

Constance Lindgreen  
35 rue du Trou de la Vente

1 800 words

+331 64 45 7279  
Connielindgreen@mac.com

## HOME FOR CHRISTMAS

by Constance Lindgreen

When the telephone rang, Christine picked it up. Martin almost never answered. He didn't like phone calls, he said. Her prediction—"It's your mother"—was right.

"Say hello," he mouthed.

She pushed the button for the speaker-phone.

*"Kommer I hjem til Jul?"* Are you coming home for Christmas? The expectant voice, weighted with resignation, paused.

She put her hand over the speaker. "I'll tell her . . . what?"

'Up to you,' his shoulders signaled. He burrowed into the pages of his book.

Christine paused. Christmas. Her decision. Christmas. Home. Wherever that was.

Sixty or more Christmases—if you could set them on the scales, how would they weigh? New Orleans, Hillsboro, Lexington—those early years she couldn't really recall. And then—trolleys on the way to Pogues and Shillito's encircled by snowflakes. People

hopping on and off, carrying mysterious things: colored cotton balls for ladies to use when they removed their make-up or applied skin creams, velveteen mother-daughter dresses for the New Year, gloves, and scarves with pompoms. And in her family? Christmas in Cincinnati on the top floor of the redbrick building Mother and Daddy had rashly purchased. Cinnamon and nutmeg and cardamom and unknown wonderful things kneaded and braided into stollen by the German family who rented the first floor perfumed the hallway with magical scents of baking and cooking. Even now her mouth watered at the memory. When she trudged home from school on the last day before the holiday her too-short boots filled with snow. She and Clara had a room under the eaves. They set up a branch of pine and hung it with strings of cranberries and paper-cut snowflakes . . . and kept it until April, when the frogs' eggs were already hatching in a jar of pond water. Plink! A shimmering silver coin dropped on the scale.

Christmas at the farmhouse in Maryland, splendid and isolated. Half a mile away, a clear frozen pond, which, some winters, was covered with ice so thick it cracked under its own weight. The sound of the cowbell her mother used to call her home reached across the snow, but she skated on. Her only gift that year was that pair of skates - CCM Flyers, so white, so expensive. She laced them tightly over a pair of her father's woolen socks. Skating, she was immortal, untouchable. Stars arrived, and the owls called. The need for warmth finally forced her hand, drove her back across the fields. Plink!

Christmas in a small town outside Baltimore where ice storms coated the thick wires. The wires fell, and there was silence. The fireplace was the only source of light and heat that night. They cooked in the fireplace and she dried her hair by the fire. For three days the world was white with the shivery whisper of mica-snow, light and slippery but so dense that the curtains of it obscured every sight in the world. She plunged through that snow, which

seemed to stretch to Moscow or Saint Petersburg, where troikas shot down broken trails and the sound of bells and strange animals and imagined peasants hovered in the air. Plink!

Christmas in Washington, Christmas in Andover, Christmas in New York. Friends, husband, lovers, sisters, their faces smiling or worrying, their images hovering in the remembered minutes, coloring the piled holidays they were part of. Happy idiotic times, cigars and whiskies and champagne and all the things she then thought were sophisticated.

Christmas in her first very-own house, far from the city, with the friend who came to stay for three months and left after three years. Christmas in front of the fire, dreaming of a trip down the Nile in a felucca sailing past the pyramids, grazing the reeds where one finds so many wonders—even a baby in a basket, all afloat and ready to be claimed. Rising at four in the morning to witness the convergence of stars they say was an echo of Bethlehem. The same sight the wise men saw. Plink!

Christmas in the Bahamas. Her girlfriend needed crew and she was always ready to go to sea. The two of them dressed in long white cotton shifts and rowed to the shore, tying up the dinghy. Summoned over the VHF, the jeep that served as a taxi bumped them along the coast to that most wondrous-strange place where Christmas dinner was conch fritters, and multicolored lights on a palm did duty to mark the night, leavened with a steel band's bright sound. Wasn't that Christmas, too? Plink!

England. London. That was a place to find Christmas. She thought so, then, at least. Warmed by excitement, she queued for the lighting-up on Oxford Street, was enchanted by the lights at Harrods, left her boots outside the hotel-room door every night to be polished by the staff at the Goring Hotel. So shabby, so condescending and also gracious. Confusingly familiar and ultimately foreign. Plink!

York Minster, looming out of the frozen bitter cold, echoing with carolers whose

singing was earnest and in tune, encircled by ancient houses whose rooftops groped for one another across the narrow alleys. She and Martin dashed along the riverbank, racing from the steel-cold cathedral into the warming embrace of mulled wine. Plink!

