

ANTHOLOGY

Christmas Celebrations

Short Stories of Jane Austen Fan Fiction

EDITED BY

CRISTY HUELSZ

ILLUSTRATIONS BY
LADYWITHPUG

2023

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Summer Hanford
EM Storm-Smith
Don Jacobson
Stephanie Vale
Tiffany Thomas
Zarilda Belle Frost
Charlotte Parke McQuary
Leigh Dreyer



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FOURTH ANTHOLOGY

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IN MEMORIAM

Mario Cesar

INTRODUCTION

The Night Before Christmas... A journey through Ukrainian tradition

On December 23rd, 1823, in New York, the world read for the first time the poem «*Twas The Night Before Christmas*» from a newspaper, which became the most popular holiday rhyming tale in English for the western world. In Eastern Europe, this title belongs to the widely beloved festive story «*The Night Before Christmas*» (sometimes translated as «*Christmas Eve*») written by Nikolai Gogol.

Jane Austen's contemporary, a descendant of an old Ukrainian Cossack noble family, Nikolai Gogol was born in 1809 in the Ukrainian town of Sorochintsy, Poltava region. Although today the author is considered to be a Russian writer, Gogol's heart was always drawn to his native land and all his life the author was in love with Ukrainian culture and folklore, depicted well in many of his works.

In 1831, the first volume of Gogol's Ukrainian stories was published, bringing him immediate success. «*The Night before Christmas*» story tells about the power of love and holiday miracles, the defeat of the devil, and of course, also describes joyful customs of Ukrainian Christmas, which have not changed much since those times.

Ukrainian winter holidays begin on December 6th (according to the Gregorian calendar) when St. Nicholas comes to the country. Modern children write letters to St. Nicholas and put them in the mailbox or leave them on the window. In the morning, those children who have behaved well all year, find a sweet gift under their pillow, while the naughty ones find just a little wooden stick.

The custom of decorating a Christmas tree came to Ukraine in 1811, when a descendant of the family of the famous Cardinal Richelieu, the 5th Duke of Richelieu, who was at that time the mayor of the Ukrainian city Odessa, organized a Christmas ball, at which a Christmas tree was installed for the first time in the country.

But Ukraine also has its own ancient traditional Christmas decorations, such as *Didukh* (which literally means "grandfather's spirit" and represents the spirit of the ancestors): a three-legged sheaf woven from rye and dried herbs, as a symbol of harvest, prosperity and wealth, a reminder of the ancient history of agriculture in Ukraine.

On December 24th Christmas Eve («*Holy Eve*» in Ukraine) brings family together. When the first star appears on the evening sky, announcing the birth of the Son of God, families sit at the table for the «*Holy Supper*» which is served with 12 dishes, symbolizing the twelve apostles. The main ancient dish is boiled wheat with honey, raisins, nuts and poppy seeds called *kutia*. Before tasting other dishes from the table everyone tries *kutia* first. The Christmas Fast begins forty days before, and during this time, food should not contain meat, eggs, butter or other dairy. So other dishes on the Holy Dinner table may include Ukrainian red *borshch* (beet soup), *varenyky* (dumplings with different filling), drinks made of dried fruit, fried cabbages, various fish, *verhuny* (pastries with sugar powder), potatoes, mushrooms, cakes and so on.

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Additional sitting may also be set at the table to commemorate our dearly departed family members: their souls, according to belief, join the family on Christmas Eve to partake the food. In pagan times, the spirits of ancestors were highly respected and believed to take care of the living family members.

Here is another custom, although not widespread these days: some hay is spread under the table and under the tablecloth in memory of the fact that Christ was born in a manger.

In the western culture, greeting cards usually read “*Merry Christmas and Happy New Year!*”, but in Ukraine, when you meet someone or enter a house, you first say: “*Christ is born!*” and receive in turn “*Truly He is Born!*”

After the family dinner, young people go out for joyful street celebrations. Chanting Christmas carols, they walk from house to house, receiving from hosts meat or sweet pies, cookies and pastries, apples or other delicious treats, which traditionally were presented in sacks. Hosts are quite generous, because it is believed, the more carolers come to sing, the more fortune and wealth they bring to their house the coming year.

In the old days, carolers got delicious treats thrown into their bags directly from the window under which they sang. For this, they placed their bags widely opened to catch their gifts. Groups of singers could brag among them about who had collected the largest and heaviest bags of goods!

One of the comical situations in Gogol’s «*The Night before Christmas*» is associated with such heavy bags that were found by young people on the street who thought these were full of caroled goods.

Caroling in Ukraine is not just singing, but rather a whole folk opera. Songs for Christmas Eve are called *koliadka* (from the Latin “*calendae*” -calendar- which is tied to the birth of Christ). Carolers often carry a Christmas star on a high pole. The star is usually made from a sieve and has eight «*horns*» decorated with foil, ribbons, and tassels of all colors. Sometimes it has a candle inside.

Like many other countries, in Ukraine there is a tradition of setting up a nativity scene. On Christmas Day, community gathers and carries a puppet theater with the nativity scene called *vertep*. It dates back to the 17th century and was originally a box with two floors, “heaven” and “earth”, with puppets. But as time passed by, the *vertep* evolved into a larger performance called the Nativity March. For some time, the anti-religious policies of the Soviet Union persecuted the nativity scene tradition, but now it is being revived again.

A week later, comes the New Year’s Eve, which is called “*The Generous Night*” in Ukraine. Fast has ended and the festive foods this day contain the most varied ingredients. It is also a day full of fun: people make masks and costumes for a large masquerade outdoors, the *malanka* carnival featuring animals and folkloric characters. One of the most popular costumes is that of a shaggy goat. Dressed-up people may play good-natured pranks or act small plays. Carols sung this day are called *shchedrivkas*, which means “*songs of Generosity*” because they wish the hosts prosperity and abundant harvests and herds.

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A century ago, the whole world fell in love with one of Ukrainian Generous Night folk Carols: performed on October 5th, 1922, at Carnegie Hall in New York by the Ukrainian National Choir as part of a cultural diplomatic mission worldwide; the song «*Shchedryk*» was later adapted as «*Carol of the Bells*» and became one of the best known Christmas Carols ever.

Although children receive mostly sweet gifts from St. Nicholas at the beginning of the month, they may receive other gifts like toys from *Did Moroz* (Grandfather Frost) at New Year's Eve. Happy Ukrainian children!

But you may also have heard that Ukrainians celebrate two Christmases! This is because for some time, governments in Eastern Europe used the Julian calendar (which is about 2 weeks behind the Gregorian calendar), thus the official day of Christmas was January 6th. For this reason, we also have the «*Old New Year*» (or Orthodox New Year) on January 14th! Not an official holiday, but an informal family dinner is always enjoyed.

Little boys and young men love this day: early in the morning, in every house they are eagerly waited for *Sowing*, an ancient ritual for ensuring a good harvest in the coming year. The *Sower* enters the house and sprinkles the room with grain: rye, wheat or barley, pronounces rhymed wishes for a rich harvest and congratulates on the New Year. For this, they receive gifts: pastries, sweets, money. The lady of the house tries to catch some grains with her apron and feed them to the chickens; it is believed that this helps them lay better eggs.

Do you want to know the name of your betrothed? When will you meet and what kind of life awaits you? You are welcome to join Ukrainian girls in ancient fortune-telling rituals on the night of Epiphany. People have always believed that during this period fortune telling has the greatest power.

Despite the cold weather, lots of people want to take a triple “cold dive” in the ice-cold lakes and rivers. The priest dips a silver cross in a hole on the ice made for such an occasion to consecrate the water. It is believed that water on this day can heal the soul and body. Not so brave for an ice-cold dive? Just get up before sunrise and take a shower to be blessed.

After supper girls run to the river to wash their face with “Jordanian” water to remain always young and beautiful. And in some regions, it is young men who escort their beloved ones to the river for this ritual. Isn't this romantic?

The Feast of the Epiphany on January 19th (old style) is the end of the winter festivities.

Finally, just like in all corners of the Earth, Christmas in Ukraine is a time for sincere prayer. Time to cleanse thoughts and soul, unite with family and the memory of ancestors, treasure our traditions and heritage, and cherish the magic of love. It is a time to share your deepest wishes, holding the hands of loved ones and keeping the departed in heart, under the peaceful Christmas night skies.

Stay safe, loved and blessed,

LadyWithPug

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FOREWORD

An Author's Confessional

About seven months ago, my good friend Cristy Huelsz approached the Austenesque writing community for willing volunteers to contribute to her annual Christmas collection, *Antologia Celebraciones de Navidad*. Having finished *The Sailor's Rest* and needing a change of pace, I raised my hand.

I now ask you, dear reader, to bear with me as I rifle through my life's album in search of an explanation for my fascination with Christmas and the Twelfth Night in my Austenesque stories. By my count, I have used a half-dozen seasonal events to move various books closer to their conclusions. I am convinced my frequent turning to Christmas and Twelfth Night rise from inner truths that inform my stories. I hope that what serves as therapy for me will give context to the new collection of stories and scenes.

Reaching into those memories, something the Season commemorates and creates, I saw how often I used Christmas and Twelfth Night in my books. This was not unexpected, I suppose. I am the son of a middle school teacher and a bank teller. Festivities were few and far between. For instance, my birthday is in July, seven months deep in the year, so a school birthday party with classmates was impossible. Cake and one or two friends were about it.

As such, Christmas became the high point toward which my compass pointed all year, something upon which every babe of 1953 could agree. The classic Christmas film, *A Christmas Story*, filled with anticipation for children and celebration for adults, was my story as a post-World War II Baby Boomer. However, my dad never won a *major prize!*

My parents were of a different age, shaped by the Great Depression. They husbanded resources. Stories of their childhood (often food related as nutrition insecurity was a problem) became morality tales in the plentiful Fifties. My mother and father had relatives who lived on the land (Mom's grandparents on her father's side farmed in Central Vermont, and Dad's relatives fought the thin soil and bedrock of Western Massachusetts's Berkshires). Those folks' cyclical lives formed William and Shirley Jacobson. The first three months of the year were dark and cold. Then came planting and tending the fields. Nervousness in advance of harvest drove autumnal activities until Halloween (All Saint's Eve) signaled the end of that stress.

Then and only then was the community able to breathe and take account of the previous months. First came Thanksgiving (in the USA). Then, in the Swedish tradition—passed to my father from his parents Gottfried and Svea (Nelson)—celebration and preparation filled the several weeks leading up to Christmas Eve. *Pepparkaker* and *limpa* filled the house with spicy sweetness. Given the number of Swedes in our town, there was a distinct chance of a molasses shortage! Church events jostled against Christmas parties thrown by the Western Mass Model A Restorers Club and family friends. The only fête my parents ever threw was their annual Christmas Eve celebration. That meant a massive smorgasbord was the centerpiece of December 24. Bounty figuratively piled to the rafters of my childhood home.

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Our house had an unheated rear entry, a traditional annex to farmhouses—although the farmland around my house was non-existent—sometimes called a *mudroom*. One of my earliest memories was going to the kosher deli to buy several pounds of *schmaltz* herring, which my father would later pickle in a crock using his mother’s recipe to make the Swedish staple *sill*—straight white vinegar. None of that cream or mustard stuff for the Jacobsons! The back hall became our walk-through refrigerator as Dad’s pickled herringaged and several gallons of apple cider hardened while chilling to somewhere in the mid-thirties. More dishes were pre-cooked and stacked in the entry as Christmas Eve approached. Severe penalties awaited children who decided to race through that aisle lest an unfortunate elbow take out Mom’s mac and cheese for thirty!

Another childhood trek was to Johnson’s Bakery in Springfield, Massachusetts, for all the old-country goods—cheeses, *potatis korv*, *fiskeboller*, *knackebrod*, lingonberry, brown beans—to create the groaning board. Finally, we ate and then, like all good Swedes, nodded through the Christmas Eve midnight service at St. Paul’s Lutheran, an Augustana Synod church.

(A recollection that just bubbled up.) *When I was little, retired ministers, one was Pastor Malmstrom, I think, would come in once a month to conduct an old Swedish-language service for the elderly Lundgrens, Nelsons, Andersons, Johnsons, and Petersons.*

Returning home around one in the morning led to the pleadings of myself and my brother Peter to allow the grand opening. Not until I went into junior high school did I understand that my father’s dash into the house *to turn on lights* while my mother fussed over Pete and me to make sure to snap our hats and button our jackets to our noses—all the while keeping us warm in the car’s backseat—was his way of helping Santa enter a house that did not have a fireplace.



As I launched into the writing of my entry into Cristy’s anthology—*The Gamekeeper’s Cabin*—I found myself drifting back six decades to that childhood. The sense of wonder that has so frequently escaped me recently returned as the underlying truths of what Christmas meant to me again became apparent. Soon enough, those sentiments found their way into the story. I was writing not as an Austenesque author but rather as someone engaged by young children discovering that, even though they were the children of a gamekeeper and his wife, old Father Christmas knew where they lived.

The joy of the Tomkins children was a present unwrapped for me. As Elizabeth and William learned, innocence cannot be simulated. However, the generosity of spirit that their parents must have shown each day informed their childish wonder.

Whether Zen or Shaker, when life’s pretensions vanish, such simple gifts resonate through most philosophies that guide human behavior.

So, too, were the scales of a life chasing security at the expense of the soul. Now, Christmas has once again found its place in my life. As the Season approached, the brightness of my

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family's spirit filled the story. I saw that the color of the Season was the pigments my family added to the canvas, one daub at a time.

Heart whole, I looked back at my earlier work to see how Christmas and Twelfth Night shaped my Regency vision. Beginning with my very first Austenesque Story—*Miss Bennet's First Christmas*—year-end fêtes gave a platform to the cast of players. Soon, I uncovered several telling examples of Christmas and Twelfth Night in my catalog.

As the guides counseled Lydia and Wickham in *Madras House Twelfth Night*, joy comes in the discovery. The handful of stories in my anthology helped me understand a facet of my being long ignored. I am much reduced without the vital balm, the precious ointment of family. I hope you and yours all find joy in this holiday season.

Don Jacobson



Christmas Excerpt
from «An Endeavour to be Worthy»

by Leslie Diamond

Elizabeth Bennet is off to spend Christmas in London with her grandparents, Lord and Lady Richmond, and her cousins, Nicholas and his sister, Amelia. While her grandmother is determined to see her spoiled with new gowns and the like, Elizabeth would prefer to play chess and shop for books with Nicholas and her grandfather and visit with her grandmother and Amelia. At Lady Vranes's private art exhibition, Elizabeth happens upon the one person she hoped she would never see again, Mr. Darcy. Not only that, but her grandparents and cousins are well acquainted with him, his cousin, Colonel Fitzwilliam, and his young sister, Georgiana. How is she to behave around a man who finds her merely tolerable and made his disdain for her evident during his time at Netherfield?

Moreover, what is she to do when he calls at Richmond House as a good friend of the family?

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When Mr. and Miss Darcy were announced, Elizabeth stood and smoothed her gown. After Mr. Darcy's reaction to the red velvet gown she wore for the performance of Mrs. Dickons, she persuaded her maid Tate to have it ready for her to wear again for Christmas Eve. He and his sister entered, and his gaze landed directly on her and lingered before he greeted her grandparents and Nicholas.

Miss Darcy hastened to her and clasped her hands. "Miss Elizabeth, is this the gown you wore Monday evening? My brother mentioned the colour and how well it looked on you, and I must say he did not exaggerate. Madame Morisot's work is incomparable. Do you not think?"

"When have I ever exaggerated?" asked Mr. Darcy, stepping to his sister's shoulder.

"I never claimed you had." Miss Darcy looked up at him with an impish smile. "I should greet the Misses Montford." She crossed the room to where Jane and Amelia spoke with Grandmamma by the fire.

"She has become more animated since spending time with you and your cousin. I appreciate the time you both have taken with her."

Elizabeth's gaze returned to him. Her insides full of flutters. How many butterflies could take flight within the confines? If she could somehow count, she would estimate in the dozens, at least. "We could do no less. I enjoy her company greatly as does Amelia. Miss Darcy has been a welcomed addition to our party during the afternoons. I do not believe I have ever practiced the pianoforte so much in my life." Which was quite true. When she did not have the diversion of friends, Miss Darcy must have spent most of her days playing and singing. Her skill reflected the time and effort she had put into the endeavours.

"Georgiana said you would be performing this evening. I am eager to hear the fruit of your efforts."

Her head tilted, she looked up at him. "You have heard us play. I am certain the sound carried into your study. As I learnt when Mr. Bingley called on Saturday, your study is not far from the music room."

"No, it is not, though I do not believe I heard an entire completed piece. Without being in the room, I also could not know who was performing. I shall have the opportunity to match the lady to the piece this evening, which I am anticipating. I must also thank you for allowing my sister to help you decorate today. She has spoken of nothing else since she returned home."

She grinned and glanced at his sister who had giggled, drawing her attention. "Yes, my grandmother attempted to persuade her housekeeper to decorating on the 21st as it seems your household did, but Mrs. Taylor adamantly refused. She is of the mind we should all die a horrible, painful death if even one sprig of holly or mistletoe is hung before Christmas Eve." His low chuckle rumbled through her. Would she ever become accustomed to the sensation?

"My housekeeper attempted to delay, but Georgiana was adamant. She would brook no refusal. The younger maids were excited to help her, but my housekeeper refused to be a part of bringing bad fortune upon us or herself."

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“Darcy? Lizzybeth? Dinner has been served,” said her grandmother, waving them to follow. Mr. Darcy held out his arm, which she did not hesitate to take. Grandmamma had not put out place cards but allowed them to sit where they pleased. Amelia and Nicholas sat in their usual chairs, and Miss Darcy sat between Jane and Amelia. The footman pulled out the chair Elizabeth favoured, and Mr. Darcy followed, sitting to her right, between her and her grandfather.

“I am pleased you could join us for Christmas this year, Darcy,” said Elizabeth’s grandfather. “Since most of society tends to depart town for their estates at this time, I have been pleasantly surprised at how many have stayed and have planned routs and fetes. I must admit that having you and Georgiana joining our merry party makes us feel as though we have the entire family with us.”

Mr. Darcy nodded with a relaxed bearing. “We thank you for including us. Richard is still in Dover last I heard of him, and his parents and Milton journeyed to Yorkshire. They will not return until the Season. Georgiana has done so well with her piano master of late that I hesitated to remove us. When we learnt you and your family would remain, Georgiana and I thought London would be preferable to a Christmastide at Pemberley this year. My sister has enjoyed her time with Miss Elizabeth and Miss Amelia, and the relationship of our families has added a great deal to our contentment in town.” He peered back at Elizabeth with a slightly crooked smile. He could not be saying she added a great deal to their contentment, could he? No, now she was exaggerating and reading more into his words than he likely meant.

Grandmamma had planned a lovely meal with beef and brawn and a sumptuous selection of sweetmeats with plum cake for dessert. As was his wont, her grandfather presented her his arm after the meal. “You can join Miss Darcy soon but join us for a time first. I insist.”

“Hugh,” said Grandmamma with a disapproving drawl.

He only beamed and led her from the room with Mr. Darcy and Nicholas following behind. After her grandfather handed her a glass of brandy, he served Mr. Darcy before sitting in his favourite chair. “I assume you told Lizzybeth of what happened in Hertfordshire and at the Dorset ball.”

Mr. Darcy’s eyebrows shot up onto his forehead. “I beg your pardon.”

Her stomach clenched. Would her grandfather disapprove? He had told her little, though surely to protect her feelings. Had the housekeeper told him of seeing her in the servants’ passages speaking to the Hills?

Grandpapa chuckled and turned his glass in his hands. “Do not get your back up. I expected it. I am not blind, you know.”

If her grandfather knew that much, he may well know all...well, not the kiss. As much as Elizabeth would wish for that to remain just between Mr. Darcy and her, Amelia witnessed her boldness. She could not force her cousin to forget. “I overheard Mr. Bingley’s call at Darcy House as well. I had never heard a word spoken in frustration or anger from him until then.”

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Nicholas straightened with a jolt, and his head whirled around towards Mr. Darcy. “You never mentioned anything of this.”

“He told me,” said Grandpapa. “After Mr. Bingley’s first attempt to call on our Janey, Mr. Gideon came to me. I ensured that man has never stepped foot inside this house. Thankfully, your cousin has not noticed the additional footmen your grandmother and I have had accompany them shopping. Men who owe large sums of money can become desperate, and a desperate man is a dangerous man. I shall take no chances.” Her stomach twisted and something rose in her throat. Would Mr. Bingley truly attempt to take Jane for her fortune? Her grandfather would protect Jane with every resource he possessed so perhaps remaining with her grandparents was a better situation than Longbourn. Her father would never have taken this so seriously. He would have laughed and made sport of any concerns laid before him while Mrs. Bennet continued to welcome Mr. Bingley with open arms.

“I have not had a letter from Papa. Have you?” They had been at Richmond House over three weeks. Her father was not a faithful correspondent, but he never failed to send a response to her note informing him of her safe arrival.

Her grandfather shook his head with a grim set to his mouth. “Naught has been in the post from him. I would have expected a letter for you, at least.”

He was well, or Mary would have sent word of any ill news. Her younger sister was not aware of the status of Jane and Elizabeth’s grandparents, but she did have the direction. Anyhow, she would need to pen a letter to Charlotte. Her wedding to Mr. Collins would be soon. She suppressed a shudder.

“Are you well, Miss Elizabeth?”

She snapped from her thoughts of Charlotte’s wedding and smiled at Mr. Darcy. “Yes, thank you. I was just thinking that Miss Lucas’ wedding should not be long after Twelfth Night. I need to write to her to be certain. She has been a good friend for so long that I do not wish to miss it.”

“I am certain you do not,” said her grandfather. “When you tell me the day, I shall arrange for you and Janey to attend.”

“I had not heard she was betrothed,” said Mr. Darcy. “Who is her intended?”

“Mr. Collins, actually.”

Nicholas spluttered on his brandy, then withdrew a handkerchief to press to his clothing and his mouth in an attempt to repair the damage. “That was badly done, Lizzy. You had not mentioned your friend accepted the heir of Longbourn. If she is friends with you, I cannot imagine her tolerating his ridiculousness—unless he is not as ridiculous as you claim.”

“No, he is ridiculous,” said Mr. Darcy. “He approached me at the Netherfield ball and introduced himself to me with a scraping bow. I was then forced to hear him give me the current

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health of Lady Catherine as well as Anne. By the way he spoke of them, you would think my aunt was the queen herself.”

Her cheeks warmed at the behaviour of such a relation, and her cousin snickered as he poured himself more brandy. “Would you care for more, grandfather? Darcy?” After they both accepted another helping, Nicholas returned to his chair, crossing his ankle over his knee. “I have not seen Lady Catherine in London in ages. Your cousin was always pale as I recall.” Mr. Wickham had made mention of Miss de Bourgh’s sickly state, had he not?

“My aunt keeps Anne in the country for her health, so rarely journeys to town. I believe Anne’s ailments are more a product of my aunt’s overtreatment, though I cannot be certain. If one physician finds naught amiss, she sends for another who then prescribes a tonic and bleeding.”

Elizabeth pressed her hand to her chest. “How sad. Are you certain she does not have some malady?”

“I have spoken to two of the physicians my aunt consulted. Anne would be healthy if her mother did not cosset her so. The problem is Anne believes her mother’s declarations, so she believes herself ill.”

What a shame. She took the last sip of her brandy, returned her glass to the tray, and kissed her grandfather on the cheek. “I have enjoyed my time with the gentlemen this evening, but it is time to join the ladies, I fear.” As she passed Mr. Darcy on her way to the door, their gazes held. He held out a hand, so she placed hers in his palm, allowing him to kiss her knuckles.

“Miss Elizabeth,” he said all low, making her knees knock together. Had he heard them when they hit or was that only in her imagination? When the door closed behind her, a murmur filtered through the door with Nicholas’s laughter following soon after. Her cousin was teasing Darcy. Nicholas needed to have a taste of his own medicine, but what to do?

“There you are, Lizzybeth,” said her grandmother when she entered the drawing room. “We are playing snapdragon on the morrow, but is there a game you would wish for tonight? Miss Darcy and Amelia mentioned that the three of you have practiced the pianoforte for this evening. Would you prefer that to any games?”

“I thought you should perform first,” said Jane. “Then, if Mr. and Miss Darcy are not tired and we have more time, we could play cards or charades.”

Miss Darcy giggled, briefly covering her mouth with her hand. “My brother would never play charades.” No, he would not prefer behaving in the silly manner charades would require.

Her grandmother sipped her sherry. “Very well. We shall see how the evening progresses. We could always persuade Nicholas to play. He sneaks in here to practice late in the evening, but I have heard him.”

“I was not aware he played,” said Miss Darcy.

“We all had lessons from the same master when we were younger,” said Amelia.

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The gentlemen were not much longer with their brandy before they joined the ladies in the drawing room. Mr. Darcy sat beside Elizabeth on the settee while Amelia and Miss Darcy made their way to the instrument. Nicholas stood near the mantel while her grandparents claimed chairs near the fire, which were set to face the pianoforte, holding hands. They had always been affectionate at home with family by holding hands and sometimes kissing a hand or a cheek. Grandpapa had once confessed he had fallen in love with Grandmamma the first time he saw her at a ball. They were still very much in love. What she would not give for a happy marriage such as theirs!

As Amelia and Miss Darcy began playing, Mr. Darcy bent near her ear. “Your grandparents’ marriage is one to be envied, is it not?” He spoke softly so as not to disturb the others’ enjoyment of the performance.

“Mayhap not envy but emulate,” she said, turning her head to speak as he had to her. His proximity was making those butterflies take flight and soar in wide circles around her stomach.

When the first carol ended, Elizabeth stood and joined them singing God Rest Ye Merry Gentleman while they accompanied her on the pianoforte. She could not look directly at Mr. Darcy while she sang, lest she falter, but on those moments her eyes flitted over him. He watched her with unwavering attention. She clasped her hands together in front of her so she did not shake. Nicholas would be terrible should he notice.

Elizabeth played a duet with Miss Darcy while Amelia sang The Twelve Days of Christmas. Amelia’s voice was richer and stronger than hers, which made her, the soprano, more proficient at that particular song. The entire party complimented her after she took her curtsey.

After their performance concluded, Elizabeth’s eye was caught by something drifting by the window. She stepped closer and gasped at the snow showering down upon Park Lane as well as Hyde Park across the street. “’Tis snowing!” She rushed through the house to the breakfast parlour, opening the doors to the back garden.

“Lizzybeth! Wait!” called Grandmamma.

With a gasp, she stepped onto the terrace and dropped her head back, the snowflakes falling towards her from a pitch-black sky, then stuck out her tongue in an effort to catch one of the delicate flakes upon the tip.

At Mr. Darcy’s characteristic low laugh, she spun around to face him. He wore his great coat and held her ruby red redingote over his arm. “You will give your grandmother an apoplexy. She is adamant you will catch your death.”

“I am not cold.” As she spoke, a cloud punctuated each word.

“Your pink nose and cheeks say otherwise.”

He held out her coat, allowing her to slip her arms inside before he slid it over her shoulders, the tops of his fingers brushing lightly over the bare flesh where her neck and shoulders met. She inhaled and turned. Her gaze met his and his face dipped closer and closer.

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“Lizzy! Grandmamma had me bring your boots.”

At Amelia’s voice, Mr. Darcy made an about face and looked up at the sky. Elizabeth’s heart, meanwhile, pounded furiously against her ribs. He was going to kiss her! Nothing else would necessitate him drawing so close, would it?

She accepted the boots and put them on while Mr. Darcy’s back was turned, though she left them unlaced and set her slippers just inside the door.

“It is so pretty,” said Miss Darcy. She and Jane were bundled up against the cold as they came outside. Grandmamma must have caught them before they could follow.

Elizabeth glanced around. Her grandparents stood arm in arm watching and pointing at the white flakes, which became heavier by the moment, Nicholas leaned against the door with his usual wry grin, and Amelia held out both hands, letting the crystalline, white flakes land in her palms.

Not much had accumulated on the ground thus far, but Elizabeth grinned and bit her bottom lip as she gathered the thick layer on the railing and formed a ball, hurling it at Nicholas before he knew what she was about. Her snowball hit him in the side of the head, and she squealed and ran into the garden when he lunged after her. “No!”

