

Twelfth Night

by Julie Kay

*I wish you a hopeful Christmas
I wish you a brave New Year
All anguish pain and sadness
Leave your heart and let your road be clear*

*They said there'd be snow at Christmas
They said there'll be peace on Earth
Hallelujah, Noel, be it Heaven or Hell
The Christmas we get, we deserve*

***I Believe in Father Christmas,
Peter Sinfield***

Two shapes emerged from shadow into the light of a street lamp. The first, an older man with wavy salt and pepper hair, walked with his head down, a heavy scarf flapping in a cold December breeze. Behind him, a younger girl struggled to keep up, her long chestnut hair mimicking her companion's scarf. Her breath visible in the evening chill, she called out ahead.

"Why exactly did we have to park all the way back there if we're heading all the way up here? Couldn't we have just landed, you know...here?"

"It's safer this way. Trust me," he replied over his shoulder.

"Safer?"

The girl stopped.

"What do you mean, safer? What do you think we're going to find?"

Her eyes went wide as a panoply of ideas flew through her consciousness, each more terrible than the one before.

"Cybermen? At Christmas? No. An Ice Warrior. Or..."

The Doctor turned, his ageless face betraying an odd mix of nervousness and sadness.

"Oh, something far more insidious, and potentially more terrible, than that, Clara."

"What could be more terrible than Cybermen at Christmas?"

He took a few more steps, stopped, and motioned to his right.

"The past."

The Doctor watched quietly as Clara made her way to his side. She turned and in the direction his hand pointed, and the two of them looked at a relatively nondescript house nestled among a row of similar looking buildings.

"It's blue, Doctor."

He allowed himself a small smile. "Yes, it is. Always thought that was a nice touch."

"Who lives there?"

“Some very old...”

He paused and swallowed.

“...friends.”

Clara grabbed his hand, the warmth welcome in the cold night. He felt her tugging him toward the open gate in front of the house.

“We should go visit them, then! After all, it’s Christmas...I’m sure they’d be happy to see you!”

He shook his head slowly, his eyes wet and glistening in the soft light.

“I’m not sure that’s a good idea. We’re talking about my own personal time line. It’s never a good idea to cross that. Besides, sometimes the past should remain...the past.”

“But...”

“Oi! You two!”

Two heads turned toward the voice. Warm light beamed from an open doorway, and a woman stood there, arms crossed in front of her. Her hair, illuminated from behind, blazed like fire.

“Kind of a small group to be caroling, aren’t you?”

“Caroling? We’re not...”

The Doctor nudged Clara with an elbow, interrupting her.

“Yes, well...you know how it is,” he said, his voice quiet, almost sad. “Kids today... they’d rather be at home with their Facebook and their Tumblr and their Twitter. I’m afraid it’s just the two of us.”

He paused, gathered his words carefully.

“Is that OK?”

The woman in the doorway smiled. “Go on then, let’s be havin’ you.”

The Doctor took Clara’s hand and guided her through the gate. They stopped a few feet away from the door, just close enough to feel the heat wafting out into the chill. A nervous smile broke on his face as he turned to Clara.

“Silent Night, on three.”

He wordlessly counted off and the two of them began to sing at roughly the same time, though what came forth stretched, if not outright broke, the generally accepted definition of the word ‘singing’. Clara held on to the tune for dear life, speeding up and slowing down in an attempt to keep pace with the Doctor, while he warbled in a weird off-key mix of Sprechgesang and Sprechstimme. They made their way through the final chorus like a pair of winded racehorses, caught their breath, and looked toward their solo audience, watching her eyebrows arched as she pursed her lips.

“Are you sure it was Tumblr or Twitter that kept the rest of your group busy tonight?”

The Doctor smiled awkwardly.

“Still...getting warmed up. You’re our first stop tonight. Would you like another? We have a great arrangement of ‘Oh Christmas Tree’...”

“No no no,” the woman exclaimed, almost too quickly. “I mean...I don’t want to ruin the memory of that...singular performance.”

A nervous quiet fell amongst them. Clara bounced slightly on the balls of her feet, while the Doctor looked down at his shoes with increasing nervousness.

“Well then...I suppose we’ll be off,’ he said, pausing awkwardly. “Have a...fantastic night.”

He turned to walk back down the path toward the sidewalk, only to be stopped by a hand gripping him firmly on his shoulder.

“You can’t be going yet.”

He turned, half expecting to see Clara behind him. Instead, the woman stood there, her face firm and determined.

“Pardon?”

“You can’t just sing and leave. You have to come in and get something warm to drink. It’s tradition.”

“I wouldn’t think...after a performance like that...”

