

Coming Home for Christmas

The open box of Christmas decorations is on the kitchen table, the cheap baubles and home-made ornaments glittering in the moonlight streaming through the window. I dip my hands inside once more, and yet again the tinsel slips through my fingers as hot, angry tears roll down my cheeks. The card lies open before me; somehow I've managed to scrawl a message.

We always went overboard at Christmas. The kids loved it when they were young, but as the years passed and they turned into rebellious teenagers, they would groan at the sight of us lugging the box down from the loft at the beginning of December. The front room became Santa's grotto, every surface filled with decorations and cards, the enormous pine tree dominating the scene.

Christmas Eve was our special day. The day we'd met, forty-one years earlier, at the small café in the high street. The day we'd conceived Jodie, our eldest daughter, and the day she'd told us we were to become grandparents. And the day, just a year before, when our lives had fallen apart.

Will and Esther. We were meant to be, it couldn't be any other way. I can't remember which one of us first started calling the other sweetie, but it stuck and we used it all our married life. Good morning, sweetie; happy birthday, sweetie; merry Christmas, sweetie; always followed by a kiss... sometimes by something more!

Then, five years ago, it began. In and out of hospital, operations, treatments, our hopes raised only to have them dashed during that final appointment with the doctor. One look at his face and we knew: it was terminal and there were no more options. We went home in shock, and decided that we would make the most of our time left together. We called Jodie and John and told them there would be no more hospital appointments, no more medicines, no more doctors. Just lots of love and happiness, right till the end. Surprisingly, they didn't argue. They just hugged us and said they'd be there for us, whatever we needed.

I give up with the decorations, sit down at the table, and wait. Wait for just one last chance to see his face, his beautiful blue eyes sparkling as he looks at me with that loving expression he uses only for me, his incredible smile that tells me he loves me.

The others told me I only have the one chance to see him again, so I must use it well. But I feel so tired already; writing the Christmas card took a lot of energy, and all this waiting is using up what's left. I know I can't waste this opportunity.

All of a sudden, I hear a key in the front door. Jodie steps through first, turning on the hall light, shaking flakes of snow off her coat and stomping her feet. I smile as I look at her, an opinionated, fiery ball of vitality who's still as beautiful as ever. John follows her, frowning at the pile of snow she's left on the hall carpet, but he doesn't say anything, having learnt during the years to keep his thoughts to himself rather than risk a barrage of verbal assault from his sister. He's already kicked the snow off his shoes outside, and now he hangs his coat up on its usual hook. Annalise waddles through the door, her enormous belly preceding her, huffing at the effort. Jodie helps her with her coat and puts an arm around her shoulders, laughing as two well-wrapped bundles charge into the house, whooping in delight.

And then I see him. Will, his hair a bit whiter than last year, a few more wrinkles around his mouth and eyes, but still the handsome man I fell in love with all those years ago.

"Here, Dad, let me help you with that," Jodie says as he shrugs his coat off his shoulders. He lets her do it without protesting, his arthritis must be bad again. "Now, you go in the front room and sit down while I make us a cup of tea."

"No, you're in my house now. I'll make the tea." He glares at her, daring her to say something.

She smiles and pats his shoulder. "Two sugars for me, Dad," she says.

"There's no Christmas tree, Grandad." Michael runs out into the hallway, almost crashing into Will. "How's Santa going to bring you presents if there's no tree?"

Seeing her father's face, Jodie takes Michael by the hand and they go to join the others.

Will walks down the hall, his shuffling gait showing how much he has aged over the last year. The hall light creates strange shadows in the dark kitchen and I wonder if he will notice me. I remember what the others told me and concentrate on creating a blue aura around my body, hoping with all my heart that he can see. He does. His eyes widen and he takes a faltering step towards me.

"Esther?" he murmurs.

I nod. I'm too tired to say anything, it takes all my energy just to move my head, but I do it. He smiles, that beautiful smile that says so much. I raise my hand to my mouth, as if to blow him a kiss, but it's too late, I can't do it. I feel myself fading and concentrate on looking at his face for one final moment.

"Dad?" Jodie touches her father's shoulder, making him jump. "Is everything OK?" She switches the kitchen light on. "Dad? You look like you've seen a ghost!"

"I-I think I have," he replies, watching as the shimmering blue light slowly fades away until nothing is left. He points at the card on the kitchen table.

"What the...?" Jodie says, picking it up. "Shall I read it?"

But Will already knows what's written on it, there's only one phrase it can possibly be. "Merry Christmas, sweetie," he murmurs.