“You will pay, Busy Lizzy!”

She managed to evade his first attempt to catch her, then ran back to the terrace. When she reached Mr. Darcy, she grabbed the arm of his great coat and swung around him to take cover behind his broad chest and back. Nicholas would not hit Mr. Darcy, would he?

Her breaths made white puffs in the air as she peeked around Mr. Darcy’s side. Nicholas all but swaggered up the steps. “You think Darcy will protect you?”

Mr. Darcy took a step to the side, so Elizabeth shifted with him. Was he trying to get her pummelled by snow? She peeked around once more as Nicholas scooped a large amount of snow into his hands and began forming it into a ball.

“Run, Miss Elizabeth,” said Miss Darcy while Jane stood beside her, her jaw lax. She had never attempted to match Nicholas and had never understood Elizabeth’s attempts.

A high laugh came from Amelia. “You are in trouble, now, Lizzy.”

Should she run? Should she remain? What if Mr. Darcy became upset at being wet by the snow? She was not quite close enough to gather another snowball from the railing on this side of the terrace, so she needed to make haste into the house. Nicholas would never bring snow inside. Grandmamma would ensure he regretted that decision. Before she attempted her escape, a nudge from Mr. Darcy’s arm made her look down. His hand was wrapped around behind him, an enormous snowball in his palm. How did he—?

She took the packed ball of ice and peeked around his arm. As soon as her head emerged, Nicholas took aim and threw his weapon. She ducked behind Mr. Darcy as he shifted to the side

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to avoid the strike. Without delay, Elizabeth stepped around Mr. Darcy and let her snowball fly. Nicholas had been rushing to make a second when hers struck him in the shoulder.

When she tried to flee into the house, Grandmamma caught her by the arm. “That is enough. We shall return inside before we catch our deaths.”

“I am not cold, Gran.” Her cheeks hurt but that was surely more from smiling than it was the cold.

“Watch out, Lizzy! There will be retribution for your mischief tonight.”

As Gran tugged her inside, she turned sideways so she could see Nicholas. “Do your worst, Cousin. I am not afraid of you.”

Mr. Darcy chuckled while they returned to the drawing room. A maid brought wassail which they drank before the fire until Miss Darcy began to yawn. As they walked their guests into the hall, Grandmamma pointed. “Lizzybeth, you and Mr. Darcy are standing under the kissing bough.”

They both peered up as Amelia began to laugh. Why did she always laugh? And why did they not look where they were walking? Her cheeks would hold a permanent tinge of red if this continued.

Gran began steering her cousins back into the drawing room. “Come, Amelia, children. It would not do to embarrass your cousin.” After her grandmother forced her cousins, Jane, and Miss Darcy back into the drawing room, she looked at Mr. Darcy, who once again drew closer and closer. Just before he would kiss her cheek, she held her breath and turned, allowing him to place his kiss upon her lips.

His lips were soft, and she sighed as they cradled hers just so. His warm breath caressed her cheek, and his breathing hitched as he released her lips for but a second before reclaiming them again.

“We shall expect you tomorrow,” said Grandpapa in a loud tone.

Mr. Darcy drew back and gave an awkward sort of nod and bow as everyone returned to the hall. “Will you sit with me at church?” The words were rushed.

“Yes.” Her voice was still breathless.

“Merry Christmas, Elizabeth,” he said before he turned, offered his sister his arm, and departed through the door.

She touched her lips. Who could have imagined a kiss could be so perfect?

Nicholas made a loud kissing noise near her ear. He made several more of the offending sounds before she let her elbow fly and hit him square in the stomach, making him grunt loudly.

“That is enough, Nicholas. You will not tease your cousin. Do you hear me?”

“Yes, Gran,” he said, rubbing his stomach with a grimace upon his face.

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About the author

L.L. Diamond is more commonly known as Leslie to her friends and Mom to her three kids. A native of Louisiana, she has followed her Air Force husband to duty stations including: Louisiana, Mississippi, California, Texas, New Mexico, Nebraska, England, Missouri, and Maryland.

Aside from mother and writer, Leslie considers herself a perpetual student. She has degrees in biology and studio art but will devour any subject of interest simply for the knowledge.

As an artist, her concentration is in graphic design, but watercolor is her medium of choice with one of her watercolors featured on the cover of her second book, *A Matter of Chance*.

She has multiple certifications in fitness and coaching swimming. When she’s not writing, she is Head Age Group coach of her team. She also plays flute and piano, but much like Elizabeth Bennet, she is always in need of practice!

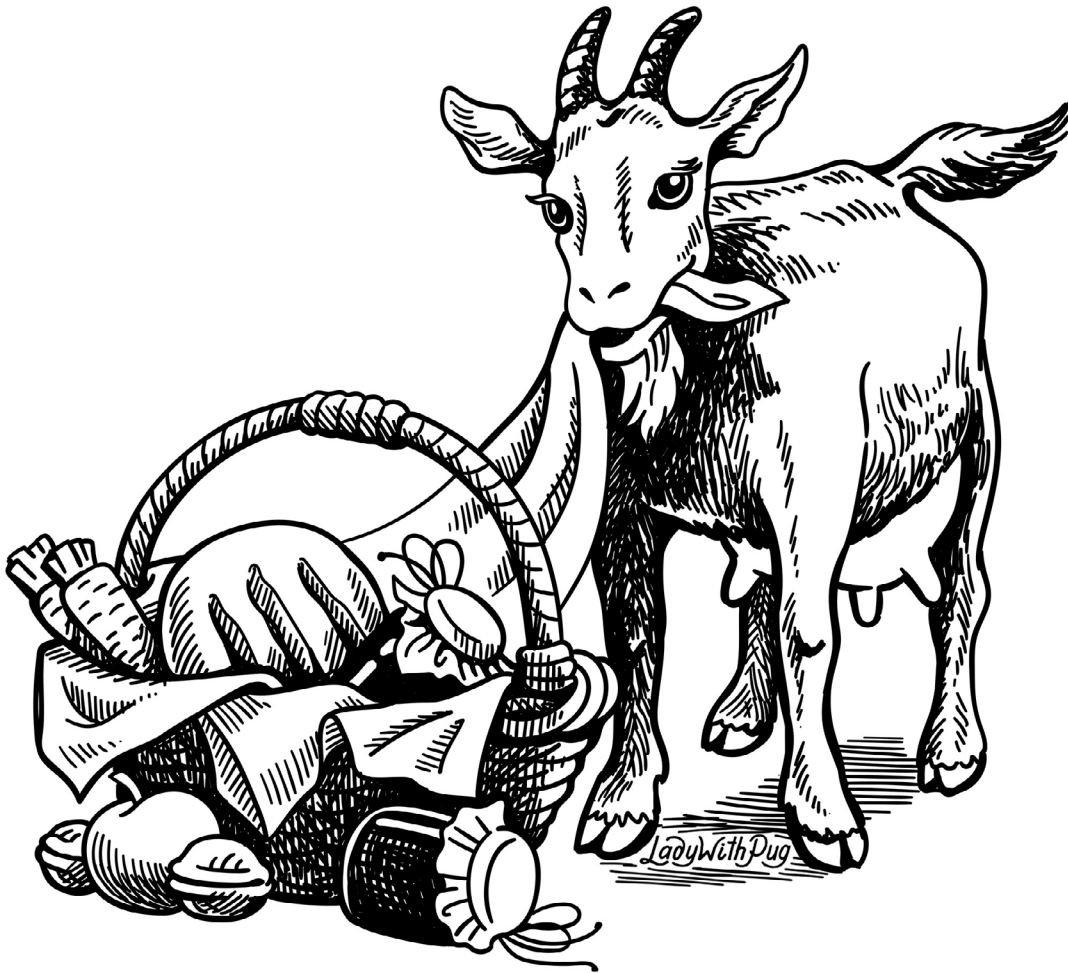
Among her best-known novels are: *His Perfect Gift*; *Unwrapping Mr. Darcy*; *Agony and Hope*; *The Montford Cousins Trilogy* (*An Endeavour to be Worthy*; *A Gentleman of Worth*; *A Worthy Woman*).

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A Nanny Goat for Christmas
by Summer Hanford

CHAPTER ONE

Elizabeth sat down to breakfast with a feeling of blissful, undeniable contentment. She and Mr. Darcy, that was, Fitzwilliam, hadn't been married for quite two months yet, but Pemberley already felt like home. Her new sister, Georgiana, who smiled across the table at her, was pleasant and kind. And her new husband, who even now retook his seat after rising to greet her, was simply perfect. Elizabeth could not ask to be more welcomed or accepted. For their part, Fitzwilliam and Georgiana seemed genuinely joyful to have Elizabeth as part of their lives. Even Mrs. Annesley, Georgiana's companion, was friendly, although not at breakfast.

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With Elizabeth to keep Georgiana company, Mrs. Annesley had gone to visit relations for the Yuletide.

“You’re looking exceedingly cheery this morning, my dear,” Darcy said, reaching for his coffee. “Do your plans for the day engender such happiness?”

“My circumstances engender such happiness, and more, but if that is your means of asking after my plans, Georgiana and I are to take the baskets we made up yesterday around to the tenant cottages. I would like to have the task completed before the Gardiners arrive for Christmas, and so we must begin today because I do not mean to rush our visits. This is my opportunity to make a good first impression as the new mistress of Pemberley.”

“Everyone will adore you,” Georgiana said stoutly.

“It is impossible they should not,” Darcy concurred.

“If only I felt the level of assurance you both have.” Elizabeth didn’t lack for confidence but she did presume she was not what Pemberley’s tenants might expect in their landlord’s new bride.

“You are everything amiable,” Darcy said firmly.

“I am perhaps not as polished as they may anticipate,” Elizabeth countered.

“You are honest and lovely,” her husband said firmly.

“And what they may anticipate would be someone like Miss Bingley.” Georgiana wrinkled her nose at the thought. “They will be pleased not to get what they expect.”

“Georgiana,” Darcy said a touch sharply.

Far from cowed now that she had Elizabeth as a guide for how to stand up to her brother, Georgiana merely shrugged. “It’s true.”

To keep the peace, Elizabeth endeavored for a shift in topic. “And what are your plans for this morning, Fitzwilliam?” She fought down the blush that still threatened each time she used his Christian name.

Darcy frowned slightly. “I am to write a letter recommending Peter, he’s one of the stable hands, to apprentice with the farrier.”

“And this causes you to frown?” Elizabeth asked.

Darcy shook his head, but his frown didn’t diminish. “Peter has always been a very good worker. Very reliable and an intelligent, solid young man. A week ago, when he applied for my recommendation, I didn’t hesitate to agree, but in the past few days he’s become less diligent in his duties.”

“Do you imagine he believes the recommendation already given?” Elizabeth asked.

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“He knows I have not yet written it.”

“How odd.”

“Yes.” Darcy shrugged and reached to pour more coffee. “I will speak with the stablemaster on the matter. He initially asked me to hold off on writing the letter because he had his eye on Peter to train up as his replacement, but with his recent erratic behavior, I’m unsure what to do.” With a shrug, he took another sip of coffee and they moved to the happier topic of the Gardiners’ upcoming visit.

CHAPTER TWO

Taking two baskets from the cart, Elizabeth and Georgiana left the driver with the remainder and started up a narrow track into the woods. Everything was a bit flat, damp, and brown and Elizabeth fervently hoped there would be snow for Christmas. Even if not, she, Georgiana and Pemberley’s housekeeper, Mrs. Reynolds, had already organized and overseen the hanging over an excessive number of boughs, berries, ribbons and more within the manor house’s rooms and halls, so the occasion would surely be festive. Still, views of snow from the windows, rather than denuded branches and the slightly sad, dull-with-the-season lawn, would make everything perfect.

The path branched and Georgiana confidently selected the middle route. Bowing to her knowledge of the area, Elizabeth kept pace at her tall sister’s side.

Georgiana hoisted the basket she held. “After we deliver this to Mrs. Martin, we’ll take the next to the Smiths. We can use the shortcut south through the Martins’ fields.”

“And the third branch in the path?” Elizabeth asked. “Should we not have delivered that basket first?” Peering in that direction through the trees, she could see a cottage set back in the woods.

“That cottage is empty but I’m certain Fitz will fill it come spring.”

“Has it been empty for long?”

Georgiana shook her head. “The father died and the mother took their daughters to go live with her sister and brother by marriage on their farm. Both girls worked in the house and Fitz offered to let them stay on, but their mother took them away with her to Cornwall. I was sad because I liked the younger sister very much.”

“Not the elder?” Elizabeth asked with mild curiosity.

“She was very...” Georgiana trailed off, thoughtful. “Very sure of herself.”

“Hm.” Elizabeth pondered what that might mean coming from her erstwhile too shy to speak to strangers new sister. She glanced back at the house, barely visible now as they moved down the path.

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The shutter moved.

Elizabeth whirled back to peer through the trees.

Georgiana halted and turned with a questioning look.

“I saw the shutter move,” Elizabeth explained. “I think someone is in the cottage.”

They both stared at the cottage. Nothing moved. A bird chirped. A rustling sound came from above and Elizabeth looked up to see a little red squirrel peering at her from a wide branch. Somewhere, a goat bleated.

“I don’t see anything,” Georgiana said.

“Maybe I imagined it.” But Elizabeth didn’t believe she had.

“Well, Fitz always has someone go around and ensure all the cottages are ready for winter, so I’m certain it will be checked.”

Elizabeth nodded. “Perhaps I will mention it to him, as well.” Turning, she smiled at Georgiana and together they resumed their mission of delivering baskets.

CHAPTER THREE

Elizabeth stood with Georgiana, with Darcy nearby, lingering outside the neat little church they attended each Sunday. As always, after bidding farewell to the rector, the local gentlemen made their way to Darcy to engage in a bit of idle chatter. She would have guessed him the type to avoid such a situation, but he’d told her these brief conversations outside the church were the best source of news about the community and what might require his attention.

For several weeks after her arrival to Pemberley, she and Georgiana had been ignored, simply waiting until Darcy finished his greetings. Now, however, many of the womenfolk made their way over for a word while their husbands spoke to Darcy. Elizabeth concluded a chat about the lack of snow and turned as Mrs. Martin came over.

Just as she reached them, Mrs. Smith passed behind her. She cast Elizabeth a sour look, sniffed, tipped her nose into the air, and marched away. Elizabeth stared after her in surprise. Not two days past when they’d delivered a basket to the Smiths, the woman had been quite cordial.

“I wonder what that was about?” she asked Georgiana, still watching Mrs. Smith’s stiff, retreating form.

Mrs. Martin craned her neck to see what had Elizabeth’s attention. “Oh, don’t you fret about that, Mrs. Darcy. She’s only put out about not having any peach jam in her basket. It’s her favorite, you know.”

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“No peach jam?” Elizabeth looked to Georgiana, who shrugged. “Oh, but there was meant to be. We put one in every basket.”

“That’s what I told her.” Mrs. Martin nodded sagely along with her words. “It’s a mistake, I said, not an insult, you old ninny. After all, I didn’t get a pound cake and you don’t hear me complaining, do you? Not a word. And the Ryans’ basket was missing the plum cake, and did Mrs. Ryan take insult? She did not.”

“Three baskets were missing items?” Chagrin shot through Elizabeth. “Oh, but this is terrible.”

“Three?” Mrs. Martin shook her head. “I daresay they were all missing something. Leastwise, so word has it.”

“We must have counted wrong,” Georgiana said, looking almost as alarmed as Elizabeth felt.

Elizabeth drew in a breath. All was not lost in her bid to make a good impression on the community. In fact, here was an opportunity for her to show that she could be gracious when criticized and would do what she must to set matters right. “Mrs. Martin, would it be too much trouble to ask you to compose a list of who did not receive what?” Elizabeth asked. “Miss Darcy and I will come around again and bring everyone what they missed.”

“Oh, that would be too kind of you, mistress.” Mrs. Martin beamed at her. “I wasn’t going to say, but I look forward to your cook’s pound cake every year. And I’ve fine handwriting, I do. You’ll have the list this afternoon.”

“Thank you.” Elizabeth smiled, already relieved. Soon, the whole matter would be put right and would seem little more than something over which to chuckle next year.

Later that afternoon, armed with Mrs. Martin list, Elizabeth, Georgiana, and Mrs. Reynolds made up a new basket, and it did indeed have one of each item. Elizabeth could only conclude, and the other two agreed, that they had counted wrong and somehow perfectly distributed the Yuletide gifts to leave one from each basket.

Leaving their conciliatory effort in the larder, Elizabeth and Georgiana went to ready for supper. They would take their new basket around tomorrow to provide each household with the item they’d missed and to make their apologies.

CHAPTER FOUR

They went first to the Ryans, where Mrs. Ryan happily accepted her plum cake and then regaled them with a story about a flying goat at the Smiths’.

“I am confused,” Georgiana said tentatively as the woman finished her tale. “Why do you say the goat was flying?”

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“Why, the gate wasn’t open and there were no little cloven prints anywhere but inside the pasture,” Mrs. Ryan said. “The ground’s been so wet of late, you know Mr. Smith would have seen them.”

“So the goat is simply gone?” Elizabeth asked, slightly alarmed. It was one thing for her to misplace some cakes and jam, but quite another for one of their tenants to lose an entire goat. No wonder Mrs. Smith was irritable. Her husband had to be in quite a state.

“Aye,” Mrs. Ryan said, serious now. “And a right good nanny goat she was, too. Always a good milker.” She shook her head. “Who would steal a goat so near Christmas?”

“I don’t know,” Elizabeth temporized. “If Mr. Smith hasn’t already, I’ll certainly bring the matter to the attention of Mr. Darcy.”

They finished their visit with Mrs. Ryan and departed for Mrs. Smith’s. Elizabeth insisted on carrying the basket and began to rummage in it as Georgiana knocked on the cottage door. The idea of pulling out the jam and presenting it as a conjuror might had caught Elizabeth’s fancy. She felt a bit of flare her due for Mrs. Smith’s snub in the churchyard.

But the jar of peach jam would not meet her seeking hand. She pushed aside various cakes and breads, and a jar of honey, but could not locate the peach preserves Mrs. Smith so enjoyed. Elizabeth hoisted the basket higher, peering inside.

“Georgiana, I cannot—”

The door opened to Mrs. Smith, the lady regarding them with a hopeful expression.

Elizabeth lowered the basket, and met the older woman’s eyes with an apologetic grimace. “Mrs. Smith. How lovely to see you. We knocked by accident. If you will excuse us, we must go but we will return shortly with your peach jam.”

Mrs. Smith’s brows descended into a dire vee. “You knocked by accident?”

Georgiana cast Elizabeth a confused look.

“We did.” Elizabeth looped an arm through the basket handle and grasped one of Georgiana’s with her free hand, tugging. “We’re terrible sorry. We’ll return soon.”

“Well. I never,” Mrs. Smith said and closed the door.

Georgiana came with Elizabeth back down the walk, but her confused expression didn’t waver. “Why didn’t we give Mrs. Smith the jam? Was it some sort of jest? I don’t think she found it funny.”

Elizabeth shook her head. “There is no jam.” She held out the basket.

Georgiana took it and halted on the path to rummage inside. Finally, she looked up. “But... we put it in. I saw you, and Mrs. Reynolds handed it to you. It was here.”

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Elizabeth could only shrug again. “It was, but it is not now. I think something is afoot in the kitchen.”

Georgiana’s eyes went wide. “A thief?”

Elizabeth cast a quick look over Georgiana’s shoulder to see Mrs. Smith peering through her curtains at them. “I don’t want to say that until we’re certain. Come. We’ll speak with Mrs. Reynolds and make up one more basket. Only this time, we’ll find somewhere from which to watch, discreetly, while it waits in the larder.”

CHAPTER FIVE

Elizabeth didn’t know if she was amused or feeling foolish as she crouched under the kitchen table with Georgiana. She did know that they should have thought to bring pillows this time. This being their third attempt to spot the thief, Elizabeth’s backside was beginning to protest continually sitting on the floor, even though each attempt had been a short one.

After considerable discussion with Mrs. Reynolds and the cook, they’d determined that there were very few, and very short, intervals when the kitchen could be found empty so that someone might sneak into the larder. At the moment, the cook had gone up with the kitchen staff to survey what had and had not been consumed by the family for breakfast. She preferred to do this in the parlor, and would then quickly compose plans for subsequent meals, feeding the staff, and what could go to the hounds or the slops. In this way, the staff would then know what to remove first, and where to take each item. Pemberley’s cook liked to keep a very ordered kitchen.

Elizabeth worked hard not to fidget, but the idea that this was foolishness began to win out. Maybe they all had, somehow, simply forgotten Mrs. Smith’s peach jam yet again, as impossible as that seemed and as much as they were certain they hadn’t. Beside her, Georgiana shifted, her longer legs likely even more cramped than Elizabeth’s were.

The back door to the kitchen swung open and Georgiana stilled. A tall young man dressed in Pemberley’s livery stepped in. He cast a quick look about, then slipped into the larder. Elizabeth gripped Georgiana’s arm. They both waited, peering through the white tablecloth that obscured them. A moment later, the young man came back out and ducked back through the kitchen door.

Elizabeth scuttled out from under the table and stood. “We have him. Come, before he gets away. We’ll call him out while he has whatever he’s taken this time on him.”

Georgiana, who’d followed her out, came to her feet. “That was Peter.”

“The stable hand Fitzwilliam is meant to write a recommendation for?” Elizabeth asked as she crossed the kitchen.

“Yes,” Georgiana said, following.

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Elizabeth peered through the kitchen window. “He’s already across the yard. He isn’t going to the stable. He’s on his way to the forest path.” She yanked open the kitchen door. She’d wanted to call him out in the yard, with witnesses, but he had a long stride and seemed to be in quite a hurry.

They rushed across the yard and onto the forest path, but once the trees enveloped them, their leafless branches touching overhead, Elizabeth slowed. If this Peter wasn’t the loyal and responsible employee her husband had always thought him, did she and Georgiana truly want to meet him alone in the woods?

“He’s getting away,” Georgiana said excitedly, obviously caught up in their chase.

Elizabeth put a hand on her arm, slowing her. “Let us follow at a distance and see where he goes. We can return and collect your brother to confront him with us.”

Georgiana cast Elizabeth a startled look, her eyes going wide with comprehension. She glanced back nervously, but they were already deep into the trees. She slowed her pace even more than Elizabeth wished, and together they crept after Peter, the wayward stable hand.

His pace did not slow and they lost all sight of him. Elizabeth began to worry they would never know where he went, and to wonder if it mattered. Darcy could confront him either way.

Georgiana caught her arm.

Elizabeth turned a questioning look on her new sister to find Georgiana pointed down a narrow trek that Elizabeth had started to walk past, not noticing the little trail.

“It’s a short cut to that cottage, the one that’s empty,” Georgiana whispered. She pointed downward. “Look. I think that’s his boot print.”

Elizabeth peered at the ground, taking in some slight marks that might be from a boot, then looked back up at Georgiana, impressed. “You’re quite the tracker.”

Georgiana shrugged. “I used to work very diligently not to meet anyone while out walking, so I wouldn’t need to speak with them.”

Elizabeth nodded and together they sneaked up the path. They reached the end in time to see Peter crossing an open field. By unspoken accord, they ducked behind two nearly touching trees to peer around the stout trunks. Approaching the supposedly-empty cottage from the back side, he strode up to the kitchen door, which opened to allow him in, then closed firmly behind him.

Elizabeth exchanged a worried look with Georgiana. It was definitely time to get Darcy.

CHAPTER SIX

Elizabeth hurried to keep up with her husband’s long stride, wondering if she should do anything to mitigate the grimness radiating from him. They approached the cottage from

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the front, but he'd sent two footmen around the back, telling them to remain hidden unless someone attempted to flee. He was taking Peter's theft and his use of the vacant cottage even more seriously than Elizabeth had expected, and she worried he would judge too quickly and harshly once they were inside. She didn't know the young man in question but she did know he'd always been reliable before, and it was nearly Christmas, a time for forgiving.

"I would like you and Georgiana to wait outside while I enter with two of my men," Darcy said as they drew in sight of the front door.

"I don't want to wait outside," Georgiana said, behind them.

Elizabeth watched Darcy's features take on an even more dire cast and wished her new sister hadn't spoken. It had taken all of Elizabeth's persuasiveness to see them included on this venture. Now was not the time to argue about going inside.

"The man is a thief and a housebreaker, and a viper in our midst," Darcy declared, and Elizabeth realized much of his ire stemmed from feeling betrayed.

"I believe we should at least listen to him before we condemn him," she said quietly to her husband.

His scowl only deepened.

When they reached the door, Elizabeth caught Georgiana back while Darcy, two footmen flanking him, applied the key. He flung the door open and tromped in demanding, "What is the meaning of this?"

From within, Elizabeth heard a decidedly feminine gasp, along with a male voice saying, "Mr. Darcy, sir." Then, a baby started to cry.

Elizabeth rushed forward, Georgiana right behind her, and into the cottage.

Peter stood in the middle of a room only sparsely furnished, his expression horrified and beseeching. A young woman sat on a lone chair by an unlit fire, clutching a baby to her chest. She stared at Mr. Darcy with something near terror, but still rocked the child, doing an admirable job of soothing it. On a table beside them rested one of the missing Christmas cakes and an open jar of peach jam which, if the mess on the baby's chin were any indication, she'd been attempting to feed to the child.

And in the middle of the room stood a nanny goat, contentedly eating the corner of a blanket.

"Explain yourself," Darcy demanded.

Peter straightened and pulled his shoulders back, though he was a slight youth of perhaps nineteen. "They are under my care, sir. I won't let you harm them."

"Harm them?" Elizabeth repeated, going around her husband to stand between him and the scared looking young woman in the chair. "Do not be ridiculous. No one is going to harm

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anyone.” She cast Darcy a piercing look in an attempt to remind him how intimidating he could be.

He blinked once, then rocked back on his heels, nodding. “No one is going to harm anyone.” Darcy cleared his throat before continuing with, “Peter, please explain what is happening here. Is this your child?”

Peter cast the girl a quick look, then turned back to Darcy, his expression defiant. “I love her as if she were, sir.”

“Is she your baby, Annabel?”

Everyone turned to look at Georgiana.

Flushing, she said, “Well, it seems to me that’s important.”

“Annabel?” Darcy repeated to his sister. “Why is the name familiar. How do you know her?”

“She used to work in the house. Her parents lived in this cottage.”

“That’s right,” Darcy said and turned back to Peter and Annabel.

“Eleanor is my sister’s baby,” Annabel said quietly, her face going red.

“I see,” Darcy said gravely, though Elizabeth doubted that made anything clearer to him than it did to her. Gentling his tone, he said, “Annabel, would you please tell us why you’re living in your family’s vacated cottage and Peter is stealing goats and food for you?”

She looked about at them all, worrying her lower lip with her teeth.

Wordlessly, Darcy gestured to the two footmen, who lingered near the door looking uncomfortable, to leave. He crossed and collected one of the room’s only other chairs, brought it over, and set it before Annabel. Sitting, he said, “Now, tell me what has happened to you.”

She swallowed, then nodded. “We got to my aunt and uncle’s, and then Mama got sick and she died, and then my sister—” Annabel broke off to glance at Georgiana. “You remember, my older sister Milly?”

“I do,” Georgiana said softly.

“Well, Milly started to show and she admitted that she’d been keeping time with a fancy gentleman, and our uncle got so angry and said he wouldn’t raise two hussies come down from Derbyshire, but our aunt, our mama’s sister, got him to let us stay. They don’t have children, you know.”

Darcy nodded encouragingly.

“When the baby came they wouldn’t let me in with Milly, but she screamed and screamed and, well, it didn’t go well.” Tears leaked down Annabel’s face. “Finally, they let me see her and

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she told me, she whispered to me who the papa is and told me I had to bring her baby here to him, so she could have a good life, and then she died.”

Elizabeth gasped, covering her mouth.

“And my aunt wanted to keep her but my uncle said he wouldn’t raise some man’s bastard. He said we’d have to give Milly’s baby up, so I took her and Mama’s necklace to sell for travel money and I came here to find Mr. Wickham.”

“Mr. Wickham?” Georgiana squeaked.