“I’d really like something warm,” Clara interjected. “After all, it is awfully cold out here.”

The Doctor stood there, unsure how to respond. Frozen with indecision, he watched as the two women in front of him turned, looked at each other, and nodded. He then felt two hands grab his and pull him forward through the front door and into the warm, brightly lit foyer. The door closed behind them with a quiet click, and he turned to face the woman. Her hands were held out toward them.

“Alright then, coats and scarf please. I’ll just put them over there and we’ll find something to warm you up. I know we have some cider warming up on the stove...or I might be able to scare up a little brandy...”

“Oh, I’d love a brandy!”

The woman turned to the Doctor.

“And you?”

“Cider, if you don’t mind.” He motioned toward Clara. “For both of us.”

The woman arched an eyebrow as Clara pouted. “Alright then,’ she replied, the alright drawn out. “I’ll be right back with it.”

She hurried off down the hall.

“Oi, stupid face! We have some carolers here...we’ll be needing a few more mugs,” she called out as she rounded the corner into the kitchen.

“Working on it, darling,” a muffled male voice replied. Christmas music played in the background, barely audible through the doorway, and as they stood there, the Doctor and Clara could barely make out some words:

*On the twelfth day of Christmas,
my true love sent to me
Twelve drummers drumming,
Eleven pipers...*

Finally alone, the Doctor turned to Clara and whispered to her almost harshly.

“What exactly were you thinking?”

“I was thinking that I’m cold,” she replied in kind. “We walked 8 blocks to get here in the freezing cold. I don’t have gloves on. My fingers were getting numb.”

She looked down the hallway, made sure they were still alone, and then continued.

“Besides, you said that they were your friends.”

“It’s...”

He paused, unsure how to continue.

“It’s...complicated.”

Clara opened her mouth in retort, but was interrupted by footsteps heading toward them. The woman and her husband headed toward them, each holding a pair of large, steaming mugs in front of them. The Doctor and Clara took theirs and sipped the spicy sweet cider quietly. Clara held her mug in both hands, smiling as the warmth soaked into chilled fingers, while the Doctor did his best to not make it seem like he was starting at the couple.

Suddenly, he felt a nudge. He looked up to see three sets of eyes on him, each filled with concern.

“Hmm? Did I miss something?”

“He was just asking if you were new around here,” Clara helpfully provided.

“Oh...yes. Sorry. Yes. Yes I am. Just moved here from...Glasgow. I’ll be...taking over as the youth deacon at the church a few blocks down next month. John Smith, by the way,” he continued, holding out his hand, “and this is the head of our youth group, Clara Oswald.”

The man took his hand and shook it firmly. “Well, it’s a pleasure to meet you both. I’m...”

Clara cleared her throat, drawing everyone’s attention.

“I’m sorry. I don’t mean to be rude, but...”

The woman smiled. “Up the stairs, down the hall, third door on the right. The light switch is just inside to the left.”

Clara smiled nervously, a slight blush rising in her cheeks, as she excused herself up the stairs. The Doctor turned his attention back to his cider momentarily, sipping at it and feeling the warmth suffuse him.

“Anyway,” the man said after a few moments, “as I was saying, I’m...”

“Oh, that is a lovely Christmas tree,” the Doctor interrupted, striding past them into the family room. The man and woman turned to each other, shrugged, and followed

him. The Doctor's face was aglow in a myriad of colors from twinkling fairy lights and he turned, a smile curling his lips, almost reaching his eyes.

"It's a real one, too. You don't see many of those these days, do you? Everyone goes artificial. Such a shame...you really can't beat a real tree."

He turned back and looked more closely at the tree. His gaze was caught by a motley assortment of unusual objects hanging from the tree...a cactus, a rocket, a tiny robot, a pirate ship.

"Very interesting decorations, if I might add."

The woman stepped up alongside him. "That was his idea," she said quietly, motioning back toward her husband with a smile. "Thought it might be a nice idea to have memories of our past travels..."

"I don't recall you having a problem with it," the man replied, his voice light and playful as he stepped forward and wrapped his arms around her. She pressed her shoulders back against him and smiled as he kissed the top of her head.

The Doctor's face softened slightly as he watched from the corner of his eye. "Travel a lot, do you?"

"Yes. Or...we did. Not as much anymore."

"Oh," the Doctor said, a touch of sadness tingeing his voice. "Any particular reason why?"

"No," she said after a few moments. "I mean..."

She paused.

"It's easier when you're younger. Not a care in the world, you can come and go as you please. But you get older, and get responsibilities, and...life kind of...gets in the way. You know?"

"Life has a way of doing that," the Doctor said quietly.

