would recover quickly this time.

“Oh Dad,” she sobbed, “It...it was horrible.”

Spock took a slow, deep breath and held it against a rush of regrets. *Dad*—such a human expression. Since their rescue she sometimes used it in strictest privacy. It seemed to burst from deep within her, like a cry for the father he would never be, for the human warmth he could never quite give. Holding her like this, fresh from the torment of his own nightmare, he questioned the lifetime spent walling his emotions instead of learning to regulate them like full-blooded humans. Now he never dared let go, never for an instant, never completely. Letting go meant losing control, which was always a shameful matter.

T’Beth grew calmer. The quiet security of her father’s room, her father’s presence, gradually worked their effect, and she eased her hold enough for Spock to sit up. Looking down at her, he observed her frail appearance, the tear-reddened eyes haunted by the unspeakable memories of their abduction. He could not help but wonder what Klingon horrors were still locked up inside the teenager. She had told him so little since their rescue.

“T’Beth,” he began with care, “it has been seven weeks now. Rather than subsiding as I had hoped, you are still suffering these nocturnal disturbances.”

She bolted upright. “Oh, no. Please, Father, you promised me time. Just a little longer. I’ll be alright.”

Spock gazed into her desperate eyes. “I have explained to you that there is no cause for fear. Healers are gentle and understanding of—”

“No!” T’Beth caught hold of his hand. “Father, please don’t make me. Opening my mind would be so...so embarrassing, so *awful*.”

With resistance such as hers, a healer’s mind-touch would be awful indeed. Spock sighed. He had seen a forced probing. Once, years ago, he had participated in a mind-trial, but the experience so sickened him that he later argued long and hard against the brutal practice. No. He would not subject T’Beth to anything of that sort, but it was becoming clear that she needed psychological help.

“Relax,” he said, “I won’t force you to see a healer.”

T’Beth closed her eyes in relief. As she settled back against him, Spock considered entering her mind himself, though such contact between a father and daughter was forbidden. It would not be the first Vulcan taboo he had broken for her sake. Properly executed, a gentle mind probe could rid her of the problem memories. But any dreams arising from her subconscious would then be even more disturbing, because she would not understand them. *No*, he decided. And with a heavy heart he escorted her back to her bedroom.

Oooo

When Spock arose the next morning, he sensed a change in the air. After dressing, he walked down the hallway, into the kitchen. At the counter, Amanda stood humming as she sliced fresh *gespar* into a bowl.

“Good morning, Mother,” he said, inhaling the good aroma.



"Oh Spock," she said absently. "Good morning." She resumed her humming as she stirred the fruit, moving the spoon in rhythm with the lilting tune.

For some reason Spock found the music unsettling. There was something about it, something vaguely familiar that—

"Christmas is next week," Amanda interrupted his thoughts, spooning the fruit into bowls. "Have you forgotten, Spock?"

*Of course, that was it. Christmas carols. Peace on Earth, joy to the world.* Spock nearly winced at the thought of all that human sentimentality intruding on his life again, now of all times. There was no joy in T'Beth this year. There was no peace for either of them. How could Amanda be thinking of celebrations? If he were speaking with anyone else, Spock might have voiced his opinion. But this was his mother, so he chose his words with extreme care.

"Christmas," he said. "Yes, it was always popular among the humans aboard ship. Some of the celebrations were quite...memorable. However..." With Amanda's full attention, he continued delicately. "However, this year, considering all that has happened, such...festivities seem rather out of place."

"Oh," Amanda said dryly. "Is that so? Are you thinking of T'Beth now...or your own preferences?"

Spock stiffened. In his thoughts he seemed to hear her adding, *It's time you stop thinking of yourself. Taking T'Beth on that ill-conceived jaunt was totally irresponsible. It put her right into the hands of the Klingons.* He had said it to himself often enough. His instructor in the disciplines lectured him frequently about the destructiveness of guilt. "I *am* thinking of T'Beth," he said without much conviction. "Surely you've heard her cries in the night."

Amanda wiped her hands on a towel with quick, angry movements, and then tossed it down. She stared at it in icy silence.

"Mother," Spock began softly.

She whirled to face him. "Yes. I've heard! And I've wept in the night for her—frivolous human tears that serve no logical purpose whatsoever."

Spock met his mother's outburst with studied calm—a typically Vulcan reaction that served to fuel her anger just now. "Always so cool," she flared, "so perfectly controlled. I sometimes wonder if those Seleyan priests are turning you into a—" She broke off as T'Beth appeared in the kitchen doorway.

Biting her lip, Amanda set the bowls on the table. Spock ate only to please her. He dreaded emotional outbursts from his mother. He did not know how to respond to her disapproval, except by retreating further into himself, which did not





help matters. He finished the meal quickly, then walked into town.

The morning air retained a chilly hint of desert night, but he was comfortable enough in his cloak as long as he kept moving. He did not have any particular destination in mind. He followed the streets in a rough loop that would eventually bring him back home, where he hoped to find his mother in a better temper. He would spend the day at his computer, immersed in mathematical studies. The cold, inarguable figures would settle his mind as surely as any meditation, eliminating all thoughts of—

“*Moi fumo*,” spoke a boyish voice.

Drawn out of his reverie, Spock found a Vulcan adolescent struggling to keep pace with him on the walkway. He came to a halt beside ShiKahr’s transit depot. The young, neatly dressed stranger stopped and gazed up at him through dark eyes.

“Good man,” he repeated most respectfully. “*Chatai*. Excuse me, but will you be going to ShanaiKahr?”

“Why do you ask?” Spock inquired, genuinely curious.

“I missed the early shuttle,” admitted the boy. “My first class begins within the hour. If you are hiring a skimmer, I would share expenses in exchange for a ride.”

Up until that moment, Spock had harbored no intention of going to ShanaiKahr, but the boy’s candor and resourcefulness appealed to him, as well as his outward calm in what was certainly a distressful situation. Spock could not help but sympathize with the young scholar’s predicament, even if it was the result of carelessness. He nodded and they entered the depot together.

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The fireball of Eradani 40 painted the morning sky pink and crimson as Spock piloted the rented skimmer over the desert. Beside him the boy sat quietly, eyes forward, his hands relaxed on the armrests—a model Vulcan.

Since exchanging names, as even Vulcan courtesy demanded, young Stoba had answered Spock in the briefest language possible, as if reluctant to give up his silence now that he had secured a ride. Or perhaps he felt a little intimidated knowing Spock’s identity. But Stoba did not act intimidated, he merely acted...Vulcan. It was Spock who grew uneasy with the closeness in the cockpit and what suddenly seemed like an unnatural lack of sociability in a young person. As the trip dragged on, he found himself thinking of T’Beth’s spontaneity, of those swift unpredictable mood swings that made his daughter such a mystery to him, but an endearing mystery. Not unlike, he realized, her grandmother Amanda.

With a sense of relief, Spock delivered the prim scholar to his destination, and then aimlessly flew around the capital city. The feeling of discontent continued to build until he finally parked the skimmer in the port district and set out walking. Here alien-run restaurants, bars, and shops catered to the tastes of off-planet visitors. There was no place less Vulcan or more refreshing to Spock in his present state of mind. The babble of languages, the diverse swatches of music, the interesting assortment of aliens hurrying along the walkways—all seemed more attractive than any tedious session on Mount Seleya.

*But what was he thinking?*

Almost at once he argued back, *Must thinking be all that matters? Had he not determined once and for all that there was also some value in simply feeling?*

His eyes caught a garish twinkle of red and green lights on an artificial Christmas tree. Drawn to the window display, he paused to study the imitation snow flocking its branches.

Someone smelling of liquor bumped into him without apology, and he moved closer to the window. On one side of the tree a holographic nativity scene played out jerkily, in urgent need of repair. Nearby, an image of a white-bearded human wore the archaic fur robe of Father Christmas.

Spock ventured inside the store. The shelves of the import shop were stacked with merchandise from Earth. Trying to be inconspicuous, wondering if the human in him showed, Spock indulged in a very human pastime. He browsed.

Many of the items he had seen before, in one form or another, but the toy section with its curious gadgets and games was a fresh, fascinating world. He had not paid any attention to human playthings since childhood, and even if he had, toys changed so much from year to year that there was always something new. Except for the classics. Those, he recognized immediately—scaled-down replicas of various conveyances, dolls, and fiber-filled animal likenesses such as the honey colored bear with a crooked yellow rain hat.

“Can I set you on fire?” asked a man in heavily accented Vulcan.

Startled by the request, Spock turned and stared at a small perspiring human.

“Can I set you on fire?” he repeated graciously.

It occurred to Spock that the man was not a pyromaniac, but had unwittingly mixed the similar-sounding Vulcan words for “set on fire” and “assist”. “No thank you,” Spock said in Standard, adding a phrase he had heard humans use in similar circumstances. “I am...just looking.”

“For a boy or a girl?” persisted the salesman, at ease now in his native tongue.

“I beg your pardon?” Spock asked, confused once again.

“The gift. Is it for a boy or a girl? A Vulcan or...?” The man’s voice trailed off, his smile widening expectantly.

“Ah.” Spock was beginning to wish he had never come into the store. But now that he was here, and the focus of the salesman’s attention, wouldn’t it be simplest just to purchase some small trinket for his daughter? A Christmas gift might not distract the child from her troubles, but it would placate Amanda. “It is for a girl.” Rather than elaborate on T’Beth’s unusual bloodlines, he merely added, “A human who recently turned fifteen.”

“Well then,” beamed the salesman, “here’s the thing!” He grabbed a purple-furred multiped from a shelf and displayed it with obvious pride. “Cuddly and soft. I assure you, girls of all ages just love them.” He winked. “Even the grownup kind!”

Spock studied the toy animal in the salesman’s hands, but was unable to identify its species. By now he was getting accustomed to these gaps in his memory, and no longer found them quite so disconcerting. He asked, “What is it?”

“Why sir,” said the man, “I already told you. It’s a *thing*—a *Thing* with a capital T.”

Spock purchased the bear with a lower case ‘b’. Embarrassed by the whole business, he wrapped his cloak around the furry toy and carried it through the back streets to his skimmer.

Amanda surprised him in the hallway when he came home. Acutely aware of the bear hidden in his cloak, Spock hugged the bundle a little closer to his body.

Amanda seemed not to notice as her gentle eyes searched him. “Spock,” she said, “I didn’t mean to snap at you this morning. Sometimes I forget that...that T’Beth isn’t the only one hurting.”

The words challenged Spock’s composure. His back throbbed at the dark memories of a Klingon whip, of pain and humiliation lashed deep into flesh and spirit. Like T’Beth, he had never revealed the shameful details of his captivity to his family or his friends. It had been a terrible effort just to open himself, once, to the temple healer. He had not done it a second time. He did not want anyone to know what had happened behind Klingon lines.

Mother’s cool fingers touched his arm. “Please don’t go back to Seleya yet, at least not until after Christmas. Your being here means so much to T’Beth. It’s the best gift you could possibly give her.”

“Then I will stay,” Spock told her, not saying how long.



Oooo

As Christmas drew near, the mountain refuge called out to Spock, promising a pleasant quietude far removed from his mother's seasonal oddities. These days Sarek was seldom home, and Spock wondered if his father was seeking his own refuge. While T'Beth was at school, Spock

As Christmas drew near, the mountain refuge called out to Spock, promising a pleasant quietude far removed from his mother's seasonal oddities. These days Sarek was seldom home, and Spock wondered if his father was seeking his own refuge. While T'Beth was at school, Spock spent a great deal of computer time on a supplemental re-education program prepared for him by his parents. When T'Beth returned home, he helped with her lessons, took her on long walks under the stars, and did his best to soothe the night terrors that sent her fleeing into his room all too often.

And right there in his room, another source of disquiet haunted his closet shelf: the golden bear, still wrapped in his cloak. How could he have made such a foolish, illogical, inappropriate purchase? He had allowed himself to be caught up in a "mood", and now he was suffering the consequences. Knowing that he was hiding a "teddy bear" made Spock uneasy when anyone came into his bedroom, including T'Beth. Yet he could not bring himself to touch the silly thing, in order to take it from the house and dispose of it.