“Wickham,” Darcy said the name like an epithet.

The nanny goat let out a worried bleat and took another bite of blanket.

Annabel looked back and forth between them. “Mr. Wickham told Milly he was going to find her and marry her, so I know he’ll want to take care of his baby.”

“Mr. Wickham married someone else,” Darcy said crisply.

“But he couldn’t know Milly is gone,” Annabel said, sounding outraged.

“I doubt he cared.” Darcy sighed and cast a quick look at Elizabeth.

She moved to Darcy’s side. “Mr. Wickham seduced a young woman and was forced to make amends by wedding her. I’m sorry, but I doubt he had any more intension of coming for your sister than of marrying the woman he ended up wedding.” There was no point in troubling Annabel with the full truth, that the young woman in question was Elizabeth’s fifteen year old sister.

“What will we do?” Georgiana asked softly.

“I will marry Annabel and care for the baby,” Peter said. “I already asked her. I told her Mr. Wickham wouldn’t come back.”

“Peter.” Affection shone bright in Annabel’s eyes. “I can’t ask you to do that.”

Peter went to her, dropping to a knee before her chair. “I know we’re young, but I’ve loved you for years. I was even trying to get a position with the farrier so I could learn a trade that would let me travel, so I could come find you.”

“That is so wonderful of you,” Annabel said with a catch in her voice. “But you cannot be a farrier with a baby, and I know you didn’t plan on starting our marriage already with one.”

He caught her hand. “We will make it work, so long as we can be together.”

Elizabeth cleared her throat. “If you are intent on being together, I believe between us, Mr. Darcy and I can come up with a better solution than the three of you traveling about shoeing horses.” She looked to her husband, who nodded. Certain his thoughts mirrored her own, Elizabeth smiled.

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“We can,” Darcy said. “But I have one question. Why is there a goat here?”

Summoned, the creature trotted over and licked the baby’s jam covered face, causing the infant to giggle.

Annabel smiled warmly at Peter. “I told Peter the baby needed milk.”

CHAPTER SEVEN

Arm in arm with Darcy, Elizabeth strode from the church, the Gardiners and Georgiana trailing them. To Mrs. Darcy’s delight, when they stepped out into the blustery winter morning, snow fell. Smiling up at the giant flakes, she said, “There’s nothing so lovely as a wedding during the Yuletide season.”

“So you would have preferred to wait these two months and more?” he asked, his tone teasing.

Elizabeth squeezed his arm. “I most certainly would not have preferred to wait. But I am happy to see Peter and Annabel married.”

“The blanket you gave them for little Eleanor was a beautiful gift.”

“I worked diligently on it but it is not so grand a gift as a cottage with an exceedingly generous lease and a position as apprentice to our stablemaster.”

Darcy smiled. “Those so-called gifts benefit me as well as them, making them not truly gifts.”

“If you would like to say so, Fitzwilliam, but I know you for the generous, caring man you are.”

Reaching the carriage they turned back to watch their smiling relations coming up the walk to join them. Beyond Georgiana and the Gardiners, the newly wedded couple stood at the top of the church steps speaking with the minister, little Eleanor in Annabel’s arms. Elizabeth squeezed Darcy’s arm, more happy than she could ever have imagined, and smiled at Peter and Annabel’s adopted baby.

Elizabeth had a secret, one she’d thought about giving Darcy for Christmas, but she’d decided to keep it a little longer, until logic told her she was sure. Not that logic could contain her joy for Elizabeth knew, with every fiber of her heart, that come next Christmas, she and Darcy would be celebrating with their own baby. Their little one would come into the world to a loving home, wonderful relations, the best father... and wouldn’t be dependent on a goat. Especially not at Christmas.

THE END

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About the author

Summer Hanford writes gripping Epic Fantasy, swashbuckling Historical Romance, and best-selling Pride and Prejudice retellings.

She lives in the Finger Lakes Region of New York with her husband and compulsory, deliberately spoiled, cats. The newest addition to their household, an energetic setter-shepherd mix, is (still) not appreciated by the cats but is well loved by the humans.

While Summer's education is in Experimental Psychology and Behavioral Neurology, her true passion has always been writing. As a child growing up on a dairy farm, she built castles made of hay and wielded swords made of fence posts.

She is passionate about gardening, travel, and organizing her closet. Nothing pleases her more than a row of tops broken down by sleeve length and ordered by color, hung on corresponding hangers... except working on her latest novel.

To follow Summer's latest work visit:

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St. Nick Visits Northanger

by *EM Storm-Smith*

*“... He sprang to his sleigh, to his team gave a whistle,
and away they all flew like the down of a thistle.
But I heard him exclaim, ere he drove out of sight
– Happy Christmas to all, and to all a good night!”*

Catherine Tilney, neé Morland, closed the small bound leather book filled with a peculiar collection of recently published short stories and poems about the Christ season. This particular poem was from the former American Colonies and had been published in New York a few years ago. It had been an early Christmas gift from her brother, James Morland, who was always finding such funny little things. He had visited the Tilneys with his family a few weeks before

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the holidays. Knowing Catherine's love of all things literary, he had compiled the collection specially for his favourite sister.

Catherine always loved seeing her eldest brother and his new wife, but James was expected to give the Christmas services at his own parish and could not stay for the holiday. Giving the leather cover one last caress and sending up a Christmas prayer for her favourite brother, Catherine laid the book on the ornate bedside table.

The nursery room in general was reasonably large with brightly papered walls and a lush carpet covering the hardwood floors. Well placed windows let in ample light by day, and beautiful moonshine by night which reflected off the cold winter lawn. Overall, it was a handsome and comfortable room, maybe even cheerful. A strange contrast to what an outside observer might think about Northanger Abbey with its gothic façade and imposing grey stones.

"Won't you read it again?" asked Little Henry Tilney. Henry, called Harry by his family, just newly turned seven years old and sat swinging his legs off the side of his bed. He showed no signs of being at all tired.

"Oh, yes please! Read it again mamma!" Pleaded Lizzy Tilney, who in contrast to her big brother, had cuddled deep under the blankets. Her head half sunk into the soft pillow and her eyes barely open.

"I have read you this exact story three times already. Are you not tired of the tale?" Catherine chided softly.

"NO!" Harry exclaimed. "I want to hear it a hundred more times!"

"That seems like too many times to me." Said their father, Henry Tilney, who had been listening, leaned against the door. He came into the room and surveyed his family. "Now children, do not badger your mother. Father Christmas would not like such, and he might come down the chimney tonight and snatch you right away!" Henry came around, scooped his son up off the bed and made like he was going to jump out of the window.

Both children screeched in delight and Catherine chuckled under her breath. "Come now, set Harry down into his bed. It is much too late for getting him riled up." Catherine pulled back the covers on her son's bed and tucked him in tight as soon as his father set him down.

"Too right my dear; it is indeed much too late for these rascallions to be out of their beds." Henry ruffled his son's hair and kissed his daughter.

But Harry was not yet ready to give up on the evening. "I am not a rascallion, you are a rascallion. And mother said he was called St. Nicholas, like the big church on the way to Bath. See here," Harry grabbed the small book off the bedside table and opened it looking for the poem, "it says 'the stockings were hung by the chimney with care, in hopes that St. Nicholas soon would be there.'" The boy read with a very slow and specific pronunciation. His learning to read was coming along very well indeed.

"Well, by Jove, you are correct, it does say that, does it not." Henry chuckled and leaned against the mantle near the windows.

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Lizzy piped up from underneath her covers. “But why would he come tonight? And are St. Nicholas and Father Christmas friends?”

Catherine took the book from Harry and patted Lizzy’s head. “I am sure that Father Christmas is friends with all the cheer-filled imps and elves who visit good children on Christmas or the night before, including St. Nicholas. He comes to make merry for all the people.”

“Do you think he will bring me a new fencing foil? I have grown too tall for the learning one Master Egbert gave me to use last year.” Harry asked as he pretended to parry and riposte at an opponent on the ceiling.

“Hmmm, maybe.” Henry stroked his chin in a teasing manner, seeming to think deeply about his son’s question. “But I am sure that only the nice little children will get something from St. Nicholas’s toy sack.”

“I am a nice child!” Harry dropped his arm down to the bed and looked at his father with pleading eyes.

“What would Cook say about you, do you think?” Catherine added to the teasing. “How many biscuits did you steal from the kitchens last week?”

“It was only three, I swear! And I shared one with Lizzy.”

“How magnanimous of you.” Henry gently pushed his son back into the mattress and tucked him into the covers, again.

Catherine picked up the candle stick and blew out the lamp. “Now, it is time for bed, no more stories. We must be awake early in the morning so that we are not late to services. You know how your grandfather despises being late.”

“Why can I not sleep with you tonight mamma? There are so many sounds in this big house, and I do not like it when the rain hits the windows.” Lizzy reached out one small hand from her covers still clutching a small rag dog toy.

“I know, poppet, but it is not raining tonight and even if there was to be a storm, it would be snow, for it is too cold for rain. The snow falls silently.” Catherine kissed her daughter one more time and smoothed down her hair. “Your brother will be here with you always.”

“This old Abbey is nothing to be afraid of, my dear.” Henry also bestowed one more kiss on Lizzy’s forehead. “I lived in this very room until I moved to Woodston and I can assure you, nothing can harm you inside these walls. Your mother and I shall be just down the hall and tomorrow there shall be carols, and figgy pudding, and blind man’s bluff, then all your cousins will be coming after church to stay until Epiphany. I promise that we shall have a wonderful Christmas indeed.”

“Do not fret, Lizzy. I will protect you from St. Nicholas! If he does try to come down the chimney, I will chase him right back up!” Harry jumped out from his covers, again, and stood on his bed, one arm extended in a fencers pose.

Henry laughed, then swept Harry off his feet and back onto the mattress. “I am glad you are ready to defend your sister, but please, do try and rest. I will not allow you to miss church if you stay up all night looking for chimney climbing elves and flying reindeer.”

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“Yes, papa.”

“Goodnight, children.”

“Good night, mamma.”

Catherine and Henry stepped into the hall, closed the door, and left Harry and Lizzy to sleep in the moonlight filled room.

It only took five minutes before Harry was back out of his covers and hopping around the nursery. He opened the screen covering the fireplace, a small fire burning at the back of the hearth to keep the room cosy for its young inhabitants, then tried to look up the flue.

“I do not think that St. Nicholas could fit down this chimney. It is too narrow at the top.” Harry declared to his half-asleep sister.

“That is good then. He cannot take us away if he cannot fit.” Lizzy sat up and snuggled her rag dog tighter.

Harry went to the seat under the window and climbed up onto the ledge, peering out onto the south lawn. “Well, he certainly cannot come from the chimney in this room, but there are so many fireplaces and chimneys all over the Abbey. He might come down another one then sneak into our room when we least expect it.” Harry turned around with his hands on his hips and tapped his foot for a moment. “We had better go check all the fireplaces to make sure he does not come in at all.”

“How are we going to make sure he does not come in the Abbey at all?”

Harry shrugged. “I will have to find the biggest chimney and guard it all night. Do not worry. You can stay here and sleep. I will protect you.”

Just then a low howling sound floated down the chimney in the children’s nursery and the window rattled slightly as the wind picked up outside.

“NO! I do not want to stay here by myself. You have to stay with me.” Lizzy pulled the covers over her head.

“You can come with me if you like, but I am going to make sure this St. Nicholas stays out of Northanger Abbey.” Harry pulled on his slippers and dressing gown then relit the candle in the fireplace. He looked back at Lizzy before opening the door. “Are you coming or are you staying?”

Lizzy sat up and looked as if she was going to argue. Another gust of wind rose up like a tempest and shook the windows violently. Even the fireplace flickered as a rush of the wind came down the chimney and into the children’s hearth. Though she still seemed unsure, Lizzy pulled on her own slippers and dressing gown. She padded to the door sucking her thumb and clutching her rag dog. Harry nodded in an officious manner then opened the door.

“Stay close to me.” Harry instructed. “We will check the rooms in this wing first, then we can go down the stairs to the main parlour floor.”

Out in the hall, the sounds of the night wind were amplified as it whipped around the ancient building. In the distance, someone closed a door with a loud bang and the click-clack

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of heeled shoes on marble floors could be heard echoing across the cavernous hallway. Lizzy grabbed onto Harry's sleeve and buried her face in his back.

"There, there, Lizzy. All is well." Harry tried to put on a brave face for his little sister, though, in truth, he was dis comforted by the noises floating around the Abbey halls. "These are just normal sounds for a house so big and old. Papa says all the time there is nothing here to fear."

Shuffling quickly down the residential hall, Harry opened the door to a set of apartments near the end of the wing opposite from the nursery rooms. Inside was a well apportioned, old-fashioned room with a four-poster bed, Bath stove, sitting area, and a large fireplace devoid of any fire. The bed did not have any linens and there were drapes across the other pieces of furniture. It was rather spooky and dark in the winter moonlight.

Over the mantle of the fireplace hung a very ornate painting partially covered in black crepe. From what the children could see, it depicted a beautiful woman with kind eyes holding what was most likely a small child. Definitely a portrait of devotion and love. Despite the warmth in the painting and the quality of the furnishings, there was a mustiness to the room that lingered, as if it had not been properly aired in a long time.

Harry walked straight into the hearth and looked up the flue.

"What can you see?" Lizzy asked, her thumb firmly lodged into her mouth, with the rag dog covering half her face.

"Not much." Harry raised the candle up a little higher and spun in a slow circle. "I do not think this chimney goes all the way to the roof. It looks like it connects to another fireplace. Maybe in the room next door?"

Lizzy looked around and found a small door on the side of the fireplace. She opened it and something small, furry, with a long tail scurried between her feet.

"EEEKKK! What is that?!" Lizzy screeched.

"Oh, fie! It is only a mouse. Do not be such a fraidy-cat." Harry walked through the door his sister had opened and stopped in his tracks. On the other side of the door was some kind of dressing closet with possibly a hundred dresses of varying designs, colours, and levels of decomposition. In the corner of the room, a set of orange eyes peeked out from behind a blue muslin dress and from the swaying of the clothing, Harry guessed that there was probably a cat with a swishing tail attached to the eyes. A large, well-fed cat in this deserted room.

"I do not think we shall find any more chimneys this way. Come Lizzy, let us try a different door." Harry backed out of the dressing room and shut the door just in time to see another mouse scurry from its hiding place only to be promptly pounced on by a very fast-moving blur of fur and eyes.

The next door they tried opened into a large sitting room with a fireplace exactly opposite the hearth in the attached bedroom. This room was just as abandoned as the bedroom, all the furniture again draped in sheets, a thick layer of dust covering everything. After another hearth inspection, Harry was once again disappointed.

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“It is just like in our little nursery room. The flue is much too narrow for any man, especially one who is described as ‘chubby and plump.’” Harry scratched his chin for a moment. “We had best try our luck downstairs in the main parlour room or maybe the ballroom. Both of those have very large fireplaces, probably with their own chimney all the way to the roof. If I were St. Nicholas, I would choose the chimney that comes into the largest room.”

“But how would he know which room each chimney goes to?”

“He’s an elf.” Harry said and nodded once with authority. “Elves know these things.”

“Well, then, he would probably stay away from this set of rooms. It is too dusty. My nose feels itchy.” Lizzy shook her little head, braided pigtails flapping about her ears.

“I wonder why all the furniture is covered over. Mamma and papa’s room is very close to here and Aunt Elinore’s rooms are in this hallway too.” Harry lifted the side of the sheet covering a painted chair. “It looks like no one has been in this room for many years now, maybe even before papa married mamma.”

“I am cold, Harry.” Lizzy complained. “The grate is empty and there is no wood for a fire in here.”

“Let us move on then, come on.”

As soon as they opened the door back to the hallway, a door on the floor below was opened and closed loudly, swift steps ascending the stairs at the end of the hall, growing in volume and falling heavily on the stone floor. Harry grabbed Lizzy’s hand and pulled her down a passageway, through a set of folding doors and into the Abbey’s main gallery. Massive portraits of all the masters of Northanger looked down at the children and several large stone sculptures stood on pedestals scattered around the room.

As the footsteps continued to get closer, Harry and Lizzy weaved between sculptures to make their way to the central staircase in the Abbey leading down to the parlour floor. The faint footfalls of their pursuer continued in the background, though a bit farther away now.

The children had not gotten far when laughter floated up the staircase. Also, footsteps belonging to one of the many footmen attending the family during their Christmas festivities and the clack of cutlery from the maids clearing the dining room sounded around the cold walls. Not able to go back to the gallery for fear of running into their pursuer, and not able to go forward without alerting the house staff of their night time excursion, Harry looked around the hall for a place to hide. Finding no doors within close reach, he blew out the candle then pulled his sister with him behind one of the many hung tapestries covering the walls.

“Harry, I want to go back to our room.”

“Shhhhhh!” Harry placed his free hand over Lizzy’s mouth. “We must be quiet. What if St. Nicholas is already in the Abbey? We have to keep going.”

Lizzy furrowed her brow but was unable to respond on account of her brother keeping his hand over her mouth. After a moment, they heard the footsteps of the footman pass their hiding spot and continue down the hall through another door near the end.

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Lizzy pushed Harry's hand off her mouth then folded her arms and then leaned heavily against the wall.

"Oof! That hurt." Lizzy exclaimed. She felt the wall behind her body for what had hit her in the head, and found a small key sticking out of a keyhole with no doorknob. "Harry, look here." She pulled on his sleeve to get Harry's attention, then turned the key.

And what to their wondering eyes should appear but a long corridor with lit torches spaced out just far enough that the light from one did not quite reach the next. At the end of the light, the children could barely make out the top of a staircase leading down into the heart of the Abbey.

"Now this looks promising." Unable, of course, to repress his curiosity in so favourable a moment for indulging it, Harry took several steps into the corridor before he was stopped by his sister.

"No, Harry, this looks scary. We should go back. Mamma will be mad if we get hurt or lost."

"Come on, Lizzy, what can happen to us in the Abbey? Besides, we have to find St. Nick." Like many young protagonists following their own adventure, Harry had leapt ahead in the story. His nighttime journey had started as a quest to find the most probable entry point for this mysterious St. Nicholas, and now he fully believed that the intruder was probably already loose in the Abbey, poised to cause untold havoc.

"But the story only says he lands on the roof and then comes down a chimney. It does not say anything about creepy hallways and stairs." Lizzy stamped her foot and refused to move down the corridor.

"Do what you like, I am going forward."

With one more huff and stomp of her foot, Lizzy turned around and got out from behind the tapestry.

Harry barely noticed the departure of his little sister. He was too focused on the dark passageway ahead of him. A few paces beyond the last torch, Harry was presented with a crossroads. The corridor curved to the left and continued around the bowels of the Abbey, or Harry could descend the narrow set of steps leading to the unknown.

Though it was late and dark outside, the Abbey was still alive within. Noises were coming from all around. The wind howled around the drafty hall while more footsteps echoed down the dim corridor. Faint voices floated up from the stairs and the pitter patter of mice scurried across the floors trying to escape the Abbey's cats. It was difficult to determine where each of the sounds originated as they all bounced around the stone walls. Harry even thought he heard the faint call of his name mixing into the night.

Harry had never heard so much noise coming from the old building where only his grandfather lived most of the time. Even during family dinners in the large dining parlour with many footmen stationed about the room, there was never this much commotion.

Time was running out for Harry to intercept the nefarious elf before he could slip down some chimney and all around the Abbey. This was no time for thought. Harry hurried on, slipped

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with the least possible noise towards the stairs, and without stopping to look or breathe, rushed forward into the darkness.

The stairs seemed, to Harry, to stretch out for miles and miles, much longer than the two stories he had expected to descend. Perhaps this was a stairwell to some before unknown dungeon deep below the Abbey, or a tunnel leading out to a secret subterraneous communication between the building and some far-off chamber where bandits might hide. The longer he spent climbing down the stairs, the more fanciful imaginings he conjured up as to what would be found at the end.

Finally, a small landing opened up at the bottom of the stairs. Several additional dark corridors spread out from that landing like fingers from the centre of a lake. One wooden door near the steps was slightly ajar with warm light spilling out. Harry peered into the room finding what appeared to be a large kitchen housing several footmen, the housekeeper, maids, Cook, and some of the stable hands.

The men were playing cards around a large table in the centre of the room whilst several maids were hanging holly boughs around the cheery room.

“Come off it, love, you know Mr. Hughs will make you take those down in the morning. He’s a right old grump.” One of the footmen called out.

“He cannot take away my holiday spirit. What would Father Christmas say if we do not have any holly to make merry?”

Harry perked up at the mention of Father Christmas. If the merry making sprite was going to visit the kitchens, maybe St. Nicholas would also try to come into the Abbey from the chimney in this room. It did look like the hearth was large with a massive fire burning. There were several bulky copper and cast iron pots hanging from a rod across the middle of the flue.

“You are full of folly, Sarah. We shall be merry enough ourselves with Cook’s punch and the leftover Christmas cakes.”

Mr. Hughs walked in from a corner of the room that Harry could not see. He placed a large platter of biscuits, iced cakes, and sweet meats on the table, right on top of the pile of playing cards. “Go on now. Here are the remains of the General’s tea. The young Tilneys went to bed a while ago and Mrs. Tilney is not one for too many sweets. Cook has fresh ones already cooling in the larder for tomorrow so these are all for you lot.”

“Happy Christmas indeed!” A general cheer from the assembled servants went around. Another bowl of punch was produced from somewhere in the room and one of the stable hands picked up a small violin while the maids took turns playing carols on the old pianoforte in the corner. Soon everyone was enjoying the merriment as much as the leftover treats. Even grumpy Mr. Hughs took a turn around the room with Cook after his third glass of punch.

An adventurous footman produced a sprig of mistletoe from his inside jacket pocket and a great game of hoodman blind became an excuse to try and capture one of the maids for a cheeky kiss under the mistletoe. It seemed that the whole household was caught up in the merriment.

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Harry sat outside the door to the kitchen on the bottom step for a long while, waiting for everyone to finish their celebrations and head to their beds. If he could just hold out a little while longer, he was sure that the massive chimney above the kitchen was the perfect place for St. Nicholas to come down.

Soon one carol morphed into the next and the warm swirls of the fire began to dance around Harry's eyelids. A large hand brushed the fringe out of Harry's eyes and patted his back comfortingly. Then the stairway floated below him as the world melted into the moonlight and snow outside.



A soft knock on the door to the nursery stirred both Harry and Lizzy Tilney from their long winters' nap on a bright Christmas morning. Harry blinked his eyes looking about the room. He was confused as to how he ended up back in his bed under the covers. A bright fire was burning behind the grate and two stockings were hung over the mantle, one with an H and one with an L embroidered at the top.

"Good morning, little adventurer." Harry looked to the door and saw his mother and father standing together just inside their room.

"Happy Christmas, Harry. Did you enjoy your jaunt down to the kitchen through the servant's hall last night?" Henry came across the room and sat down on his son's bed, ruffling his hair a bit.

"I did not know where I ended up last night. Lizzy unlocked a mystery door behind the large tapestry at the top of the stairs and I found a secret passage! How did you find me?"

Catherine chuckled. "One of the footmen saw you both unlock the servant's passage door and came to tell us right away."

"Yes, son. You were not very sneaky bumbling all around the central passage. Mr. Hughs alerted us to your night-time adventure. I followed you down to the stairs leading to the kitchens and found you asleep on the bottom stair. I then carried you back to bed."

"What about St. Nicholas? Did he get into the Abbey?" Harry looked devastated that he had failed in his mission to protect the inhabitants of Northanger Abbey.

Henry looked towards the mantle above the nursery fireplace. "Why do you not see for yourself?" He nodded his head to encourage both children to examine the stockings.

Lizzy hopped out of her bed and grabbed at the new decoration. "What is this mamma? Oh! A little dolly! She is so beautiful."

Harry went much more cautiously and looked into the stocking emblazoned with an 'H.' At the bottom was a small painted wooden soldier with a musket and officer's sabre.

"I know it is not the fencing foil you wanted, but this little man is ready to protect the whole family, if needed, from imps, scamps, and the occasional wandering rapsallion." Henry winked at his son and smiled broadly. "Now! It is time to dress for church. Do not tarry long. Grandfather is already drinking his coffee and will want to be in the carriage before the top of the hour if we are to make it to church on time."

Harry looked back down to his new toy soldier and back to the hearth with its warm burning fire. Perhaps a visit from St. Nicholas was not such a bad thing after all.

About the author

Like many who come to Austen-inspired tales, E.M. Storm-Smith has worn a variety of hats in her lifetime. She has been a mother, a wife, a lover of good literature, a former engineer, and a lawyer. Possessing a lifelong obsession for books and the power a well-written story, E.M. made the decision to create her own tales. For years, she read about characters she loved; now, it is her turn to create characters others will adore. Her first Austen-inspired book, *Reputation, An Easy Thing to Lose*, was published in 2022 and more, like *Cause to Repine*, are on the horizon.

A life-long reader, E.M. spends an inordinate amount of time reading the tales others have written, preferably in a place which includes traveling, sunshine, and cooking, especially with chocolate as the primary ingredient. To “*pay the bills*”, so to speak, E.M. works with corporations and nonprofit organizations, assisting them in increasing their reach, meeting financial goals, securing their future mission, and investing in impact sectors.

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The Gamekeeper's Cabin

by Don Jacobson

*Station confers neither greater nor lesser love for one's family
or willingness to sacrifice for their happiness.*

Warm white cotton clouds surrounded her. She elbowed through.

And then freedom, as the clutching fibers of sleep—how she knew 'twas that and not something more sinister, death perhaps—fell away.

A warm moistness huffed and shifted an errant fringe drooping against her forehead. Breath guided her to the surface: not gales but gentle and tintured with milk's sweetness.

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Resisting the impulse to return to the world, Elizabeth tried to burrow back into her chrysalis. The breather would not have it. A finger, small yet insistent, pulled the curl away.

With wakefulness, awareness replaced dream time, and numbing frost wrapped her in its faerie tendrils.

How long have I slept? Was it sleep? I can remember Will shouting at me to stay awake.

Oh yes: the sleigh slid into a ditch, traces snapped, and Circe fled into the woods, stranding us.

And Will had been afraid. I never knew him to sound as he did.

His voice, quivering then, had been the beacon toward which she pointed her prow. But another echoed his urgent cry, piloting them through the sharp mist that stung even through carriage furs. She thudded against her husband's chest as Darcy struggled to flee through drifts burying the ridges and swales. She slid in and out of awareness but had been conscious of them being led deeper into the woods.

Georgie had warned me that Pemberley had two faces despite what Caroline vowed. A particular beauty makes our home Titania's garden throughout an endless summer. Leaf-fall is idyllic, the dry scent waiting to be inhaled in great gusts. Winter, though, is worse than anything my newest sister could describe. It has been over a year, and my blood is still Hertfordshire-thin.

Perhaps she had been too new a bride to understand the brutality of a Derbyshire December. The bliss shared with Will insulated her from last year's icy blasts. Then she began increasing shortly after Twelfth Night. Little Ben's birth was her celebration of Pemberley's fertile fields, heavy heads drooping waiting for the scythe.

The Darcys had broken free from their sandstone fastness to fly toward Thornhill in an adult escape. Elizabeth's life had been a year-long whirl; Pemberley's mistress needed relief. Sharing time with Jane would be the tonic! Elizabeth was reluctant to leave Ben with Nurse but craved a more anciently familiar Natal season. Bingley's invitation to share the day was timely indeed.

Only a tinge of white had tinted the sky above the western hills as they prepared to leave. Dismissing the warning as morning frost, Darcy turned the sleigh onto the track linking the two manor houses. Deep drifts on the east-facing incline slowed their progress, and overhead the weather shifted as the wind brought an Irish Sea blizzard howling into the Peak District. Their situation became increasingly difficult.

Now she was securely warm away from the wind rattling impotently against the walls. As she cataloged her world, Elizabeth leaned into the little finger tracing soothing patterns on her cheek. A child's whispered song laved her face, and she recalled Ben's baby's breath.

Elizabeth cracked an eyelid to admit herself into her refuge. A button nose and gigantic eyes burning with curiosity dominated her vision. Those orbs widened. "Mama, Mama. The lady waked up!"

