

*Bring a Torch, Jeanette, Isabella*

by

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The bell rang, the last bell before Winter Break at Cavender Middle School. Mademoiselle Jeanette Isabelle—Jennie du Lac--the petite seventh grade French teacher, stood by her door, watching, as hundreds of students stampeded down the hall. A tattooed, purple-haired girl bumped into her, made a face, then ran, shrieking, after a gangly boy in a studded leather jacket.

Jennie shuddered. It was certainly different from her own Catholic school days. At St. Paul's, boys wore white polo shirts with the school logo and girls wore plaid pleated skirts. Back then, Winter Break was called Christmas Vacation. Some people thought it still should be.

She shook off the thought. *You have to move on*, she told herself. *Change is good.*

Life was changing now for Jennie. It was her last year at Cavender. In the fall, she'd be teaching French at St. Clair Community College, the same school where Nick Santos, her fiancé, taught welding and coached the basketball team. They had it all planned out. It was supposed to be wonderful, but Jennie wasn't so sure.

A few minutes later, the students were gone; the building was quiet. She looked down the silent hall and repeated the mantra of academia: Civilization wouldn't collapse. What looked like implosion was simply the force of change. Embrace it. A new age was coming; the world would be a better place. That's what they said.

But somehow the words didn't ring true. Not after last night.

*She had met Nick at Biggby's for coffee.* He had driven down from Port Huron to see her after basketball practice. It was raining, a steady cold drizzle, and she was on edge, her nerves frazzled from teaching people who didn't want to be taught. Just one more day and then she'd be free for a couple of weeks. She could relax.

They sat on high stools at the counter by the window, looking out at the Christmas lights on the lamp posts. *O Come, O Come, Emmanuel* floated down from the ceiling speakers. Across the street, church bells rang the hour.

Fingering her pearls, Jennie told Nick what a difficult day she'd had. "Nobody wanted to work," she said. "All those kids wanted was to get out for Winter Break."

"Winter Break?" He set his coffee down on the counter. "You mean Christmas?"

“Same thing.”

Nick frowned, but Jennie didn't notice. She complained some more, then sighed. “At least now there's a better understanding of what we need to do,” she said. “We have a new paradigm. Education is the key.”

*Key to what?* he'd asked abruptly.

His tone startled her. “The future,” she answered, repeating what had been drummed into her head since college. “A society that embraces diversity and celebrates the human spirit.”

“You've got to be kidding.”

“No, I'm not, Nick. We're teachers. We can make a difference. Build a new culture.”

He looked at her like she was crazy. Or worse, like she was a stranger. “Without Christ,” he said deliberately, “there is no culture worth building.”

She stared at him, shocked. “You can't say that.”

“Why not?”

“It's divisive.”

“You're right.”

“You're okay with that?”

“Absolutely.”

“It's wrong.” She turned her face. “We have to be inclusive. Especially at the holidays.”

“Jennie, come on. *Holidays?* Cut it out. It's *Christmas.*”

“What's word choice got to do with it?” she blurted.

“Everything. It's a question of truth.”

Jennie looked down at her hands. An image rose in her mind: *Lighted candles. Silence. The priest laying Baby Jesus in the manger while the people sang, O Holy Night.* It was lovely, she thought, but was it real?

“Every religion has its own truth,” she insisted. “Its own path to God.”

“Right. And the gods of the Gentiles are devils,” he snapped.

“I didn't hear you.”

“Never mind.” Nick cradled his cup in his hands. He didn't look at her. “So, then, Jennie, what do you think it's all about? What does Christmas mean?”

She dropped her eyes and didn't answer.

“Jen?”

“I don't really know,” she said.

He looked like he'd been struck. “I don't get it,” he said quietly. He stared out the window, swirling his coffee. “We're Catholic...We go to Mass...I thought...”

"Thought what?"

"That we were on the same page."

She bit her lip.

"Does it matter?" she asked.

"I think we need to go," Nick said. He picked up their empty cups and threw them away. Jennie watched him, tears welling in her eyes, as she buttoned her coat. When they left the coffee shop, he said he wouldn't see her for a couple of days. He needed to think, he told her. Sleet pelted her face as they walked out to their cars.

*Now, the next day*, standing by her classroom door, Jennie looked down at her engagement ring. The diamond was dull in the windowless hall.

She was turning to go back to her desk when the girls' gym teacher, Toby McIntyre, jogged around the corner toward her.