Late Christmas Eve, he caught his mother coming out of his room and all pretense of ignoring the situation vanished in a stab of panic. "Mother!" he blurted out, before continuing in a calmer tone. "Were you...were you looking for me?"

"No, Spock." She said in the very patient voice that she sometimes used on slow learners. "You left your coat in the living room. I was putting it away."

Spock's mind raced to the closet. He envisioned his mother opening the door, saw her start to hang the coat, notice a wadded cloak on the shelf and reach for it. "You did not have to do that," he said levelly.

Amanda gave him a look that he could not interpret. "We all do things we don't have to do. They're like gifts for each other. They make life pleasant. Speaking of which...are you giving T'Beth a present tomorrow?"

The question seemed calculated to throw him further off balance, and Spock responded curtly. "You said my being here was gift enough."

There was an awkward moment of silence during which he came to regret his abruptness.

"Yes," Amanda said at last, her voice delicately laced with ice. "I did say that, Spock. I should have known you'd take it literally."

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Long after the house grew quiet, Spock sat in his room, neither studying nor meditating. The unfortunate scene in the hallway kept replaying through his mind. He had shown a disrespectful attitude toward his mother, and all because of his embarrassment over a toy. To all appearances the bear had not been disturbed, but tonight he would remove the foolish thing from his closet, and from his life, before it caused him any further trouble. The trash cyler in the skimmer bay—or the "garage", as his mother called it—seemed ideal for the purpose.

Now that his mind was set, Spock moved quickly, thrusting the bear under his shirt, easing his bedroom door open, looking and listening in the dim hall. The way was clear. With the soft, sensual feel of synthetic fur against his skin, he eased down the hallway, slipped through the shadows of the kitchen, and entered the skimmer bay.

The indicator light on the trash unit showed that it was occupied with digesting the contents

of its last deposit. That meant the bear would have to wait in backload, but not for long. By morning it, too, would be devoured, right down to its crooked little rain hat.

Spock pulled the toy out from under his shirt. Warmed by his body, it almost felt alive to the touch. Its glass eyes caught the glow of the indicator light and glimmered at him as he forced it down the intake chute. Then the bear was gone.

Spock's relief was short-lived. As he stood in the darkness, a cry of pain sounded from within the house. He followed the sound to his daughter's room and did his best to comfort her.

oooo

Spock slept late the next morning. Perhaps it was an attempt to avoid Christmas, or escape the bitter memories of what a vengeful Klingon had done to his life and the life of his daughter. Whatever its source, the fatigue felt genuine and clung to him even after he awoke, making him want to roll over and go back to sleep.

A tapping at his door drew him back to reality. Sighing, he rose and put on a robe. He left the closet open, taking some small pleasure in the fact that at least he no longer had anything hidden there. Running a hand through his uncombed hair, he said, "Come in."

T'Beth entered and shut the door behind her. She looked pale and dispirited in her best clothes as she said, "We're waiting for you."

It was painful to see her so downcast on Christmas morning, and Spock thought, *that is what the Klingons have done to her. I was there when it happened. I practically handed her over to them...*

"Admiral Kirk and the others are coming this afternoon," she said, "when Grandfather gets home from work. Gram wants to go ahead with the presents now."

"Then we must not disappoint her," Spock replied.

A sonic shower did little to refresh him. Out of consideration for his mother, he put on a special suit of clothes. A pall of gloom hung over the living room as he entered. With a wan ghost of a smile, T'Beth looked up from the couch where she sat surrounded by brightly wrapped packages.

"Merry Christmas, Spock."

He turned from his daughter and found Amanda seated in her favorite chair. Nodding to her, he said "Merry Christmas, Mother" because it was a courtesy expected of him. "I did not mean to delay the proceedings," he added. And it was true enough. He had hoped they would go ahead without him.

"You needed the rest," Amanda said generously. "Are you hungry?"

"No," he replied.

"Then I think we've kept this girl waiting quite long enough."

Spock looked once again at T'Beth. She had donned an oversized gray hat that made her seem even more pathetic.

"Recognize it?" T'Beth asked, handing it over.

Upon closer examination, he realized that the brimmed cap had once belonged to him.

"It's from Starfleet Academy," she said. "I found it in your things when you were..." She stopped suddenly.

"Deceased," he finished for her.

She quickly moved on. "What was it doing here? I know that Sarek wasn't even talking to you back then. He didn't like you joining Starfleet."

Amanda gave Spock a fond smile. "Do you still remember?"

"Yes." Strange, how vividly he recalled that long-ago day and how deeply touched he had been to see her at his graduation. There, among so many humans, she had not stood out as she did on Vulcan. "You came to my commencement ceremony. This is the hat I wore. I didn't throw it



into the air, like the other cadets. Instead, I gave it to you.”

“And I’ve treasured it,” Amanda said. “I kept it from Sarek, in your bedroom.”

“Put it on, put it on,” T’Beth begged with more enthusiasm than she had displayed for anything since their captivity.

Spock obliged by donning the hat at the proper angle and she responded with a smile...but the smile grew forced as she began opening her presents. Spock settled into a chair and watched. Surely his mother could read the pain in her eyes. Why act out this travesty of celebration?

As Amanda blithely accepted the thanks for each gift, Spock found himself growing more and more annoyed, but he maintained a respectful silence. At last only one present remained. The strain of the ordeal plainly showed on T’Beth’s face and in the trembling of her fingers as she tugged red and green wrapping paper from the box. She lifted the lid. Tears gathered and she sat staring into the carton for so long that Spock almost said, “Enough.”

But then, incredibly, a smile began to steal over T’Beth’s face and she blinked away the tears, leaving her damp eyes glowing with an unmistakable light of pleasure. “Oh,” he’s adorable!” she exclaimed, carefully lifting the source of this remarkable transformation out of its box.

Curious, Spock leaned forward and glimpsed something golden and furry. As he stared at it, he could feel the blood rushing to his face, leaving his hands cold and his stomach in a knot.

Beaming, T’Beth soundly hugged the bear with the crooked yellow rain hat, and then jumped up and danced it around the room before collapsing in laughter on the arm of her grandmother’s chair. “I love him!” she said, clutching the bear in one arm and squeezing Amanda with the other. “Oh, thank you, Gram. He’s *perfect!*”

Spock looked on, speechless. What an odd coincidence; he had purchased the very same bear as his mother, only to destroy it. He had badly misjudged the situation, but now Amanda’s thoughtful gift was actually bringing T’Beth some real happiness. That should have been reward enough, yet he found himself wishing things had turned out differently and the credit for the gift might have been his.



Then Amanda said to T’Beth, “Dear, I’m so glad you like it, but I’m afraid you’re thanking the wrong person.”

T’Beth went still and searched her grandmother’s face. “You’re joking.” She saw that Amanda was not joking. “Then who...?”

Incredibly, Amanda turned and gave Spock an amused, very telling look. He sat rooted to the spot as T’Beth followed her grandmother’s line of sight, eyes opening wide in astonishment.

“*You* bought it?” she cried.

Amanda said, “I only wrapped it for him.”

There was no chance for Spock to comment, even had he been so inclined. Leaping off Amanda’s chair, T’Beth rushed over and caught him in a fierce embrace that knocked his hat askew.

“Thanks, Dad,” she whispered in his ear.

Holding her close, Spock gazed upon his mother with appreciation.

The End







The background of the page is a soft-focus, dreamlike illustration of a winter scene. A vibrant rainbow arches across the upper right portion of the image. In the foreground, a large, detailed snowflake is visible on the left, and a fountain pen lies diagonally across the lower right. The overall atmosphere is ethereal and wintry, with a color palette dominated by cool blues and purples, accented by the warm colors of the rainbow.

## winter's fae

by linda m. crate

crystals of light  
danced  
upon the snow  
faerie glitter  
for the winter fae,  
and i felt the sharpness  
of his blue eyes  
as crows danced all around me;  
but when i turned  
he was never  
there—  
i wonder if winter's fae meant to surprise me  
to catch me off guard,  
force me into the harshness of a kiss  
that i didn't want,  
but i felt my chagrin rise as the snow was above  
my knees,  
and i heard his laugh  
in the howling of the wind yet when i looked  
he wasn't there—  
the crows screeched at me and i think they  
must have known winter would  
shoot a chill through my bones that  
took my breath,  
but when i opened my eyes  
he wasn't there,  
only the icy blue reflection of his eyes upon the snow.



# WINTER WARRIOR

## BY ELIJAH DAVID



Snow fell unseen in the moonless night air, each flake making its journey without notice or proclamation. Nick liked the snow on nights like this. It went about its business anonymously, as he did on the best of nights.

Nick was neither angel nor demon, but he wasn't, strictly speaking, human. To be human, one must possess both body and soul, and Nick was a bit short in the corporeal department. Had been for centuries now. He wasn't the only spirit wandering the earth, but he hadn't met another like him in a month of Christmases.

He never introduced himself—on the rare chance an introduction was needed—as Nick. It wasn't his true name, or even his favorite of the names others had called him over the centuries, but he supposed it was the best to use in the current age. It was an easy name to grasp, a simple identity to hold onto as the numberless winters faded into springs.

In the town Nick was visiting, the sparse yellow lights made the snow seem black as the flakes flew through the dim halos feebly holding back the winter night. It was odd, Nick thought, how two symbols of goodness—light and snow—could be turned into one of evil when brought together just so. Yet the snow passed through, pure as ever. It completed its mission, compelled just as Nick was to move on until the task was done.

The few people out at this time of the night would not have noted Nick's passing, except perhaps to idly think the chill of the air a little less and the warmth of the lights a little greater for a moment before dismissing such fantasies for what they were and getting on to whatever business they had, planned or unplanned, for the rest of the night. The most perceptive of people might have thought they felt the presence of a lost loved one nearby, but those cases were rarer than Nick could guess. No human ever saw him, spoke to him, or thanked him. He was less than a ghost to them.

Only a few blocks from his first stop, Nick paused and turned away from his destination. A tired man of about thirty years stood outside an office building, his coat ill-fitting despite its obvious luxury. His face was heavily lined for one so young. Grey flecked his hair like snow that had melted into the surrounding hairs without losing its paleness. A shadow of black and gold hovered beside the man's ear—a trick of the light to human eyes—a spirit of despair to Nick's.

Nick crossed the street, quieter than snow on snow, and touched the man's shoulder. In most cases, that was all it took. A light touch, half a moment's kind thought could work more than a hundred years of heavy-fisted domination. The glinting shadow by the man's ear shuddered, but his weariness seemed to abate slightly. Nick held on another moment. The shadow squeaked in protest and dissipated. The man's face smoothed out, the wrinkles turning to laugh lines, and he walked down the street, almost unconsciously



dropping a few folded bills into the lap of a sleeping homeless woman.

The woman woke with a start, though the impact of the bills had been barely more than that of the falling snow. She pushed her hat and scarf away from her eyes to see more clearly what had been left for her. Nick felt the joy well in her heart as she stood hastily. She would have slipped on the cold sidewalk, save for Nick's hand steadying her. She made her way as quickly as she could to the makeshift shelter a few blocks away, where her children were sleeping under her brother's care.

Such was the nature of Nick's work: kind thoughts producing actions producing kind thoughts, each lending itself to multiplication the more it spread. He allowed his gaze to follow the woman's journey, committing the sight of her joyful face to memory. It would join the other memories stored by, held close on cold nights when hope was hardest to find. Years weighed down spirits both in and out of the flesh, and the burdens of others were easier to lift than Nick's own worries. Despite his choice to wander rather than seek the rest of his faith, Nick sometimes felt swept along by his mission to the point that he was never as effective as he ought to be.

But Nick had given the weary man hope enough that he would be a happy presence in his home this night, and the man's generosity, unconscious though it might have been, had sent the woman back to her family and out of the cold. Such connections might seem inconsequential to the humans who experienced them—they often were, from all Nick could gather—yet Nick treasured them as though he had been the one to arrive home more cheerful than usual. No matter how many lives he touched, each one carried him forward to the next.

Which reminded him, he needed to be off to the next house, the one he had been aiming for before his delay with the tired young man. Contrary to folklore, he did not visit each household in a single night. Indeed, he hardly visited every "believing" household in a night. Time bound him as tightly as the snowflakes falling through him to the ground. But he could reach those who most needed him quickly enough, and he did eventually circumnavigate the Earth every few years or so. It all depended on



the number of stops. And delays.