"There you are. I was wondering where you lot had gotten off to."

The Doctor turned back and saw Clara standing in the doorway. He offered a half smile and slowly walked back over to her side. He turned, and back in the family room, a clock softly chimed nine times.

“I hate to seem ungrateful for your generosity, but it is getting late, and we’ve got more singing to get to,” he said. He looked down at Clara, who seemed prepared to argue with him. He shook his head almost imperceptibly, and after a moment, she nodded. They grabbed their jackets from the banister and pulled them back on. The Doctor grabbed his scarf, contemplated it for a second, and quickly wrapped it loosely around Clara’s neck.

The woman walked over to the door while her husband gathered up the nearly empty mugs. They exchanged a brief look, sharing their confusion, before he turned to carry the mugs back to the kitchen. She waited for the two to finish bundling up before opening the door.

“You two stay warm out there, OK?”

Clara nodded as she stepped out into the December air. She turned and smiled.

“We will. Merry Christmas.”

The woman’s face softened as she smiled. “Merry Christmas. And to you, too,” she continued, turning her attention to the Doctor.

He stood there, unsure how exactly to respond. Without warning, he leaned in and wrapped his arms around her, hugging her tightly against him. Her eyes opened wide and she was about to call out to her husband when she felt him shaking lightly.

“Are you...are you alright?”

The Doctor sniffled once...twice...and finally spoke. His voice was quiet, almost a broken half whisper.

“Take care of him.”

“I...will?”

“I mean it. No matter what happens, or where it takes you. You take care of Rory, and make sure he takes care of you. Understand?”

She stood there, frozen to the spot, as he released her.

“How...”

He stepped back, folded his hands together against his face and took in a deep, shuddering breath.

“Merry Christmas, Amelia.”

He turned, took Clara's hand, and quickly made his way back to the sidewalk. The streetlamp flickered before going black, drenching them in darkness.

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Amy stood in the doorway, struck still by the unexpected revelation. Down the hall, Rory left the kitchen and made his way toward her.

"I've got the mugs in the dishwasher. If you hurry, we can catch..."

He stopped as he saw Amy still standing in the open door.

"Is everything OK?"

Amy turned, her cheeks flushed, her eyes red.

"Amy? What's wrong?"

She stumbled forward and fell into Rory's arms. Confusion and concern washed over his face in waves, and he held her close as she began to tremble.

"Did he say something to you?"

"He...told us to take care of each other. And wished us a merry Christmas."

The confusion on Rory's face deepened. "I don't understand."

Amy began to turn, and Rory relaxed his arms slightly. She gazed back out the door into the night, and slowly the tears came to a stop.

"Neither do I."

She stepped forward and closed the door gently. Her hand remained on the handle for a few seconds before she flipped the lock and turned back to Rory. She could see the worry on his face and reached out with her right hand, stroking his cheek lightly.

"You go sit down, OK? I'll bring you some more cider, and we'll figure out what we're doing for dinner tomorrow. Dad's supposed to be coming in, and I expect we should set a place for the Doctor as well."

"He won't be coming."

“What do you mean, he won’t be coming? He’s been here the last three Christmases. What makes you think he won’t be here tomorrow?”

Amy turned, sadness conflicting with her smile...a smile that never reached her eyes.

“Because I think he was just here.”

Rory’s mouth opened wordlessly.

“What?”

Amy nodded.

“But...he...”

“Yeah.”

“I mean...how?”

“I don’t know,” she replied, shaking her head.

Rory burst past her, clumsily unlocked the door and flung it open. He ran down the path, nearly hitting the cast iron gate that never quite stayed latched, and took several steps into the street. He looked left and right, but saw nothing.

“Doctor?”

There was no response.

“Doctor? Are you there? Doctor?”

Faintly, and carried by the wind, Rory heard a familiar sound. It rose and fell in pitch, like vast engines revving up. He took a few steps toward it, but the sound faded almost as quickly as it appeared. As he stood there, he felt a gentle touch on his shoulder. He turned to face Amy, who took his hands in hers. They stood there in silence.

“I don’t understand,” he finally said.

“Neither do I,” she replied. “I don’t know if we’re meant to. Not right now, at least.”

She tugged at his hands lightly.

“Come on, Rory. Let’s go inside.”

“But...”

Amy tugged again.

“Hopefully he’ll come back someday. Maybe he’ll explain it to us then.”

They turned and made their way back to the house. Amy looked up into the dark December sky, hoping to see a familiar flashing light above. As she watched, a light snow began to fall, the flakes picked up by the wind and set to dance through the chilly air. She leaned in against Rory and, as she felt his arm wrap warmly around her, a single tear trailed down her cheek.

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