"Hey, Jeanette Isabella!" she sang out.

Jennie managed a small grin. Nobody called her that, nobody except her godmother, her Great-Aunt Isabelle from Provence.

Childhood memories rose from her heart. The old French carol played in her mind. Isabelle used to sing it to her on Christmas morning, when it was still dark, just before dawn. Before anyone else was awake, the woman and child would go outside to watch the sun rise over the lake.

*Un flambeau, Jeanette, Isabelle...courrons au berceau...*

*Bring a torch, Jeanette, Isabella...Let's run to the crib...Christ is born.*

"You are Jeanette and I am Isabelle," her godmother would say. We go to greet the Christ Child."

*Ah! Ah! How beautiful is the Mother...How beautiful is the Son...*

For a moment, she was a little girl again.

Toby looked at her quizzically. "Are you all right?" she asked.

"What? Oh, sure...still in French mode, I guess."

"Glad I only speak one language. Want to grab a pizza? Celebrate our freedom?"

*Why not?* Jennie thought. *She wouldn't be seeing Nick. Not today, not tomorrow. Maybe never, for all she knew.* "It's kind of early," she said.

"I know. Do you mind?"

"Not at all." It would be good to have something to do, something to get her through the evening without Nick.

“Great,” Toby said. “My grandma’s in the nursing home, and I thought I’d stop by and see her if it wasn’t too late. My cousins are going tomorrow, and my mom and dad will be there Christmas Eve. I wanted to go this evening.” She looked at Jennie sheepishly. “I wanted to have her all to myself. She’s pretty special.”

“I get it,” Jennie said. “My godmother is like that. My Great-Aunt Isabelle. I haven’t seen her in awhile.”

“Is she local?”

“Not really. She lives in Lexington. On a cliff overlooking Lake Huron.”

“Nice.”

Jennie’s phone beeped in her pocket. “Sorry,” she said as she pulled it out.

“No problem.”

She opened the message. “Speak of the devil,” she started to say, then stopped herself. “Figuratively, I mean.”

“Your godmother?”

“Yes. I can’t believe it. The woman’s eight-seven years old and she sends a text?”

“You’re lucky,” Toby said. “My grandma couldn’t do that. It sounds like old Isabelle is still with it.”

“Guess so. Listen to this. *Imperative I see you. Come up Sunday? Stay til Christmas?*”

Jennie shook her head. “She signed it *Auntie* with two hearts.”

“Cute. Are you going?”

“I’d better. Just a sec. Let me answer her real quick

A half hour later, Toby and Jennie were sitting in a red and white booth at Angelo’s, sipping Chianti. White lights twinkled around the window. A triple cheese and anchovy pizza sizzled on the stand in front of them.

Toby propped her elbows on the table. “So are you ready for Christmas?” she asked.

“I guess so.”

“You don’t sound very enthusiastic.”

“I don’t feel very enthusiastic.”

Toby picked up a slice of pizza and dropped it on her plate. “Ouch,” she said, shaking her fingers. “That’s hot. Be careful.” She reached for her knife and fork. “So now what’s wrong?” she asked.

“Nick’s mad at me.”

“He’ll get over it.”

“I doubt it.”

“He will. It’s Christmas.”

“That’s the problem,” Jennie said. “Christmas.”

“Weird,” Toby said as she cut her pizza in pieces. “How can Christmas be a problem?”

“He asked me what I thought it meant, and I couldn’t tell him.”

“Why should he get bent out of shape about that?” Toby speared a bite of pizza, blew on it, and popped it in her mouth. “Christmas is Christmas,” she said. “Snow. Lights. Sleigh bells. Presents under the tree.”

“Not that. The religious part.”

“That’s easy. It’s Jesus’ birthday.”

“But who is He?” Jennie asked. “Is He God? What does it mean that He was born?”

Toby shrugged. “I never really thought about it.”

“I guess we’re in the same boat then.”

Jennie was home by seven. Nick didn’t call, not that night nor all day Saturday. She went to Mass alone Sunday morning, hoping to see him in their usual pew, but he wasn’t there. Her eyes burned as she looked over at the stable and the empty crèche.