The apartment building was typical of the breed, the brick exterior hiding a hollow sort of living space that had potential for comfort or congestion, depending on the occupants. Nick's destination was on the third floor. He made his way up the chilly stairwell and down the hall to the apartment where his latest charge lay in fitful sleep, her once-dark hair damp with sweat from a fever.

The woman's dreams nestled around her like dark serpents. They did not threaten. They had no need of threats. The presence of one nightmare was enough to unsettle any human's sleep. When this many were gathered near a single person, particularly the very young or very old, the effect was disturbingly tremendous.

Nick stepped into the room and shooed the nightmares, but they only raised their sluggish heads to reveal open, many-toothed mouths.

Nick did not recoil. He drew the sword at his side and severed the heads from the rest of the nightmare bodies. The dark dreams faded with unheard shrieks and the woman's sleep grew peaceful again. Nick put a hand on her forehead, hoping to send a pleasant dream or perhaps a dreamless sleep into her mind.

"I wondered what was keeping you," said a familiar voice from beside Nick.

Nick did not turn to see who was speaking, nor did he respond. Instead, he straightened, moving closer to the sleeping woman, his sword still bare and ready in his hand. He laid the other hand back on the woman's forehead and felt the fever leave.

"Sleep well, child," Nick whispered in a voice that he supposed might become a haunting reminder of the night if she ever remembered hearing it.

Satisfied with his work, Nick turned and addressed the other speaker. "I stopped to help a few others on the way," he explained.

"You always do," said the other spirit. He was tall and had handsome features. In the right light, he might have been objectively beautiful. Incandescent bulbs in the living room/kitchen of a small apartment in Illinois did not provide the right illumination. Instead, the other spirit's features seemed flawed at a subconscious level, so that, although he was handsome, there was always a slight something about his face that made onlookers shift nervously.

"It's almost not worth setting up these little visits in advance," the other spirit continued. "I mean, look at how long it took you to get here for a woman in the throes of





fever and a dozen nightmares. One would almost be tempted to think you'd stopped caring about them."

The other spirit was the reason Nick didn't much like his own name, despite the fact that he couldn't quite hold onto the fullness of his original name. "Nick" was part of a name humans had given to the type of being standing across the room: Old Nick.

"Nick," said Nick, "why do you torment them? It doesn't change anything."

"Nick," returned Old Nick, "why do you care about them? It doesn't change anything, either."

Old Nick was not the devil, but one of the other rebellious angels who wandered the earth trying to drain the hope and faith from humanity, rather than inspiring those virtues. His hungering, empty eyes moved from the sleeping woman before him to the weapon in Nick's hand.

"You're carrying a sword again," said Old Nick. "What happened to 'peace on earth, good will toward men'?"

"Men have nothing to fear from me," said Nick, "so long as they do not hold darkness in their hearts." He held his sword out to the side, and Old Nick's eyes flickered as he understood the earnestness with which Nick would use that sword against anything as dark and unhuman as him.

"But that's such a tricky thing for them, isn't it?" asked Old Nick. He traced delicate patterns on the forehead of the sleeping woman, his fingertips passing through the same places Nick's had touched moments before. "The darkness is always there, waiting to surge up. And it only takes a little thing to bring it out. Like a careless thought brought on by weariness." He tapped the woman's head and, to Nick's eyes, a small dark tendril snaked its way between Old Nick and the woman before snapping.

"I like to think I help some of them push back the darkness," Nick said.

"And the ones who don't want to push it back, or mistake it for the light?"

"All the more reason to help them," Nick said. He leaned forward, his sword at Old Nick's chest. "Your business is done here. Leave."

Old Nick eyed the sword with a false air of confidence. "I could say the same to you." He raised his hands in mock surrender and backed away. "Just remember, Nick. You chose this existence."

Old Nick vanished and Nick sheathed his sword before kneeling by the woman's side. He laid his hand on her head and was surprised, though not wholly, that Old Nick had not planted a thought in her mind, but instead had tapped into the weakened wall of a small blood vessel.

Nick bit his lip and considered his options. He was not an avenging angel or a healer. He was a messenger of hope, an easer of burdens. He had asked for that when he first presented his request to wander the world on the same mission he had once held in life. He could try to wake the woman in the hope of giving her the chance to reach medical care. Or he could comfort her as she passed, keeping at bay the dark dreams and fears

that lingered in the cold night. The decision affected Nick in a way he had not known in years; humans called it heartbreak. He had chosen this existence, had pleaded for it, and now he was faced with a choice whose options would not, could not fulfill his purpose or his mission.



"Father, give me grace," he whispered as he eased the worry welling up in the woman's soul.

As he stood, he noticed that the woman's eyes were now open. She stared at Nick, though he told himself she must be looking through him. She could not see him; none of them could.

"Am I going to die?" the woman asked.

"I—" said Nick before he could remind himself that the woman could not possibly be speaking to him, even if she were on the threshold between life and death.

Despite this reminder, he responded with a question that often haunted him on his visits. "What is your name?"

It was one of the shortcomings of his existence that he never knew the names of those he helped. Names, though trivialized in the modern world, held power over a person. Without a name, a person wasn't complete. Without names, they were faceless and void.

And how long until Nick could no longer remember even that much of his own name? What awaited him then?

"Luci," said the woman. "My name is Luci."

By the Risen—the woman could see him! She could hear him!

"Am I going to die?" Luci asked again.

"I don't know," said Nick. "You might be all right if you get a doctor here."

"But then again I might not, *sí*?" Her hand fumbled for the telephone on the table beside her. As she dialed the emergency number, she asked, "Are you going to keep him away? The *diablo* who was here?"

Had she seen Old Nick as well?

"Yes," Nick said. "Whenever I can, wherever he is."

"Good," said Luci, closing her eyes. "Thank you for stopping my dreams. They were not . . . very nice."

Nick could hardly think while Luci spoke with the dispatcher on the other end of the call. She saw him, spoke to him, and knew what he had done for her. None of the others had done so, not in more than a thousand years of wandering. Why this woman? Why now?





When the dispatcher had her name and address, Luci turned the phone to her shoulder and asked, “*San Nicolás*, are you going to stay? Surely there are others to see tonight. *Niños y niñas* with stockings, *sí*?”

Nick almost responded that he couldn’t stay, as if some instinct told him this was impossible. Yet he wanted it as soon as the woman asked. He wanted to stay, to guard her forever from the wiles of Old Nick and his ilk.

“I don’t know,” he said at last. “Would you like me to?”

“Please,” she said. “Until the ambulance gets here.”

Nick nodded, but even as he settled into the apartment, leaning against a wall near the couch so he could watch over Luci, he felt a resurgence of doubt that he could fulfill those words.

They sat in contemplation of themselves and each other. Nick could not say what the woman thought of him, and he wondered how he appeared to her. To him, she seemed a woman deep into her old age, yet still innocent at heart despite the world’s cares.

“Will he come back?” Luci asked.

“Perhaps,” Nick said. “I hope not.”

“You can’t keep him away forever, can you?”

“No, I don’t think so.”

“But you’ll try?”

“I will.”

She reached out for his hand, though neither of them could feel the other, and said, “You aren’t used to people talking to you, are you?”

“No. Most people can’t see me.”

“Why?”

A good question, Nick thought. “I suppose because I don’t have a body right now.”

“So you died,” said Luci.

“Yes.”

“Are you going to get a new body?”

“Someday,” he assured her, “but not yet.”

“Is that something everyone does after they die, or are you special?”

Nick wasn’t sure of the answer. Though he wasn’t the only spirit to choose this life—afterlife, he supposed—there were far too few of them for it to be a universal calling.

“Not everyone,” he said. “But some.”

The EMTs arrived then, and Nick pressed himself back against the wall to keep out off



their way. He even sheathed his sword, though there was no need. The EMTs quickly got Luci transported to the ambulance, and Nick followed, making certain Luci could see him every step of the way. As they closed the doors of the ambulance, Nick recalled Old Nick's words about the darkness lurking in men's hearts.

He pushed through the EMTs and the icy metal of the ambulance. When he had reached Luci's side, he whispered to her, "Cling to the light, Luci. No matter what dreams come to you, no matter what happens. Cling to the light."

He hadn't meant to reach her so quickly. He had started moving again, and with great speed, and now he felt himself drawn to his next charge. There would be no years of rest here, keeping watch over Luci, becoming a friend known only to her. He must go on. No, he couldn't allow himself to think of it that way. As he had told Luci, he was allowed to keep moving, helping others as he went.

"I will," Luci said as Nick was drawn out into the night's snowy winds.

Nick imagined that the EMTs, if they had noticed Luci's words, would have asked her about her conversation partner. He wondered what she would tell them.

As he rushed out of town on the winds of his calling, Nick spotted Old Nick crouched in an alley. With whispered words and the quiet dread that leached into the mind like cold into bones, Old Nick was trying to drown the hope of the homeless woman Nick had helped earlier. Already she seemed on the brink of walking into the storm and abandoning the family that had brought her joy.

Nick drew his sword and called out to Old Nick. The other spirit turned and stared at Nick, as though not recognizing him with a sword in his hand. He pierced Old Nick's un-body with the sword and carried them both away so quickly that he did not have a chance to ease the woman's fear. Old Nick clung to the sword and tried feebly to remove it from his chest.

"You are a blight upon the world," Nick said, keeping up their momentum so that Old Nick was bent nearly double around the silver blade. "You haunt old women with nightmares when they might be beacons of hope in the world's winter." Old Nick clawed at Nick's face, leaving scratches as deep as nail scars. "You steal joy from those who have nothing else." Old Nick's hands cut themselves on the blade as he tried again to release himself from its grip. "You do nothing for gain or pleasure. The only thing pure about you is your spite."

"You're . . . spending . . . yourself, Nick," sputtered Old Nick, his voice nearly lost in the wind of their passing.

Nick pushed on a little farther before slowing down and dropping a weak and broken Old Nick in the snow. His sword bore no mark or stain to witness carrying the spirit for so many miles.



"That's the reason I chose this life," said Nick, who for a moment almost thought of himself once more as Saint Nicholas, "to *spend* myself."

Nick turned his back on Old Nick, now a withered and snow-drifted husk. As the night enfolded them, he added, "Merry Christmas."



# Under the Sun

A Narnia

By Hannah

Standing on a second story balcony overlooking the outer walls of Tashbaan, Susan stared up into the night sky with tear-dampened cheeks, watching the haunting but beautiful red auroras roll across the hot dry desert like bloodstained celestial waves.

"Confound them!" she muttered angrily, confident that only the large Jaguar curled up at her feet could hear. Forcefully gripping the white marble terrace with such pressure that her hands paled, she continued, "Oh, just *confound them!* It's Christmas Eve! I want to be *home!*"

Suddenly catching a small noise below, she peered down just as two Tarkaans emerged through a doorway across the street. Pausing when they noticed her, they stopped to stare at the blossoming foreign queen with leering grins, pointing at her with licentious chuckles. Instinctively, she started to pull back, but rooted herself in place with strengthened resolve when the Jaguar's head rose up over the railing like a slow-motion jack-in-the-box.

"Thanks, Onca," she whispered, offering him a small smile as they watched the bearded men slip into the darkness.

"The *fools,*" he replied with a soft snarl, his golden eyes burning with contempt. "I only wish I could do more. Your brothers and sister will be furious when they hear of the insults that you've endured on this trip."

"I just wish we were together tonight," she sighed. "It wouldn't be like Christmas at home, of course, but at least..." She let her voice trail off into a sigh. "But who knew a trade conference would last almost two months? It's like the Calormenes *want* everyone to spend their Christmas here."

"I wouldn't put it past them, your majesty," the Cat replied dryly, pinning his ears back.

"I don't want my family finding out about any of *this,*" she continued, gesturing towards the street with a note of authority in her voice.

"My queen..." he protested gently, "those men, the prince—your brothers would—"

"No." She shook her head anxiously. "*Those* men are lost in the darkness. I didn't even recognize them—forget them. And as for Rabadash, while yes, I'll admit that he *has* been more forceful on this trip, he hasn't been grossly outrageous." She sighed again. "If I complain, he will only say that I am unhappy because the conference didn't go to my liking. And that's why I'm still here," she finished, her face setting with determination, "instead of home where I'd desperately love to be right now. I don't want him to be able to say that I'm unhappy with the negotiations."