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The girl rocked back on her heels as hurried footsteps scrapped across planks. Her sudden absence brought a surge of cold to cheeks accustomed to a coal fire's waves. Then winter was dismissed from within despite the storm without. A maternal hand rearranged Elizabeth's blankets before gently lifting her head to plump the pillow. "Ah, Mistress, you are back with us. The Master'll be pleased. I am sorry I left li'l Sarah to tend you; I was trying to build something hearty to chase the frost from your bones. You were nigh unto half frozen when the men brought you in."

Elizabeth shook off sleep and absorbed her sanctuary's features. There were few, a poor man's bounty. An oil lantern atop a sturdy trestle table illuminated the sparsely furnished room: tidy, dominated by the fireplace at one end. Elizabeth lay on a rustic bedframe. She peered over her blanket cocoon and saw two children huddled on another bed.

"A cup of tea should set you up before we eat." That last word enlivened Elizabeth's senses and put an edge on her midriff's gnawing emptiness. She inhaled, and her nose filled with a stew's hearty aroma.

The woman stepped away. Her movement brought the world into sharper focus. Elizabeth's gaze captured her pulling a steaming kettle from above the fire. Then she carefully, near reverently, drew a tin from near the eaves. Sarah attended her mother, watching hawk-like as the woman spooned leaves into another treasure, a china teapot, also brought from its home near the rafters.

Elizabeth recalled Grandmama Lizzie's dower cottage, where the parlor had shelves high enough to protect ceramic shepherdesses from granddaughters' busy fingers. This lady likewise had sequestered her life's few pearls.

But the tea?

Leaves steeping, the woman brought the brew to Elizabeth's side, a rose garland wreathing the teacup chalice—a solitary lump, brown in its sweet economy, balanced on the saucer.

"Sorry, Mistress, if the drink be thin: the leaves been used only two, maybe three, times. Mr. Tomkins likes his tea a bit lighter." She dipped her scarved head and blushed at the patent falsehood that was dignity's fig leaf. Elizabeth did not press her.

"Might be too weak for r'fined tastes, but t'is hot."

Her embarrassment showed at having her benefactress thawing in her rude cabin. "I dinna add milk as all we have is our goat Miss Clary. Not sure if'n you might be partial to cow."

Elizabeth rasped, her throat parched from sleep's enforced idleness, "Just a splash, Mrs. Tomkins; you are Mrs. Tomkins, are you not? Although we had milk cows, my mama insisted we girls drank goat's milk when we broke our fast. She was sure the creature's hardiness would encourage healthy growth."

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The woman relaxed as Elizabeth's friendly nature conferred a degree of consequence: that of hostess. Mrs. Tomkins set the cup on a stool, accepted a jug from Sarah, and dripped creamy liquor into Mrs. Darcy's tea.

The perfection of the simple act was captivating and allowed Elizabeth to sort through what William had told her of Tomkins.

'He is one of our new gamekeepers—Charlie Tomkins—hired because Will Rochet asked it of us. Tomkins had been one of Rochet's followers aboard Sprite but has a weak hip thanks to an unfortunately-placed French ball he took for Rochet.'

Maria wrote asking if we could find a place for him until the war ends. Then he would live out his life at their new establishment. My Will would never turn off a beached sailor. But he said nothing about the man having a family.

A gamekeeper's lot is meager, paying maybe twenty pounds a year along with this cabin, produce from the home farm, and what he can take from the woods. There is little enough for one man and is thoroughly unsuited to keeping a wife, let alone three little ones.

Understanding the Tomkinses' poverty, Elizabeth appreciated the gift of tea as if from Epiphany's trunks. She sat up, retrieved the cup and saucer, and leaned back against the wall to enjoy the drink's fragrance.

Her peaceful reverie shattered as the door slammed open. Two men, one laden with firewood and the other hauling water buckets, shouldered their way into the room. Although a shawl muffled his head, Darcy was instantly recognizable. The snow piled atop his greatcoat dropped to the ground reacting to his comical foot-to-foot shaking dance beyond the threshold. A few icy remnants dangled from wool's fuzz.

A snow-caked cape wrapped his hatless companion. This man lowered the buckets, carefully removed his wrap, rolled it snowy-side in, and limped past Darcy, who was filling the wood box. Unlatching a rear door, the man opened the blanket and shook it into the dark passage that, by the warm fug flowing in, accessed an outbuilding, likely a stable.

Doors closed, they sought out their respective ladies.

Darcy stripped off his gloves and knelt on the rough-hewn floorboards by the head of the bed. He removed the saucer and cup from Elizabeth's hands before capturing them in his own, chilled despite having been covered. "Elizabeth, dearest, are you well? I have been fearful that the time I took to fetch Tomkins will be your undoing.

"Remember how long it took you to recover after Ben..."

And, dear man, are you impervious to a blizzard? Your concern for your dependents—voluntary or not—is one of your most endearing—and infuriating—traits. Gently, though, Lizzy: Will seeks to present himself as invulnerable, yet, like a diamond of the first water beneath a cleaving tool, one slip and worthless shards fly everywhere.

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Throat soothed, Elizabeth nodded. “Yes, Will, rest restored me. As you can see, Mrs. Tomkins has me bundled like a plump coney in my winter burrow. The tea was helpful.

“And, dear one, women have been giving birth since Biblical times! Bearing your son wearied me; however, I am back to my old self.”

She motioned for her cup. After another sip, her voice dropped to a whisper that matched her concerned look. “But ought we not be on our way? We have imposed on the Tomkinses’ hospitality long enough. They have been the soul of generosity to help us.”

Darcy sat back on his heels, his eyes showing his resignation at being unable to give her an affirmative answer. “The snow is not letting up: if anything, it is heavier than when we crashed. Luckily Circe found Tomkins’ stable, but our sleigh is useless.

“Tomkins knows the weather here on the ridge. He tells me that we could see another foot. With the wind howling as it is, the drifts could be man-high.

“We could be stranded here for several days.”

Elizabeth looked over her husband’s shoulder to see the other couple tête-à-tête. “I see Tomkins is breaking the same news to his wife.

“Although, Will, I think ‘stranded’ implies distress. On the contrary, we are warm and in happy company.”



Mrs. Tomkins reached up and gently gripped her husband’s shoulders. “Now, Charlie Tomkins, you have nothing to be ashamed of. No, we did not expect to be entertaining anyone this holiday season, least of all the Darcys.

“But, the good Lord sent them to our door, and He doesn’t do anything without a good reason. Mayhap we are to be learning something; mayhap,” she looked at the other couple, “they are.”

Resolved, the lady shook herself and patted Tomkins’ broad chest with both hands. “What Tomkins House may lack in consequence, we will make up in welcome.”

Tomkins bent to kiss her bandanaed crown. “Aye, Sally Tomkins, your heart is too big to be trapped in a gamekeeper’s cabin. You should be the lady of a grand manor.

“Our hearth may not have a massive chimneypiece, but neither did we have a great cabin back on Sprite. Somehow, though, the Cap’n found a way to entertain ole Adm’r’ l Croft and Mrs. Adm’r’ l when we hurried ’em from Kingston Harbor down to the Pool.

“Think ’twas the Cap’n’s mama, Madame Rochet, who schooled her son.”

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Then Tomkins jumped back to the present. “’Tis colder than a witches...” he paused, remembering he stood in Derbyshire and not Drake’s Passage, “...Uh, the wind is making it nigh unto impossible to see more’n ten feet. Cold, too.

“Even though the Darcys fell off but a half a cable from our door, if I hadn’t been out harvesting...well,” his voice dropped to a whisper, “the you-know-what for the kids, the Master and his Missus would have been in a bad way.

“But something nudged me toward the track.

“The good news is that we returned to the sleigh and rescued the hamper and trunks. At least they will have some dry clothes.”



Little bellies have a way of pushing aside grown-up concerns. Hungry fidgeting spurred the adults into action. After Elizabeth hopped from the bed, the men made a screen of the fur blanket, and she hurriedly stripped off every damp stitch. Sally Tomkins briskly towed her until the lady’s skin glowed. Both men, imbued with healthy imaginations, stared away and focused on the fire’s dancing fingers: one mesmerized by what he imagined, the other by what he knew.

Elizabeth bent over the kettle bubbling on the hearth and ladled stew into the children’s bowls handed her by Sally. While the women worked, Darcy peeled off his wet clothes and used the flannel to return circulation to his limbs. Then he and Tomkins sat beside their wives.

Tomkins blessed the meal. “We thank’ee, Lord, for this bounty and the new friends you have guided to our door to share it on this night before your Son’s birth.”

Then he cocked one eye at the three young heads bowed over the meal. “As you know, Lord, good behavior has always been the Tomkins’ motto. So, you can tell your elf, Father Christmas, the hearts here deserve his visit. Amen”

The children relaxed, and three small sighs floated above the table. Attention, though, soon was paid to their food. Tomkins pulled a breadboard to him where a loaf rested. He tore the brownish lump in half, split one piece five ways for his family, and pushed the trencher to Sally. She cut the remainder. Wordlessly she slid the neat slices between Darcy and Elizabeth.

Who is greater in the eyes of the Lord: the master who allows his servants to partake of leftovers from his feast or the poor man who shares his only crust with the exhausted traveler?

Humbled by Sally’s selfless act, Elizabeth found a mother’s compliment. “Your brood are angels. When my sisters and I were young, time spent at the big table usually led to disputes over the last sweet roll.” Then she caught herself and blushed, realizing that sugary confections were beyond the Tomkinses’ means.

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Mrs. Tomkins ignored Elizabeth's unintentional slight. "Charlie spends the week before you-know-when teasing the children. By the time it rolls around, they are scrambling to be helpful. Even the littlest one, wee Mary, finds corners what need cleaning and sticks that ought to be in the wood box."

Elizabeth's heart clenched thinking of her little man. He was too young to know anything of the Natal season. Ben had only just begun to roll over in his cot. Even imbued with new parents' eyes, neither she nor Will could fool themselves about his awareness of the season's mystery any more than they could convince themselves that he smiled rather than needed a burp on a soft shoulder.

She could see Darcy stiffening against the injustice of the sacrifice forced upon the Tomkins, choosing between the comfort of their employers or their children. However, Elizabeth's gimlet eye speared him as she dipped her bread in the stew thickened by turnips and onions, sweetened by carrots, and leavened by some unidentifiable game. He accepted the bread gracefully, and enjoyment played across his face as he dug into the simple fare.

Storm shutters rattled in their frames as the world outside dimmed in winter's early twilight. Little heads nodded despite whined objections that nobody was tired. Grubby cheeks and hands met a soapy dishcloth. Each child contributed one stocking to hang by the hearth. A gentle reminder that Father Christmas would delay coming until all were sound asleep finally bundled the youngsters into their bed curtained off with a drape from the Pemberley rag bin.



Eventide upon them, the adults went about their duties: the men vanished into the adjacent shed while the ladies filled the room with sounds of a cheerful cleanup. Tiny ears bent toward magical sounds heard none of the clatter. In short order, Darcy and Tomkins returned with a "tree:" evergreen boughs bound to a staff. They stood the lash-up in a corner and fluffed the branches filling the room with spruce's scent. The wives looked at branches adorned with colorful ribbons, twists of bright cloth, and the sparkling glass baubles that Elizabeth knew had been destined for Jane's pine.

She peered closely and saw Darcy's Christmas cravat—red silk—garlanding the construct. Eyes widened, she glanced at William. Her husband expressively blinked and tipped his head minutely.

Sally Tomkins was transfixed, a childlike glow illuminating her features. "Oh, Charlie, you did yourself proud. How glorious it is. I doubt Queen Charlotte's tree in Buckingham House is half as beautiful."

Then she slyly looked at Darcy. "However, Master Darcy, I can see your hand in this, and if your good lady does not object to my display, I will hug you. The children will think an angel came into our house, and perhaps one did."

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Surprised, Darcy gracefully submitted. He relaxed when Elizabeth bestowed upon him her best smile.

As the evening aged—and in recognition that there would be a point in the early hours when little eyes would not remain closed—the parents began their Natal ritual: digging out the special treats to be left by Father Christmas:

a hand-carved sailor for Timmy,
a set of gaily painted wooden blocks for little Mary,
and a stuffed cloth doll for Sarah

Mrs. Reynolds's larder provided an orange to fill out each stocking. Rooting around the basket, Elizabeth uncovered another treasure: a bag of boiled candies, each wrapped in colorful paper. Three fireplace socks received a sprinkling of these.

Charlie had broken out a souvenir from Sprite, a flask of something he called *añejo*: a rich, dark rum. He and Darcy stood by the hearth, drinks in hand, admiring their handiwork as men are wont to do. They paid little attention to their wives.

Those worthies sat at the table pondering the three gifts. While confident that the littlest Tomkineses would be over the moon, a cloud floated above the women's joy.

Elizabeth looked at her tablemate and saw something she had missed. Since Mrs. Darcy had awakened, Sally Tomkins had never removed her scarf.

Elizabeth Darcy reached over to cover Sally's hand. "My dear, I have been struck by something. There is a sadness about you as if you are not who you remember yourself to be."

"Mrs. Darcy..."

"Elizabeth or even Lizzy: I insist. In our short acquaintance, you and I have shared too much, although most of it is from your side: your home, hospitality, and, I think, heart. We are well on our way to becoming friends.

"And, in the world of Elizabeth Darcy, friends do not conceal that which ought to be shared."

Sally looked wistful and then dejected. Her hand patted her kerchief but she was not ready to speak of it. "I'd wished it could hae been more."

"More?"

"Charlie sold his coachman's coat to the ragpicker in Lambton early in December. The feller struck a mean bargain, knowing that a man'ud ne'er part with his coat, not when a Derbyshire winter was 'round the corner, less'n he'd already be in a hard place. But we could'na let the children face a bare tree."

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Amazement at Tomkins' sacrifice colored Elizabeth's voice. "Your husband sold his coat to buy these for your little ones?" She waved her hand above the small collection on the table before lowering it to caress the doll.

She continued, "But you sold more: did you not?"

A tear welled in a dark brown eye before trickling down a carmine-stained cheek. Sally ducked her head and whispered, "No, Missus, not more, just diff'rent."

Her downcast eyes were unreadable. Her hands exhibited embarrassed modesty as they fumbled with the knot tying the headcloth beneath her chin. Her short-shorn curls tumbled loosely around her face.

Elizabeth unconsciously patted her coiffure. If released, her hair would fall to her waist. Sally Tomkins' rough cut did not reach her shoulders.

Gathering herself, Elizabeth reached over and collected the young mother's hands. She asked softly, "Sally, your hair: did you sell your hair?"

"I did, ma'am..."

Elizabeth interrupted, seeking to distract her friend. "Lizzy: you must call me Lizzy.

"You reminded me of my girlhood when I wanted to purchase ribbons for my sister Jane's birthday. Since I was too young to go into Meryton alone, I must have badgered Mama to escort me."

She shook her head. "Mama became impatient with my fidgeting while she gossiped with Aunt Philips and sent me into the High Street. She likely assumed I would visit the mercantile to buy some candy. That was never my plan.

"I have always been obstinate and headstrong, and, although I did not have a farthing, I intended to pay for Jane's gift rather than put it on Longbourn's account. I took my one treasure, a copy of *The History of Little Goody Two-Shoes*, to Mr. Pritchard's bookshop.

"I loved that book. It was the first one my Papa had given me. But, faced with choosing between seeing Jane's joy at a sky-blue ribbon or keeping the book to read for a hundredth time, I knew what to do.

"I pushed my book across the counter to Mr. Pritchard, who, to his credit, asked me exactly why I wanted to sell it because, in his experience, no Bennet ever sold a book.

"I told him. He nodded and offered two shillings as if I were my father. But I drove a hard bargain, and we settled on two and four.

"I hurried to the milliner, bought the ribbon, and felt much the slyboots. I gave Jane her gift at dinner."

Elizabeth's story had diverted Sally. "And your book: did you miss it?"

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“I barely had the chance,” Elizabeth laughed, a crystalline cascade that brought Darcy’s head up. “The next day, Papa called me into his bookroom to gift me a copy of Goody Two-Shoes. He said my tattered one was fit only to level a chest of drawers.

“But, when I opened the book, I discovered it was mine. Papa never let on that he had conspired with the bookseller, but now I know he could not see me do without, even for my sister.”

She forged ahead. “My quest for a ribbon is nothing akin to your situation. My book was somewhere I traveled. Your hair: well, a woman’s tresses define who she is.

“However, like Papa’s silence about my book, there is more to say about your hair. If Charlie’s coat paid for the children’s gifts, why did you have to sell your hair? Most women would never cut their hair until the birth of their first grandchild.”

Sally’s sigh shook Elizabeth like a cannon blast. “’Twas difficult after Michaelmas Quarter Day. Timmy took real sick in October, and we had to get Mr. Jones from Lambton. Thank the Lord; he and the medicine set Timmy up right. Plus, we owed Charlie’s uncle for shifting us from Newcastle. Suddenly there wasn’t enough.

“My curls went in November because Charlie needed his coat to do his duty by the Master. Got a mite over a pound as the peddler said it wasn’t real lady’s tresses. But it paid the apothecary, Charlie’s kin, and bought supplies—just. Lest you think we are loose, we counted everything three times. There just was nothing left over.

Her voice broke. “I couldn’t shake one worry. What if Timmy slipped off during a spring fever and never knew the joy of Christmas—you know that wonderful brightness a child gets when they wake up to see Father Christmas come?”

“I had to do something for the kids. Good man that he is, Charlie decided he could make do with the blanket until spring.”

A wave of sadness swept over Elizabeth. She circled the table and collected Sally in her arms. “No one will question parents who sacrifice for their children’s happiness. You, my dear, are Mother Mary, the Madonna.” She kissed Sally’s shaggy locks and continued, “Now, allow me to play lady’s maid. I think my sewing scissors will do nicely.”

After setting Sally’s hair to rights, Elizabeth donated several handkerchiefs to wrap the presents. With stockings stuffed and the fire safely banked, the Tomkinses insisted that the Darcys take the bed while they dosed down on fir boughs and blankets. As the room dimmed, voices murmured secrets revealed.



Dawn came not with the sun’s rising but with the pitter-patter of tiny bare feet, made immune to cold by St. Nicholas’ power. The fire—someone had added wood overnight—crackled orange in the hearth. Elizabeth listened as the two eldest whispered.

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“Sarah, di’ ’e come?”

“Ohhh...look at the’ stockin’s! See ’ow big the toe be, Timmy!”

“Can ye get mine?”

“Here, take it. I’ll get Mary’s. Careful how ye wake her. Don’ wan’ to ’sturb Mama and Papa nor Master and Missus.”

Darcy stirred. Elizabeth turned to his ear. “Shhh. The children are up. They are the dearest little things. Just listen.”

The chatter entertained her for another minute. A shadow ghosted to the hearth—Sally—and opened the cast iron door to remove two loaves. Spice bread’s aroma filled the chamber. The mother knelt beside her children to hear enthusiastic first reports of the elf’s appearance.

Little visits to the chair of ease quickly followed. Elizabeth dressed in a dark corner, modesty’s conventions loosened. Hair brushed, hands washed, the adults sat over their Christmas tea, freshly made from leaves found in Mrs. Reynolds’s mystic larder.

Then Darcy did something unexpected—he dropped to the floor between Mary and Timmy. The little girl had a beatific smile as she made block towers and then knocked them over. Timmy earnestly explained the intricacies of a bosun’s duties onboard a sloop of war. Elizabeth surreptitiously left the table to return with two bundles.

Children occupied, the Tomkinses exchanged gifts: Charlie received a knit woolen waistcoat, and he gave Sally a scrimshaw brooch.

Then Sally pushed a serviette-wrapped block toward Elizabeth. As Mrs. Darcy cocked her head in question, the cabin’s mistress said, “T’aint much, Lizzy, but ’tis the best we could do.”

The package was warm, and cinnamon flooded Elizabeth’s nose. “Sally! This was meant to bless your Christmas feast!”

“Our Christmas feast, Mistress. I thought you’d share it with the Bingleys, or mayhap you and the master might enjoy a late-night snack in your chambers if you do that sort of thing,” she bashfully replied.

Emotions betraying her, Elizabeth cleared her throat. “Sally, Mr. Tomkins: you are living examples of what we learned in the Bible.”

Darcy interrupted. “Not that we expect our people to be Good Samaritans, but you have shown that you understand Pemberley hospitality.”

“And, for that, we thank you,” Elizabeth added, glaring at her husband for his impertinent outburst. “More importantly, thank you for opening your home and arms to us.”

“That you did so without protest, or even a sideways glance, shows you daily live what most of us celebrate but once a year.”

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Tomkins did object then. “Sal an’ me would’a done th’ same fur anyone.”

Darcy replied. “Of that, we are sure. We could expect no less from one of Rochet’s men.”

Elizabeth took charge. “Before we combine our dinner resources, my husband and I have a gift for each of you, our new friends.”

Darcy took up the cause. “What you told me, Charlie, and what Sally told Elizabeth before we went to bed yesterday struck us.

“I asked Elizabeth what was left for you if you gave everything for your children. While watching one’s own grow to an age is the greatest gift for a parent, there must be something that recognizes your contribution to their wellbeing.”

“That was when I knew,” Elizabeth said, “that every step they take is because you set them on the right path.

“And, for that, you deserve notice.”

She pushed the bulkier of the two packages toward Charlie.

Darcy rumbled, “You are an essential part of Pemberley’s community. Our gamekeeper must be ready to defend the estate in wind and rain against those who would poach against man’s law. Your understanding of God’s law reminds you to allow the poor their share.

“Your wife’s beautiful handiwork,” he pointed at the multicolored waistcoat, “cannot long survive brambles and burs.” Charlie stood stunned as the magnificence of Darcy’s caped greatcoat draped across his hands to sweep the floor.

Darcy stalled any objection. “No, Tomkins: you rescued my most cherished possession from frostbite or worse. The very least I can do is preserve you from the same so you can continue providing for your family.”

Elizabeth filled the silence. “And you, Sally Tomkins: you may have given over your crowning glory for your little ones, but that does not mean that you are not worthy of adornment.”

She smiled knowingly at the two men. “While talking of what men do over a glass, someone let slip that a particular lady would receive something suitable for Sunday services: a piece of handmade jewelry.

“Please, Sally, do not make me wait any longer. I am bouncing in my seat!”

With a chuckle, Sally slid a silk shawl—Christmas crimson—from its wrappings. Charlie reverently draped it over his lady’s shoulders, and she anchored it with the scrimshaw brooch.

An impulse took them, and the Tomkinses stood together. Years of care fell away, and they twirled their joy and became again the broadly built sailor and the petite maid of all work.

The simplest of gifts were accepted and treasured as if from Magi caskets. Sated by a Pemberley picnic and a gamekeeper’s harvest, the two couples sat in companionable silence as the day aged and the snow waned. Soon men from Thornhill and Pemberley would break a trail and pierce the bubble of serenity.

Until then, they would wrap themselves in the glory of the day.

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About the author

Don Jacobson has written professionally for forty years, from news and features to advertising, television, and radio. His work has been nominated for Emmys and other awards. He has previously published five books, all nonfiction. In 2016, he published the first volume of *The Bennet Wardrobe Series*, *The Keeper: Mary Bennet's Extraordinary Journey*. Since then, Meryton Press re-edited and republished *Keeper* and the subsequent six volumes in the series. In 2022, Meryton Press published the eighth and final book in the series—*The Grail: The Saving of Elizabeth Darcy*. Other Meryton Press books by Jacobson include *Lessers and Betters*, *In Plain Sight*, and *The Longbourn Quarantine*. All his works are also available as audiobooks (at Audible).

Jacobson holds an advanced degree in history. As a college instructor, he taught United States history, world history, the history of western civilization, and research writing. He is in his third career as an author and is a JASNA and Regency Fiction Writers member.

Besides thoroughly immersing himself in the Austenesque world, Jacobson enjoys cooking, dining out, fine wine, and well-aged scotch whiskey.

His other passion is cycling. He has ridden several “centuries” (hundred-mile days). He is incredibly proud of having completed the AIDS Ride–Midwest (500 miles from Minneapolis to Chicago) and the Make-a-Wish Miracle Ride (300 miles from Traverse City to Brooklyn, both in Michigan).

When not traveling, Jacobson lives in Las Vegas, Nevada, with his wife and co-author, Pam—a woman Miss Austen would have been hard-pressed to categorize.

To check Don's latest updates, visit:

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It's a Wonderful Wife *by Stephanie Vale*

Thomas Bennet had read classics at Trinity College, Cambridge, in his youth, and remained there as a tutor, but the unexpected deaths of his parents and elder brother had thrust him into a role for which he was woefully unprepared: landowner, master of the family estate, Longbourn, in Hertfordshire.

Fortunately, he had been able to consult a few better prepared friends and classmates: William Cavendish, future Duke of Devonshire; Anthony Fitzwilliam, future Earl of Matlock; and George Darcy, untitled but heir to a great estate and fortune. All were eldest sons who had been steeped in estate management since boyhood, and when Bennet inherited, they began campaigns of correspondence and occasional visits to support him. Bennet credited his friends

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with saving Longbourn during those days when his mind was a miasma of grief. Over time, he became more self-sufficient. After a decade he had nearly tripled the annual income of the estate thanks to the insights of his friends. Their ties remained strong, and they maintained a regular correspondence, even when he did not meet personally with any of them for years. He disliked London, and even his friends' occasional presence there was not enough to induce him to make the trip.

He had married a local beauty, Frances "Fannie" Gardiner, whose flightiness he discovered only after the wedlock. Resolving to make the best of it, he made every effort to improve his wife's mind, whilst accepting she would always suffer with various nervous complaints, which became more severe over the years as their family grew to include five daughters and no son. The lack of a son was critical because Longbourn was entailed away from the female line, and, without a male heir, the estate would pass to a distant male cousin when Thomas died.

Fannie worried much about this, considering herself a failure, and would not give up on her efforts to conceive an heir. Thomas enjoyed these efforts, and although he privately doubted their eventual efficacy, he would never decline the advances of his still-beautiful wife. In recent months, though, he had detected an escalating level of frenzy in her efforts, and more frequent complaints about her nerves. Some days she kept entirely to her room. He had urged her to consult the apothecary, but the apothecary diagnosed her only with "women's complaints" and assured her that her troubles were all in her mind.

They lived quietly. The occasional assembly, or visiting with neighbours, were their main forms of amusement. The older girls enjoyed visits to their aunt and uncle in London, where Fannie's brother Edward was a successful tradesman, but none of the female residents of Longbourn had ever travelled farther than that great city. This understated style of life had enabled Thomas Bennet to assemble more than twenty-five thousand pounds for his daughters' future dowries. Said sum he had invested with Edward and continued to grow. He and Edward took pains to keep this information from Fannie, whom they felt would have had designs on that money if she had known of it. They felt that larger dowries were a better investment than fancy gowns or new wallpaper. They would inform her when the time was right.

One October day, a letter from George Darcy arrived proposing a reunion of close friends from Cambridge years over the Christmas holidays at Pemberley, his estate in Derbyshire. Since the death of his wife, Lady Anne Darcy, six months earlier, he had been lonely, and had felt the pull of old friendships. He offered to send a large carriage, especially fitted for winter travel, to convey the Bennets to the north, and advocated that they depart Hertfordshire no later than the fifteenth of December, to allow for contingencies. Darcy's housekeeper, Mrs. Reynolds, he added, wished the Bennets to know that Pemberley was well-stocked with warm gowns, cloaks, pelisses, and boots in every size, and that therefore the ladies of Longbourn need not concern themselves with acquiring whole new winter wardrobes for extreme conditions they might not encounter again.

"What say you, Mrs. Bennet? Shall we visit the North for Christmastide?"

"Will it be very cold, Mr. Bennet?"

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“Colder than you and the girls are accustomed to, certainly. We may not need a great deal of winter attire, but you and the girls should each have a few new gowns for the festive season.”

Fannie was not one to decline an opportunity for new clothes. “Thank you, Thomas. If it is very cold in the north, perhaps we should have our new gowns made in velvets and our day dresses in woolens. And some new shifts and stockings and—”

“I will leave that to you, my dear. I will budget one hundred pounds for the project. Remember, you do not need everything, but as we will be on the road for three or four days at least, we will need to keep warm during that time. I shall write Darcy and tell him we accept his invitation.”

