

A COUNTRY CHRISTMAS

A short story by AA Abbott

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“Don’t sing,” Ben snapped, braking sharply as a BMW cut in front of him.

“It’s my favourite song,” his eight-year-old daughter protested.

He switched the radio off. “You know I don’t like it,” he admonished her.

Ciara took it well. She didn’t sulk, simply started playing a game on her phone. An only child, she’d always been self-sufficient.

Ben risked a sidelong glance at her once the traffic eased. Dark and slight, a wisp of a girl, she was the spitting image of her mother. He shuddered as he thought of Lucy, how he’d waved to her as she left with her choir on the coach, a coach that didn’t come back after its death plunge off a French mountainside. Although the motorway’s tarmac ribbon merely passed over flat fields, he resolved to focus only on the road. It stopped him dwelling on Lucy, his grief, or the Christmas he was about to spend with Michaela.

She was his first love and had become his first wife, albeit briefly. A year into their marriage, she’d informed him she was leaving to go travelling. He’d thought that wound had healed once he’d met Lucy, but now he wasn’t sure. It was uncommonly generous of Michaela to offer him the chance of a family Christmas, however, and he’d accepted for Ciara’s sake.

Ben’s anxiety rose as soon as he saw Hickwinton Hall. It was very different from the poky studio he’d shared with Michaela many years before, or indeed, the tiny terrace he owned now. Of course, he knew Michaela and Simon had one wing only, but who could fail to be impressed by the avenue of larches, the sweeping grounds and the huge old pile itself? Gothic arches, gables and lacy fretwork adorned the creamy stone mansion. He felt insignificant, simply an ant crawling along the avenue in his little Fiat.

Simon, his arm around Michaela’s shoulder, was standing outside the main door. A tall, bearded man, he was an architect who designed cutting edge skyscrapers in the City of London. Like most of that ilk, he’d never dream of living in one. With a pipe in one hand and a golden labrador at his feet, he looked every inch the country gentleman.

“Welcome,” Simon said, stepping forward to shake Ben’s hand. “Let me take your bags. Michaela will organise drinks.”

A beer was just what Ben needed. Ciara trailed after him, clutching her princess-pink backpack, as he gratefully followed Simon inside. The door opened into a wood panelled hallway with a grand marble staircase.

Simon gestured. “Our flat’s upstairs.”

The flat was larger than most houses. After a short stop in the shiny kitchen to thrust drinks in their hands, a beer for Ben and a Coke for Ciara, Michaela offered to take her guests to their rooms. It was the pretext for a tour. Michaela was self-assured, breezy as an estate agent. She could easily have passed for one, her hair blonder and make-up brighter than Ben remembered. He was left in no doubt that she was proud of the flat, her recent marriage to Simon and their life in the country. Smiling, she showed off her drawing room, dining room, games den where Simon’s two student sons looked up briefly from a PlayStation, and an upper floor filled with bedrooms and bathrooms. The décor was tasteful; original fireplaces, panelling and cornices gleaming with polish and paint. If his ex had intended to evoke jealousy towards Simon, a hint of resentment that her new squeeze could provide far more for her than Ben, she couldn’t have succeeded better.

“You like pink, don’t you?” Michaela asked Ciara.

Ben saw Ciara's eyes widen at the rose-strewn wallpaper and crammed bookcase. He softened towards Michaela again. The books were age-appropriate classics, old but of good quality. Michaela had obviously made more of an effort for his small daughter than the sugary Coke had suggested.

"May I stay here and read?" Ciara asked.

"I don't see why not," Ben said. The two lads were hardly going to bother amusing a small child. He allowed himself to be whisked back to the drawing room for more beers with Simon. It didn't take long to unwind, his antipathy vanishing, as Simon chatted about sport. Michaela popped in with a tray of sandwiches, but otherwise busied herself in the kitchen. It transpired that she had carefully mapped out activities for the next two days. They would walk to the local church that afternoon for carols, then return to a drinks party Michaela was hosting for neighbours. On Christmas Day, they would open presents and enjoy a traditional lunch. The next morning, Boxing Day, Ben and Ciara would return home.

The ground was still crunchy with frost as the two families walked to church in the last of Christmas Eve's sunlight. Ciara seemed cheerful, if quiet, looking solemnly at the white Christmas roses Michaela pointed out. The only sour notes came from the two gangling students. They evidently weren't attending of their own free will. Dawdling behind their father, they talked of tropes and memes within video games, a discussion Ben too might have enjoyed in his carefree youth. Nostalgia nagged at him until Ciara placed her hand in his.

The spire of St Stephen's Church was visible in the distance, its slates reflecting the sun's red rays. The rest of the mellow stone edifice came into view once they left the grounds of Hickwinton Hall.

A group of carollers already stood outside, the strains of Good King Wenceslas floating through the chilly air.