"Your brothers and sister would be insulted," the Cat repeated, his claws sounding like fingernails on glass as he reflectively sharpened them on the terrace, "if they had heard some of the things that have come out of the prince's mouth in reference to your majesty."

Susan opened her mouth to respond, but was interrupted by a booming knock on the apartment's door. Onca growled softly.

"Who is it?" she called cautiously, her head swiveling towards the sound as she laid a light hand on the



# Northern Lights

A Story

by Sarah Skipper

Cat's broad shoulder. Why hadn't anyone informed her of a visitor?

"A weary traveler and his son from across the desert," a familiar voice called, "come to seek a Christmas audience with the elder queen of Narnia."

Susan squealed with delight as she raced to unbolt the door, and she flung her arms around the robust king and his grinning boy. "Come in, come in! Oh, this is a much-needed surprise! Thank you so much!"

"We all need friendly company when we're stuck in Tashbaan for this long," Lune replied ruefully, his eyes sparkling above his bright smile. Leaning close, he whispered in her ear, "The Calormenes do this about once a generation, I think. I was here with my father, as a boy the last time, and now it seems that Corin is to have the same pleasure."

"What pleasure?" Corin grumped, making a face.

"You don't say!" Susan's eyes grew wide with recognition. "I've been thinking that something was off!"

"As I recall, they're running the ruse just about the same as when I was a boy," Lune shrugged as they settled onto the couches, adding, "Personally, I think it's each Tisrocs' idea of an intimation tactic, since they've never succeed in conquering us. They know how much Christmas means to us Northerners—particularly, I think, you Narnians."

"To go without it for a hundred years is unimaginable to me," Susan mused, shuddering.

"Can I please box Rabadash, Father?" Corin groused, folding his arms over his chest, his jaw working from side to side. "What he is doing is completely unfair!"

"Corin," the king frowned sternly, "I brought you here to learn diplomacy, not butcher it." He turned back to Susan. "But, now, my dear, it is time to open your gift."

"My *what*—" she gasped. "You didn't! But I don't—"

He laughed, waving aside her protest. "It's enough for me to spend Christmas with my son, but to think that I could make this accursed conference a bit more passable for you is a bonus that I won't pass up."

"You have never ceased to amaze me," she replied softly, thinking of everything that he'd gone through as they gripped hands in firm friendship.

"Corin?" his father prompted. "You mentioned pleasure? Well, give her majesty the box and we will see if—"

Grinning from ear to ear, Corin whipped a long rectangular box out from behind his back before Lune had even finished. "You'll never guess what it is!" he teased.

"Oh, really?" Susan teased back, wondering why she hadn't noticed it when they came in. "Well, I'll have you know that I'm the best guesser in my family!"

"I thought King Edmund was the best guesser," Corin replied, freezing Susan's hand just above the lid.

"Whoever told you that?"



"King Edmund."

"Oh, well," she laughed, lifting the lid, "*that* figures. Well, I'll say that King Edmund is better at making jests!"

"Oh, how *beautiful*!" she gasped, staring down at a single desert lily.

"Merry Christmas, my dear." Lune smiled broadly. "Admittedly," he continued, "you have something from us that awaits your return to Cair Paravel. But once I realized that we wouldn't be home for Christmas, and since I know that you haven't been through this before, I solicited a Tarkaan to go for a ride in the desert, and while we were resting by an oasis, I found this."

"He stole it from the desert," Corin said, behind his hand, grinning like a fox and bringing a round of laughter to the king and queen. "What will the Tisroc do?"

"Oh, you really do never cease to amaze me," Susan repeated, shaking her head as the laughter died down, "Thank you!"

"You are most welcome."

"You know," she changed the subject after a quiet minute, dejectedly bringing the lily up to her face to smell its perfume, "I never feel farther from Aslan than when I'm here."

"And I often never feel closer," he countered gently, growing thoughtful. "I talk to Him every day, of course, regardless of where I am, but somehow I'm more fully aware of Him when I'm here. It's a feeling that I can't really explain...but..."

"You feel *closer*?" she frowned, taken aback. "In this place?"

Corin made another face. "I have to agree with Queen Susan on this one, Father. Ugh, *He* can't be here."

"Oh yes, He is here; be sure of that," Lune answered, giving his son a strange look. "No Tisroc could keep Him out."

"Well, that's true," Susan agreed, her face brightening a shade.

"In fact," he went on eagerly, smiling at her lightened mood, "I have no doubt that He is in this room right now, because I see His reflection in you."





# Christmas in the Old World

## A Fantastic Beasts Story

By Carolina Hobot

*June 1927, New York*

The dock was bustling with people arriving and departing. The sound of ship whistles filled the air as Jacob pushed his way through the crowd. He anxiously surveyed the milling populous for any overt signs of danger.

No one was paying him attention beyond grumbles as they made way for him. Indeed, the family to his left were busy with their crying children and spared Jacob merely an irritated glance.

However, Jacob wasn't convinced. Ever since he had regained his memories of the magical world that lived alongside the 'ordinary' world he had inhabited for most of his life, Jacob had learnt that rarely was anything as it seemed. Particularly when one was attempting to escape the rigid rules of MACUSA while they were on the alert for the most dangerous dark wizard for centuries: Grindelwald. As this wizard had eluded the cells of MACUSA, plus said Government's version of police had not noticed their Director of Magical Security had been impersonated, Jacob wasn't exactly swayed by MACUSA's ability. However, Jacob knew from his time in the trenches that a government that was angry and embarrassed wouldn't stop to review its actions beyond the bare minimum; most would continue throwing men and women at the problem until it stopped.

So, Jacob looked out for MACUSA and Grindelwald fanatics by what was not there: a space or an area where his eyes seemed to slide off and not 'see', such as to his right, for example.

Inhaling sharply, Jacob kept a casual eye on that locale and pressed on, more urgent to reach his ship.

*Please God, please let my Queenie reach her transport safely.*

Queenie was also running, separately and by wizarding means to throw everyone off the scent. No one would stop her, for she was determined to live her life with the No-Maj she had fallen in love with, and Jacob was grateful every day for her willingness to abandon the country she knew, for Britain.

Of course, Queenie said he was doing the same with the dream of his life, what with his bakery and leaving America. Jacob didn't feel it was the same. He would start a bakery in London; Newt had already persuaded his brother to help with procuring a wonderful spot in an area both Muggles and magical folk frequented.

Jacob smiled even as he observed that area which kept his eyes sliding away as if it didn't exist. He was Polish American and the Poles were used to travelling and fighting all sorts; heck, they had only gained their country back after the War, so displacement was not something new.

His grandma had thankfully lived to see the day Poland regained independence, which gladdened his heart. Queenie and Tina were descended from Jewish ancestors who were used to travelling, so for both Queenie and him, this was



just another journey. They would reach their promised land. Jacob believed this, for he had received renewed love in the form of new friends and a woman he cared for deeply, after a War where so much death had occurred. If that was possible, anything was possible.

He caught a glimpse of a woman's long grey coat and purple hat, and his fingers were about to touch the turquoise ball in his pocket that would summon Tina, when the woman spoke.

"Your Occamy's plumage is so vibrant—"

"—that it dazzles the eyes," finished Jacob. "Tina," he whispered, "the spot to my right, by that container, causes my eyes to slide right past."

The woman nodded and clutched his elbow. "I know. I managed to catch a glimpse with badly watering eyes. Grindelwald's lookout."

"For us?"

"I hope not."

"Be careful."

The eyes under the hat went hard. "You be careful, Mr Kowalski; my sister could perish."

Jacob swallowed and nodded. There was nothing to say because they had reached the ship, with Tina now murmuring an untraceable spell. They exchanged one long look full of silent promises and wishes.

*Keep my sister safe.*

*I will; you stay safe, too.*

*I will; have a peaceful voyage.*

Then Tina was gone, and Jacob went to his cabin (again secured discreetly by Theseus Scamander), which contained two small beds, a cupboard, desk, and wash basin. It was empty, apart from an innocuous suitcase on one of the beds.

*It can't be.*

A sudden sharp pop and a wizard appeared, all long blue coat and freckled face. A beaming smile met his startled gaze.

"The Nundu has a cold—"

"—better duck!"

"Jacob!" The wizard seized him and embraced with a fierce hug before letting go.

"Newt!" gasped Jacob with a wild grin. "I didn't expect you to be here." Then his eyes fell on the key Newt had placed on the desk. "That's not one of those illegal portkeys, is it?"

Innocence bled from Newt, which alarmed Jacob considerably, as an innocent Newt usually equalled dangerous beasts somewhere, at some point.

"Don't fret about that, Jacob; I couldn't let you travel alone, could I?"

Jacob sighed and placed his suitcase (full of minimised items) on the free bed. "Grindelwald?"

Worry twisted Newt's face. "Yes, have you bumped into one of his followers?"

"Tina and I noticed one on the docks, but Tina was calling reinforcements."

Newt relaxed, confident in Tina's abilities. "So," he clapped his hands, "shall we explore?"

"As long as we're not trying to recapture any of your beasts..."

"You love it," protested Newt.



“Yeah, but some quiet would be nice.”

Two days later, Jacob staggered into their cabin, wet and shaken after his voyage to the dark depths of the ocean, carrying under his coat a denizen of the depths.

Quiet? The good Lord clearly had no intention of granting him quiet. Shaking his head, Jacob accepted his fate as a dripping Newt led the way into the suitcase and conjured a massive saltwater pool in a new enclosure.

~ \* ~

*July 1927, London*

Jacob kissed Queenie. Her bright, delighted eyes brimmed with tears of happiness.

Behind them, Jacob could hear Newt encouraging his beasts to give a cheer, which led to a cacophony of roars, shrieks, piercing cries, hisses, and a tentacle from a temporary pool reaching out to touch Jacob’s elbow in congratulations.

“My wife,” he breathed, and he felt tears on his cheeks.

Queenie laughed, her mind spilling over with his happiness as his thoughts brushed her mind as well her own joy.

“My husband,” she sighed, then she kissed him. Pulling back, still embraced, she raised their joined hands, rings glinting in the sunlight.

Tina cheered harder, with Theseus joining in with a flick of his wand; a glittery shower fell about them. Dumbledore added a jolly piece of music that had Jacob singing.

The priest (who had a brother who was a wizard), bowed to them and went to join the small congregation, his face curious as he took in Newt’s creatures. Within seconds, the poor man was listening to an avid Newt and was lost for the afternoon and evening. Jacob just chuckled and shook hands with his sister-in-law and Theseus.

He couldn’t be happier.

~ \* ~

*23<sup>rd</sup> December 1927, London*

The smell of yeast filled Jacob’s senses as he uncovered the bowl where he had allowed the yeast to rise in the milk. Sighing happily, he carefully added it to another bowl full of an egg mixture, and beat the ingredients thoroughly. Flour followed in a small plume.

“Oh sweetie!” called a voice delightfully.

Glancing up, Jacob’s heart swelled at the vision. His beautiful Queenie, so sweet and gentle, had entered the kitchen. Her eyes sparkled with warmth, and her hair was done in her lovely curls. Clad in a pale red dress, the woman he loved so dearly touched his nose with a mischievous gleam.

Her finger came away covered in white dust. “Are you baking yourself, darling, or wishing for snow?”

Jacob laughed. “No darling, merely getting my flour everywhere.”

His *wife* – and how Jacob rejoiced that he could call Queenie his wife – chuckled. “Aw, my suggestions were much more fun.”

“I hope you weren’t gonna eat me like that witch from Hansel and Gretel,” remarked Jacob, gracing the waggling, flour-sprinkled finger with a quick kiss.

Queenie giggled. “Of course not, honey. However...” (And here her wand appeared in her hands, whirling in a trail of sparks.) “...I can provide the snow.”

“As long as it doesn’t float into my babka, feel free, my sweet. The neighbours won’t notice, right?”

Jacob finished beating his mixture and covered the bowl, so the mixture could rise.

“The babka is safe,” she assured him. “After all, I love the cake, too.”

