

# In Little Space

A Stancester  
Christmas story

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The question had been bubbling in Colette's mind all afternoon. Now she said it out loud: 'Why do we do this?'

Lydia paused, knife in mid-air, and frowned. 'Well, the orange symbolises the earth, and the candle...'

Colette picked up another raisin. 'No, I know all that. I mean, why do we do it at all?'

They'd been together eighteen months now, and she still wasn't tired of Lydia's smile. This one was half-scandalised, half-mischievous. 'You can't ask things like that!'

'I absolutely can.'

Felicity looked up, laughing. 'It gets the kids into church, and it raises money for a good cause. And if you're lucky nobody gets set on fire.'

They had an efficient production line going. Felicity was sticking a band of red electrician's tape around the circumference of each orange. Lydia was incising a cross in the top and jamming a candle into it. Colette was threading raisins onto cocktail sticks for Nikki, Felicity's wife, to spike into the oranges four at a time, north, south, east and west. A basket for the completed Christingles was steadily filling, ready for the next day's service.

Felicity and Nikki's kitchen table was huge. A vinyl cloth protected it from squirting juice, and there was plenty of elbow room for all four of them. It was a nice table. It was a nice kitchen. Colette was slightly envious of it, and felt slightly guilty about that. Felicity and Nikki had offered up time and space for this ridiculous preparation, and supplied tea, and had promised mince pies for after they'd finished.

Given the choice, Colette thought, she'd prefer a kitchen table to a dining room table. It wasn't a choice in their own flat: there was just about room for one of them to pass the other in their narrow kitchen (*galley*, the letting agent's brochure had called it). Then she felt slightly disloyal to their own flat. No matter how small it was, it was home.

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And this year, they were spending Christmas there.

'Your folks won't mind?' Lydia had asked, disquiet in her dark eyes.

'I don't think so. We could see if they wanted to stop off here on the way south to Uncle Laurie and Auntie Wendy's.'

'But that wouldn't be Christmas, would it?'

'No, New Year. But honestly,' Colette said, 'I don't mind what we do or where we do it. I just want you to have a better Christmas than last year.'

'Last *Christmas* could have been worse,' Lydia said. 'And New Year was fine. It was just the bit in between.'

'You know what I mean.' Between last Christmas and last New Year Lydia had come out to her parents and walked out shortly afterwards. Colette still felt guilty about that. If she hadn't pushed Lydia to come out before she was ready... If she'd only believed her about her parents...

Lydia smiled at her, clearly not wanting to talk about that. She said, 'Our first year living together – well, living together as a couple – and an affirming church, which I've never had before in my life. If you really don't mind missing Christmas with your family, I'd love to spend it here.'

She didn't need to think about it 'Of course. I'd love that. We can go to Bromsgrove next year. I think it would be lovely to spend this Christmas together, just the two of us.'

\*

Colette didn't go to the Christingle service. She'd already been to church in the morning and, having given up her Saturday afternoon to making the things, she didn't see why she should give up her Sunday afternoon to watching them get burned and eaten. Of course, that meant spending it alone, because Lydia was on duty at church and had gone early to set up and was staying late to clear up.

She made a resentful start on the Christmas cards. Of course it was exciting, signing them as a couple for the first time, but she'd imagined that Lydia would be at her side to do it, not that she'd end up presenting her with a stack of half-written cards to sign and slot into envelopes. And was there anything as boring as writing addresses? She had to text her mother twice, once to check Auntie Tricia's postcode, and once to find out the name of Bianca's new baby. And were Andy and Pip still together...?

And Lydia's family was a minefield that she wasn't going to step into. Her sister would be fine; so would her cousin Abby. Those were the only two that Colette had met. She had no idea whether any other relations would want to hear from Lydia *and her girlfriend*. Her own side had been informed by way of her parents' Christmas round robin letter, which had informed the entire family connection that *Colette moved in with girlfriend Lydia in August* and illustrated it with a photograph of the two of them on top of the Sugar Loaf. It was quite a nice photo, actually: Lydia was laughing into the sun, her face tanned and one hand atop her head to keep her hat one, while Colette's hair was streaming out in the breeze, and with her arm around Lydia, she was looking far less of an awkward bundle of sticks than she usually did. But she couldn't see Lydia's family liking it.