Even with the prospect of new dresses, the girls were uncertain. “Does this mean we shall not see Aunt and Uncle Gardiner and our cousins for Christmas?” Lydia, ten years old, was not best pleased.

“We shall see them in the new year when we stop in London for a few days before returning home,” Fannie replied. “After all, we will need more occasions to wear our new clothes.” She emphasized the last two words to remind them of the benefits of the plan.

“What do you think, Lizzie?” Jane, the eldest, aged seventeen, wanted to hear from her closest sister.

“Papa says that the library at Pemberley might be the finest private library in all of England. I know I would very much like to see it. And I do not need new gowns to sit in the library and read.”

“Not need new gowns?!” Fannie was aghast. “You shall all have new gowns. They will be warmer, because it is very cold in the north, and also more elegant, because you will be in company with wealthy and titled families. And who knows? Perhaps their sons will take a liking to Jane, or Lizzie—»

“MAMA!” Jane and Elizabeth spoke with one voice.

Jane added, “I am sure that is not Mr. Darcy’s design in inviting us.”

“I did not say it was his design. I said it might happen. It could happen. We shall not speculate now. Instead, let us look at this pattern book and decide which styles will be most flattering for each of you. I especially like some of the new sleeves.”



The much-awaited day of departure finally arrived.

“Girls! Look at this fine carriage Mr. Darcy has sent for us, with his own drivers and footmen. And a second carriage for our trunks and servants! So many fur cloaks and blankets!

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We shall be cozy indeed on our trip. He has already selected the inns where we shall stop overnight, and where we shall change horses. He has made all the arrangements!”

“He has paid for them, too,” intoned her husband.

“What a fine friend he is to your father! We must all be sure to thank him most sincerely.”

The girls excitedly inspected the elegant, well-sprung, double-insulated carriage. It was large enough to carry all of them, and the second carriage, while somewhat humbler in appearance, also seemed very sturdy and comfortable. Their maids, Sally and Betty, and Mr. Bennet’s manservant, Hunter, would ride with the trunks, and would also be guarded by two imposing Darcy footmen.

The Darcy drivers and footmen rested at the local inn overnight, as their master knew Longbourn was not large enough to accommodate them all. On the following day the carriages pulled up in front of Longbourn, the trunks were loaded, the servants boarded and headed off, and soon the family followed. A smaller trunk of necessities the family would require on the road was strapped to the rear of the large carriage as they entered.

The weather on the journey was cold, but not snowy, and they made good time. As they set out four mornings later, they learned they were but two or three hours away from Pemberley. The second carriage had been sent ahead the evening before, so their servants could unpack for them before their arrival, but George Darcy meant for the Bennets to arrive at Pemberley in full daylight so they could have good views of the house as they approached, and those views did not disappoint. Pemberley was a beautifully landscaped grey stone mansion of venerable age, exquisitely situated at the bend of a large stream. They pressed on and within a few minutes they had entered the courtyard. George Darcy came into view welcoming them.

Mr. Bennet was first out of the carriage and assisted his wife and daughters to descend, then led them toward the entrance. George Darcy pulled Bennet into a rough embrace and whispered, “By Jove, Tom, it is good to see you! Come, it is cold, let us get you inside!”

Devonshire, Matlock, and their wives stood in the entrance hall. After the old friends’ greetings, Darcy introduced a respectable looking couple in their 40s. “Here are Mr. and Mrs. Reynolds. If you ring for them, they will see to anything you need.”

Reynolds bowed as his wife curtsied. She spoke first. “Your servants arrived last night and have been settled in. They have made your rooms ready. I have ordered hot water for any of you who would like to have a bath and change out of your travelling clothes.”

There were general expressions of interest and gratitude. “We each get our own bath? That is such a lot of hot water!” Lydia whispered. Mrs. Reynolds smiled. “Yes, but Pemberley is a large estate and we always manage to see to the comfort of our guests. Now, if you like, please follow me and I will show you to your apartments.” She led the way up the stairs. “Mrs. Bennet, if I may have a word?”

“Of course.”

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“As was the late Mrs. Darcy’s custom, we have placed warm winter apparel and woolen stockings into the cupboards of all the bedchambers. I believe you will find suitable gowns, cloaks, and boots for you and all your girls. We can supply more or different sizes, as necessary. Simply ring for me and we will take care of it.”

Mrs. Bennet was struck by the casual grandeur of this gesture in a way that she had not been when it was simply words in a letter. She nodded but could only whisper “Thank you.”

“Here is the room Misses Catherine and Lydia will share.” The housekeeper opened the door to a large and inviting room decorated mostly in pinks, with two canopied beds and two enormous cupboards, and a roaring fire making the temperature comfortable. “The dressing room is through that door, and you will find your tubs being filled now.” Lydia and Kitty looked at each other in glee and rushed to bounce on the beds.

“Girls!” Mrs. Bennet remonstrated. “I will return for you at teatime,” she added, “and I would like you to be bathed and dressed. Betty will be here to help you.”

“Here is Betty now,” said Mrs. Reynolds. The Longbourn servant entered and curtsied, then began shooing the girls toward their baths. Mrs. Reynolds led the group to a somewhat smaller room across the corridor. “This is Miss Mary’s room.” This room was decorated in shades of yellow. A cheery fire blazed in the grate.

The next room, decorated in deep green, was for Elizabeth; Jane’s blue chamber adjoined it through a small sitting room. Observing that the Bennets had brought but two maids, and that the more senior maid, Sally, served only Mrs. Bennet, while Betty was tasked with attending to all the daughters, Mrs. Reynolds had assigned a Pemberley maid, Diana, to wait on Jane and Elizabeth. Diana was already within, overseeing the pouring of hot water for their baths, and tending the fires to fend off any chills.

Mrs. Reynolds now led Mrs. Bennet to a dove grey room a few doors away. “This will be your bedchamber, Mrs. Bennet. Mr. Bennet’s bedchamber is through that door, on the other side of your sitting room. Sally is here preparing your bath, and Mr. Bennet’s man Hunter is at work in his dressing room now.”

“I wonder where Mr. Bennet is,” Fannie pondered.

Mrs. Reynolds offered a smile. “I believe he is with the master and the other gentlemen in the master’s study.”

“Of course. I am glad he can be with his friends. I shall have my bath now.”

As Mrs. Bennet soaked in her bath, she pondered the great wealth and stability that enabled the level of comfort she and her family were able to enjoy at Pemberley, and the unfairness of it all. Why should Longbourn be entailed, while Pemberley was not? Why should George Darcy, who did not even need a son, get one, while Thomas Bennet could not?

“’Tis my own fault,” she reflected. “I have failed Thomas. My courses are no longer regular. I am approaching the Change, and I will never be able to bear him the son he needs and deserves.

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When Thomas passes, my girls will be defenseless. Would that I had never married Thomas and had all those girls! He deserves a wife who would bear him a son. Would that I had never been born! Truly Thomas would be better situated if I had never been born!”

Climbing out of the bath, she knew what she must do.



The next day it began to snow, and the party was largely housebound, but the days flew by. Georgiana, shy at fourteen, found her natural reserve overcome by the liveliness of the Bennet sisters. Mrs. Bennet, initially humbled by the social gap between her and the other ladies, found them friendly and welcoming.

The young gentlemen enjoyed their own amusements and saw the young ladies mostly at meals, where the conversation was lively. Henry Fitzwilliam, heir to the earldom, found the Bennet girls charming, as did his brother Richard, a soldier on leave from the Royal Dragoons. Their younger sisters were pleased to have made new friends, as were the Devonshire daughters. Young Darcy thought the newcomers seemed harmless enough, although the two youngest Bennets were too noisy for his taste, and the eldest smiled more than he liked.

Georgiana, Elizabeth, and Jane practiced music, drawing, and painting. Georgiana had had the benefit of a drawing and painting master for several years and was able to help Jane improve noticeably. The girls produced a number of snowy landscapes as the days progressed, using prospects from all sides of the house, including several lovely watercolor studies of a rustic bridge over the substantial stream behind the house, the best of which was destined for Mr. Darcy’s study. Elizabeth and her father often played chess with George Darcy and his son in the afternoons, and to young Darcy’s dismay (and his sire’s amusement) she bested him several times. Mary practiced pianoforte while the others drew and painted, and, with Georgiana’s help, Mary, began to improve. The ladies embroidered, knitted, and chatted. Kitty and Lydia joined the Fitzwilliam and Cavendish girls for half days of lessons, then in the afternoons played with the puppies recently whelped by Georgiana’s spaniel, Lulu.

Christmas Day was merry. The whole party climbed into three large sleighs in the morning for the trip to church and then returned home to hot chocolate and freshly baked treats. The house had been decorated with festive greenery. The Bennet girls had spent weeks before the visit embroidering a large cushion depicting Pemberley in springtime, from a painting in Mr. Bennet’s library, and presented it to their host with pride. Mr. Darcy was charmed and had immediately placed the cushion in a place of honour in the drawing room. Gifts of hair ornaments, art supplies, lengths of muslin and ribbons, sheet music, and books delighted all the young Bennets; Elizabeth perused her new book about chess, vowing a rematch with Fitzwilliam Darcy, who had defeated her now twice in a row.

The evening meal was convivial and relaxed. The overall mood showed joy and gratitude for the good company and the many gifts of God they enjoyed. Mrs. Bennet was uncharacteristically

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quiet. After dinner Georgiana and Elizabeth played and sang carols with the others, accompanied by occasional joyful barks from Lulu. All seemed cheerful and content.

A light snow was falling, and after Elizabeth and Jane had wrapped themselves up in warm nightgowns and robes, they came together in their shared sitting room in front of the banked fire, opened the curtains, and watched the snow fall for some time in quiet companionship. Neither had ever seen so much snow in her life.

“Are you enjoying Derbyshire, Jane?”

“Oh, yes. The Darcys have been everything kind and generous, and Pemberley is beautiful. What about you, Lizzie?”

“I am having a delightful time. It seems almost unreal. Pemberley is like a fairytale. Hot baths whenever you like, warm clothes in the cupboard when you arrive, these beautiful rooms, being waited on by Diana and not having to share Betty with Mary and Kitty and Lydia –”

“Mr. Darcy is very rich.”

“And he is also deeply good. Truly. Mama told me that when Papa inherited unexpectedly, Mr. Darcy traveled to Hertfordshire and stayed at Longbourn for many weeks, leaving his own estate to be managed by his steward, in order to help Papa learn to manage his inheritance. Mama says she is so glad to be here to express her appreciation to him. And yet she seems –”

“Seems what, Lizzie?”

“Have you not noticed? Mama seems sad, somehow. There is an air of melancholy about her, especially when the rest of the party is noisy and joyful and she thinks no one is watching her. She is even going for walks in the garden. Walking in snow, Jane! Alone! It is entirely unlike her.”

“Perhaps it is just the novelty of the snow.”

“Perhaps. But I own I have been concerned about her.”

“I have noticed that she has been quiet, but perhaps she has observed the behaviour of the other ladies and is trying to imitate them. Let us hope that your impression is incorrect. And now to bed.” She opened the door to her room. “Good night, Lizzie. Do not stay up too late reading your new books!”

Elizabeth chuckled. “Good night, Jane.” She closed the book in her lap and gazed out the window for a few more minutes before claiming her own bed, not noticing the light of a single candle flickering in the blackness of the Derbyshire winter night.



A few hours earlier, in the midst of the happy assembly, Frances Bennet had formed a desperate resolution, and after the household retired, she had donned her fur-lined boots and

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cloak, found a candle, and crept out of the house through the darkened kitchen. She hurried along a mostly-cleared path she had marked with twigs on one of her earlier walks, toward the rustic bridge that featured in so many of the girls' watercolour landscapes. She reached the apex of the bridge after a few minutes, leaned on the rail, and held the candle out before her to illuminate the stream below. It appeared to be mostly frozen, but she could not be sure.

She wondered if she might be losing her nerve. In spite of such thought, she knew she must carry on with her plan. She breathed in the cold, crisp air, then exhaled raggedly, accidentally extinguishing her only source of light.

"Ohhhh!" she hissed, glaring at the fading red glow at the tip of the wick.

"You should be more careful, Mrs. Bennet!" admonished a lovely blonde woman who had somehow joined Frances on the bridge. She seemed to glow from within. She looked very familiar, and in a moment Frances recognized her from her portrait in the family gallery.

"Lady Anne?"

"Very good, Mrs. Bennet." She snapped her fingers and Fannie's candle wick burned once more.

Frances started visibly and took a step backward, clutching her candle with both hands. "But—you are dead."

"In a manner of speaking, yes, I suppose I am."

"Why, then, are you here?"

"I am here to prevent you from making a foolish mistake."

"How do you know who I am? How do you know my plan? Are you a ghost?"

"No, I am an angel. I am your guardian angel today, in fact. I am here to keep you safe until you abandon this terrible idea."

"It is not so terrible."

"It is a dreadful idea, Frances. May I call you Frances?"

"Yes. What shall I call you?"

"You may call me Anne. In Heaven we have no use for titles."

"Very well ... Anne."

"Now, Frances, tell me, why did you think this plan of yours was a good idea at any time? Especially at Christmas?"

"Surely you know the whole story, if you have come from heaven."

"I wish to hear it from your own lips, Frances."

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“Very well... my husband’s estate is entailed away from the female line.”

“Yes.”

“And I have borne only daughters for my husband. Five daughters.”

“Go on.”

“I am growing older and soon I will lose all hope of giving him a son.”

“I understand.”

“I have wasted twenty years of his life. If I had never been born, and had never met him, he might have married a woman who could have delivered a son or sons for him.”

“You cannot know that.”

“When their father passes, my daughters will be homeless and unprotected. I worry about their future.”

“That is understandable. But it does not explain why you are standing here on this bridge in the middle of the night.”

“Is it not obvious? If I died or disappeared, Thomas could remarry a younger woman who could bear a son. That would protect my daughters in a better way than I ever could if I remained alive. They would always have a home at Longbourn and would never be forced to leave. They could have dowries.”

“Tell me, what does Mr. Bennet think about all this? Does he agree that you should make him a widower so he can remarry?”

“Do not be silly. Of course I have not told him.”

“Because you know he would vociferously object to your plan. Frances, this is madness. Your husband loves you, and you love him. I saw you two under the mistletoe. And your daughters need you. Why could you possibly think otherwise?”

“It would be better for them all if I were gone.”

“Women at your time of life often have terrible nervous complaints and negative thoughts, Frances, but listen to me. I am a wife and mother who died, and I know a little bit about this kind of thing. I have watched my husband, a strong and courageous man, sobbing in his study when he thinks he will be unobserved. I have watched my son, my tall, brave, brilliant son, riding out on his horse so he could weep when he was alone. And worst of all, I have watched my little girl, only fourteen, who still needs her mother, silent and withdrawn during the days, crying herself to sleep at night. I would give anything to have been able to stay in their world. No amount of wealth or comfort can replace a wife’s or a mother’s love.”

“Can they not see you, Anne, as I can? Can they not hear you? Can you not comfort them? Do they not know you are here watching over them?”

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“No, they cannot see or hear me, so I cannot comfort them, and in any event, I do not expect to be here much longer.”

“Why not?”

Anne Darcy smiled wearily. “I was kept here for a reason, Frances. I was never told what that reason was, only that it would become obvious at the right time. And now I know. I was kept here because of you, Frances. I have remained at Pemberley observing and waiting for the moment when my purpose would be revealed to me. I was kept here because God knew you would be here and you would need my help. I thank you for revealing my purpose as an angel. I am grateful to my husband for inviting you and your family here to allow me to fulfill that purpose. I can now say that my work here is almost done. Soon I will be able to go to my reward.”

Frances nodded, too emotional to speak. It was almost midnight, and she was cold and suddenly very tired.

Anne put her arm around the younger woman’s shoulders. Fannie could feel warmth all the way through her layers of winter clothing. She turned fully into Anne’s embrace and sobbed. Anne rubbed gentle circles on Fannie’s back, as she had done for her children so many times.

“Frances...”

She looked up. “Yes, Anne?”

“There are some things you should know, but it is not my place to tell you. Promise me that you will speak with Thomas about your concerns for the girls and their future, and your need for reassurance. Promise me that you will not entertain thoughts of self-destruction again. Promise me that if you begin to feel hopeless in the future, you will confide in someone. Perhaps Thomas, or your brother, or your sister Madeleine. Whatever happens, please promise me that you will not undertake to bear a burden like this alone again. Will you give me your word?”

Frances dabbed at her eyes and nose with her handkerchief. “Yes. I promise.”

“Good. Now let us get you inside where it is warmer.”

“What about you, Anne? Where do you go?”

“At Pemberley, I am everywhere. I am in the drawing room. I am in George’s study. I am in the library with Fitzwilliam. I am in the schoolroom and the music room with Georgiana. I am in the housekeeper’s room and the kitchen, and sometimes even the stables. But tonight, and for as long as you need me, Frances, I pledge that I will be with you.”

“Happy Christmas, Anne.”

“Happy Christmas, Frances.”

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About the author

Stephanie Vale is the pen name of an attorney and part-time university instructor who lives with her excellent husband in the Pacific Northwest of the United States. She has loved Jane Austen for more than 40 years, and has been reading and enjoying Austenesque fiction since 2008. Around 2017, she finally became inspired to attempt writing it herself.

Her available titles on Amazon are *The Colonel's Brother* and *Fordyce and Friendship*.

She enjoys reading, writing, teaching, traveling, and attending the theater and opera. She also loves Star Wars, the Marvel Cinematic Universe, and the films of Katharine Hepburn (with or without Spencer Tracy). She has held leadership positions in several nonprofit organizations and is a Life Member of the Jane Austen Society of North America.

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First Christmas at Longbourn
an outtake from «The Sins of Their Fathers»

by Tiffany Thomas

In Pride & Prejudice, the Longbourn estate is entailed away on William Collins. Mr. Bennet describes his heir's late father as a miserly and unpleasant man. In this variation, the curtain is pulled back on William Collins's childhood. The senior Mr. Collins was an abusive drunk who regularly beat his son from a young age. Mrs. Collins, while a very loving mother, was of poor health and unable to protect her son or herself from the abuse.

Shortly after William's tenth birthday, his mother succumbed to her illness. Upon finding his wife dead, Mr. Collins takes his rage out on his son, nearly killing young William. He then stumbles out into the night, drunk, and perishes.

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So instead of being raised by his cruel father, William Collins is sent to live with his Bennet cousins. This short story, which is not included in "The Sins of Their Fathers," shows William's first Christmas at Longbourn.

"Oomph!"

Something landed directly on ten-year-old William's back as he lay sleeping in his new bed at Longbourn.

"Ah!" he shouted in surprise, rolling over and tangling himself in the soft sheets before falling out of the bed. He winced as he landed on the bones that were still healing from his last encounter with his father.

As he struggled to fight his way through the covers, he heard a soft giggle. Once able to see clearly, he looked up from the floor at four-year-old Elizabeth Bennet peering over the bed at him, grinning broadly.

"Wake up!" she yelled.

Attempting to regain some semblance of dignity, William pulled himself up from the floor and resumed his place on the bed. He always felt some surprise whenever the soft mattress sank beneath him; it was a far cry from the tiny cot in the kitchen at his father's home.

Six-year-old Jane stood near the bed, holding a candle. The light from the small flame cast shadows on her face, and her expression made her appear much older than her age. She wore a gentle smile as she said softly, "Good morning, Cousin."

William blinked at the two girls in confusion. "Why are you awake so early?"

"It's Christmas! Happy Christmas!" Elizabeth cheered, jumping off the bed and landing with a loud thump on the floor.

"Yes, I know," he replied, "but what does that have to do with anything?"

"We want to see all of the greenery and how far the Yule log has burned," Jane explained.

"I want to give everyone my presents!" Elizabeth added in excitement as she bounced from one foot to another.

"Presents?"

"Yes, I made everyone a present!" beamed Elizabeth. "Nurse helped me. Jane didn't do any presents, though. Just me."

"That is because I was helping you with yours," the elder girl pointed out with a soft smile.

"And that's why you're the best sister ever," Elizabeth said, throwing her arms around Jane.

"Is it usual to get presents at Christmas?" William asked.

Both girls stopped and stared at William. "Have you never gotten a Christmas gift before?" Elizabeth asked in shock.

William shook his head and looked at the ground.

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“Not ever?”

“I don’t think I’ve ever received a present of any sort before,” William said softly. “My mother made me a special dinner once on my birthday, though.”

Elizabeth gasped in dismay, and Jane’s eyes filled with tears. Without saying a word, Elizabeth dashed out of the room.

“I didn’t make any presents for anyone, either,” William said to Jane, his voice forlorn.

“Oh, that is quite all right,” Jane reassured him. “Not everyone gives presents at Christmastime, especially the children. Papa and Mama give each of us a gift, and sometimes Uncle Gardiner will send something.”

William felt a little better at knowing he wasn’t expected to have done anything. As he walked down the stairs with Jane, however, a lump formed in his stomach. Would the Bennets have a gift for him? He tried to tell himself it wouldn’t matter if they did or not. After all, they were already doing so much for him.

It would be difficult to watch everyone else open presents except for himself, he admitted to himself. It would once again show just how much of an outsider he was to the family.

His father’s ugly voice filled his head. *Yer worthless, boy. How could anyone love a stupid lump like you?*

Jane and William entered the breakfast room, where Elizabeth was eagerly putting a small package at each plate. “Don’t open them yet until everyone is here!” she cried.

Both nodded and sat down at their seats. He looked down with a smile at the small parcel she laid next to his plate. At least one person felt like he belonged somewhere, even if she was just four years old.

Over the next half hour, the remainder of the Bennet family trickled into the room. Even three-year-old Mary and one-year-old Kitty were brought downstairs by Nurse to join the family for the special occasion.

Mr. Bennet was the last to join the group. With a fond smile at his wife, he began walking around the table, passing out gifts to each of his daughters.

When Mr. Bennet reached William’s chair, William dropped his eyes to the table. He didn’t want to actually witness Mr. Bennet’s gaze pass by him without acknowledgment.

To his great astonishment, he felt a small box rest on his lap. The Bennets had given him a gift!

William opened his eyes and stared at the beautifully wrapped package. Unsure of what to do, he placed it gently next to the gift from Lizzy at the side of his plate. Then he watched as one by one, each of the Bennets opened their gifts.

Elizabeth had drawn a picture for each family member, which had then been carefully rolled up and tied with a pretty ribbon.

“William, open yours!” she cried, bouncing over from her seat to stand next to him.

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He gently held one end of the bow and pulled, then unrolled the paper so he could see the entire thing.

“What is it?” he asked, looking at the childish scrawls across the page.

“It’s you and me!” Elizabeth explained, pointing to the ovals on the page. “We’re holding hands. And there’s Mama, with a baby in her stomach, along with Papa and Jane and Kitty and Mary!”

“What’s that part?” he asked, pointing to an oval above his own.

“That’s your mama,” Elizabeth said simply. “She’s an angel now, so she isn’t on the ground with us, but she’s still part of our family.”

The picture blurred in front of William’s eyes. “Thank you, Elizabeth,” he said quietly, using his napkin to wipe the tears away before anyone saw.

“You’re welcome. I love you!” the girl lisped. She gave him a hug, then skipped back to her seat.

William looked around the table to see Mrs. Bennet looking at him kindly. Her smile reminded him of his mother’s: full of love, warmth, and acceptance.

“Would you like to open ours now, William, dear?” she gently encouraged.

He carefully untied the ribbon and removed the paper to find a small box. Cautiously, he opened the lid and lifted out a locket. He looked at Mrs. Bennet in confusion.

“Open it,” she urged.

Undoing the clasp, he opened the locket to see a beautiful miniature portrait of his mother. William gasped in disbelief, and his eyes filled with tears again. He clutched it tightly to his chest and began to sob quietly.

“Thank you so much,” he choked out.

Suddenly William felt gentle arms come around him. He looked up and found himself in Mrs. Bennet’s warm embrace. “I know I can never replace her,” she said gently, “but please know that I love you as much as I do my daughters. You will always be part of our family.”

Mr. Bennet gruffly cleared his throat. “The landlord of your former home found the locket as he was cleaning everything out. He thought you might wish to have this, so he asked the pastor there to send it on to us. It arrived a couple of days ago, and we thought you might appreciate it for Christmas.”

William nodded mutely. Never in his wildest imaginations had he dreamed he could feel so much love and peace. That Christmas, William finally took the first step in realizing his true value.

It was a very happy Christmas, indeed.

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Want to read the whole story?

Support the author and find

“The Sins of Their Fathers: A Pride & Prejudice Variation”

available on Amazon.

About the author

Tiffany Thomas is a chocoholic former math teacher and home-schooling mom with Crohn’s Disease. She loves Jane Austen and can often be found in bed with ice cream and her the latest JAFF. She and her husband (who is an engineer) have four kids and live in Texas. They enjoy spending time with their family, geeking out over sci-fi together, and working on their blog *Saving Talents*.

Her *Pride & Prejudice* variations include the following works: *A Look Behind the Mask*; *The Sins of Their Fathers*; *When Summer Never Came*; *Pride, Prejudice & Permutations*.

Stay tuned with Tiffany through her socials:

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Bingley's Gift

by Zarilda Belle Frost

Early morning, December 6th, 1811

Charles Bingley bowed low, his lips brushing Jane Bennet's gloved hand. He rose to see her eyes shining beneath the hood of a fur-trimmed cloak, a soft smile on her lips. His curls ruffled in the blustery wind as he assisted her into the carriage, where her sisters and mother awaited.

"I will call when I return from London." He smiled, stepping back for her father to join the family. Her cousin, Mr. Collins, sat on the box next to the coachman, frowning as he wrapped a scarf around his neck.

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Bingley smiled again, and sighed, watching the Bennet carriage disappear among the trees of Netherfield Park's long driveway. He stood shivering for a moment, then turned from the chill darkness toward the warmth and light of the manor.

It had been a wonderful ball—despite his sisters' attempts to dissuade him and their success at delaying the ball more than a week later than he had planned. But once he had cajoled and convinced them, they had arranged a memorable celebration. All of the leading families from the area attended. The food and décor were the match of anything in London. And Jane—Miss Bennet—was exquisite, they had smiled and danced and talked.

She was more than beautiful. She was good through and through, and made him want to be a man worthy of her. He was decided. He would meet with his attorney to draw up a settlement while he was in London, then ask for a formal courtship when he returned in a few days.

Yawning and hunching his shoulders against the cold, he walked slowly into the house, where servants scurried about, removing the last remnants of food and stray dishes from the hall, dining room and ballroom. The gaiety of earlier had worn off and everything looked tired, the white flowers, brought in at great expense from London greenhouses, drooped amongst the evergreen branches, and the candles sputtered in their mirrored sconces.

He stepped toward the drawing room door, then stopped abruptly. His sister Caroline was speaking, her voice strident, "... totally inappropriate. We must prevent him from making a tragic mistake."

"She is a nice enough girl, but that family, did you see the younger sisters? And relations in trade. It is simply unacceptable. You do agree, do you not, Mr. Darcy?" That was his other sister, Louisa Hurst.

Indistinguishable words from a deep voice, then Caroline again.

"He plans to go to London for business tomorrow—today, now. If you were to attend him, Mr. Darcy, we could close the house and travel to London no more than an hour or two behind you.

"Once in London, we will convince him to stay and he will quickly find another 'angel'. You know how easily he is distracted. We have diverted him from unsuitable infatuations before, this will be no different."

All his joy in the evening tumbled into a hard knot in his middle. They were right. They had convinced him, oh, so many times. 'Go to this ball, not that.' 'Dance with this lady, ignore the other.' How had he been so easily led? Oh, yes, he disliked arguments. How paltry an excuse.

Another murmur, then Caroline continued. "We have the perfect excuse, we wish to spend Christmas in London. After all, Mr. Darcy, I know you would wish to celebrate the holiday with dear Georgiana, and you could not bring her to such an unsuitable neighbourhood."

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Clenching his fists, Bingley took one step toward the slightly open door, then stopped. He pulled back his shoulders and smiled grimly, lifting an eyebrow, and walked quietly past the doorway and up the stairs to his rooms.