Twirling in a circle of perfumed air, Queenie murmured words too low for Jacob to distinguish, and suddenly flakes of ivory began to descend around them. Jacob watched in awe as the flakes settled on the surfaces of his kitchen, somehow not melting nor cold. Yet a feeling of winter suffused the air as an ivory blanket transformed his kitchen to drifts of snow, minor hills rising from kitchen counters or chairs crystallising with ice that felt warm to the touch, yet resembled diamonds glittering in the rising winter sunlight that filtered in through their windows.

Jacob grinned widely at Queenie as his eyes darted to the window. Outside, the street was quiet, people slowly coming awake. No snow had yet fallen, though the temperature had dropped significantly. Jacob suspected that there would be snow by midday. Inside however, the warmth of magical fires enveloped their home. The snow that gathered in Queenie’s hair was golden or white depending on the light, and Jacob could feel the flakes sticking to his moustache.

“I love magic!” cried Jacob in joy as he swept a laughing Queenie into his arms.

Queenie nodded, eyes bright. “I am so happy you remembered, Jacob; I never felt so hopeless when I first visited your bakery until I *saw* you remember me.”

Jacob nodded sombrely, for those days were still vivid in his memories. “I know, Queenie, but I remembered, didn’t I? I understood then and now why it had to be done.”

Squeezing his wife close, Jacob whispered in her ear, his snowy-white moustache brushing her cheeks and her earlobe, causing Queenie to gasp delightfully. “We’re together now and have a chance of a new life,” he said, “so let’s not dwell on the past that hurt us, eh?”

Queenie was quiet, then nodded. Pulling away, she smiled, though there was a shadow of pain in her face. “Okay honey, I’ll try.” Tucking her wand away, she said more cheerfully, “I’ll pop over to check if Tina and Newt are still coming for Wigilia.”

Jacob nodded, worried over the shadow he had seen settle on his wife. “I hope so. I know they’re not religious, but the birth of Christ is a symbol of hope and love for our world, and well...seems we need it even more so, now.” He ran a hand over his glistening moustache, dislodging a bit of snow. “And I have a lot of hope and love in our new life together to give thanks for and celebrate.”

Queenie’s gaze was too full of wonder for Jacob to be comfortable. Queenie was a natural Legilimens, and while Jacob still (mostly) loved it when she read his mind, Queenie maintained a delicate shield so he could still have his privacy. Yet, even though Queenie could glimpse his thoughts, she remained firm in believing him to be the nicest, kindest man she had ever known. Such wonder at his simple statements about being happy confounded Jacob. Surely any decent person would say such things? However, Queenie disagreed, and his dear friend Newt was no help in discouraging the sentiment.

Newt...another once friendless soul who thought Jacob was special, and so many months back had introduced him to his marvellous world of magical life that the sensitive British wizard was trying to save and protect. Then his new friend had given him the means for his bakery, because they were friends even if Jacob might never remember their friendship.

Then he *had* remembered, and Newt, once returned to America, was as insatiable as Queenie, as courageous and foolish in seeking his companionship and dragging him all over America to save magical creatures in danger from destruction from poorly educated, frightened, and sometimes cruel humans.





Jacob commemorated the creatures in his pastries, doughnuts, and bread, filled with the vigour of rekindled love for Queenie and a fast friendship with Newt. All the time, Newt was overwhelmed by how Jacob accepted him, *liked* him just as he was, and admired his wish to save these misunderstood creatures, including the Niffler, which while cute was a bit of a pain.

That said, he couldn't let anything bad happen to the jewel thief, so he simply made all manner of candied decorations and collected any scrap metal that he then shined to perfection. These he scattered in his storage room, so the Niffler spent ages searching and glorifying over its finds in its treasure trove in the suitcase. This apparently convinced Newt that his friend was the best thing since moving pictures.

Yeah, he would get no help from Newt in dissuading Queenie from believing him to be a great man.

Queenie broke his quiet contemplation by kissing him on the forehead. "Newt is right," she whispered.

Jacob rolled his eyes. "Legilimens and wizards are bad combinations; they believe all this fanciful stuff."

Queenie summoned her warm pink coat and smirked as she strolled to the kitchen fire, gathering the Floo powder in her hand. She cast one look over her shoulder, eyebrow arched and voice sweet as honey and sharp as a bee sting. "We all have our beliefs which are truths, honey. You prepare for yours, dear, while I fetch Newt to confirm mine. Tina can sit and be merry with the vodka, watching us."

Then in a flash of green fire, his wife was gone.

*Sweet*, thought Jacob as he pulled the fluted babka pan over and greased it in preparation for the yeasty mixture rising away in the bowl. Jacob hoped the babka and the rest would be sufficient for their guests both human and beast.

*...I better increase quantities for Newt's suitcase...*

~ \* ~

*24<sup>th</sup> December 1927*

The first star had risen in the sky when Jacob, Queenie, Tina, and Newt broke bread before they sat for their evening meal. After an exchange of good wishes and health, the little family sat at the table. A seat had a picture of his grandma and Queenie and Tina's parents. Jacob nodded to the trio as he sat.

As per tradition, a spare place sat to Queenie's right in case a visitor arrived.

Jacob half-wondered if it would be a magical guest who might be blown in on a cold wind this night, or whether another No-Maj or Muggle like him might stumble their way here, guided by a cold silver star high in the heavens, just like the wise men so many centuries ago.

At this point in his life, Jacob wouldn't be surprised if the guest was one of those Ukrainian Ironbellys Newt had served with on the Eastern Front, or one his war pals, borne across the Atlantic for some reason or another.

Candles bobbed above the festive table, casting a warm yellow glow over the proceedings. In the fireplace, a flickering fire heated the small dining room. The table was laden with vegetarian dishes, twelve to be exact, as a reminder of the twelve apostles.

The table was covered with a cotton cloth, under which a thin layer of hay represented the hay Christ had lain upon in the manger.

Queenie flicked her wand, and a few dishes floated through the air while Newt passed a dish by hand to Jacob. Amused by the combination of No-Maj and magical efforts going on, Jacob helped himself to śledzie and bread.

"Are your creatures happy with the food I prepared for them?" Jacob asked as he watched Newt cautiously try some pickled herring.

Newt beamed and nodded. "Yes, thank you, Jacob. The Niffler especially was wild for the tinsel decorations for his nest, and the festive supper you put on has been a real treat. I just hope the spiced wine isn't a mistake."

Jacob snorted. “As long as we don’t have to put out any fires, Newt. Once was enough. That dragon was a menace. I’ll never complain about stomach problems again!”

Chewing on the śledzie with enthusiasm, Newt swallowed and said happily, “But we learnt so much!”

“Yeah, Newt, we did, especially how not to feed my pączki to a Ukrainian Ironbelly.”

Newt merely grinned unrepentantly with a gleam that informed Jacob that more trouble lay ahead.

“You love Newt’s trouble, honey,” teased his wife from where she had been gossiping with her sister.

Jacob rolled his eyes and shot a helpless look at Tina, who shared his woe.

“I’m afraid Queenie’s right, Jacob,” said Tina with a sigh.

“Yeah, well, got to try to project an image of respectability when you run a bakery.”

Newt raised a glass of wine. “You manage that quite well, Jacob.”

“And at night you run about like a criminal with Newt,” added Tina cheerfully – far too cheerfully for an Auror.

Jacob gave up in the face of such affectionate teasing, deciding to check whether his Occamy was pleased with its meal of insects. His vibrantly coloured blue and silver friend was coiled about the Christmas tree with Pickett lounging on a particularly bushy bough. Orange eyes blinked at him before uncoiling to slither down to the splendid bowl with a tiny hole in the lid. Scaling down to a mere wisp, his Occamy disappeared to eat. His sea monster in a magicked pool (in a corner somehow bigger inside than out), was peering at him and waved a long tentacle before resuming its meal of carp.

Grinning happily, Jacob rose from the table. Clearing his throat, he glanced at each of the people sharing this celebration with him. Queenie grasped his hand and gazed at him with love, but still tainted with that shadow from yesterday. Tina straightened her back, and Newt merely observed silently, frame shivering with suppressed nervous excitement. They all sensed the air of seriousness that had fallen.

Into the quiet, Jacob spoke with all the sincerity he felt. “I don’t like speeches, and I’m not good at them. However, I have to say this because it’s important.”

His wife squeezed his fingers, voice low and gentle. “Go ahead, sweetie.”

“First, thank you for coming here to share Wigilia with me and Queenie. I know I’m the only Christian here, so it means an awful lot to be able to share this day with you. To share the birth of Jesus with this meal, in your presence by the Christmas tree and Nativity scene you magicked, Tina, so the animals make noise and the angels sing ‘Silent Night’.”

Jacob breathed deeply and continued as Tina blushed and mumbled, “It was nothing.”

“Hope and Love was born, and laid in a manger so many years past. Christ is love, hope, and salvation.”

Jacob caught Queenie’s gaze and said quickly, words tumbling out, “A few months ago hope was rekindled in my life when you walked back into it, and hope was reborn with the love you offered me, dear. I know you feel bad that I had to abandon my bakery in America to escape to Britain, but...” He drew Queenie to him, engulfing his wife in an embrace so fierce that the air nearly went from their lungs for a moment.

Releasing a trembling Queenie, Jacob swallowed past his tears. “I couldn’t be happy with you giving up your magic for me or having to hide my friendship with Newt and the risks both entailed. A new life in Britain was the only place we could be ourselves. And now we have our bakery, Newt can be friends with me, and Tina isn’t in trouble with MACUSA.”

Jacob cupped Queenie’s face, smiling at the tears forming in those beautiful wells he was lost in daily. “Queenie Kowalski, I love you more than I thought possible. Don’t you see, darling? Our lives are full of a new hope and love that can prosper here. I can’t be unhappy or regretful, so put that nonsense away and let the light chase away the shadow.”



He dropped his hands, and a crying Queenie put her head on his shoulder as he faced Tina and Newt. Tina was smiling through her own tears, and Newt was flushed, eyes bright, lips quivering.

Picking up his glass, Jacob gave a toast. “So, bless you all my friends and wife for this new, crazy life you have given me. I know that Grindelwald guy is growing in power and spreading his evil, but we came through a dark period before.”

Newt nodded, and by the shadow that had fallen over Newt’s face, Jacob could see the Great War reflected. Together they shuddered and briefly clasped their free hands.

“Even if there is another terrible war, we’ll get through it. I mean, we bested him once so he’s not infallible, right?” Jacob grinned and as he let his gaze fall from Tina’s pensive expression to the Nativity set that was currently showing the scene where the shepherds had arrived and were gazing at the Christ Child. The hovering star cast by Queenie glowed silver and cast a beautiful silver gleam over the scene.

Dougal rested nearby, visible, with calm eyes observing them all.

“So, no more shadows tonight. Tonight, we have light, love and hope and laughter. Merry Christmas and God bless you all!”

“Merry Christmas!” cried his companions, and they fell on the food with renewed vigour, eyes all slightly tearful, but for this night at least, they were at peace.

Jacob sat with Queenie closer than ever, her bright smile no longer tainted with darkness. She smiled at him, and Jacob knew he could never persuade her that, despite his faults, he wasn’t the kindest man she had ever met. He found that he didn’t mind anymore. After all, he loved Queenie and thought the same about her, didn’t he?

Ducking his head, Jacob finished his herring, soul lighter than a feather as he thought quietly, *And thank you, Jesus, for bringing light into my world and blessing me with renewed hope and love. I think we are going to need a lot more hope and love in the years to come.*

~ \* ~



# AWAY FOR CHRISTMAS

By Patrick W. Kavanagh

The Christmas tree lights up, - but you are gone so very far away

And yet, somehow, I feel your hand, so softly clasping mine.

I catch your fragrance in the air, and know that you are near.

And feel the warmth of memories that come so fresh and clear,

I sense your presence, though my heart is aching and my tears will burn,

And as we place the presents underneath the tree, I hold a certainty inside, that someday,  
somehow you will finally return.

I will put away all thoughts of sadness, for the sake of those whom I hold dear.

For, even in our darkest hour, there is a Light that shines with love for those for whom we care.

Hearts that love the way we love can never really be apart,

Hearts that hope beyond all hope will have their hopes fulfilled one day.

This has always been love's law, and this has always been love's way.