She decided not to think about it and moved on to university friends. That meant more research, mostly texting people. Some were easy. She knew Georgia's address. Peter's card could go to the church office where he was working now. Will's parents' address would be fine.

And Becky... Well, no card was going to reach Becky this year.

She shook her head, reached for a new card, and wrote *Stuart, with love from Colette and*. When the door opened, she looked up.

'Sorry,' Lydia said. 'It took ages. Nikki was scraping candlewax up off the floor with a spoon, would you believe?'

'Don't worry,' Colette said, suppressing her irritation. 'Do you want to sign this lot while I get dinner started?'

\*

Over the meal, they mapped out the schedule for the next eleven days.

Colette pulled up an email on her phone. 'We've got James and Giselle's party tomorrow, and then on Tuesday it's the team's Christmas lunch so I probably won't want to eat in the evening.'

'You probably won't be home in time for dinner, either,' Lydia said. 'Is James planning to spend the whole week drunk or something?'

'I think Monday was literally the only free day between now and Christmas.'

'I know the feeling.' Lydia tapped the pen on the calendar. 'Wednesday's my house group party. You're invited.'

Colette got on well with all the members of the group. 'I'd like to come.'

'Then on Thursday I have tickets to the SGMC concert, remember.'

'SGMC?'

'Stancester Gay Men's Chorus.'

'Oh yes, of course. And we're going to this because...?'

'My friend Gabe wrote two of the carols, arranged some more, and is singing in all of them.'

She had a feeling she was meant to know who Gabe was, but she couldn't picture him. 'Fair enough. Are we free on Friday evening?'

'No, I'm singing carols at the hospital. Want to come?'

Colette was feeling tired just thinking about it, but she said, 'Maybe. What time?'

'Starting at six.'

'You're going to have to dash from work, then.'

Lydia pulled a face. 'Yeah. You can sneak out whenever, I assume?'

'No sneaking required. Even if I didn't write my own timetable I doubt there'll be anybody in the lab to see me go. So, Saturday?'

'Beautifully, blessedly free.'

Good. 'Sunday's church, of course.'

Lydia nodded. 'Then I'm off work from Monday – which is when Abby and company are coming down to see us. On Tuesday there's nothing in the daytime but it's the carol service in the evening.'

'Wednesday's Christmas Eve, so we might as well move into the church at that point.'

'And Thursday is Christmas Day. So basically we're busy all the way from here until Christmas.'

'Except for Saturday.'

Then the phone rang. Lydia got up to answer it. 'Hello...? Oh, hello. Of course.' She mouthed, *Yours* at Colette, who drained her water glass and took the phone from her.

'Hello, love.'

'Dad! Hi. Is everything OK?'

'Yes, just a bit awkward. News from Plymouth. Laurie's going in for an operation, so we aren't going to do the New Year's jaunt. But that means that we could spend the whole week with Chris and Hannah and hold the babies for them.'

Colette tried not to sound disappointed. 'Oh, right. OK.'

'But we worked out that we – that's me, your mum, and Richie – could do a dash down south on Saturday. How does that sound?'

'Won't you be absolutely knackered from the end of term?'

'Don't worry: I'll get Richie to drive.'

Colette was not sure that being driven by her younger brother would be an exactly relaxing experience, but that wasn't her problem. 'One moment,' she said. 'Let me talk to Lydia.'

Lydia – still very conscious, Colette suspected, that she was the reason they weren't going to be in Bromsgrove for Christmas – said that it sounded lovely, and Colette promised to book a table somewhere. 'At least that means I don't have to post your presents,' she said.

Later, after they'd rung off, she observed, 'It still means that I have to buy them, though.'

