

Twelve Days of Christmas

You were still asleep when I awoke. The first rays of morning light, milky-white and soft, pierced through our half-drawn curtains. Millions of dust particles danced a waltz across our room, swirling and frolicking in the pale winter sun. The cold, polished wooden floor beneath my bare feet, I crept over to the window. Its glass, steamed up in the corners and cold to the touch, was covered in a thin layer of ice. Delicate ice-ferns had spread across the surface, stretching out their elegant arms and revealing an intricate pattern of icy branches.

Peering outside, I could discern a world still in deep slumber, snuggled up in a thick blanket of velvety snow. The neighbours' neatly-kept front gardens, normally lined with quaint green bushes and grey cobble paths, were powdered white with a fine layer of ice and snow. The fields in the distance, now being kissed by the rising sun, shimmered in circles of icy sparkles. The little forest at the end of the lane gleamed softly from afar and even the huge silver fir in front of our porch seemed to have been dressed in a pearly white, almost festive attire. Countless snowflakes, delicate like Brussels lace, covered its broad branches and each of its needles seemed to have been dipped in a layer of frozen ice. Single droplets of dew had crystallised to icicles, in which rays of light seemed to be infinitely reflected. Seeing the whole tree thus adorned in icy ornaments, I had to smile. I already saw your little face, glowing with excitement over the first snow of December.

I leaned over the window-sill to take a peak further down but was unable to spot father's car in the driveway. Gazing up and down the undisturbed layers of ice and snow on the lane below, I figured that neither father nor mother had returned from the party last evening. They must have got snowed in and decided to stay the night at the Richardsons' after all. Putting on a cheery smile, I turned around to wake you. But you, you already sat upright in your bed, your cheeks flushed with rosy excitement.

“Has it snowed? Lucy, has it snowed? Tell me at once or I’ll burst with curiosity.”

You looked so very sternly at me, crossing your short, chubby arms across your small chest and shaking so very indignantly your face, framed with locks of bouncy, blond hair.

I smiled. “It sure did.”

We looked at each other for a moment. Then we rushed out of our room, down the broad oak staircase and out the front door. Outside in the gleaming brightness of ice and light, we had to squint for a moment or two. We breathed in, deeply, breathed in the sharp freshness of icy-cold air. As we closed our eyes, we could smell the sweetness of resin, could hear a subtle rustling in the bushes below. The first robins must have awoken, fluttering about and carefully shaking out their ruffled plumage. The snow beneath our naked feet felt so very cottony soft with every step we took, and yet it felt so piercing and cold. Within a few minutes, our lips turned blueish and our cheeks pale and white. It was too cold after all to be jumping about in thin, cotton nighties. I lifted you up and holding on tight, we went back in for a cup of hot cocoa and the warmth of a woollen blanket.

The afternoon we spent at Auntie Grace’s place a few houses down the lane. Our parents had called us that morning. It seemed that their car had broken down somewhere between Rochester and Hillsbury. Now, they were waiting for its repair, as I guessed, at the Richardsons’. Hearing this, you stamped your little feet. Little tears, I could not quite tell if of anger or sadness, rolled down your chubby cheeks and chin. Through your pressed-down lips, I could hear you muttering how very unfair all this was.

“I know.” I had answered and cradled you in my arms. “How about we built a snowman, just like the one in your picture book, and then we go to Auntie Grace’s place and have afternoon tea, like the proper grown-ups do.”

Your whole face lit up. That day at least, you proved to be not entirely inconsolable.

After all, this still meant that we could spend some time at Auntie Grace’s. Rather our neighbour than a proper aunt, we loved spending our afternoons at her place. Her small cottage

always smelled of candied fruits, of freshly cooked bramble jam and hot, buttered toast. Upon entering her quaint, little parlour, we were greeted with the warm scent of cinnamon and ginger. Auntie Grace had just pulled out a tray of freshly baked ginger biscuits from the oven. Surrounded by her heavy crimson curtains, screening us from the cold outside, and her hearty laughs, we felt like proper ladies, sipping our tea from porcelain cups and eating tea cakes from a silver tray.