And I will wait, until my waiting days, and all my waiting years, have passed away.

I will hold you safe within my heart, and we will meet again,

I know that this is true, although I may not know for certain, when.

May you rest in Summer-land until our hearts are healed.

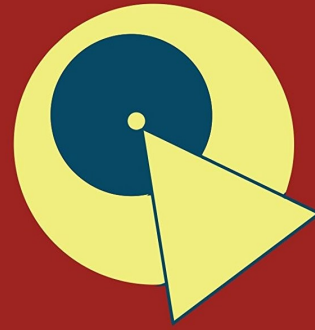
And I will hold you in my arms one day, when life's true beauty is revealed.



# THE JOINING

## A Vulcan Holiday Tale

By HeronS



It is Stardate 33872.9, or, which is more relevant at the moment, January 3, 2267, and Spock ch'Sarek is more than ready for the human holiday season to be over.

A part of the chaos of the last few weeks is due to the misfortune of coincidence. Terran Christmas, Hannukah, and Kwanzaa are, unfortunately, expected to occur close together during any Terran solar cycle. This time, Eid al-Fitr had fallen on December 16th, and as if that wasn't enough, the Martian and Terran Standard New Year had coincided, and been followed immediately by the Buddhist Mahayana New Year celebrations.

The number of crew members who had suddenly and simultaneously discovered newfound religious dedications was suspicious. When Spock remarked upon it, however, the doctor had become even more ill-tempered than usual, and the Vulcan had been brusquely reminded that of the last two holiday seasons, the first had been spent limping home with half the systems fried from an engagement in Romulan space, and during the second they had been battling a plague on Yaris II.

"We're owed," the doctor had growled, and Spock has not been able to figure out exactly what is owed, or from whom.

As a result, forty-three days of pure star mapping have been all but wasted. Normally, star mapping leaves the crew free to engage is less time-pressing issues, while the *Enterprise's* powerful computers perform detailed scans of surrounding systems. What could have been a month of scientific progress, training, and careful instrument calibration has been fractured into a maelstrom of key personnel on half shifts or off duty; labs being contaminated by everything from spinning tops,

to fir trees, to incense; and an unending progression of official dinners. If Spock had not been exceedingly well versed in not one, but two systems of etiquette, he might have been tempted to suggest that the true object of veneration in all human religions is an excess of food.

There have been any number of ceremonies, from the most vulgar and secular to the holy (and it is not always easy to see where the first ends and the second begins). Spock has attempted to navigate them with as much grace as possible, his thoughts often going to his parents' effortless ease at diplomatic functions. It is not easy. He finds gift-giving confusing,



but has reached the conclusion that a carefully selected poem from the large corpus of Vulcan pre-reform poetry (which appeal to other species much more than modern Vulcan poetry, unfortunately), is a suitable substitution for objects in most cases. (Though not all – on at least one occasion an over-enthusiastic and inebriated Martian crewmember insisted on embracing him as thanks for the mandatory host gift.)

Overall, it has been confusing, loud, and has involved far too much tactile contact with various people.

Once December 24<sup>th</sup> comes around, Spock yields to the realities of the situation and shuts down half the Science Labs until January 3<sup>rd</sup>. He also stops sleeping in order to free more beta and gamma shift personnel to their carnival of celebrations. The half-empty auxiliary bridge has, unfortunately, not been a very quiet place since he has had to run most of the bridge system recalibrations himself.

It has been a taxing, but fulfilling, exercise in optimization of both himself and the systems, and the ship is now ready for the return of the full (sober and satisfied) crew complement. The first proper, fully staffed alpha shift of the new year has ended, and beta shift has taken over the bridge, and the Vulcan is quite ready for his scheduled nine shift vacation.

While not absolutely necessary, biologically speaking, Spock knows that it would be logical to sleep. He has been pushing his body for weeks, and he has depleted several hormones and started noting the slight efficiency decrease associated with prolonged lack of REM sleep.

And yet...

On this day, this particular day, the solitude of his quarters does not appeal. Instead of their usual air of welcome calm, they seem... *feel*... desolate and cold. It is emotionalism of the worst sort, for the temperature is set to Vulcan normal, and there is absolutely no reason to remember and prefer the dry heat of ShiKahr city... Or the way it gradually gives way to the humid heat of their ancestral oasis... The heat rising from *heran* cakes, spiced *fent* cups and *plomeek* soup. The heat of the *sehlats*, the sudden change from a sedate city life to this sojourn to the desert. They always take particular care to surround him and his mother... The local star setting and T’Kuth rising behind the Llangons, bathing the white tents in her red glow...

The worst kind of emotionalism.

Sleep is logical. But before that, he prepares himself for a strict set of high level meditation and control exercises, and is just about to kneel before the fire idol when his terminal chirps.

*Spock, will you join us in rec room four?*

The message is from the captain – from Jim, he should say, since it is sent over the informal communication net rather than official channels. It is uncharacteristically vague, and the phrasing threatens to bring up just those memories that Spock is currently keeping at bay. It’s been seventeen years since he last could attend a Joining of his clan by the oasis, and now, when he has reconciled with Sarek and would be welcome to come, Vulcan is so far away so as to not even register on the ship’s sensors.

He needs quiet and harmony. But he has obligations outside his professional role on the *Enterprise* as well, and it will take much more than fatigue before he denies a request from this man.

Spock fires off a quick *affirmative* and then steps out of his quarters, still clad in dark, embroidered Vulcan meditation robes. They warm more than the uniform, after all, and he is off duty, and he has observed any number of outlandish costumes during the last few weeks. He will allow himself this, today.

The first inkling he gets that something is not quite normal with rec room four, is the fact that he has to manually open the door. The reason for this is immediately revealed when a wave of heat rolls out of the room, enfolding him in warmth and Vulcan incense. He steps inside and the doors immediately swish shut behind him. The hustle and bustle sounds of the *Enterprise* corridors are abruptly cut off.





The chairs have been removed, and all the tables lowered and covered with white fabrics. The black Starfleet standard sofas have been left along the walls, and pillows litter the carpet-covered floor – not in the symmetrical patterns the decorations call for, but it is close enough. Three *shreva* fire cauldrons hang from tripods among the pillows, and while the smell that comes from the nearest one is clearly coffee and not *fent*, it is the most Vulcan image he has seen in a long while.

Soft lyre chords emanate from a corner. Nyota is playing, her legs drawn up under her, eyes intent on the strings. Christine Chapel is curled up beside her, asleep, hugging a book with a colorful front page. Spock knows that she has just come off a triple shift in sickbay, caring for a clumsy lieutenant who had overindulged at the Mahayana New Year celebrations.

Other than the music, the crackling of the fire cauldrons (presumably artificial—Spock suspects Scotty’s hand in this), and some small sounds as the others turn pages or shift slightly from their various positions on pillows and carpets, the room is silent. No one looks up or greets him. He takes another step inside. The doctor is lounging on a large pile of pillows, one hand leisurely swiping on a pad, the other stirring...coffee, is it? in an overlarge decorated *oara'en* bowl. Scotty sits on one of the sofas, pads spread

out all around him. While Spock suspects that the others’ indifference to his entrance in the room is feigned, the Scotsman seems legitimately engrossed in his reading.

Hikaru isn’t reading, but is instead writing calligraphy. Spock recalls that it is one (of many) interests that the man has often complained about never finding proper time for. Next to him, Pavel is leaning back against a wall, earbuds in both ears, conducting an invisible orchestra with his index fingers.

Jim is close to the entrance, lying on his side with a pillow supporting his left shoulder. His head is in his hand, and he has one of his prized paper books open on the floor beside him. There is a slight creak as he turns a page. A cup of not-*fent* sits on the low table by his side, and another one sits waiting on the other side of the table, the air above it distorted by its heat.

If it hadn’t been for the cup, the pile of books and pads on the table would have been signal enough. He takes a few steps to the table, lets his hand trail over the objects before he clenches it tight.

He really should have meditated before venturing out of his quarters.

It takes fourteen-point-three seconds before he can trust his voice, but when he does begin to speak, to try to convey a vetted and proper and thoroughly insufficient message of... something, he is shushed by the doctor.

“Hush, you. Really, Spock, speaking at a Joining. What would people say?”

“Doctor, considering the fact that you are drinking coffee out of a soup bowl...”

“I’d be drinking that vile *fent* concoction if it weren’t toxic to all sensible beings. Now shut up, sit down, and read.”

Spock sits down by the cup and the reading material. He does not know if the doctor is aware of the status and power his (slightly) more advanced age gives him in this setting, and he has no intention of informing him. He has thirty-two...thirty-three...thirty-four...*several* questions about the how and who and why of this gathering, though he suspects the answer to the last is “family” and

a great many emotional words that would make him uncomfortable.

It is customary to give scrolls and digital texts at a Joining. There are no explanations given; the texts themselves should be answers enough about who and why they were gifted. Ideally the texts should expand the receiver's mind – introduce thoughts one would not seek out on one's own. As the first sand storms of the storm season hit ShiKahr from the Forge, the hectic life of pre-industrialization Vulcan would suddenly calm down. People gathered in their clans, by their oasis, for a period of calm and rest, reaffirmation of clan bonds, and time for quiet contemplation. Vulcan in general, and Spock's clan in particular, has always striven for a way to combine the ancient wisdoms and ways with modern thinking, and the Joining is one of many ritual that Spock remembers fondly from his childhood.

It is the anti-thesis of the many celebrations he has witnessed during the last few weeks, Spock thinks – not boisterous, but silent; not demanding anything except serious contemplation; not presuming anything but joint existence with your clan.

There are two books and eight pads on the table. A last glance around the room confirms that no one is looking at him and that nothing more seems to be expected of him other than to *shut up, sit down, and read*.

He reins in his curiosity and dampens his gratitude. He is, even after forty-three seconds of evidence, quite... *thrown* by the existence of this place in the heart of the starship, so far from the warm sands.

That will not do. This is hardly the most startling thing that has occurred in his service aboard this ship. And it would be unworthy of him to be surprised at the lengths these humans will go in displays of loyalty and... affection.

He lifts the first pad, and as it flashes to life, he lies down by the table. The text is in Cyrillic script, and he identifies the language as Russian, approximately a century old, judging by the spelling conventions. The first few words are strange in this context – it is Surak's famous speech in the marketplace, but the text is annotated by a flurry of footnotes. He realizes that it is the text from the first Russian edition, compiled by his grandfather Skon together with human enthusiasts, and that the annotations are not from one, but several Terrans who had gone through their very first First Contact just a few years before. Like all Vulcan school children, he knows the original text by heart, but the alien footnotes make his eyes widen. The Russian scholars seem overwhelmed, overjoyed, sometimes terrified, always utterly fascinated by their strange (space elves!) green (like the movies!) pacifist (*xorosh*o, as must all advanced races be, *da?*) visitors. It is a new perspective on the most transformative period in Federation history, and he looks forward to discuss it with the ensign.

Before he can become too engrossed in the Russian text, he puts it aside to do an inventory of the gifts before him. There is a short work of koans that Spock thinks originate from Hikaru. Zen Buddhism comes close to several Vulcan spiritual traditions (in particular Kolinahr), but he has never had time, before this, to study it in more in detail.

Spock judges the odds to be 7,539 to 1 that the text on protomatter is from Montgomery Scott – they currently disagree on several of the hypothesized properties of the mysterious banned substance, and Spock will now clearly have to give the pro-quattrion bond position a second chance. He resolves to do his best to keep an open mind.

Someone – presumably Nyota – has given him several plastisheets with Vulcan lyre music scores. The quality of the print is bad; it seems to have been photographed from a great distance and then reprinted. His eyebrows rise as he realizes why – it is not Vulcan, but Romulan. Contemporary Romulan music is as unimpressive as its Terran equivalent, but this is old and as he lets the chords resonate in his imagination, he comes to the conclusion that it cannot be long parted from its Vulcan parent tradition. Since all Vulcan records of the Romulan exodus are destroyed, and the Romulan senate guard their archives carefully, any scrap of information about this time period is revolutionizing. How did it come into her possession? It has clearly been smuggled across the Neutral Zone.