\*

The week passed, somehow. The days were short and filled with good intentions. The evenings were hectically busy. Nothing got done in the lab, though Colette went in every day even after her supervisor had switched off and swanned off to St Moritz, and the rest of the team called it a day after the Tuesday lunch. She did manage to get into town to post her presents without feeling guilty, except for leaving it so late that it seemed doubtful whether they'd be there for Christmas.

Lydia, meanwhile, was working long hours for a job that was inevitably going to let her go before the end of the year, and not seeing the inside of their flat between seven thirty in the morning and eleven at night.

After the hospital carols on Friday evening they went to the pub with the rest of the singers, and slept in rather later than they'd meant to on Saturday morning.

Colette was the first one awake. She decided to let Lydia sleep a little longer, and was halfway down her first cup of tea when her girlfriend emerged, drowsy-eyed and wrapped in a blanket. It trailed behind her as she crossed the living room and came to kiss Colette. 'Good morning.'

'Morning.' She reached up to smooth a curl of hair into place. 'The kettle's probably still just about hot enough for coffee.'

Lydia smiled and draped the blanket around Colette's shoulders. 'Let's see.' She disappeared into the kitchen, and apparently disagreed on the matter of hot water, because Colette heard the kettle begin to grumble. Soon afterwards, Lydia came out again with a steaming mug and settled herself down by Colette on the sofa. 'When are your folks arriving?'

'Twelve o'clock. I told them to park in the cathedral car park if they could.'

Lydia, who didn't drive, shrugged her shoulders. 'And we'll meet them at the White Hart?'

'Either that, or on the way there.' She put down her empty mug and laid her head carefully on Lydia's shoulder. It looked like this was going to be one of a vanishingly small number of quiet moments together before Christmas. The thought itself drove her to destroy it, and ask, 'So what's happening tomorrow? Church, presumably?'

'Yeah, it's the kids' Nativity pageant. Which reminds me: do you mind if I take that blue tea towel we never use?'

'For the Virgin Mary's headdress, I assume? No problem. Are you in charge of costumes, then?'

Lydia shuddered theatrically. 'No, I just said I thought we had something that would do. I just have to wear a pair of wings and a tinsel halo and make sure all the kids end up in the right place at the right time. And sing.'

'The kids?'

A chuckle. 'No, me. Well, all of us.'

'Fine. So shall we do something nice in the afternoon?'

'We could put the tree up?'

Colette said, doubtfully, 'We never do that until Christmas Eve.'

Lydia nodded as if she didn't mind. Colette, who had been half expecting and half hoping that she would push back, put this down to Lydia's still not being quite sure what a normal family should do. 'But I don't see why we shouldn't do it tomorrow. It's *nearly* Christmas, after all.'

That at least prompted an uncomplicated smile. 'Then let's... Oh, no.'

'What?'

'I can't.'

'Lydia. Why not?' She made a silent bet with herself: *church*. She was right.

'I said I'd help Felicity with the candles for Tuesday, and there needs to be a chaperone for the children's singing group.'

'And there isn't anybody else who'll do it.' She didn't bother making it a question.

'Not at such short notice.'

She looked – *afraid*. Colette hated it. 'Perhaps in the evening?'

Lydia said, gratefully, 'That would work. And maybe we could go into town and get some decorations now, before your family arrives?'

'And they'll all be half price because it's nearly Christmas. The decorations, not my family.' She squeezed Lydia's hand, through the blanket. 'What else do we have going on?'



'Well, Monday I've got Abby and Paul coming, with Jeremy and Katie. And Rae.'

'Of course.' Lydia's little sister had left home straight after the summer exams, and moved in with their cousin's family.

'And I'm going to have to find time somewhere to wrap their presents... Oh, Monday morning will be fine. On Tuesday evening there's the carol service. Wednesday's Christmas Eve, so there's the crib service. And then...'

'Christmas Day. Collect two hundred pounds as you pass Go. We're not going to play Monopoly,' she added hurriedly. 'It brings out the very worst in me.'

'Christmas Day. And that is it. I think I'm down to do the prayers sometime in January.'