Ciara's eyes shone. "Come on, Emily," she said, pulling away from her father and skipping towards the singers.

"Emily?" Ben asked Michaela, puzzled. "Since when did you change your name?"

"Isn't Emily her imaginary friend?" Michaela asked. "She's been talking to me about nothing else." Mildly alarmed, Ben was about to express concern when a song sheet was handed to him.

"Come on," Simon whispered, "It's men only on the next verse."

When the children joined in again, an exceptionally pure voice trilled from Ciara's direction.

"Beautiful," Michaela said, nudging Ben in the ribs.

The remainder of the day was unremarkable. They were ushered inside the church shortly after their arrival. The service, heavy on carols and light on religion, passed swiftly. Although he knew no one, the evening drinks were pleasant enough, alcohol blurring the edges and causing Ben to forget the name of every neighbour to whom he was introduced. Ciara stayed in her room, venturing out only to ask if there would be a mince pie for Father Christmas. On being reassured, she put herself to bed.

Christmas morning began with a heavier frost, much appreciated by the labrador, Taffy. After a bracing walk through the grounds, Michaela announced communal opening of presents. There was even a bottle of port for Ben. That was unexpected, and rather decent of Michaela. Ben's finances were so stretched, they'd agreed he would bring a gift only for Ciara.

"Where's Emily's present?" Ciara asked anxiously.

"I expect Santa left it in her stocking," Michaela replied, to Ben's relief.

"No." Ciara shook her head. "I'll show you."

Ben shrugged. At least he might find out more about his daughter's imaginary friend. He let her lead him to her room.

"Look," she said, pushing the tall bookcase with all her might.

The bookshelves swivelled round, revealing a further chamber beyond.

"It's Emily's room," Ciara said.

There was little to see: bare floorboards, a wooden chair, and a bed. The covers might be white below the thick dust. An old rag doll in a lacy crinoline, grey with age, sat in the chair. Ben couldn't

lose the feeling that its button eyes were fixed on him. Despite the dust, a faint scent of roses hung in the air.

“You see?” Ciara said triumphantly. “No presents for Emily!”

“Let’s invite Emily to lunch with us,” Ben suggested. He might as well make the best of a bad job. Michaela was pragmatic; she was bound to agree.

“Emily would like that,” Ciara said, “although she only eats mince pies.”

Ben recalled the mince pie left out for Father Christmas. That had disappeared by morning. He’d assumed the dog had eaten it. It was a more likely explanation than a figment of his child’s imagination, conjured from an empty room. In any event, the labrador gave Ciara a wide berth once a place at the table was laid next to her for Emily.

When everyone was seated, Simon served smoked salmon mousse and flutes of champagne. A can of lemonade was produced for Ciara.

“Merry Christmas!” Simon said, raising his glass. Inevitably, after the first toast, he led another for absent friends.

Michaela hugged Ben. “We know it’s hard for you,” she said. “Thanks for spending the day with us.”

Ciara addressed the empty chair. “My mummy isn’t here,” she said. She sounded quite matter of fact. “But my daddy is.” Pointing to Ben, she beamed with pride.

Michaela had done everything for her menfolk on Christmas Eve. On Christmas Day, they rallied round to cook for her. Nearly everything except the turkey came out of a packet, Ben noted, but it was none the worse for that. Champagne, red wine and port were liberally splashed into his glass. Emily’s mince pie disappeared, as did the rosy Turkish delight Ciara had chosen for her before leaving to play alone. Again, Ben hadn’t seen who ate it. He dismissed the twinge of unease that flitted into his mind.

Despite the huge amount of alcohol he’d consumed, Ben felt sober enough to drive the next morning. All things considered, the stay at Michaela’s hadn’t been especially traumatic. It had been uplifting for Ciara to enjoy a family Christmas again. He almost broke into a tune as he drove home.

Their cat came running to greet them at the sound of the car engine, halting as Ciara emerged from the ageing vehicle. The smell of the dog, Taffy, must be clinging to her still, although evidently not to her father. The animal followed Ben into their small house as he unlocked the front door and carried their suitcases inside.

Ciara’s eyes sparkled. The trip really had done her good. He realised how withdrawn they’d both become since Lucy’s death.

“Can I play in my room, Dad?”

“Of course.”

Clutching her backpack, Ciara ran to the top of the stairs, humming. A short while later, Ben heard that gorgeous pure voice again. He really must encourage her to sing after all, perhaps even join a choir. There was no reason for lightning to strike twice.

He went to her room to tell her. There was just a hint, the faintest whiff of roses, at the threshold. Her singing had stopped now, and his daughter lay on her bed, sleeping. She was obviously exhausted. Nevertheless, as she breathed gently, her sweet face wore the most blissful smile.

The old rag doll was lying in her arms. It was merely a trick of the light, Ben was sure, that its button eyes appeared to wink at him.

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