His appreciation for the thoughtfulness of the gifts ends abruptly when he picks up the next pad. It is a work of fiction, about a hundred years old. The setting is Earth, 4<sup>th</sup> century BCE, and the novel dramatizes the life of the Greek warlord Alexander and his closest general and friend, Hephaiston. Even a short perusal reveals that it has altogether far too many adjectives and it seems to be given to emotional reflections on the relationship between the two men, in a way that does not advance the narrative. Spock does not understand the relevance of the novel, and decides to read it first so that he may spend the rest of his free shifts on more stimulating intellectual fare.

The next pad also holds a work of fiction. Spock knows his mother will be pleased – as a teacher, she approves wholeheartedly of the Vulcan notion that parents have a lifelong responsibility for the education of their children, and she is always sending Spock historical and contemporary novels. Spock reads them dutifully, though with little enthusiasm. He has taken to discussing the more bewildering ones with Christine Chapel, who has shown a startling understanding for not only Terran, but also Andorian and Klingon flights of fancy. Spock suspects that it is the head nurse who wishes him to read Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes books, and he must admit that the prospect of dissecting them with her afterwards makes the task more welcome.

Finally, he picks up the thick, bound volume on the table. He darts a look at the captain at the other side of the low table, but to all outward appearances the human is completely lost in his own book. This is Vulcan courtesy, the granting of personal space even in close quarters.

The book is a classic, and Spock has, of course, read it in his youth. It is *The Journey is the Goal* by Hernandez Ye of Orion Beta IV. It has won both the Nobel and Zee-Magnee prizes, and has the honor (together with the works of Shakespeare of Earth and Ulya of Tellar) of being claimed as a stolen Klingon classic by the Klingon Bureau of Culture and Propaganda.

Over the course of that day and the next, Spock reads. Occasionally he makes a note or two on his pad, but he strives to keep his focus on the texts themselves.

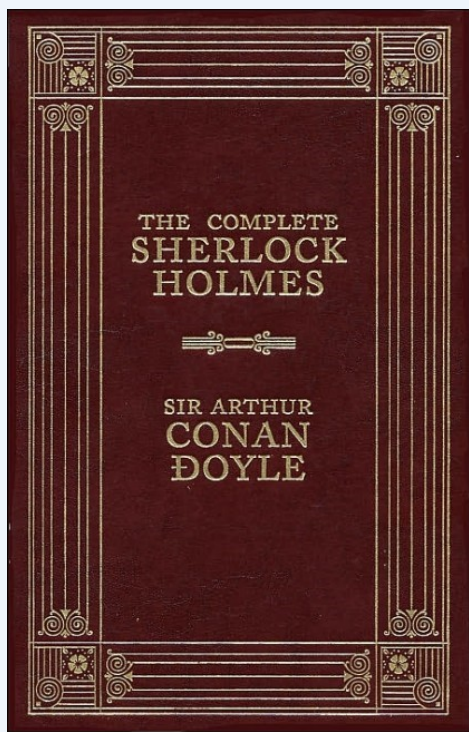
The others come and go, in silence. They go to their shifts, and then always return an hour or two after shift change, taking up their pads and books, magazines, and the occasional instrument or

paint brush. The Vulcan is somewhat concerned that the calm and subdued Joining will prove a challenge to his restless friends, but the intense last few weeks – indeed, the intense and taxing last year – has taught even the youngest humans to treasure rest whenever it is offered. When their night shift begins, pillows and blankets are brought forth from the storage compartments in the rec room walls. All in silence.

Humans retain more of their pack instinct than Vulcans, and several times he sees them seek each other out in gazes or surreptitious touches. They show each other a part of text, they share a small smile. It is part of their nature, though they try to repress it for him, for this time and place. Spock finds great contentment in the unexpected gift of being able to rest in the quiet company of these extraordinary aliens, and yet... For once Spock wishes he could tell them to not try quite so hard. If this had been a Vulcan Joining, this would have been one of the few times each Vulcan year where such interpersonal affirmation would have been encouraged.

But, biologically, that aspect of the Joining is one of the few that they cannot give him.

Spock is grateful for the texts he's been given. They are all gifts of new perspectives, and he treasures them. Some works that he thought would be complex are not – he finds an elegant similarity between the Buddhist koans and the precepts of the Vulcan discipline of Kolinahr. Each gives him a glimpse of the cool serenity that he has sought since childhood. It is a balm to his



sometimes overactive mind.

Other works give him pause.

He wonders if Christine sees a Sherlock Holmes in him, if that is why she gave him the book. He dislikes the character: for all his brilliance, he is arrogant and self-centered, and shows a marked disdain for any knowledge that is outside his own sphere of interest. Surely he is not like that? He knows it is a common and insidious path to intellectual and moral ruin, and the very fact that the gift brings these thoughts to him is a warning sign he should not ignore.

It is not so easy to dismiss the doctor's gift of the fiction book of the Greek warriors, either. He understands that it is a comment on his friendship with Jim. It makes him think of the ancient Vulcan legends of t'hy'la, soulmates. It is a revered bond, almost sacred, a favorite topic in classical Vulcan poems and songs, but he has never heard of anyone suggesting that it could also exist in other races. Or between aliens and Vulcans. Loyalty and trust is the foundation of Vulcan bonds, while the strange multifaceted 'love' is hailed as the cornerstone of all deep human relationships. He is quite certain that he does not understand this 'love', but then again, no two humans seem to agree on a definition for it either... He puts the book aside, but the thoughts keep returning.

When he opens Jim's gift, the book falls open to a bookmark inserted near the end. It is one of the protagonist's most famous speeches to the struggling multispecies settlement of Orion Beta IV:

"The true greatness of sentience begins with three little words. It is not *unity brings strength*, it is not *knowledge is power*. It is not even *I love you*, though love is what binds us together. It starts with an outreached hand and a simple *let me help*."

He rereads the book twice during the next to last of his free shifts. It is written in post-contact style, a mixture of fiction, essays, and poems. It is a tale of fellowship, loyalty and affection – humans would call it love – and the way this brings together a divided group of souls, making them greater than the sum of their parts. When he finally puts it down, he notes that the sense of belonging he identified in the book does not leave him. Instead it envelops him with calm confidence.

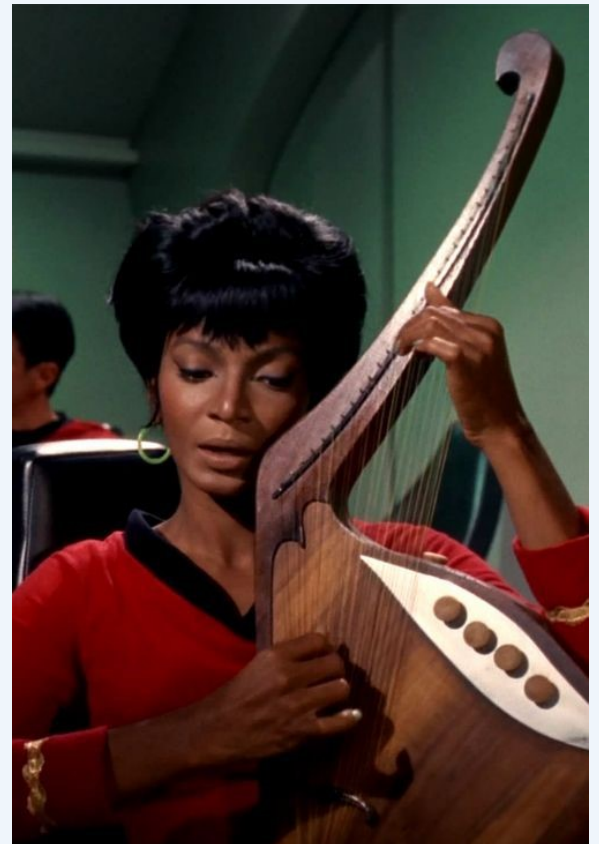
It is alpha shift night, and the humans are spread out around him. Nyota is sleeping on one of the sofas, and he rises and carefully removes the lyre from under her arm. Spock sits down at the foot of the sofa and tunes the instrument more by sense than after any established music tradition – there is no established tradition that truly covers any of this, after all. He begins to play softly, using the rhythmic deep strumming of the Romulan music as a base, and letting a lighter, human melody soar above it. Nyota stretches above him and sleepily opens her eyes. He meets her gaze deliberately, purposefully letting the music speak for him. *Loyalty. Trust.*

The others wake, and he lets the melody speak to each of them – he interweaves Scottish ballads with Shinto-Buddhist prayer chants, Russian folk music, and even a few bars of "Georgia on my Mind" that makes a bleary-eyed Bones snort and then laugh out loud.

After a while he lets the music fade out, but immediately gives the instrument to Nyota. He does not intend for this to be a solo performance; while he will seek ways to repay his friends for their generosity in all of this, that is not his purpose at the moment. Instead he retreats to his place next to Jim by the table and lets first Nyota's lyre, and then Scotty's flute, continue what he started.

Community. It is not what it would be like on the sands beneath the *Llangons*. But it is good.

Spock drifts off to sleep to the sound of the lyre,





thirty-eight minutes later. It is exceedingly rare for him to fall asleep involuntarily, especially among others, but his body is exhausted and his mind needs rest to process a wealth of new impressions.

When he wakes up, four hours, three minutes, and two REM cycles have passed, and the rec room is all but empty. A single *shreve* is left lit – it has been moved to their table, and Jim seems to have been reading in its light. He is the only one of the humans left. The two have not shared spoken communication for almost two days, but now his captain is looking directly at him.

Jim is sitting, leaning back towards the wall, abandoned book held casually in his right hand. He smiles slightly.

"How close did we get?"

"There are as many versions of Joinings as there are families that practice them. This one was profoundly...satisfying. And unexpected."

He has many questions, but for now he is content with staying in the moment. His mind, usually processing ideas and information on multiple parallel tracks, is as focused as after deep meditations, and he feels refreshed. He hopes that the deep sense of belonging will stay with him even out in the brightly lit corridors of the ship, but for now he makes no attempt to rise.

"Mm," Jim responds, "most Terran traditions are the same. But some things, some very fundamental things about a Joining remain the same for most families, or are at least very similar?"

Spock looks at him for a long moment and then nods.

"But we're not telepaths, any more than we can actually drink *fent*."

"It is not necessary, Jim. I am honored by all efforts that have gone into creating this."

Jim shakes his head. "This ship is honored by your service. Even if you hadn't gone over and beyond the call of duty the last few weeks to keep this ship functioning while we had the much-needed shore leave that the Admiralty won't give us...we would still have wanted to do this. It comes only every third Vulcan year—who knows where we will all be the next time. Celebrate when you can, my Gran always said... Anyway, we're not telepaths. I'm not a telepath. And Bones doesn't think it would be particularly relaxing for you to hold up more than one meld at a time. That being said..." He smiled and shrugged. "You need some more sleep, and I need a few hours, too, before alpha shift starts. I thought I'd spend it here. It doesn't have to be more than that, but if you would like to..."

"Very much, Jim. But melds can be profoundly disturbing experiences for humans, and a joint dream would be potentially even more abnormal for you."

"You keep warning me about melds, and I'll say the same thing that I've always said. It's never felt disturbing or abnormal to me. In fact, it feels like the most natural thing in the world." He shrugs and smiles and lies down along the other side of the table, perpendicular to Spock, his head close by. "It's all up to you."

Falling asleep at will is a necessity for a starship captain, and after a second of pillow adjusting and blanket pulling, Spock hears Jim start the deep, deliberate breaths that will slow down his higher mental functions and increase the body's melatonin production. It takes four minutes, twenty-seven seconds before the human falls asleep, face serene, head twenty-one centimeters from Spock.

Spock has been taught to be wary of when that thing which he wants also seems to be the most logical choice, so he spends a few minutes contemplating wants, needs, and moral duty. In the end though, he trusts Jim – trusts that he knows his own mind, and Spock's.

Lying down would put him at an awkward angle, so he scoots closer to the wall and places his left hand on Jim's face, resting on a pillow beside him. He starts slowing his breathing down, and increases the melatonin levels in his body.

He opens up the mind touch. It blossoms readily – as the captain says, it is a natural thing. He frees his mind of most of the usual mental controls, does nothing when memories and speculations rush in and intermingle. He remembers his first Joining, a few months after his *Kahs-wan* at age seven.