Bingley tilted his head, stretching unobtrusively as he descended the stairs. Below, a clock bonged, one, two, twelve times. Late, even for him. In the hall he peeked cautiously into the breakfast room—empty! Then he sauntered toward the library, or “Netherfield’s excuse for a library,” as some had called it.

There he was. His good friend and houseguest, Fitzwilliam Darcy, sat in a high-backed burgundy leather chair next to the window, paging through a massive book. He was impeccably groomed, as always, and had probably been awake for hours. Bingley ran a hand through his own tousled hair.

“Good morning,” he called.

“Good afternoon,” Darcy replied, glancing pointedly at the clock.

“It is rather late.” Bingley peered past Darcy at the scene outside the window. Heavy clouds blocked the sun, and the shrubbery waved briskly in the breeze. “Rather unpleasant, too.”

“I believed you off to London this morning,” said Darcy. “I decided to join you, as I have business of my own. But my valet reported you were still abed.”

“That was sudden, was it not? I believed I was the one who would leave with five minutes notice.” He raised his eyebrows, waiting for a response that did not come.

“In any case, leaving this morning was a foolish idea. We both know I cannot arise so early after a late night. But it is of no mind, as I decided to wait a day, to conclude some business here. I plan to call on Miss Bennet this afternoon to ask a very important question.”

“Bingley — Charles — you have only known her for a few weeks. You cannot mean —”

Bingley held up his hand.

“What I can, and do, mean is that I am not going to allow anyone — my sisters, or anyone else — to dictate my happiness.

“I do not plan to propose—today. But I will ask for a formal courtship. I wish her—and everyone else—to know my attentions are not idle flirtation, and that my affections are engaged.”

Darcy shook his head, frowning slightly.

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“I would wish to prevent you being trapped in a marriage of unequal affections. You say your affections are engaged, but what about hers? I observed her most carefully at the ball last night, and while it was clear she accepted your attentions with pleasure, she did not show any preference for you. Her smile was the same for you as it was for... for Sir William Lucas,” he referenced the highest ranked gentleman in the neighbourhood.

“You observed!” Bingley laughed shortly. “Darcy, you are the best of men, and have offered me excellent advice on many occasions.” He leaned back in the leather chair opposite Darcy, tenting his fingers and crossing his ankles as he stretched out.

“But your powers of observation are somewhat lacking when regarding single ladies. Your only thought is to escape.

“Did you observe how her eyes shone when I spoke to her? Or how she blushed when I leaned close to whisper to her during supper? Did you observe her smile when I asked for the supper dance, or when we spoke while we waited for the Bennets’ carriage?”

“I doubt you did. You were too busy glaring at Miss Elizabeth, and trying to elude Caroline.”

Darcy, who had begun to rise, sat back heavily. “I do not glare at Miss Elizabeth. And I did dance with Miss Bingley, and Mrs. Hurst, as was appropriate.”

“Of course.” Bingley rose and walked toward the library door.

“I am to breakfast, then a ride to Longbourn. Join me if you wish. And, Darcy?”

“Yes?”

“I heard my sisters after the ball. I know their concern is status, not my happiness. I do not know if you agreed to participate in their conspiracy, but I will not be manipulated by them, or anyone else. It was enough that I allowed them to delay the ball by more than a week. No more.”

He heard the thud of Darcy’s book dropping to the floor, and chuckled as he walked to the breakfast room.

“Darcy, observant? Ha!”

An efficient footman served coffee and toast and offered breakfast.

“Just eggs and sausage,” Bingley instructed.

Darcy walked in and accepted his own coffee and toast.

Bingley’s plate arrived: eggs, sausage, bacon, mushrooms and potatoes, despite his instructions and his mouth watered. Across the table, Darcy cut his toast into precise strips, then dropped them on his plate.

“I will meet you at the stables. Half an hour?”

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Bingley nodded, attention on his food. He finished, and headed upstairs, skipping one or two as he went.

His valet, Evans, had laid out a riding outfit of buckskin breeches, boots and a black wool jacket.

“No, the blue superfine, with the striped waistcoat. And my greatcoat. It does not appear that we will see any sun today.”

After one last glance in the mirror, he moved through the quiet house, grateful that his sisters were still sleeping. Before going to bed, he had instructed his valet that none of the servants should awake the family.

Darcy, wearing a dark green greatcoat, was already seated on his bay stallion, Zeus. Bingley greeted his sorrel gelding, Blaze, with a scratch under the ear, and quickly mounted.

Both horses were frisky with eager energy, so they gave them their heads down the long drive of Netherfield, and along the road leading to Meryton. In town, they slowed to a walk, Bingley nodding to every person he saw, tipping his hat, and greeting those he knew.

“What has come over you?” Darcy finally spoke, as they exited the market town. “You are intent on a match that is beneath you—that family is dreadful. You must have noticed the younger sisters’ behaviour at the ball. And the mother was crowing about your future with her daughter to anyone who would listen.

“Is that it? Do you feel you are about to be trapped? If so, you need to leave right now before you show any further attention to Miss Bennet.”

Bingley silently pulled his horse to a stop. Darcy continued for a few steps before turning Zeus to face him.

“Darcy,” Bingley huffed out a short breath, “I admire Miss Jane Bennet, and believe she would make me a wonderful wife. I did hear some of Mrs. Bennet’s comments last night, and what did she say that the matchmaking mamas of the ton do not say? Only, she said it where we could hear.

“I know you do not think me an introspective fellow, but after I heard the conversation last night, I sat up for some hours debating whether to follow my original plan, and risk being led by the nose by my sisters and friend, or whether to stand up and be my own man. Overhearing that conversation was a gift, which allowed me to see clearly for the first time.

“My sisters’ views are irrelevant. They are concerned only for their own social advancement. And while I appreciate your support in dealing with the ton, and advice with the estate, your judgment of the ladies is rather cynical, and I choose to follow my own inclination.

“In fact, your attitude toward everyone in Meryton has been deplorable. You have disapproved of, and insulted, everyone and everything in this town since the moment you arrived.

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“I hope you can understand, and will visit the Bennets with an open mind but, if you cannot, perhaps you should remember something important to do at Netherfield.”

“I see.” Darcy stared at him for a few, long, moments, then signalled his horse, passing Bingley on the way back to Netherfield.

Bingley swivelled to watch him with a sad smile. That might be the end of their friendship, but it was necessary. It was time for him to stand for himself. He waited a moment, then gently tapped the reins to direct Blaze toward Longbourn.

Only a few yards down the road, he heard hoofbeats, then Darcy settled into position beside him.

“Pax.” Darcy held up his hand. “It is your decision and I will no longer argue. Have I really been so overbearing as you suggest?”

“Darcy, you have gone beyond Caroline overbearing, into the territory of your Aunt Catherine. What is it that she says? That the distinction of the social classes must be maintained?” Darcy grimaced.

By this time Longbourn, a sprawling hodgepodge, with welcoming light shining from the windows, had come into view.

They handed over their reins to a groom, then were greeted at the door by a smiling matron in a crisp white apron.

“Mrs. Hill, how are you this blustery day?”

“I am very well, sir, thank you. Please come in, and I will let the family know you have arrived.” She bustled away.

“Darcy, you can take off your coat.”

Darcy, looking down the hall where the housekeeper had disappeared, started, then removed his coat.

“I will take that for you, sir. The ladies await you in the family parlour.” Mrs. Hill had quickly reappeared.

Bingley stopped at the door. Jane Bennet sat near the window, her blond hair silvered in the cloudy light. She rose and curtsied with a surprised smile, pages of paper fluttering to the floor.

“Welcome, welcome, gentlemen,” Mrs. Bennet gestured them into the room. “You are our first St. Nicholas Day guests! Please do come in and be comfortable. It is such a cold day, we have just been very cozy here. I hope you do not mind being informal.”

“Not at all, it is a good day for comfort.” Bingley smiled. “I hope everyone is well after the late night?”

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“Oh, very well. We were just saying what a beautiful job your sisters did with the ball. Please give them our compliments. I have never seen such a lovely ballroom.”

Hardly taking a breath, she invited them to be seated, then called for Mrs. Hill to bring tea. “Cook made the most lovely spiced biscuits this morning, just the thing for a cold afternoon.”

Bingley took a seat next to Jane—Miss Bennet, while Darcy selected a chair near a subdued Miss Elizabeth. Miss Mary was reading a book, while the two youngest, Miss Catherine, known as Kitty, and Miss Lydia, were looking at fashion magazines.

For a time the conversation remained general, as the younger Bennets enthused about the ball, and Mrs. Bennet asked for their preference in tea and biscuits, simultaneously questioning Bingley’s postponed trip to London.

She bustled out of the room when Mrs. Hill appeared, leaving a sudden silence.

“Miss Elizabeth, I hope you are well today,” Darcy offered after a long pause.

“Quite well.”

“Miss Bennet, thank you again for the dances last night. I do not believe I have ever enjoyed a ball so much.”

“Thank you, sir,” Jane replied, smiling toward him. “I, too, believe it was the most enjoyable ball I have ever attended.”

Darcy spoke again to Miss Elizabeth, asking of her mother’s comment on St. Nicholas Day.

“One of our uncle’s warehouse managers is from the Netherlands. He told Jane and me of their celebration of St. Nicholas on one of our visits. Since our little church in Longbourn Village is dedicated to St. Nicholas, we adopted one of the traditions, providing sweets for the children of tenants and in the village,” Miss Elizabeth explained. “These biscuits, called speculaas, are one of his family recipes.”

Bingley relaxed as his friend continued the civil conversation with Miss Elizabeth, and turned his attention to Jane, who worried the folded pages in her hands for a moment, then firmly tucked them into her workbasket. They continued speaking quietly, as a bustle could be heard in the hallway, and Mrs. Bennet peeked into the room occasionally.

When the clock struck three, Darcy stood and began to walk toward the window, when Miss Lydia exclaimed, “Look, it is snowing!”

In just moments, the sight increased from a few flakes to a heavy, thick snow that obscured the sight of the garden outside.

“Perhaps we should return to Netherfield,” Darcy offered.

“Nonsense, you shall stay for dinner, and if it has not cleared, you can stay the night. Mr. Collins,” Mrs. Bennet, who had just entered, shot a glance at Miss Elizabeth, “left unexpectedly for Kent, so there is plenty of food and plenty of space.”

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“Thank you, we would be delighted,” Bingley answered quickly.

Dinner was, as promised, generous and tasty. Roast chicken with vegetables, fresh bread, and a surprisingly good wine.

“This is a fine dinner,” he leaned toward Jane as he spoke. Her scent mingled with the aroma of wine and food. Roses? Lilies? Whatever it was, it was distinctly her own.

“My mother prides herself on setting a good table.” The home farm provided most of the dishes, she explained, leading to an exchange of stories of favourite meals and other memories.

The ladies had withdrawn after a course of cheese and fruit from Longbourn’s orchards. As Mr. Bennet poured glasses of port for the three gentlemen, Bingley turned to him, feeling a queasiness that had nothing to do with the excellent meal.

“Mr. Bennet, I called today with a particular purpose. Might we speak now, or would you prefer a conference in your study?”

Port in hand, Darcy walked to the window, where snowflakes reflected light from the room.

Mr. Bennet stilled, then cleared his throat.

“Here is as good as anywhere, I suppose,” he drawled. “Please, proceed.”

Bingley took a deep breath and straightened his shoulders, looking directly at the elder man.

“Sir, from our first meeting, your daughter caught my eye for her beauty. But as I grew to know her, it was her kindness, her generous nature, and good temper that earned my affection.

“Sir, I would like to ask for a courtship, with a view to marriage if it comes to the wished for conclusion.”

“A very pretty speech. Do you have a particular daughter in mind, or shall I choose one for you? I do have five to dispose of.”

“Miss Jane Bennet, of course! You must know she has been the object of my attention.”

“Yes, yes, Jane is the one who could be described as beautiful, kind and good-tempered.

“And what say you, Mr. Darcy? Does his quest have your approval?”

Darcy glanced toward Bingley.

“He does not need my approval, but I wish him good fortune in his effort.”

“Well said. In any case, Mr. Bingley, I give my approval for you to speak to my eldest daughter about a courtship. If things go as you wish, we may speak about your business matters later.”

“I have only one stipulation.”

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“Of course, sir.”

“Do not announce your courtship while I am in the vicinity. Not in the room, not even in the house, as my ears cannot withstand Mrs. Bennet’s exclamations,” he grinned. “In all seriousness, I am glad you spoke up today. Your attentions had begun to cause talk in Meryton, and with word that you were leaving for London after the ball, I was afraid Jane would be left to bear the scrutiny of the neighbours—and Mrs. Bennet—on her own.

“The ton may be cruel in its judgments, but is nothing to the gossip of our neighbours. You might have exposed Jane to their derision for disappointed hopes and yourself to censure for caprice and instability.”

They returned to the parlour to discover a scheme for walking out had been proposed by the younger girls. The final flakes of snow had fallen while they conferred, leaving a glorious world waiting to be explored. Or such was the gist of Miss Lydia and Miss Kitty’s excited pronouncements. For the day, they seemed to have thrown off their flirting and quarrelling, and reverted to a becomingly childlike enthusiasm. While snow was not uncommon in Hertfordshire, having it so early in the year was unusual, and cause to celebrate with snow men and snowball fights.

At the door, Bingley extended his arm to Jane. She was bundled thoroughly, with a winter bonnet covering her head and a thick scarf wrapped around her neck, leaving her face, with shining eyes, barely visible. She placed one gloved hand on his offered arm.

“Are you warm enough?” he asked. “It is not long since you were sick, I would not wish you to be chilled.”

“I am quite warm.”

“We wrapped her up well,” added Miss Elizabeth.

“Shall we walk in the garden, or the lane?” Bingley asked.

“I think the garden,” answered Miss Elizabeth. “I am afraid the snow may hide ruts in the drive.”

“The garden it is,” he agreed, turning in that direction.

“It is,” Jane began, then lowered her voice. “It is beautiful,” she murmured, just loud enough to be heard.

“It is glorious, amazing,” Miss Elizabeth agreed, spinning around to see, her spirits seemingly brightened. Inky black shadows loomed beneath the trees, a pristine path of snow lay ahead of them. Plants and shrubs wore caps of bluish white, and tree branches waved gently, as if in greeting, invoking glimmering cascades of falling crystals.

In the garden, Darcy and Miss Elizabeth turned down a different path, and the voices of Miss Kitty and Miss Lydia, who had finally reached the front door, faded away.

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The faint crunch of their footsteps broke the overwhelming silence. The snow gleamed and glistened, sparkling motes in an eerie, luminous blue light. It dimmed and brightened, reflecting the shine of the half moon peeking between the retreating clouds. The only hints of warmth in the chill landscape were the flickers of candles in the manor's windows.

Bingley took a deep breath, absorbing the serenity of the moment. This perfect, magical moment. This perfect woman next to him. If only he could find the perfect words.

"I hope our visit was not an imposition on your family. We truly did not expect to be stranded here for the day."

"Not at all. My mother enjoys being a hostess, and we were all happy to see you. But you said last night that you planned to leave for London this morning. Did something happen?"

"In a way. I wanted to... that is, last night, after you left, I overheard a conversation that made me think about what I want in life. I realized that I have been too easily swayed by what others want, and I was not happy with myself."

"I see..." Jane said quietly.

"I am doing this all wrong. Miss Bennet, Jane, what I want is a life with a woman who is kind, who is good company, who will encourage me to do my best, who I can admire and love, and who will return that affection. I believe—I hope—that woman is you."

He took both her hands, turning her so the moonlight illuminated her face with a silver glow.

"I have grown to admire you very much, and would request a formal courtship, if you are willing. When... when you are ready," the words tumbled out, "I wish to ask for your hand in marriage."

Her smile was brighter than the moonlight.

"I am ready," Jane replied.

He sighed, letting his tight shoulders relax. "Wait—you mean?"

"Have you not been courting me all this time?" she smiled brilliantly. "Although," her smile dimmed like the moon disappearing behind the clouds, "there is the matter of your sisters."

"Yes, that is what I overheard, but how did you know?"

"Let us speak of that later. For now, I accept your courtship with pleasure."

"Oh, no, you have already said you are ready for me to propose!"

He knelt, heedless of the snow soaking his breeches, still holding her gloved hand.

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“Miss Jane Bennet, I have grown to admire and love you very much. I can imagine nothing that would make me happier than to spend the rest of my life making you happy. Will you do me the great honour of accepting my hand in marriage?”

Her smile eclipsed every other smile he had ever seen, and tears glistened, reflecting the moonlight.

“Yes, Mr. Bingley, I will marry you.”

He leaned over her hands, easing her glove down to reveal a sliver of bare wrist. He pulled her hand closer, brushing a kiss, feeling her shiver as his warm lips touched cool skin. Her eyes widened and she blinked, then smiled again.

Bingley pulled up her glove, then stood and tucked her close, his hand covering hers. They walked a few more minutes in silence. At every opportunity he caught her eye, and their smiles grew with each glance.

Ahead, Darcy and Miss Elizabeth approached, and Bingley sighed.

“Now, to my sisters. I had planned to go to London today, then return in a few days to call on you. But I overheard...”

“Yes?”

“I would begin our lives together with the truth, though painful. I overheard my sisters say they would follow me to London, and find reasons to keep me from returning. They wish me to marry for status. In the past, perhaps I would have given in, and let them distract me. But no longer.

“Oh, my, I just realized!” Bingley laughed.

Jane looked up. “Realized?”

“Darcy and I left before Caroline or the Hursts arose. They might have thought we travelled to London and left to follow us.”

Darcy and Miss Elizabeth stopped before them.

“Darcy, did you say anything to Mrs. Nichols about where we were going?” Bingley asked.

“I did not.”

“Well, there may be some surprised people, either arriving in London, or when we return to Netherfield tomorrow,” Bingley grinned.

“And we will have another surprise for them. Miss Bennet has done me the honor of accepting my proposal.”

“Oh, Jane!”

The sisters awkwardly hugged, impeded by their scarves, cloaks and bonnets.

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“Now, Jane, we need to get you back inside before you get chilled,” Miss Elizabeth said.

“Miss Bennet—Jane—and Miss Elizabeth. Your father requested that we wait to announce the courtship when he is not present. Oh, I suppose I must speak to him again!”

They wandered back to the house in silence, Bingley ever aware of Jane’s hand on his arm, his own hand covering hers. The silence was broken as they rounded the corner. The younger girls giggled at a very small, very crooked snowman, whose body faced one way and whose head looked another way with eyes far too large for its face.

“We asked Mary for her old cloak buttons, but she said we would lose them, so we had to use stones,” Miss Lydia laughed.

“All the better to see us with,” Miss Elizabeth offered the first jest Darcy had heard from her all day.

They entered the house to find a choice of tea, coffee, or chocolate, and more of the St. Nicholas Day spiced biscuits.

As they ate, Bingley stole glances at Miss Bennet—Jane in his heart—sitting next to him, their fingers brushing lightly as they passed the cream or the biscuits.

Mr. Bennet, at the end of the table, threw a pointed glance at their hands, then jerked his head toward the doorway. Pulling in a deep breath, Bingley straightened his shoulders and followed, receiving a sympathetic smile from Jane.

“I take it you have something more to request?” Mr. Bennet raised an eyebrow.

“Well, yes, I have proposed, and Jane has accepted me,” Bingley blurted. “I mean—”

“I understand what you meant. And you are sure this is not just an impulse? A courtship can be ended gracefully. A betrothal...” he trailed off.

“I have never been more certain of anything in my life,” Bingley said firmly. “I wish to spend my life making Miss Bennet the happiest of women, and I ask for your blessing.”

“Very well. I hope you know how fortunate you are to gain her regard.”

“Indeed, I do.”

They returned to the parlour, where Miss Mary was reading from some handwritten pages.

“The daughters did not know what would become of them, as they had no dowries to allow them to marry, and their father could scarcely afford to feed them. That night, they washed their stockings and hung them by the fireplace to dry, then joined hands and said a prayer.

“In the morning, the first sister picked up her stocking and found it full of gold coins, enough to feed the family and provide a dowry, so she could marry her sweetheart. The next night, they once again prayed, and in the morning the second daughter found gold coins in her stocking. The third night, the father tried to stay awake, to learn who had left the gold. When

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he heard the clink of coins, he looked out the window to see their neighbour, Nicholas, nephew of the parish priest.

“How can I ever repay you?” he asked. “You have saved my daughters.” “No need for repayment” Nicholas responded. “Simply live a good life, and help others when you are able.”

“And that is why,” Miss Mary concluded, “the children in the Netherlands hang their stockings by the fire on St. Nicholas Day, in hopes that he will bless them, too.”

There was silence for a long moment, then Mr. Bennet cleared his throat, shrugging his shoulders and smiling wryly at Bingley.

“Well,” he paused. “There are no stockings, and this gift would not fit into one, anyway.” He paused again, chuckling at the puzzled looks from all except the eldest Bennet sisters. He waved Jane over to join Bingley.

“I am pleased to announce that Jane has accepted the hand of Mr. Bingley, and they are betrothed.”

The younger girls gasped, then giggled, as Mrs. Bennet rose. Instead of the exclamations Mr. Bennet had warned of, she offered a brilliant smile, looking in the moment like Jane’s sister, rather than mother.

“I have always wanted a son. Welcome to the family.” He saw tears form as she reached out to hug him, pulling Jane into the embrace. “It is a true gift from St. Nicholas.”

“Yes, it is.” he agreed silently, his heart brimming, his future bright before him. “A gift more precious than you will ever know.”

About the author

Zarilda Belle Frost is the pen name of a jill of all trades who discovered Austenesque fiction in 2016, just in time to load her tablet with variations, and her car with her cats to evacuate for Hurricane Matthew. She was hooked, and has been reading variations, and dreaming up new plots ever since. Her career has included reporter-editor-columnist for small town newspapers, public relations, non-profit management, a small family business, and more.

She recently retired and is now focusing on writing and her life-long passion for fiber arts. She lives in coastal Georgia, USA, with three spoiled cats. Her first novel is *A Cradle Betrothal, a Pride and Prejudice Variation*.

Check out updates on her writing, cats and art at:

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Persuasion at *La Posada*
by Charlotte Parke McQuary

Late 80's in the US

ADVENT I: HOPE

Dianne Engelke fished through a box of Christmas decorations hoping to find her mother's Advent wreath lost in the shuffle of moving into a new home. Tomorrow was the First Sunday of Advent, the time of preparation and reflection before the holiday season ensued. There had never been a time Dianne did not recall the wreath gracing their dinner table to signal the first week of the Church Year. Since her father, the esteemed Rev. Dr. John Engelke, had reluctantly

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retired from a venerable career at Concordia Seminary, Dianne's orderly world, had seen the first of many changes in one year. It naturally fell to Dianne, the middle of three daughters, to manage their father's household in proper fashion. Thus far, nothing in this strange, chaotic year had been in any semblance of order.

Her father sustaining a mild stroke just before Easter meant a long slow recovery under her care. Thus, she gave up her apartment, moved back to her childhood home on campus for a few months before the seminary urged Dr. Engelke into retirement with full pension at the end of May, earlier that year. That meant yet another move by mid-Summer to find a house suitable for them both. Among Dr. Engelke's three daughters, Dianne, a school teacher, was best suited, living closest and still unattached. Her elder sister, Elaine, was too involved with deaconess duties in Texas and younger sister, Maren, gloried in her role as minister's wife to Rev. Carl Munzert. Anne, as her friends and family dubbed her, did not mind the task before her, ensuring their father received the best care possible with as little disruption to his life as possible. Having the Advent Wreath in place in their new home, as family tradition had it, was one meaningful thing she would do after packing over thirty years of mementoes into an odd assortment of boxes within three weeks, just in time for the newly appointed professor to take up residence.

The school year began bringing another batch of fidgety first graders for her to teach. "Turn around", the song, and an ordinary September Sunday as organist brought yet another upset to a year that she'd just as soon forget, though a New Year meant little improvement. He would still be there at every turn, on Sunday morning reading from the lectionary, at every potluck, or on the occasional youth group outings it was her duty to assist with, and worst of all, now he was participating in La Posada, her most favorite tradition of the Yuletide season.

Turn around... Every now and then... Turn around... Bright Eyes...

The radio softly played the Bonnie Tyler hit as she dug through another box. It had to be here. She would not shed tears over this nor the stupid tune -unofficially 'their' song- one that played in the college student union on study breaks, or in the car as they drove through Oak Park on a date to their favorite pizza place or strolling down Lake Shore Drive. Fred Worthing would have had a word to say on her lack of organization skills just now and her insufferable need for perfectionism. "Total Eclipse of the Heart" aptly summed up their relationship. "Once upon a time I was falling in love, now I'm only falling apart. Nothing I can say... It's a tot-" she hummed along mindlessly, fighting the tug at her heart. Focus! Find that wreath! She smarted herself.

"Anne? It's about time for supper. Don't you think?" John Engelke stood in the doorway connecting garage to house, leaning on his cane. "Whatever you're doing can certainly wait till tomorrow."

"I'm looking for our Advent wreath. It's got to be here somewhere." She stretched from the cramped position on the concrete floor. "I'll get supper started right away."

"Tomorrow's the first Sunday of Advent," John stated wistfully, "Mom always did have the Advent wreath in place by Thanksgiving."

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“Yes, Dad,” she softly replied, “I know, which is why I need to find it.”

“I suppose the old tree won’t do in our new home without those ten-foot ceilings.” Dr. Engelke observed.

“We’ll just have to cut a hole in the ceiling like the Peterkins did.” Dianne laughed, thinking of the charming old Christmas tale her mother read to them each year ever since she could remember. “Or perhaps we’ll forego a tree this year.” If there was no Advent wreath, what was the point of a Christmas tree? This year she could do without all the holiday fall-der-roll.

“Maren will want the tree up as always.”

“Then she can put it up in their parsonage.” Dianne’s younger sister had still been in high school when their mother died suddenly of an aneurism, while she and their eldest sister, Elaine, were away at college. Even now, years later, Maren had worn this tragic loss as sort of badge of honor, and their father acceded her every whim. “We will have a tree, Dad,” Dianne conceded, “But first, there’s the matter of the Advent wreath.”

“Ah! But it is only one candle to light for tomorrow. You have time before Christmas, and we can manage some other device to form a makeshift wreath. It’s what your mother and I did our first Christmas together, struggling on a seminary student’s meager income.” His attention drifted across the sea of boxes in the garage with her among them, his eyes spoke of long-ago memories and the sharp mind Dianne knew so well. He made sense, a sure sign his thought process was returning, though the droop to his left lip and eye remained, giving him a haggard appearance.

Dianne stood, brushing the dusty feel from her jeans. «Nevertheless, I would rather have the wreath in place as always.» It was one thing that did matter. Perhaps if this one tradition was upheld, to start the Advent season, then whatever came after would not matter so much, she could only hope.

The new house was much smaller than the five-bedroom bungalow with tall ceilings, a marble mantled fireplace and a library of solid oak shelves to house all a professor’s books. Now a two-car attached garage held dozens of unpacked boxes of things yet to be assimilated into the two-bedroom ranch which would hardly accommodate the seven-and-a-half foot Douglas fir still yet to be found. Perhaps a small real pine tree would appease her sister’s whims and offer a cozy old-fashioned scent to their new home.

“Maren called and asked about La Posada. You will direct the caroler’s chorus again?» Her father turned to head back into the house. «And she said the committee is at a loss for finding someone to play Joseph.”

La Posada, again! Yes, she had directed the carolers, all donned in Victorian attire, ever since she had returned home from college and would again this year. Before that, she had sung with the carolers through high school and before that, had played in the fife and drum corps since age eight. Somehow in her twenty-seven years, she’d participated in this annual event more times than she could count. *La Posada* had been the one thing in a year, no matter how wrong, that brought order and completion, a reminder of what the season embodied.

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There was something about the community walking down Old Main Street together, re-enacting the trip to Bethlehem with the Holy Family in search of lodging, only to be told at each strategically placed stop, that there was “no room at the inn”. Dejected, but hopeful, they traveled on, accompanied by carolers, and bystanders joining in the wake along the brick streets, singing carols to the fluty tunes and rat-a-tat-tat of fifers and drummers dressed in 18th century military regalia. It all culminated at the bandstand by the river where Mary and Joseph at last found a stable awaiting the heaven sent, newborn King. Everyone would gather to gaze reverently at the creche while the St. Luke account was read interspersed with more carols of the season. Finally, a Yule Log burning culminated the evening as everyone gathered to sip hot cocoa and revel in the season’s merriment.