The rest of our afternoon we spend in her kitchen, baking fruit cake and learning Christmas carols by heart. As we cut orange and lemon peels in thin slices to candy them in hot syrup, the smell of fresh citrus tickled our noses and the whole kitchen began to smell of the heavy sweetness of preserving sugar. We mixed half a pound of butter with flour, fresh eggs, and brown sugar to make a smooth batter and added baking powder and different spices. Our cakes were then to be filled with prunes and freshly chopped up hazelnuts, walnuts and candied fruits. We already saw our parents' faces gleaming with delight.

As we filled our batter into the buttered baking tins, Auntie Grace began singing again. "On the first day of Christmas my true love gave to me –", and we answered, "A partridge in a pear tree."

"On the second day of Christmas my true love gave to me –."

"Two turtle doves, and a partridge in a pear tree."

We all had to laugh and it felt like evening would never come. But evening came and brought with it darkness and a fresh load of snow. Despite Auntie Grace's sincere entreaty to stay at her place that night, we decided to go back home. After all, our parents might show up earlier than expected. Wrapped up in our wool coats, scarves and bobble hats, we hurried back along the snowy lane, the wind tugging at our clothes and turning our noses red.

At home, we stepped into utter darkness. I lit the fireplace in the living room and arranged pillows and blankets, as you cling to me tightly every step of the way. The power seemed to have been cut and we sat, huddled together, on the carpet and listened into the night. In the flickering

light of the fire, your face looked so very scared. But you did not dare say a word. Outside, the wind had grown into a proper storm, pulling violently at the window shutters and metal clasps. The silver fir's branches seemed to creak, bracing themselves against the forceful gushes of snow and ice.

Small, silent tears ran down your cheeks, as you hid your face in the warm embrace of my arms. I rocked back and forth, holding on tightly to your small, shivering body. Then, a loud bang cut through our silence. A gust of wind must have got a firm grip on a loose window shutter and slammed it against the wall. You started up and looked into my face pale of fear. You traced every line of worry, from my frown on my forehead down to my mouth quivering with fright. Clinging on even more tightly, you started to sing, first very faintly, then with increasing volume and courage.

“On the first day of Christmas my true love gave to me, a partridge in a pear tree.”

“On the second day of Christmas my true love gave to me –”, I joined in with a shaky voice, “Two turtle doves, and a partridge in a pear tree.”

We tightened our embrace and sang as loud as our voices would allow, trying to drown out the ferocious snow storm reaching into every nook and crack of our house with its long, icy claws and causing havoc outside.

“On the twelfth day of Christmas my true love gave to me, twelve drummers drumming, eleven pipers piping, ten lords a-leaping, nine ladies dancing –”.

Suddenly, loud banging sounds echoed from outside. We sang louder.

“Eight maids a-milking, seven swans a-swimming, six geese a-laying –”.

The banging and rattling grew louder and louder, something seemed to try to take the door off its hinges.

“Five gold rings, four calling birds, three French hens –”.

Then, a faint voice seemed to call out from the other side of the door. We stopped and listened intently. There it was again, someone was shouting out from outside. We started up and

upon opening the door, we were greeted by Auntie Grace, wrapped up in a shawl and covered with thick flakes of snow. She took us in her arms and would not let go of us until we were safely back at her house, tucked in warm duvets with a cup of hot cocoa in our hands.

My darling Mabel, that night you had been so very brave. In fact, you had always been the braver, the stronger of the two of us. Our parents, Auntie Grace, so many and so much are long gone. But the scent of hot cocoa, of candied fruits, the sound of the raging snow storm outside, your voice amidst the violent rattling of wind and ice forever linger on my mind. You might have forgotten this wee little story, one among the many moments we shared in our long life. Your memory might be jumbled up a bit, obscured in a mist of confusion and oblivion. But I, I will never grow tired of telling you this story, my dear, be it today, tomorrow, the week, the month, the year after this one. I promise. Your true sibling love, always, Lucy.