After having experienced a few Joinings with Amanda's alien, mind-blind presence in the joint dreams, the twenty-seven members of the extended family that are invited to Sarek's Joining are intensely curious as to how the young Vulcan-alien hybrid will fit in. They are too polite to ever say so, of course, but all is revealed in the first seeking, weaving, unfolding mental tendrils of the dream. Sarek has chosen carefully – there is no animosity, only welcoming acceptance and anticipation from the others.

The shared dream is based on a network of mind touches, slightly enhanced by the properties of the *fent*. The strongest telepaths – his brother Sybok, the ancient and venerated L'henna, and surprisingly, himself – naturally congregate to form the basic matrix. As usual, Sybok's mind is a explosion of colors in all directions, and Spock realizes that he himself will not be the most extravagant presence here. He reaches for his father to bring his almost-sleeping mind into the matrix, and marvels at how similar their minds are. Sarek lacks the raw telepathic power of his two sons, but his intelligence and mental discipline give his thought structures an inspiring elegance and influence. Spock seeks to emulate it, and soon the two of them have caught the others up in a joint structure, even Sybok. L'henna surveys everything, finds it good, and then sends out a powerful suggestion through the networked minds. *Sleep.*

This time is like that, and not like that.

Vulcan dreams are more abstract than human dreams, less given to recreations of sensory perceptions. Human dreams are heavily vision oriented. Spock's hybrid dreams are different, yet again. He does not dream often, but when he does, he dreams in music and color, smell and taste, and the mathematical constructs that underlie reality, just as much as he does in the visual modality, *the movie reel*, as he's heard humans call it. He has dreamt that he is the vectors through subspace that the *Enterprise* takes, he has dreamt that he is the taste of an alien ocean on Cygnus III.

Jim's mind, though mind-blind, is, as always, a source of endless fascination. They are much alike in that they both revel in new experiences. They share an almost insatiable curiosity for the unknown. *A childish sense of wonder?* The captain teased him once, to which he had replied, *There is nothing childish in a sense of wonder before the universe, Captain. Nothing could be more logical.* And Jim had smiled at him and nodded in agreement.

Now Jim's mind, his dream, is reaching for Spock. It is mainly a visual experience, but Spock can feel the caress of the warm Iowa winter sun through the imagined thermoreceptors on his face, in sharp contrast with the cold wind of the snowy landscape. He takes a step and hears the crackling of the snow crust, smells the slight wood smoke in the air.

Jim is running through the snow towards him, and then, with a characteristic lack of logic and narrative structure, he is suddenly beside him.

*You're here! Welcome.*

The snow under their feet suddenly has the texture of sand, and they know that the way to get up the steep hill to their left is to find the most elegant mathematical formula for its curve. Jim's eyes sparkle.

*It's like a waking dream, Spock. Like a holo tank. I've never had this much control before. This is truly... fantastic.*

*I believe I can teach you even more control. Would you like me to?*

*Yes. Later. First – let's find out what's on the other side of that hill.*

*Presumably another hill, Jim.*

Jim laughs, warmth and excitement enveloping them both.

*Excellent.*





# IN DEFENSE OF

# *Santa Claus*

## BY NADIA ALDERNAY

I was a firm believer in Santa Claus until I turned eleven years old. After all, it was always the villains or grumps who doubted the Christmas magic, never the characters I admired and wanted to imitate. I was also very stubborn and Christmas was my favorite time of year. So it took me until I was eleven years old before I began to doubt that Santa Claus was real.

I began asking questions. How crazy is it for one individual to travel all the way around the world and visit every child in one night? Why were all the toys that Santa brought just like the ones on the store shelves instead of handmade by the elves? Why was my best friend, Betsy, shushed by her mother when I explained I still believed in Santa Claus? I talked with Betsy later, when her mom was not around, and she explained that she did not believe in Santa Claus. Her mom and dad did not practice playing Santa Claus because they did not want their children to grow up believing in lies. It was better, Betsy explained, if children were told the truth—that there is no Santa Claus. I was devastated. I knew the tooth fairy was not real when I found my dad poking around under my pillow one night, but somehow it had not shaken my belief in Santa Claus. No, it took very forward and practical Betsy to convince me that Santa Claus might not be real. I wondered when or if my parents would tell me. Did they think I already knew because I was eleven? What eleven-year-old still believed in Santa Claus? I decided to test them as soon as we were alone.

My mother and I were tinseling the Christmas tree, and my siblings were out of earshot. She was talking about the Santa Claus printed on a silk ornament that my father had bought for her many years ago. The portrayal of this Santa Claus was more traditional. He has a long silver beard instead of a plump white one. He had dark cherry velvet robes instead of the coat and pants. He resembled what might be called 'Father Christmas' in my mind. He was skinnier than most modern portrayals, but that did not keep him from being jolly. He had big red cheeks and a large black belt wrapped around a firm middle, a sack tossed over one shoulder, and polished black boots. He looked as if he could almost talk, and if he did, it would be a far richer voice than any I had ever heard before, like a Moses or St. John the Baptist voice.

"I always thought Santa Claus must look something more like this, certainly not like all the commercials are trying to portray him," my mother remarked, gazing lovingly at the ball.

I swallowed hard and said, "Mom, you know I am too old to believe in Santa Claus anymore, right?"

My mother turned and looked at me. To my surprise, she quickly put the tinsel down, gently grabbed my hand and led me into the other room, "Come on, sweetheart. We need to talk."

My siblings watched me as I left and I felt like I was being led away for punishment. 'Oh boy, here comes the explanation and growing up talk,' I thought as my mother rattled off instructions for the rest of my siblings about staying out of trouble for a few minutes.



We slipped into my bedroom and closed the door behind us. My mother looked at me steadily, took a deep breath, and said, "Sweetheart, Santa Claus is real."

I am sure my mouth must have fallen open. I was not prepared for that answer. I thought I would be told how to keep the magic alive longer for my siblings, to watch what I say around them, how I am growing up and an expected part of that is to lose belief in Santa. I was prepared for almost anything else but hearing that Santa Claus was real. But my mother's serious blue eyes did not let me doubt for a moment that she believed.

I was frightened. This was not what I expected. "So-so what about all the presents on Christmas? You don't expect me to believe that a man in a red suit really visits every child in the entire world in one night?!"

My mother looked a little sad. She sat down on the bed and beckoned me to join her.

I sat down slowly, and the words just tumbled out. "Betsy said that she doesn't believe in Santa Claus. She knows her parents buy her presents. She says her parents don't want to lie to their children and so they tell them Santa Claus is not real, because he isn't."

"Santa Claus is real, sweetheart, but he is not real in way we think as children," my mother explained, "In a way, Santa Claus is even more real than we could possibly imagine. We believe in God the Father. He has given every single one of us the incredible gift of His Son. That is a gift far beyond anything we could imagine. Not even the angels could have imagined it. In a single night, every single person is offered the gift of Jesus from God the Father. Parents as well as children, every person from the poorest beggar to the richest king, receives a gift beyond price.

"The *real* Santa Claus gives parents the ability to become His little elves. We participate in just a tiny way in the joy of giving, only because God our Father gave first. As we grow up, Santa Claus does not die. He becomes even more real, and the story turns out to be so much greater than we are told as children. This is why we tell you stories, not to deceive you, but to prepare you for the truth. We need stories, we need Santa Claus, in order to take those steps we need towards the truth. If the truth were to be revealed all at once, it would surely be too great for us to handle. Even I am still learning and growing. Every Christmas, Santa Claus becomes more real for me; I learn something new about the joy of giving, and I feel even more like God the Father's little girl, waiting for Him to give me the greatest gift of all, His only Son, on Christmas Day. Do you understand a little better now?"

I sniffed and I am sure my eyes were red, but I did not care. I hugged my mother and thanked her. Her eyes were shining as we walked back into the living room and began to tinsel the tree once more. I looked at the ornament my mother cherished. I knew why that Santa Claus looked more real. It looked more like the pictures of God the Father.

Santa Claus was real again for me. My doubt was dead and dispersed. Christmas was even more magical for me than any that had dawned before. Every year, just like for my mother, I have grown to believe even more in Santa Claus, not as the world does, but in a far, far more powerful and magical way.

Merry Christmas!





## Editor's Picks of 2017:

### Top 12 for the Harry Potter Anniversary Year

There have been so many amazing submissions in our Hogwarts section this year, and many featuring everyone's favorite least favorite teacher in the wizarding world, Severus Snape. All are worthy of mention and reading, but a handful have especially caught the eye of our Editor-in-Chief, Avellina Balestri, and she would like to give a special shout out to the following twelve works.

#12. *A Movie Fan's Dream* by Emily Geerling

Join the author on her colorful journey into dreamland, meeting a panoply of fandom figures who recruit her for a magical rescue mission. Full of laughter and lots of surprises, it's rollicking fun for readers of all ages.

#11. *A Gilded Cage* by LastCrazyHorn

A near canon-congruent insert involving a moment in Harry Potter's teenage years when he begins to realize Professor Severus Snape, though ridiculing and hard-edge, might just care for his well-being more than he previously thought. A scene that should have included in the films!

#10. *Too Many Wrackspurts* by Noppah

Luna Lovegood has always been a different sort of girl, and a very perceptive student. In spite of the irascible attitude of Professor Snape, towards her and the rest of the planet, she sees more to him than meets the eye. An unexpected surprise at the end may require tissues.

#9. *Folk of the Wood* by Excessively Perky

It's said we only get one life to live. But Severus Snape finds himself defying this statement and living in a limbo-like state, in the form of a tree. There he will have the opportunity to transform himself in order to continue his journey. This story wins the award for uniqueness!

#8. *Moon's End* by Rachel Atterholt

Remus Lupin faces his final moments in anguish, but soon finds himself in the company of some very old friends who are determined to cheer him up in the afterlife. A tear-jerker Maurader fic, even for those who typically don't like the Mauraders.



#7. ***I Am Walking*** by Lady Memory

In the aftermath of Lily Potter's death, Albus Dumbledore uses cunning to trap the and emotionally distraught and guilt-ridden young Severus Snape into becoming a spy. A poignant drama that shows the subtle twistedness and tragedy of allowing the ends to justify the means.

#6. ***Life Goes On*** by Becca Sarna

The war is over, and student life at Hogwarts is starting to get back into normal swing. Meanwhile, Harry Potter finds an unexpected potential mentor in his old nemesis, Severus Snape. A story about gradual healing and moving on in spite of past traumatic events.

#5. ***The Magic and the Memories*** by Isabella Summitt

A fan's memories are always interlaced with the real events of life, and how it all weaves into a precious tapestry worth looking back on. The author shares her personal memories reading the Harry Potter series in a deeply heart-felt trend-of-consciousness style.

#4. ***Voldesect and the Girl Who Lived to Tell the Tale*** by Veronica Lynn

The Battle of Hogwarts gets a re-play in the valiant author's bathroom after discovering a monster roach in waiting. No holds are barred in this epic conflict of the centuries, as the elder wand shoe is set to smash Voldesect once and for all! A true story, with a twist of spoof.

#3. ***The Dentist*** by Prunus Padus

It's always strange to run into old teachers in unusual places. But Dr. Hermione Granger, working in a dental clinic, has even more on her plate when the crotchety and dentist-spooked Professor Snape comes in to have a tooth pulled. Lots of laughs, and a tuft of fluff!

#2. ***All Are His Children*** by Sheankelor

The founding of Hogwarts, from the perspective of an Irish monk, who helps out with the building project as only a "holy ghost" can! A great little gem of fandom writing with a mystical Catholic twist in the spirit of *The Secret of Kells*.

#1. ***A Stopper in Death*** by Yatzstar

Professor Severus Snape dies from after being bitten by Nagini...or does he? A heart-warming tale of a happier ending for everyone's favorite least favorite teacher, and one that honestly just makes more sense given his potion making expertise! Both in-character and delightfully human.





## **About This Magazine**

Fellowship and Fairydust Magazine is a publication of Fellowship & Fairydust Publications. F&F is an online literary blog and magazine that aims to inspire faith and creativity and explore the arts through a spiritual lens. F&F came into being when the blog and online magazine The Fellowship of the King merged with the online magazine Ink and Fairydust in January 2017. To learn more, visit [fellowshipandfairydust.com](http://fellowshipandfairydust.com).

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