It was this charming intimate tradition, going back over a century to the early days of Spanish settlement, that brought her closest to her faith, her family, and her community. And, perhaps, it made her aware of her place in it all, despite misguided choices, there remained this moment, this time and the hope of lasting peace and joy. But clearly not to be in this changing mixed-up year.

“Yes, Dad, I do believe it’s time for supper.” Still no wreath to light tomorrow, but she would figure something out, just as she’d likely solve her younger sister’s problem over who would play Joseph.

ADVENT II: PEACE

Ever since the Thirteenth Sunday of Trinity, Dianne had managed to avoid Frederick Timothy Worthing, or Fred as he preferred to her “Anne”. But college seemed so long ago now, when they were “two American kids growing up in the heartland” as their friends teased them whenever the John Mellencamp song blared on the radio. “A little ditty about Fred and Dianne” his dorm mates razed him mercilessly with their irreverent parody. She had put it all behind her, until that Sunday he appeared as the new seminary fieldworker in her very own congregation.

A busy Fall meant it wasn’t difficult finding distractions and deterring any chance to casually run into him. A new school year, her classroom to arrange, and one of the most challenging classes of first graders in her teaching career thus far kept her sufficiently busy. A wedding nearly every weekend, sometimes two, kept her fingers busy at the organ keyboard, given September was now the new June of popular wedding months. It meant a little extra cash to squirrel away and a chance to play some of her favorite splashy pieces, pulling out all the stops for a rousing Handel, Purcell or a more contemporary Paul Manz or Cesar Franck prelude as she tactfully steered brides from the tediously cliché Bridal Chorus and Wedding March. Yet all the while, she secretly assessed wedding details, taking note of a flower arrangement, a subtle detail strategically placed on pews or best of all, the style and cut of the bridal gowns which these days, as the decade waned, ranged from rivalling Princess Diana’s poufy splendor to simpler elegant statements in lace and satin.

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But now, Fred's presence only brought a constant reminder of a broken past. She could have been one of those brides processing to a Trumpet Tune on the arm of her proud father toward her groom waiting in a morning cutaway or formal evening tux. But her decision had changed all that on the heels of the call service her senior year, just three months after her mother's passing. How could she abandon her family now? Her sister, Maren, without a mother. Elaine moving to take up her call as deaconess in Texas. Then her father ensured her position at their local church school, she had no choice. So, she had to break off her secret engagement to Fred. It was the only way. He was not of her church affiliation, his career goals conflicted with hers and her family's interests. It simply wouldn't work. She put the past behind only to have it come walking into her church that September Sunday. Fred Worthing, former college sweetheart and secret fiancé, was now studying to be a minister at the very same seminary where her father had recently finished a long and respected career of service.

"Are you listening to me, Anne?" She barely heard her younger sister's prattling over the kitchen counter on this Sunday afternoon. "*La Posada!* We were discussing some changes this year. We're still without a Joseph and... I'm not so sure about these musical changes."

"Why not?" Anne reached over to help her two young nephews roll out a batch of cookie dough. "I thought introducing some authentic *Posada* songs this year would be a nice change. Looking back in the archives, it seems this was done once upon a time."

"But... the choir already knows the songs we've done every year. I don't know about this." She sat at the end of the parsonage kitchen counter, blowing on her freshly polished nails. "Will the choir have time to learn them in Spanish with only two weeks away?" asked the younger sister.

As usual, Maren had invited Dianne over to discuss *La Posada* plans, but with the ulterior motive to bake Christmas cookies with her two little boys. Thus, it fell to Anne to manage her nephews who were now covered in flour and putting more cookie dough in their mouths than on the baking sheet. Four-year-old Cameron just wanted to sculpt cookie snakes and creepy crawlies, while younger brother, Phillip, or Pips, preferred tapping one cutter after another in random designs all over the freshly rolled dough. "Boys! Stop that now!" Maren called from a safe distance, still surmising her new manicure.

Anne deftly distracted her nephews with assigned tasks and ideas for decorating baked cookies with sprinkles and icing, and somehow managed to get one batch in the oven.

"You're so good at this, Anne," Maren said, using her preferred nickname to the dreadful "Di" or worse, the handle of "Lady Di" she had been given by her dorm mates the year of the spectacular royal wedding. "But then that's why you teach first grade and I..."

"...and you are the pastor's wife," Anne finished her sister's inevitable reminder of the differences in their station. Somehow marrying a minister gave one status among her church community, especially when one lived in the "Holy City" that housed the seminary training learned preachers who often sought their future wives from unwed daughters of local congregations. That had been Maren's blessed luck just out of high school when Carl Munzert served as fieldworker before receiving a call to preach at Bethlehem Church. For Elaine and

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Dianne, serving one as a deaconess and the other as a parish day schoolteacher and music director came a close second.

“You’re sure to find a pastor to marry growing up on the seminary campus!” Anne recalled her giddy dormmates and college friends’ misguided wish for her. But there had only been Fred in her eyes that senior year, the most unlikely of fiancés. Alas, in the end, it fell apart; she graduated, putting college, silly dreams and the past behind her only to have it all walk into her church one Sunday morning.

“What sort of songs were you thinking anyway?” Maren asked, brewing a latte while Anne checked the cookies in the oven. “And will the choir have time to learn them?”

“We began practicing a month ago,” Anne said. “And they’re loving the Spanish lyrics.”

“Yes, but...” Maren flinched away from Pips reaching sticky hands toward his Mama. “Who’s going to understand a word? Anne! Please wash his hands. My nails! I just polished them.”

Anne dutifully scooped up her little nephew and swung him around toward the sink. “Some might understand, and the intent is there. They know the story, for heaven’s sake. And those Christmas songs are traditional to the *posadas* in Mexico. It will be fine. Joseph will ask at each door and the chorus will sing *En el nombre del cielo* as the traditional song asking for lodging.”

“Oh! I meant to tell you, not that it matters or anything,” Maren tucked an errant curl behind one ear. “We found a replacement for Joseph, since Allen Kramer can’t this year.” She rapped a tattoo on the counter. “Drum roll please! And... the winner is.... our new seminarian, Fred Worthing. Ta-Da! He agreed! And will make the perfect Joseph to Hannah as Mary!”

The news hit Anne while another thud of cookie dough hit the floor. Cameron let out a cry that his reindeer had been ruined and proceeded to blame his little brother. Anne bent to clean the mess and soothe the boys while absently taking in the news. Fred was playing Joseph opposite Hannah Munzert, Maren’s sister-in-law.

“Yes! Isn’t it wonderful?” Maren stated excitedly. “The two are getting quite chummy since the youth group hayride last October. I dare say, we might hear an announcement of their engagement by Christmas this year.”

ADVENT III: JOY

The third week of Advent meant one week to go before the Feast of the Nativity. Instead of a purple candle on the wreath, this week a rose-colored tapir was lit for Joy. Anne, still not finding her mother’s wreath, bought a new one from the Hallmark store in town. Not the same, but perhaps a new house and a new beginning for her and Dad warranted new traditions as well. Anne kept busy with all the holiday preparations, choir practices, additional Wednesday evening worship and some Christmas shopping in between. The school Christmas concert had gone off without a hitch and even her rambunctious class seemed better than usual. Only

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one thing dampened her spirits: Fred was everywhere! Officiating at every worship service, consulting her on how to chant the liturgy and even now serving on the Christmas decorating committee to select a tree for the sanctuary.

The next Saturday, they all set out for Grandpa George's tree lot. An hour later, Anne strolled through the forest of pines keeping her distance from the others, including Fred, who headed for the section with the tallest trees.

"If it's a ten-footer you're wanting," she heard the tree lot attendant say, "then this section is your best bet."

The chatter of voices trailed off as Anne wandered among the smaller trees, feeling the calm and beauty of this winter wonderland. No snowfall yet, but still the chill in the air, the frost-tinged needles and pinecones gave a sense of this magical season of hope and blessed joy. How she longed for that Christmas-y feeling that eluded her this year; Dad's stroke, giving up her independence to move home, then another move and then... Fred! Her feelings had not changed, but clearly his had. He was enamored with Hannah, or at least she was to him, and did her best to make that known. Fred did not seem to mind, as he reciprocated her teasing, despite being the reserved, studious seminarian. If he bore any resentment or hurt from their prior relationship, he showed none of it. Rather, he seemed to treat Anne as an old college classmate he might vaguely recall from History of the Reformation or Christian Ethics class their junior or senior year. If this was meant to hurt her or punish her, she was determined not to let it show. She should keep her distance, be equally reserved and professional.

Still, such thoughts were unbecoming of two professional church workers, let alone adults pushing thirty. How could she think him capable of such spite and cruelty? No. More likely he had left their youthful romance behind in favor of new opportunities. But Fred receiving a call to preach? "How can they hear without a preacher?" the seminary recruiting posters read plastered around their college campus... Could that have had an affect on him? Why had he never said anything? Never gave even the slightest hint?

He had planned on pursuing his masters in political science and possibly a career in criminal justice. She could've gone on serenely as a teacher, music director and now caregiver to her aging father. But apparently not. God clearly had other plans for each of them. But why now after all this time? She had pondered that more than she cared to admit in the past several weeks. Should it keep her mindful of her folly and regret for heeding her family and not the desires of her own heart? "Delight thyself in the Lord and he shall give thee the desires of thine heart." Those words from her Confirmation verse plagued more than comforted her these days.

"Ah! There you are." Anne turned to the voice only to see Fred standing at the end of the grove. "These aren't tall enough to fill the chancel."

"Definitely not," Anne replied. "But maybe... never mind." She shook her head.

"Ah! So you are shopping for your own tree on company time?" That old mischievous glint filled his eyes.

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“Perhaps,” she stated flatly. “... in our house.” She swallowed, thinking of the implications that may denote. “I mean, my house with Father. Our old artificial tree is unsuitable now.”

“Ah! Yes, Professor Engelke said as much.” To her confused look he added, “I have enjoyed the drives to seminary for weekly chapel. He is quite knowledgeable, and I regret not having the opportunity to sit in one of his classes.”

“You’ve... been driving Dad to chapel?” How had she not known this? How had Dad never thought to mention it?

“Yes,” he said as if something everyone knew. “He never told you? Carl asked me to, as part of my fieldworker duties. Gotta admit I jumped at the opportunity. I do believe I gain more from the drives. He is quite an amazing man! And an exceptional teacher!”

“Yes... yes he is.” Anne didn’t know quite what to make of this. Her father riding in the car every week with this man she intended to keep secret all through their final year of college. And all the while was he keeping secret desires of his own from her? Why had he never told her of his aspirations to be a minister, let alone, in her own denomination? His family rarely attended church. He barely tolerated college chapel services.

With a twelve-foot balsam fir strapped securely to the top of the van, the decorating committee sang carols on the drive back to church for an afternoon of tree trimming and decking the halls with the other youth group members. Once all the ornaments glistened on the four-yard long fir and greenery framed each stained-glass window with red velvet bows and the nativity scene set prominently before the chancel steps, the assembly gleefully headed to the fellowship hall for pizza a soda – the youth group’s reward for a job well done on a Saturday afternoon.

“How many are going to the ice-skating party next weekend?” Hannah addressed the group between bites of pizza but her eye was askance toward Fred, who reached over to wipe a drip of pizza sauce from her chin before it fell on her jeans.

“Ice skating?” Fred said, “I’m in! Where?”

“Steinberg’s Rink in Forest Park.” Anne was a fair skater, though not nearly the athlete Fred was, having played ice hockey in high school. He could skate like a pro as she well knew from their ice skating dates in those harsh Chicago winters. Did he remember? Or want to forget?

“Yes! It’s our annual youth group Christmas party at the rink,” Hannah leaned closer to Fred.

The next Saturday evening, Anne laced up her skates at the down ice rink while Fred helped Hannah and a few novice skaters tighten their laces assuring them he’d have their back as they maneuvered across the slick surface. “Don’t just cling to the wall. One foot in front of the other. Glide and step and slide and...” If he hadn’t decided to enter seminary, Anne mused, getting her footing on the ice, Fred might’ve had a calling as an ice-skating or hockey coach.

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Soon, Anne relaxed into the easy feel of ice beneath her feet, gliding, weightless and free, wrapped snugly in her newest Fair Isle sweater on this frosty starlit evening. The rink was not too crowded for a Saturday evening, and everyone seemed to be all in the holiday spirit, if only Anne could catch a bit of it too.

Hannah clung especially close to Fred, who put full attention into her skating lessons. “I... can’t...” she sputtered between gasps. “I’ll fall...”

“You got this, Hannah,” Fred said, “I’m not far away. Just glide. Easy there!” He skated backwards facing her a few feet away, encouraging her to “... relax, breathe, one foot, then the other”. Anne rounded the bend toward the other side of the rink, lost in thought, to the rhythm of her own skates and the music tinkling overhead.

“I... CAN’T... Oh!” Anne turned to see Hannah slip backwards and Fred swerve behind to catch her and then deftly swing her around to face him in a whirling move that elicited a round of applause from a few passing skaters and those on the bench surrounding the fire pit outside the rink. Fred took his bow in true Olympic style, holding raised hands with his partner. A few snarky kids dashed off pretend scores of 7.9 and 8.0 on a napkin assessing their performance. Everyone laughed and the skating resumed.

“Ooh! Let’s do that again!” Hannah squealed. “We can do better. Right, Freddy? Aw! C’mon!”

Fred declined, moving a distance away to help another youth when Hannah propelled her skates in Fred’s direction, arms wide and squealing with glee. “Catch me, Freddy!”

But he hadn’t seen her soon enough as she sped toward him at full speed. A second later she lay sprawled, flat on her back, her head cracking against the ice resounding in the cold night air.

Anne weaved across the ice between oblivious skaters, a few frozen in shock, including Fred.

“Just say still, Hannah,” Anne said calmly. “Can you hear me?” The girl’s eyes were unfocused, pupils dilated, and she muttered incoherently.

“Easy, Hannah. Don’t move. Someone help us!” Anne turned to see the rink attendant skating toward them. Minutes later, Carl drove his sister to the nearest ER. What else could go wrong in this week of Joy? Anne pondered as she rode along doing her best to comfort an agitated and disoriented Hannah.

ADVENT IV: LOVE

Two days before *La Posada*, Hannah was in no condition to portray Mary riding a donkey down the five-block journey through Old Towne. A concussion and sprained shoulder kept her resting at home though, thankfully, she would recover.

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“We’ve run out of anyone who isn’t already in the program or willing to ride a donkey.” Maren appealed to her older sister, as usual, to solve the dilemma.

“I suppose one of my sopranos could,” Anne offered, “Maybe Anita Hermann, or... Samantha Filmore.”

Fred offered a tentative solution. “Why not yourself, Anne? The way you helped Hannah, you’d manage a donkey quite aptly.”

The four other committee members stared at him. Maren tittered. “My sister directs the Victorian carolers and always has. She could never play the Virgin Mary who was... what? All of thirteen or fourteen?” as if that were the most ridiculous thing imagined. Anne focused on her meeting notes and twirled her pen. “Of course, It’s not possible. I’m the choir director. But, I will talk with Anita or Sam and see if either is interested.”

“Oh! Would you? That would be awesome!” Maren clasped her hands together. “Anita would be perfect. Don’t you think? Closer in age at least.”

Christmas Eve was slightly overcast with a promise of light snowfall late in the evening. Fred took his place at the head of the parade with Anita, robed in blue, poised on the donkey ready to be led along the brick streets, the entourage of Christmas revelers trailing behind. At each door, his sweet baritone sang out the verse in Spanish, asking for room.

At each shop along Main Street, a woman stationed on the balcony above replied, “There is no room here, keep looking further. Go away!”

Again, this scenario was repeated between singing carols accompanied by pipers and drummers, until at last Joseph’s request was heeded.

“Yes, good sir, there is a place in my stable.” The woman pointed toward the riverfront where the creche awaited on the bandstand.

It always brought tears to Anne’s eyes, but never more than after a year of changes and trials; it all came down to searching, trusting, and finally, finding a home – a place of rest and peace. If Mary could endure such ignominy of bearing the Son of God in a crude stall only to face the piercing of her own soul, pondering in her heart things too great to grasp, then what had she to fret over?

The Nativity pageant completed, all headed toward the park where a massive Yule Log awaited to be set ablaze. A mixing of cultures and traditions. Mexican, English and American all mingled together in this Season of Joy, Peace, Hope and Love. She longed to tell Fred he had done splendidly tonight, but he was likely somewhere lost in the crowd, among his new friends, basking in the glow of his stirring performance. “The best Joseph we’ve ever had!” bystanders gushed in praise of another successful Posada. “And he sung in Spanish! That’s our fieldworker!”

The crowd pressing around, Anne moved to a quiet bench by the river, gazing at the twinkling lights shimmering on rippling waters.

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“Turn around, Bright Eyes.”

Fred stood backlit by the glow of the burning Yule, still in his Joseph costume, holding two cups of hot cocoa. “Thought you’d like a cuppa. What’s a Christmas night without hot cocoa?” He held the cup toward her. “*La Posada* was a rousing success after all, best one ever, I hear. And mostly due to your tireless work, Anne.”

“I don’t know about that.” She took the cup and smiled her thanks. “I hear you stole the show with your Spanish singing.” She raised her cup in salute. “You’ve quite enchanted my hometown.”

“Not intentionally, I assure you.” He chuckled, then sobered into thoughtfulness. “I can see why you wanted to return here. I didn’t intend to upset your life by entering the seminary. I... guess I have a lot to explain.”

“Nothing to explain,” she lied, “It’s a free country and... we each must follow our calling.”

“Yes, I recall you saying that once upon a time.” He winced and sipped his cocoa. “It took me a while to understand. I should’ve told you long before... I knew our senior year, but...”

“When God calls, there’s no turning back?” she intoned wanly, “We can only proceed on the path before us, trusting.” He had called her Bright Eyes. “That song, you remember?”

“*Once upon a time I was falling in love,*” he sang softly.

“*Now I’m only falling apart,*” she joined in.

“Falling apart? Never on Christmas!” He paused. “Look, I just encountered countless rejections as Joseph finding suitable lodging for our Savior. I figure... what can I lose?” His eyes glistened. “My feelings haven’t changed, and I just wondered...”

“Neither have mine,” she exclaimed. “Maybe forever is gonna start tonight, Bright Eyes.” Lanterns on Main Street glowed as costumed carolers sang silhouetted around the blazing Yule Log. Whatever the future held, she was here now... with Fred on the most wonderful night of the year.

About the author

The author behind the pen name Charlotte Parke McQuary does not recall a time she did not know the name Jane Austen or her delightful novels. From watching the 1940 adaptation of *Pride & Prejudice* as a young child to anticipating the 1980 version on PBS in her teens, she was well versed in all things Austen by the time the iconic 1995 adaptation aired on A&E.

In between, there were all the Jane Austen novels to read and re-read until the world of fan fiction opened the doors to even more tales to spin with Austen's beloved characters. After secretly penning random ideas for plot ideas, she wandered into a welcoming social media community on all things JAFF, and decided it was time to take her writing seriously.

She is honored to be part of this Christmas Anthology as her first official JAFF publication, hopefully, with more to follow soon.

When not writing or reading JAFF she loves playing the pianoforte, working in her garden and spoiling two loveable cocker spaniels.



Home for Christmas

by Leigh Dreyer

Elizabeth laughed until her stomach ached and she wiped away a few tears. She had been lucky after college to land herself at an engineering firm as a communications specialist with an emphasis in marketing at the Pemberley Group. Charlie Bingley and his sisters Caroline and Louisa, William Darcy, and Richard Fitzwilliam had been at the firm when she signed on and they had all become fast friends. Elizabeth enjoyed the chaos of her friends. Spending the last seven months in a new place without them would have been a challenge.

Charlie, a vibrant people person in charge of her department, lifted his glass to deliver another toast. "To our Christmas bonuses!" he cheered.

"To our bonus!" the rest echoed.

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Caroline frowned and said, “May we all have the chance this year to prove that money doesn’t make us happy.”

“Hear, hear!” They said as they drank.

“You know,” said Elizabeth, “the engineering department got a larger piece of the bonus pie this year.”

Richard elbowed Darcy. “Next drink’s on you, eh, Moneybags?”

“How do you know that? You aren’t supposed to discuss your salaries with other co-workers!” said Caroline, putting a hand to her chest.

“Are you actually clutching your pearls?” laughed Richard mimicking Caroline while she and Louisa argued about how the bonus percentages leaked to the rest of the firm. Caroline and Louisa worked in Human Resources (Elizabeth privately thought it was only there that they could learn all the salacious gossip without being fired themselves).

“Come on, Richard. Stop teasing her. You know she doesn’t like it,” said Darcy, rolling his eyes at his exuberant cousin.

William Darcy was an electrical engineer and anyone that knew him could tell. Will regularly insulted people without meaning to, asked too many questions and generally was awkward and occasionally rude. He was a great guy, normally kind, but often a little too honest which threw people for a loop, especially those that did not know him. He was incredibly intelligent but, unfortunately, his face showed every time he thought someone else was... not.

When Elizabeth had first met Darcy at the bar after work, she overheard him telling Charlie that she was “kind of pretty, but not worth my time.” That had not started their relationship out on a great foot, but eventually Elizabeth had come to the realization that he simply did not filter his thoughts. Used to the efficiencies of the projects he worked on, he told the truth whether it was kind or not. Sometimes he was full of himself and pretentious about his education and accomplishments, but for the most part, he quietly went about his job, providing suggestions to other engineers and had a reputation for looking out for his team.

If she was honest, Darcy had grown on her. He was handsome, articulate, and had apologized for his initial comments (he knew she had overheard) and told her he thought she was beautiful one time when he had one drink too many.

“Okay, okay,” Darcy said as he tried to calm Richard and the sisters from their argument which was now veering into technical human resource law. “Next drink is on me since I’m incredibly wealthy.” He waived for their regular waitress, Sarah. “Could we get another round?”

“Absolutely. Are you all eating tonight?” she said, leaning against Richard’s chair. Richard was Darcy’s cousin and worked for what he described as “the law,” but, in reality, he was a talented patent attorney and singlehandedly fought for the rights of the company’s inventors.

“Maybe just dessert?” Charlie entreated the group. “We’re all leaving this evening for Christmas vacation for the next week.”

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“You are so lucky.” Sarah frowned. “The only vacation we get is time we don’t get paid. I’ll be right back with those drinks.”

As soon as she walked away, Darcy spoke conspiratorially, “You guys brought your tips for Sarah, right? Caroline, you remembered?”

The group gathered bills together and handed them to Darcy. “Well, it won’t get her a week, but she should have a day or two she can call in. Thanks, everyone.”

“Speaking of vacation,” said Caroline, “what are you doing this year Richard?”

Richard looked at Darcy. They both rolled their eyes and said in unison, “Fitzwilliam Family Fun.”

“What is that?” asked Louisa.

Richard sighed. “It’s when my mother and father who think they are God’s gift to entertainment take it upon themselves to be the best grandma and grandfather in the whole wide world and host a series of made-up Olympic events that we all have to participate in.”

“Last year was World’s Strongest Cousin,” said Darcy.

“Practically a decathlon and they had us all matched up by weight classes. It was a little spooky. The year before that was Rockets’ Red Glare where we had to make and launch model rockets. Before that they took us to a working dude ranch where we were forced to work cattle. It was significantly less romantic than the Westerns make it out to be. Wyoming is freezing in December.”

“It’s nice your mom makes an effort to be creative,” said Elizabeth. “My mom just spends all day in the kitchen stressing out about everything being exactly as she pictured it.”

Richard shrugged. “Yeah, I guess. This year’s theme is ‘Movie Madness’ and I can’t begin to imagine the horrors that await me at home.”

Sarah returned with the drinks and a tray of dessert plates.

“I got you guys the sampler. Let me know if you need anything else, but I’ve got to close down tabs now,” Sarah said. She gathered their cards and returned quickly to her station to run them. Darcy excused himself to hand Sarah an envelope of their combined cash. Elizabeth could not hear their interaction but watched as Sarah teared up and hugged Darcy. Elizabeth felt a strange stab of jealousy as she watched them together.

“What about you Bingleys?” asked Elizabeth, half to distract herself from Darcy’s continued conversation.

“We’re going on a family cruise. Mother simply insists that we be in Kauai -in the Hawaiian islands- by Christmas and refuses to fly so a boat is the next best option,” said Louisa.

“Any Christmas that requires a bikini is my kind of holiday,” said Caroline, preening.

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“I guess a cruise isn’t so bad,” said Charlie. “I just wish we could have one normal Christmas with the stockings and the tree that we decorate.”

“How primitive,” said Caroline. “You probably want little decorations made out of popsicle sticks and googly eyes too, don’t you?”

Elizabeth rolled her eyes and caught Richard doing the same. “There’s nothing wrong with nostalgia, Caroline,” Richard said.

Caroline’s eyes widened. “Of course not... if your family is dignified. But children are little monsters and have to be taught to enjoy the finer things.”

Richard nudged Elizabeth and whispered under his breath. “I’m sure her tree will have Faberge ornaments with Hermes scarf bunting.” They erupted into giggles.

“What?” said Caroline. “You find those salt dough creations ridiculous too?”

Elizabeth trained her face into a look of questionable sincerity. “Yes. Richard and I are offended by their entire existence. In fact, my tree only has ornaments of taste.”

“See? There’s nothing wrong with balls, Charlie!”

That sent the entire group reeling. Caroline rolled her eyes until she could not help laughing with the group until Darcy returned.

They got up from the table to put on their coats, Elizabeth gasped. “Darcy! We never asked you for your plans! Are you going to Fitzwilliam Family Fun too?”

“No, I was just going to stay here.”

“With your sister?”

“Oh, she’ll be with Tom. She just told me the day before yesterday. It was all a bit sudden.”

“Meeting the parents? Must be getting serious.”

“I think he’s going to propose on Christmas Eve.”

“That’s wonderful. They’re so great together.” Elizabeth paused for his plans, but none were forthcoming, and Darcy was putting his wallet in his pocket, clearly not distracted. “So, you’re just going to have Christmas alone?”

Caroline, Louisa, Richard, and Charlie all stood staring at him. The question had silenced the group.

“I guess so.”

“Unacceptable,” said Caroline and Louisa together.

“I could stay home,” said Charlie.

“Fitzwilliam Family Fun,” said Richard in what Elizabeth assumed was an enticing manner.

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Darcy shrugged. “I didn’t think it would be a big deal.”

Elizabeth stood stunned. She couldn’t imagine not going home for Christmas. Of course, Darcy’s parents had died in a car crash a few years before so he did not have a home to go to, but what about Santa and stockings and getting pajamas on Christmas Eve? He must have had traditions with his sister, but with her gone too...

Darcy sighed. “I could’ve got a ticket to Richard’s parents, but it was just so expensive for a last-minute ticket and with my sister getting married soon I didn’t want to spend the money. I guess—well, I guess I kind of thought you would be here too.” Darcy sounded flustered. He met Elizabeth’s eyes and she noticed he did not look around at any of their other friends.

Elizabeth had seen Darcy’s apartment. It was fine—a stark, comfortable bachelor pad with few decorations. It needed a woman’s touch badly, but all told, it was perfectly fine. It would never be described as homey or cozy or snuggly and that is exactly what everyone needed on Christmas.

“Come home with me,” she blurted mid-thought, surprising even herself.

“What?” Darcy asked. Elizabeth had mostly complained about her family. She never complained about Jane, of course, but Mary, Kevin, and Lydia had all been the stars of her stories about home. Her mother fretted and worried too much generally and was loud and her dad was kind of lazy. She had told all sorts of stories to Darcy and the others, and she could only imagine what was going through his mind now as he considered her offer.

“Why don’t you come home with me?” Elizabeth cleared her throat and tried to act casual. “My parents never mind if friends come over and certainly will have plenty of food for one more person. I think my cousins might be in town along with my aunts and uncles so another person will just fill in the crowd. It will be fun. Just a lot of eating and talking, really.”