She grabbed a breakfast burrito at Taco Bell and ate it mindlessly while she drove the sixty miles north to Lexington. The rain had turned to snow. It fell fast and thick, blanketing the bare branches along the expressway and drifting across the fields. When she pulled into her great-aunt’s driveway, Isabelle was standing at the front door, hanging a wreath. Like Jennie, she was tiny and delicate-boned. Her hair, once nearly black, was white now, pulled back in a neat chignon. A heavy tweed coat covered her from head to foot.

As Jennie opened the car door, a cold breeze blew from the lake, rippling the wind chimes in the maple tree. She stepped out into the snow. Great-Aunt Isabelle turned and waved.

“Quickly, *ma petite!* Come inside.” She looked down at Jennie’s feet. “You have no boots! *Dans le neige!* Oh, oh, Jeanette Isabelle!”

“It’s alright, Auntie,” Jennie said. “I’m not cold.”

Isabelle raised her thin cheek for a kiss.

They went inside. A bare fir tree stood in the corner. Boxes of ornaments were stacked beside it, and a cedar garland lay across the sofa. Jennie could smell bread baking in the kitchen.

“Brioche?” she asked.

“*Oui*. Your favorite, *non*?” Isabelle gestured toward the table. A manilla envelope lay on the center placemat. “Sit, *chérie*. I’ll bring something to eat. *Café aussi*?”

“Coffee, please, yes,” Jennie said, then turned and gazed out the wide window. A wooden deck reached from a small garden to the edge of the cliff. Blue metal chairs were pulled up to a round table. Thirty feet below the bluff, Lake Huron stretched far to the east. The water had not yet frozen; gray waves churned white in the wind.

Isabelle brought in china cups and a pot of coffee on a silver tray, then went back for bread and cheese, cream puffs and petits gateaux. She sat down, made the sign of the cross, and they whispered grace. The familiar words felt smooth as chocolate on Jennie’s tongue.

*Bénis-nous, ô Seigneur... Par le Christ, notre Seigneur. Amen*

Bless me, Jennie thought, O, Lord, please please bless me.

While they ate, Isabelle told Jennie why she had asked her to come. “I am leaving here,” she said.

“Where are you going?”

“I go to, what do you call it, assisted living?”

“What!” Jennie’s hand flew to her mouth. “Auntie! No!”

“Sh, sh...I am old, *ma petite*.” She reached across the table and patted her grandniece’s arm. “So old. It is time.”

“But this house!” Jennie’s voice cracked. “You can’t leave! I love this place!”

*So many memories*, she thought. *Christmas at the lake! Great-Aunt Isabelle singing to her at dawn in beautiful, crystal clear French.*

First Nick, now this.

Isabelle picked up the envelope lying on the table and handed it to Jennie. “I have something for you.”

Jennie gasped when she opened it. Inside the envelope was the deed to the house. With her name on it. “Auntie!” she cried. “What have you done?”

“It is for you, *ma petite*. It was always for you.”

“But why?”

“You are the daughter of my heart.”

*Merci, ah, ma tante, merci!* Jennie’s voice caught in her throat. Fingering the edge of the deed, she could say no more.

“It is a wedding present,” Isabelle said. “Here you can make a home. Raise a family.”

“Oh, no. Oh, no.” Jennie looked down, her face gray as dust. She started to cry.

Isabelle was alarmed. “What is it, Jeanette?” she asked. “What’s wrong?”

"Everything," Jennie sobbed. "Just everything."

"So tell me."

Jennie slipped the deed back into the envelope and laid it on the table. "I don't think there's going to be any wedding."

"No?"

Jennie told her what had happened. "Basically," she said, sniffing, "Nick and I don't think alike. I guess you could say we don't share the same faith."

"That's ridiculous!" Isabelle's temper flared. "You're Catholic. He's Catholic." She was quiet for a moment, thinking, and then, tapping her fingers on the tray, she arched an eyebrow. "You haven't left the Church, have you?"

"No, Auntie, I haven't." She tried to smile. "I went to Mass this morning. I just don't know if it's true. If it's real."

"Of course it's real."

Jeanette's thoughts raced. *How I wish I knew!*

Isabelle glanced at her, shook her head, then got up and took the tray to the kitchen. A few minutes later, she came back with a big cardboard box. "Now we will make our crèche," she said. "With a little village like Bethlehem.

"What about the tree?"

"Christmas Eve we do the tree."

"That's kind of late, don't you think?"

"It is best that way."