Finchdean, the two of them heads down against the cold, wind-hurried walks across the South Downs, ending in tiny gray Saint Michael's, filled with home-county gentry and countryfolk, singing the bright carols of the Anglican service. Plink!

France. Where Christmas seemed to be the New Year's poorer cousin. And yet a time of friendliness and vivacity, champagne and red wine. Foie gras in the years they could afford it, breast of duck when they couldn't. Plink!

Piled together, the weight of memories tinkled in the scale, sparkling and bright. Perhaps she—we, she corrected herself—she and Martin —would go to one of those remembered places.

"Home" to Denmark? The drive would be long. Two days, at least. Whether through Germany or Holland, there was no escape from the traffic. Germany was the fastest. But there was that stretch in the mountains, where the snow and ice had so often forced them to stop for dull dinners before redirecting the car northward on icy motorways bounded by snowy giants of pines. They would stop in Göttingen, its Christkindlmarkt in full flow, with too-easily caricatured red-cheeked singing students bustling down yellow-lamped streets, past overflowing bookstores, bakeries jammed with cakes, everything aglow in the icy night. The Hotel Stadt Hannover must still be there. If only the cold isn't so bad, this time. Not like the winter when the tire pressure dropped so low because the air was, effectively, frozen. We could even chance a stop in Lübeck if we take the land route. But we won't, she thought. We're going to a country of islands. To reach an island, you sail. Plink! The balance shifted slightly. Germany, a pass-through country, was not enough.

And then, Denmark. The dark density of days when the sun barely rose, and every house defied that darkness with candles and small *nisse* - elves whose propitiation was itself a Christmas rite. She closed her eyes. Helsingør Slotskirke, Egebaeksvang, Sankt Petri, Fredriksborg Slotskirke, Roskilde Domkirke, Vor Frue, Holmens Kirke . . . all the warm-breathing living churches built in *munkesten*, the big bricks the monks made, the stepped roofs barely hinting at a steeple. In the countryside, you could see from one church to another, each a whitewashed beacon. She knew how each of them would look.

Darker than a pearl's gray—more a dove's—the curved scroll at the end of every pew soft with the smooth strokes of centuries, warmed her hand as she opened the gate and slid inside. A thread of gilt paint caught the light of the candles, tracing the curve of the wood. How fine the organ was! A Frobenius, probably. The choir, trained by daily morning-song at school and the choirmaster on Saturdays, announced the kindling of the light of Christmas. In the hymnal there were only words, but everyone knew the tunes. They were the same melodies the monks had brought with them when the knight-bishop Absalom and his men forced the kings to abandon their gods for the new religion, ensuring conversion with their swords. Cadences still strange to her ear, modal, intricate, falling when she anticipated rising tones . . . and which she now could sing.

They could go to the royal chapel at Fredriksborg, reaching it in the three-o'clock darkness of the fading afternoon, stumbling across the paving-block courtyard, to reach the low door. The priest stepped forward modestly in his black cassock and white ruff. Before them stood the tree lit only with white candles, an echo of his sobriety. And the service would begin. No leaping up to sing. No standing at all—except to hear the gospels read with gravity.

Small children wriggled in the aisles, walking up, some of them, to sit on the steps leading to the altar, ready to be led back without much protest, secure in the knowledge that

hard upon the end of this mysterious rite, dinner would follow. Duck, goose, pork roast with cracklings, all would be theirs to plunder, along with potatoes both caramelized and plain, beetroot and red cabbage in wine and pickled marrows and—finally—the bowl of *ris à l'amande* topped with whipped cream and cherry sauce you had to force yourself to finish. The lucky finder of the whole almond won the *mandelgave*, the first Christmas present.

Coats and scarves retrieved, swept out by the organ as its music marked the end of the service, they would shake hands and wish the priest and one another *god Jul*. Good Christmas. Not merry and bright. Simply good. The ice of the air—she could feel it in her lungs. She shivered.

Flickering candles on the tree illuminated the darkened room, wavering as the family pushed through the doors. A child's fingers clutched her left hand and her husband the right as they circled the tree, singing all the verses anyone knew. And then a wild chain formed, and the leader pulled them through every room in the house, declaring that Christmas would last until Easter.

Afterward? There would be walks through the forest, where they might again find small shrines and offerings to older gods. They would walk by the sea, where ice-white swans tipped themselves into black water, searching for seaweed, waiting patiently for their nesting ponds to melt. Light against the darkness. Darkness becoming light.

A single golden coin fell heavily into the waiting scale, its weight tipping out the piled shimmering silver.

*"Kommer I hjem til Jul?"*

*"Ja."* Martin sat quite still, listening. He didn't turn his head but she could see the muscles in his cheek lift into a smile. A smile to match her own.

*"Ja. Vi kommer."* she replied. "Yes. We're coming."