“Can I come too?” Richard said eagerly.

Darcy lifted an eyebrow. “You have your own fun planned.”

Elizabeth shrugged. “I’d invite you too, Richard, but I only have room for one other person in my car.”

“Are you sure I won’t be a burden?” asked Darcy, tentatively.

“Absolutely not! It will be nice to have another driver. Besides, my folks would love to have you.”

“It sounds like a fabulous Christmas. Thank you for the invitation. I’d love to come.”



The dirt road was bumpier than she remembered. “They must not have grazed the road lately. They only do it every few years.”

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“When was the last time you were home?” Darcy asked while he concentrated on avoiding the ruts in the road.

“Graduation weekend. I took a couple days off between graduation and starting work at Pemberley.”

“Have you missed it?” Darcy asked, meeting her eye briefly.

Elizabeth looked around at the old oaks her grandmother had planted that lined both sides of the road, the tall, yellowed grass as it danced in waves in the fields. If it snowed this Christmas, those fields would be sparkling white as far as the eye could see. Her favorite thing as a kid had been to be the first to put a line of footprints into a snowy plain. It was magical. She smelled the air filled with earth and wind and while she felt the exciting zing of possibility, she felt at home.

“Yeah,” she admitted, almost to herself. “Yeah, I have.”

Darcy gave her a few moments of privacy which she appreciated. He was a person comfortable with the quiet and she found that she did not mind it much when he was around. Her life was normally chaotic filled with noise and life, but Darcy seemed to help her stop and notice the small things that made life beautiful.

“Remind me of your siblings and their names again, please,” said Darcy. “There’s Jane?”

“Yes. You’ll know Jane as soon as you see her. She’s beautiful and an absolute angel. Everybody loves her.”

“And then Mary?”

“Pious Virgin Mary.” Elizabeth gasped and shot her hand to cover her mouth. “Don’t tell her I call her that! I should never have told you!”

Darcy shook his head. “The Virgin Mary. I take it she is not the angel Jane is?”

“I cannot believe I said that out loud.” Elizabeth blushed. “No, she is fine. She’s just a little self-righteous and a few years ago got invited to this revival and came back singing hymns and telling everyone she had been saved every five minutes and it got really annoying. She’s honestly great. If you ever need a rule-follower with an eye for detail, it’s Mary. She’s a senior at university, studying architecture and this is the first year she’s been home for a few years while she’s been doing school. I’m sure she has chilled out considerably since leaving home. I mean, who wasn’t an idiot at fifteen?”

Darcy nodded. “True, true. My sister decided she was going to elope with a friend of Richard and mine. Too bad for her I found out and stopped the whole thing.”

“At fifteen? Can you even get married at that age?”

“No, but to her teenage romantic heart, I don’t think she realized that my friend wasn’t interested and even if he was it couldn’t happen. It was right after our parents died and I think

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it was her crisis moment. She's never done anything so stupid since, so I guess I can forgive a lot of dumb choices at fifteen."

"Poor thing. Mary is fine now. At least she seems fine. We'll see."

"Who is next? Your brother, right?"

"Kevin."

"Kevin does what?"

"Kevin does high school. He graduates this year. He plays football and is generally a jock. He is also my dad's favorite, but don't tell anyone I told you." Elizabeth playfully held her fingers to her lips and shushed.

Darcy winked at her. "Your secret is safe with me." Elizabeth noticed that Darcy's hazel eyes held a hint of playfulness that she had never noticed before. Normally, Darcy was laser-focused on his projects, never participating in water cooler gossip, never attending to the innate personal details of his co-workers' lives. He attended every event, helped set up and take down, had a seemingly easy relationship with other people, but he remained a little separated from most at work. It was just to their modest friend group that he had really opened up.

Darcy ticked siblings off on his fingers. "So, we have Jane, you, Mary, Kevin, then Linda?"

"Close—it's Lydia. Lydia is sixteen and..." Elizabeth went silent. "Well, that's really the best description of Lydia. Sixteen."

"I understand. I've heard some of your stories about Lydia. I can only imagine."

The car slowed as it passed a driveway and Elizabeth pointed to the next mailbox just ahead. "It's that one. Just pull in anywhere there's a spot."

Darcy parked the car and before either door had opened a flood of people exited the wide, white, ranch-style home. Choruses of "Merry Christmas!" and "Elizabeth!" along with "Who's your friend?" surrounded Darcy and Elizabeth while busy hands grabbed suitcases, pillows, and wrapped presents. Before long Elizabeth was sitting next to Darcy on a long couch in front of a fireplace, her entire family sitting around them eager to interrogate the stranger.

Elizabeth blushed brightly. She had told her mom that she was bringing a friend home, but she neglected to tell him that he could be considered a handsome, available man.

Mrs. Bennet was a short, round sort of woman who had a soft lap, quick hands, and loud opinions. "Lizzy!" she nearly shrieked. "You didn't tell us you were going to bring home a man. How long have you two been dating then?"

Elizabeth wanted to die of shame. Darcy stuttered in clear surprise at such a question.

"Will is just a friend, mom."

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“Well, that is nice. Always glad to have friends around. You’re welcome any time, Will.” Mrs. Bennet stood up. “I’ve got to check on the turkey and potatoes or Christmas will be ruined.” As she left, Elizabeth could hear mutterings of, “Of course that girl brings home a friend. How I’ll ever have grandbabies I’ll never know. He would be the cutest man she’s probably ever known. Wouldn’t know romance if it bit her in the foot, that one.”

Elizabeth met Darcy’s eyes and put her lips together in a grin and shrugged.

“Tell me about your education, Will,” Mary began. “Lizzy said you were an engineer?”

Darcy talked about his college, both undergraduate studies and his masters. Elizabeth tried to pay attention to his answers, but she noticed that when Darcy was in a conversation with her family he really focused on the person and asked questions in return. He was normally awkward, but she was impressed that he was clearly trying to make a good impression. He smiled often and that smile reached his eyes which crinkled lightly at the corners.

“Wait a second,” Elizabeth interrupted Darcy’s explanation of the differences in engineer types by putting her hand over his to quiet him politely. He turned his hand up and held it lightly. “Where is Lydia?”

Mr. Bennet chuckled. “Just noticed, did you?”

“The room was too quiet,” said Elizabeth.

Kevin spoke up. “She’s on a Christmas date with Andrew.” He sang the name and made kissing noises. Kevin began dancing suggestively and sat on Jane’s lap. “Santa Baby stick an Andrew under the tree, for me.”

Jane just laughed good-humoredly. “She’s been trying to go out with Andrew since seventh grade. Give her a break.” She checked her watch. “They should be home fairly soon. It’s already dark out.”

“Let’s go wait for them,” shouted Kevin. He ran to the hall and started putting on his jacket. “Come on, Will. Lydia will just die.” He laughed with glee like a mischievous elf, threw Darcy’s coat at him and ran to fling open the front door.

Darcy stared wide-eyed at Elizabeth, who just giggled. “Want to embarrass a teenager?” she said.

“I’ll do anything with you. It’s your house,” said Darcy putting on his coat. Elizabeth met the eyes of her father who raised one eyebrow before mouthing I’ll do anything with you at her. She stuck her tongue out at Mr. Bennet, stepped into her coat being gallantly offered by Darcy and walked out.

They did not have to wait long before they spotted headlights visible at the top of the hill a few hundred yards down the road. As soon as they saw them however, the lights cut out.

Elizabeth heard Darcy chuckle softly. “Do you think we need to go intervene? You don’t think their car died do you?” Darcy asked as if she did not know exactly what was happening.

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Kevin hooted. Mary shook her head. Jane and Mr. Bennet laughed. Mrs. Bennet tutted. “My dinner will get cold if that girl doesn’t get a move on!”

Elizabeth leaned closer to Darcy, both to get warmer and to speak softly to him. He put his arm around her and Elizabeth felt snug in his embrace, reminding herself that he was just a friend...wasn’t he? “Lydia is probably making out right now.”

Darcy grinned. Elizabeth had never seen such a look on his face. “What?” she finally asked when the grin did not fade.

Darcy shook his head. “Nothing.”

“Not nothing. You’ve got a smile as big as the moon.” She nudged his chest with her shoulder. “Really, tell me what you’re thinking.”

He leaned down next to her ear and she could feel the warm heat of his breath against her neck. She shivered, but not from the cold. “I was just thinking, I wish I was Andrew right about now.”

Elizabeth’s jaw dropped. “What?”

Darcy looked down at her and she could see that he must have realized what he had said. “Oh, no. It’s just that...” he fumbled a few more seconds on his words. “I mean to be on a date on Christmas Eve with a cute girl—at least I assume she’s cute based on the other girls in your family—and sneaking in for a Christmas kiss. I haven’t dated anyone since Caroline and I broke up.”

“You dated Caroline?”

“Yeah, for a couple months. I’m surprised she didn’t tell you.”

“Caroline only tells me things that make her look good. Losing a boyfriend doesn’t accomplish that goal.”

“Well, true. I did break up with her.”

“Really?”

“Does that surprise you? I’m not that big of a nerd, Elizabeth. Give me a little credit.”

“No, I didn’t mean that. Why did you break up?”

“Different life goals. I always wanted a big family. You know growing up with just a sister, it’s lonely. Our Christmases are never like this. Your family is so full of joy and love. You can feel it radiating through your house. I mean, your mom has a turkey waiting in the oven. That’s like movie level Christmas right there.”

Elizabeth looked around her at her family. They had always been there and she supposed she had never properly appreciated them. She briefly wondered if Darcy would fit in during other Christmases before stopping herself. What was she doing? She had clearly watched one

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too many sappy Christmas movies. How could she even picture him here with her as a boyfriend or husband or father to her children? She needed to get a hold of herself.

“The lights are back on!” Kevin shouted, jumping up and down on the porch.

The family watched as the headlights slowly made their way down the hill, turned into the driveway. They all waved at Andrew, who waved back merrily. Lydia, however, had her arms crossed and a look of pure loathing. She got out of the car, slammed the door, and stalked up the sidewalk.

“I can’t believe you people. You’re all out here looking like a bunch of Hillbillies sitting on the porch. What are you even doing out here? Can’t you go inside like a normal family?”

“Lyddie and Andrew sitting in a tree! K-I-S-S-I-N-G!” Kevin started singing. Much to Lydia’s horror, the rest of the family continued with the next line. “First comes love, then comes marriage!”

“At this rate I’ll definitely be the first one married in this family since you’re all a bunch of weirdos! You won’t be able to find anyone willing to marry you.” Lydia called as she deliberately kept her head forward, not looking back at the group of seven people singing behind her. She walked to her room, her head held high and shut the door.

“Lydia! Christmas dinner is in five minutes and if you aren’t at the dinner table on time, Santa will not come!” Mrs. Bennet shouted through the door at her. Mrs. Bennet then turned down the hallway and stopped in front of Elizabeth. “Wouldn’t it be just the thing if she married Andrew? He wants to be in the military, and I’ve always been fond of a man in uniform. Do you think they would get married the year after high school or wait until after college? If he went to a military academy, they would have to wait, wouldn’t they? Dear Lydia would not like that one bit.”

Darcy pressed himself against the wall to let Mrs. Bennet through and glanced at Elizabeth skeptically. “Is your mom seriously trying to marry off your sixteen-year-old sister?”

Elizabeth took off her coat and hung it on the coat rack. “Don’t mind her. Ever since our friend Mrs. Lucas’ daughter Charlotte had a baby, mom is obsessed with the idea of grandchildren. Charlotte is a little older than Jane, but mom can’t get the idea out of her head. Jane hasn’t had a date in months. There just aren’t a lot of guys here and most of them we’ve known since elementary school. You know, I’ve actually thought about fixing Jane up with Charlie next time she is in town.”

“They’d probably be good together. He needs someone down to earth and a little more mature than he is to really settle into himself. We should double,” Darcy said.

“What do you mean we?” Elizabeth asked, but before Darcy could answer, they were called into dinner and Lydia stomped down the hallway directly in-between them. Darcy shrugged, winked at her, and grabbed her hand to escort her to the table. Elizabeth was not quite sure what had happened, but she suddenly did not hate the idea of pulling a Lydia and sneaking a Christmas kiss either.

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Dinner was a traditional Christmas affair. They stuffed themselves to oblivion and talked about the year. Darcy was livelier than Elizabeth had ever seen him. He complimented her mother on the cooking until she blushed and said, "Stop, stop. Aren't you the sweetest man alive? It isn't all that good, but I did get that new recipe for the green beans from the internet."

Kevin and Darcy talked about the football season and Elizabeth was shocked that Darcy followed the game at all. They chatted about different players and their capabilities, who was oversold in the draft, and which team they thought would be in the playoffs. Jane talked about her job and Darcy sold the idea of coming to town and meeting Charlie better than Elizabeth ever could. As Darcy always did, he was overly honest (Charlie is great, but a little indecisive and his sisters are awful), but her family seemed to notice that he was so sincere that a few blunt sentences did not bother them at all.

Mr. Bennet caught Elizabeth's eye during dessert, glanced meaningfully at Darcy, and then back to her. Elizabeth pointed discreetly just above her plate between the two of them and shook her head no and mouthed "he's just a friend." Her father nodded, but Elizabeth noticed a look of skepticism as if to say, "not for long." Elizabeth looked at the napkin in her lap and wondered that she was suddenly bothered he was a just a friend.

After dinner, Mrs. Bennet folded out the couch for Darcy and made up the bed. "We're so glad you could come to Christmas. Our mornings used to be pretty early with the kids excited to see what Santa had brought, but until God sees fit to give me grandbabies, we've been starting later and later. Last year we didn't even get to our stockings until about eleven. You enjoy this chance to sleep in. I'm sure you don't get to often working for Pemberley. Lizzy said you all are always so busy. Let me know if you need anything, but extra blankets are in that corner over there and there are towels in the cabinet below the sink. You're welcome to anything in the fridge except for the cake for tomorrow."

Mrs. Bennet gave Darcy a little wink, patted the bed one more time, and shuffled off to her own room. Elizabeth stood awkwardly. She was going to sleep in Jane's room. Lydia had commandeered her room the day after she moved out of town. The couch was normally her bed when she visited these days. They were finally alone for the first time since they got out of the car and it seemed so quiet.

"Your family is really nice," Darcy finally said sitting on the edge of the bed and motioning for her to sit next him.

"Thanks." Elizabeth sat and picked at a stitch in the quilt her mom had chosen. "I know they can be a bit much."

"I'll say. I don't think I've ever had that much conversation at a dinner in my life. It seemed like everyone was in at least three conversations and then eavesdropping and jumping into at least three more."

Elizabeth nodded. "You're right."

"It was like a word tornado."

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That got her. She burst into laughter and he joined her and for a few minutes the laughter broke the tension of the quiet room and embraced them both into the warm glow of the home.

Darcy let out a sigh. “Oh, I asked Lydia what she and Andrew were doing with the lights off for so long.”

“What did she say?” Elizabeth looked over at Darcy eagerly. Lydia frequently gave the wildest excuses for her behavior and the family had long since stopped asking her anything about what she did.

“She said they were just talking.”

“Talking with their mouths together?”

“Probably.”

“What would they even be talking about?”

Darcy snorted. “He probably asked her if she kissed left-handed or right-handed.”

Elizabeth’s eyebrows pulled together. “What?”

“Well, no one knows which one they do, right? So, then they’d have to figure it out.”

“Do people even kiss handedly?”

“I don’t know. But it’s a good line, huh? You’d have to kiss someone to find out, for science.”

“Only you would bring up science on a date.” Elizabeth nudged her shoulder into Darcy’s and he put his arm around her.

“Well?” Darcy pulled her closer to him and tilted his head to look down at her. “Which is it for you?”

Elizabeth felt the familiar pull in her stomach—the thrill of anticipation and excitement.

“I’m not sure,” she said.

“Let’s find out together.” Darcy leaned down to touch his lips to hers.

“For science,” she muttered before letting herself go and experiencing the best first kiss of her life.

There had been many Christmases since their first together, but Elizabeth would always fondly remember the best first kiss she had ever received at home for Christmas.

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About the author

Leigh Dreyer is a huge fan of Jane Austen variations and the JAFF community. She is blessed to have multi-generational military connections through herself and her husband, who she met in pilot training. This personal experience has been the key to the realism portrayed in her modern variations.

Leigh lives with her husband and four children in Las Vegas where she participates in community theater and writes her stories.

Her three modern *Pride & Prejudice* variations from the *Pride in Flight Series* and her collaboration for the *Quill Collective's* anthology *Elizabeth: Obstinate Headstrong Girl*, can be purchased through Amazon.

Catch up with Leigh and her latest work at:

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AFTERWORD

A glimpse into our Mexican Christmas traditions *by Cristy Huelsz*

Noche Buena is how we say Christmas Eve in Spanish.

Some of my best memories as a child were around the Christmas tree at home or with my grandparents, when our maternal grandmother taught her grandchildren to sing Christmas carols to the baby Jesus, or when we broke the *piñata* and drank *ponche* in almost every house we visited during the holidays.

The first date of the season is December 12th with the celebration of the *Virgin Mary of Guadalupe*, the day she appeared to the indigenous Juan Diego almost 500 years ago, and it's a great national holiday. A lot of our traditions are a fusion of pre-Hispanic and Spanish culture over several centuries.

Something that cannot be missed is the *Nativity* or *manger*, a representation of the place where Jesus was born, with Mary and Joseph, some shepherds, animals and the 3 Wise Men. The figure of the baby Jesus is not placed until Christmas Eve, when the little ones of the house coo and sing to him. This Christmas is the 800th anniversary of the institution of this beloved custom by St. Francis of Assisi. Returning from a trip to the Holy Land, he staged a living nativity scene in a cave in Greccio, a village in central Italy.

The nativity remains on display in homes until February 2nd, the Feast of Candlemas, when Mary and Joseph presented the child in the temple. On this day, families bring their young children to church to receive special blessings.

The *pastorelas* are another great popular enjoyment. They are a theatrical representation about Christmas, Mary and Joseph's pilgrimage to Bethlehem to find a place to stay and the shepherds who will go meet the child God and their difficulties along the way. This is where the creativity of the performers comes in to give comedy to the tugging between the demons, who seek to tempt the shepherds into missing their meeting with the newborn, and the angels, who want to aid the shepherds.

During the nine nights leading up to Christmas Eve (December 16-24), we visit family, friends and even co-workers to celebrate the famous gatherings known as *posadas*. Part of these traditions date back to the 16th century. As you saw in the story *Persuasion at La Posada*, it is customary for a family to host the *posada*, offering food such as tacos, tamales, *buñuelos* and hot drinks such as *atole*, hot chocolate and *ponche*.

At these gatherings we do not usually exchange gifts, but we do break *piñatas*, pots traditionally made of clay with seven cardboard spikes covered with bright multicolored paper, symbolizing the seven deadly sins, and breaking it symbolizes the destruction of the sins. The *piñata* is filled with candies and fruits (heaven's rewards). Those who break the *piñata* must be blindfolded (alluding to faith being blind) and both adults and children participate.

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Normally before dinner during the *posadas*, we have a sung representation of Joseph's struggle while asking for shelter since Mary is about to give birth (which is the origin of the gathering's name). We divide into 2 groups: pilgrims (those who are going to be outside) and innkeepers (those who will be inside). And what do we sing?

Here's our *posada* song in Spanish and a literal translation to English.

<p>PEREGRINOS <i>En el nombre del cielo os pido posada, pues no puede andar mi esposa amada.</i></p>	<p>PILGRIMS <i>In the name of heaven I ask you for shelter, For she cannot walk my beloved wife.</i></p>	<p>PEREGRINOS <i>Posada te pide, amado casero, por solo una noche la reina del cielo.</i></p>	<p>PILGRIMS <i>She asks you shelter beloved innkeeper, for just one night the queen of heaven.</i></p>
<p>POSADEROS <i>Aquí no es mesón, sigan adelante. Yo no puedo abrir, no sea algún tunante.</i></p>	<p>INNKEEPERS <i>This is not an inn, go ahead. I cannot open, you might be a robber.</i></p>	<p>POSADEROS <i>Pues si es una reina quien lo solicita, ¿cómo es que de noche anda tan solita?</i></p>	<p>INNKEEPERS <i>So, if it's a queen who requests it, how is it that at night she travels so alone?</i></p>
<p>PEREGRINOS <i>No seas inhumano, tennos caridad, que el Dios de los cielos te lo premiará.</i></p>	<p>PILGRIMS <i>Don't be inhuman, be charitable to us, that the God of heavens will reward you for it.</i></p>	<p>PEREGRINOS <i>Mi esposa es María, es reina del cielo, y madre va a ser del Divino Verbo.</i></p>	<p>PILGRIMS <i>My wife is Mary, she is queen of heaven, and mother she will be of the Divine Word.</i></p>
<p>POSADEROS <i>Ya se pueden ir y no molestar, porque si me enfado os voy a apalear.</i></p>	<p>INNKEEPERS <i>You may go now and do not disturb, because if I get angry I will strike you down.</i></p>	<p>POSADEROS <i>¿Eres tú José? ¿Tu esposa es María? Entren peregrinos, no los conocía.</i></p>	<p>INNKEEPERS <i>Are you Joseph? Is your wife Mary? Come in pilgrims, I hadn't recognized you.</i></p>
<p>PEREGRINOS <i>Venimos rendidos desde Nazaret. Yo soy carpintero de nombre José.</i></p>	<p>PILGRIMS <i>We come exhausted from Nazareth. I am a carpenter named Joseph.</i></p>	<p>PEREGRINOS <i>Dios pague, señores, vuestra caridad, y que os colme el cielo de felicidad.</i></p>	<p>PILGRIMS <i>May God repay, sirs your charity, and may heaven fill you with happiness.</i></p>
<p>POSADEROS <i>No me importa el nombre, déjenme dormir, pues yo ya les digo que no hemos de abrir.</i></p>	<p>INNKEEPERS <i>I don't care about the name, let me sleep, for I already told you we shall not open.</i></p>	<p>POSADEROS <i>¡Dichosa la casa que abriga este día a la Virgen pura, la hermosa María!</i></p>	<p>INNKEEPERS <i>Blessed is the house that shelters this day the pure Virgin, the beautiful Mary!</i></p>

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*Los posaderos abren la puerta
y dejan entrar a los peregrinos*

*The innkeepers open the door
and let the pilgrims enter*

TODOS

*¡Entren santos peregrinos,
reciban este rincón,
que aunque es pobre la morada,
os la doy de corazón!
¡Cantemos con alegría
todos al considerar
que Jesús, José y María
nos vienen a visitar!*

EVERYONE

*Enter, holy pilgrims,
receive this corner,
although the dwelling is poor,
I give it to you from my heart!
Let us sing with joy
all of us as we consider
that Jesus, Joseph and Mary
have come to visit us!*

While those outside sing, they have small candles lit, and the group that is inside usually turns off some of the house lights. By the time they welcome those outside, the candles are extinguished and the inner lights are turned on.

Another of our traditions is the *Advent wreath*. Advent, from the Latin for «coming», is the time that announces the coming of Jesus, as its candles are lit on the 4 Sundays before Christmas Eve. It comes from the pre-Christian German tradition and in the 16th century it was already used by German Catholics and Protestants. It consists of a wreath of green foliage in which four candles are inserted: three purple and one pink, each one representing Hope, Peace, Joy and Love. It is usually decorated with pinecones, bows and artificial Christmas Eve flowers. The wreath represents the light that illuminates the world and gives hope.

We love to decorate at this time of the year with *noche buena* flowers or in Nahuatl *Cuetlaxochitl*. Throughout Latin America it has different names, but it is native to Mexico and was highly appreciated by the Aztecs. There are more than 100 varieties. In the United States it came to be known thanks to the botanist and statesman Joel Roberts Poinsett (1779-1851), who was the first representative of the U.S. government in Mexico (the position of Ambassador did not yet exist at that time). It was in Taxco where he first saw this beautiful flower and took samples back to his country and by 1836 it was already known as «*poinsettia*».



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Families and friends get organized to spend Christmas at someone's house. Before dinner, many attend mass, where a special blessing is given. In some places the mass is at midnight. Returning home, there is dinner, the cooing of the baby Jesus in the manger, singing of Christmas carols, breaking the *piñata*, exchanging gifts, and enjoying being together.

On the morning of the 25th, it is also customary to go to mass, as well as on New Year's Eve. Whether on December 31st or January 1st, we usually go to give a hug to family and friends, wishing them the best for the new year. On January 6th we celebrate the coming of the Three Wise Men and gifts are given to children. In various places such as churches, shopping malls, and others, there are those who dress up as the Three Wise Men to take pictures with the children. It is around this day that we eat in family, at work or even at school the *Rosca de Reyes*, a sweet bread decorated with *ate* or candied fruit. The tradition comes from Spain in the 12th century and was imported to Mexico in the 16th century. Inside the *Rosca* are hidden little plastic figures of baby Jesus, and whoever finds it has to pay for the tamales that will be eaten on Candlemas Day.

Therefore, we gather again to have said tamales on February 2nd. Tamales are a pre-Hispanic dish prepared with corn dough that may have savory fillings such as chicken in red sauce, roasted poblano peppers with cheese, mole, pork, etc., as well as sweet fillings. There are many varieties, depending on the gastronomic customs of the different regions of the country.

So, there is really a lot to celebrate, and for every occasion we will always try to get together, eat and enjoy our traditions.

**“It is a truth universally acknowledged,
that an author in possession of a good novel,
must be in want of a translator”**

About the editor / translator

Cristy Huelsz was born in Mexico and for the past few years has been living in Washington with her beloved husband, her faithful companion in adventures.

After studying at the Autonomous University of Querétaro and working as an English teacher for a few years, she decided to venture into the area of literary translation, inspired by Sally Smith O'Rourke's novel *The Man Who Loved Jane Austen*.

She is the founder and director of *Cris Translates*, a company whose mission is to bring great classical and contemporary works to the Hispanic and Latin American public.

She has taken master's level courses and diplomas in translation at the Universidad de Guanajuato and the Mexican Association of Literary Translators (in collaboration with the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, UNAM). She is a life member of the Jane Austen Society of North America.

Some of her most outstanding Spanish translations include:

Nefasto by Nicole Clarkston

Cuando el sol se duerme by Alix James

Pemberley, el dragón del señor Darcy by Maria Grace

El descanso del marinero by Don Jacobson

and her four editions of Christmas anthologies.

To learn more about her upcoming projects or to make inquiries, follow her at:

www.cristranslates.com

Facebook: [fb.com/Cristranslates](https://www.facebook.com/Cristranslates)

Instagram: [@cristranslates89](https://www.instagram.com/cristranslates89)

CHRISTMAS CELEBRATIONS • 2023

About the illustrator

LadyWithPug (Julia Aliper) is an artist, illustrator and graphic designer based in Ukraine. She works both with traditional mediums and digital techniques.

Julia attended a School of Arts where she studied drawing, painting, sculpture and the history of arts and happily graduated with honors. Moving onto a Technical University, she actively participated in the student photographic community and additionally studied digital graphics, polygraphy and prepressing. Between her study sessions, she worked with children as a teacher of fine arts and decorator in a Summer Children's Centre.

After graduation she worked as designer of printing materials for an advertisement agency, illustrator of children's books and educational materials, and has illustrated Regency Romance novels.

In 2018 she partook in the International Book Illustration Exhibition in Haifa, Israel. In 2019 she became a Finalist for the International Illustration Award, at the SanSperArte Paese Museo, Italy. In 2020 she was selected for the 21st International Biennale of Cerveira Art, Portugal.

Currently she focuses on historical illustrations (Regency/Napoleonic Era) and is working on her coloring book for adults based on one of Jane Austen's novels.

To learn more about her upcoming projects or to make inquiries, follow her at:

www.ladywithpug.com

Facebook: fb.com/LadyWithPug

Instagram: @lady_with_pug

CHRISTMAS CELEBRATIONS • 2023

*Thank you for reading our Christmas anthology,
and to those who have made possible this beautiful project!*

*If you like this anthology,
we will be very happy to read your reviews and comments.*

*Are you an author who would want to participate next year?
Send us an email to:*

contact@cristranslates.com

*We wish you a happy holiday
and the very best for your loved ones!*

Merry Christmas and Happy New Year!

@cristranslates