They set up the olivewood nativity set on the buffet. Jennie was reaching into the box for the manger when her hand brushed against an old holy card. She picked it up. On the front was an image of the Christ Child, robed like a priest, His arms outstretched on a wooden cross. The inscription read *I can do no more to show how much I love you.*

Jennie's hands shook. "Auntie," she said. "What is this?"

Isabelle came over to her and looked at the card. "That is the Christ Child of Pichincha," she answered.

"It's beautiful."

"He is beautiful."

They spent the next day and Christmas Eve cooking, baking, and decorating the tree. Jennie tried not to think about Nick, but she didn't succeed. He was on her mind all day. His face. His voice. The plans they had for their marriage, for the children they hoped to have.

She fought back tears as she hung the ornaments on the tree.

Isabelle clapped her hands when it was done. "*Parfait!*" she exclaimed.

"Shall I turn on the lights?" Jennie asked.

"Not until midnight."

"Really? Nobody waits that long."

"In France we did."

Their work done, Isabelle and Jennie sat down at the kitchen table for a simple meal of fish soup, bread, and a bottle of wine.

"I don't go to Midnight Mass anymore," Isabelle said as she set a plate of madeleines at Jennie's place. "It is too late and I am too old. But do you?"

"Yes..." Jennie paused. "Nick and I always do..well, did..."

"But not this year."

"No. Not this year."

"I will pray for you."

Jennie didn't sleep well that night. She kept going over and over her last conversation with Nick. How could she have said the stupid things she said? How could she have been so blind? She struggled to clear the fog in her brain. It was like she was brainwashed or something. How could she have thought she was right?

*If only...she thought...if only what?*

If only I could see.

She woke up before dawn, put on her robe and slippers, then went into the living room. The tree was lit, sparkling in a blaze of color, and the Christmas star shone bright as the moon. She stood looking at it for a moment, then walked over to the crèche. Isabelle had placed the Baby Jesus in the manger. Jennie looked down and began to sing.

*Hush, hush, peacefully now He slumbers*

*Hush, hush, peacefully now He sleeps.*

On an impulse, she reached down and picked him up. She held him in her hand, looking at his eyes, touching his face, and then, with a stifled cry, she lifted the figure to her lips and kissed him.

*O, my Jesus, she murmured. I want to know the Truth. I do so want to know.*

She was going to go back to bed when she changed her mind. She decided to do what she and Isabelle had always done on Christmas morning. She was going to go outside to greet the Christ Child. Pulling the sash of her robe tightly around her waist, she walked over to the



sliding glass door and went out. It was freezing cold. The wind was blowing and she could hear the waves of Lake Huron beating against the seawall like the clash of cymbals.

She walked to the edge of the deck and looked out. Suddenly, the horizon lit up in a fiery blaze. The dawn broke. Golden light streamed over the water from the rising sun. Jennie gazed at it, transfixed, and then, in an instant, conviction came, strong and true:

This day God is born in the Flesh.

The sun seemed to recede. As she watched, a figure formed in its place, the figure of a Child. Clad in white like the Infant of Prague, a crown on His head, He nodded, stretched out His arms and smiled.

And then He was gone.

Jennie fell to her knees in the snow.

As she knelt there, she heard the door open behind her. She turned and stood up. It was Isabelle, wrapped in a blanket, a fur cap on her head, singing in her clear soprano:

*Bring a torch, Jeannette, Isabella...*

Jennie took her hand and joined her.

*Hasten now, Good folk of the village*

*Hasten now, the Christ Child to see*

When the song was ended, Isabelle squeezed Jennie's hand. "*Joyeux Noel, ma petite,*" she said and Jennie cried out, Oh, Auntie! The merriest Christmas ever!"

"All is well with you now?" Isabelle asked.

"Most well! Now, there's something I have to do..."

Isabelle reached under her blanket and pulled something out of her robe pocket. "For that, I believe you need this," she said and handed Jennie her phone.

"How did you...I mean..." she said.

Isabelle smiled and lifted her eyes to Heaven as Jennie sent Nick a text: *I was so wrong. So dumb. Forgive me. I know what Christmas means. It is all real.*

The phone beeped back. The words came. *Thank God.*

She tapped: *I'm at Great-Aunt Isabelle's. Could you come up? Take us to Mass?*

*Be there in an hour,* he answered. *Merry Christmas, my love.*

Tears fell and she whispered, *And to you, my dearest Nick, and to you.*