'So there's nothing between Christmas and New Year. Wow. Free time. Whatever will we do with it?' She supposed the Christmas holidays would drift past the way they usually did, though of course this year would be different. That was the problem, really. Last year there had been the comforting rhythm of undergraduate life. Last year there had been the clear demarcation between term time and holiday, between university and home.

Last year there had been the awful gaping hole in her life after Becky... After the funeral...

'Colette? Are you all right?'

She swallowed. 'Yes. Sorry.'

Lydia looked sceptical. 'Sure?'

Colette stood up, folded the blanket, and said, 'We'd better get dressed, if we're going to get any shopping done. Will you be OK without breakfast?'

\*

On Monday it was the turn of Lydia's relations to come to Stancester and be taken to the pub for lunch. This was a more fractious affair, with the baby overtired, his parents exhausted, and Lydia and her sister not quite agreed on how much and in what tone to discuss their parents. Colette found it all rather awkward. It was something of a relief to get home and close the door, although even then the outside world found a way to intrude, because, when Colette suggested putting a film on or something, Lydia groaned. 'I need to look at this poem.'

'Poem?'

'Reading.' She slid her phone out of her pocket and frowned at the screen. After a little while, she said, 'What *is* a tortoise stove, anyway?'

'No idea.'

'I thought it was the kind of thing some relative of yours might have had.'

'Not that I know of. I'd assume it's some kind of wood burning or coal burning thing.'

'Mm.' Lydia dragged her finger down the screen.

'When is this for?'

'The carol service. Tuesday.'

'Tomorrow, you mean. Ugh. I'd forgotten about that.'

'You don't have to come.' Lydia's tone was neutral; almost *too* neutral, Colette felt.

'But I will.' When Lydia looked up, she added, 'It wouldn't feel right, not to.'

Raised eyebrows.

'It's what I'd be doing at home. Dad would be singing. We'd go to hear him. It's just that it would have been on the Sunday before Christmas; there wouldn't be anything tomorrow.'

'There has been a lot on,' Lydia admitted. She put her phone away. 'I'm sorry. We got the balance wrong. Mostly me.'

Colette thought this was true, and didn't know how to agree. 'It's probably good to keep busy, really.'

Lydia still wasn't satisfied. 'You weren't very happy, Saturday morning.'

'Every so often,' Colette said carefully, 'I find myself thinking about Becky.'

Lydia got up, came over, and put her arms around Colette. 'That's understandable.'

'She didn't even celebrate Christmas! Except when she wanted to, I mean.'

'She'd probably have had something to say about me overcommitting myself. While overcommitting *herself* doing something different.'

Colette smiled despite herself. Lydia hadn't known Becky all that long, but she'd clearly known her long enough to *know* her. 'Very likely.' But there was something else she needed to say. 'It wasn't just Becky, last Christmas, though of course that made it awful. It was – what happened to you.'

'Which wasn't your fault.'

'But which happened because I pressured you into coming out.' She wasn't ever going to forget the sight of Lydia's haunted eyes and bruised face, the knowledge that it was her fault, the knowledge that she hadn't been there.

'Several weeks before I actually did, and which I wouldn't have done if it hadn't been something I needed to do.' She stepped back a little so that she was looking Colette in the eye. 'We both did things we regretted, last year.'

'And are still doing them now.' She didn't like being grumpy; it was just all coming out like that. 'I'm sorry.'

Lydia said, 'I think the reason *this* has happened is that it's been so wonderful for me, having a church where everybody knows I'm gay and still wants me there, that every time someone asks me to do something, I say yes out of pure gratitude.'

Colette could see it. 'And I'm trying not to begrudge you that! Anyway, it's not just church stuff, is it? There have been parties and family and all sorts. That's just the way things are at Christmas. And if we were at home – in Bromsgrove, I mean – we'd be doing all the church stuff there instead, *and* have to get there.'

'Ha, yes, but we'd have turned down a load of the party invitations. And neither of us would have to cook.'

'You think?' Colette knew perfectly well that they'd have been put to work peeling potatoes.

'Well, I'll wait to find out next year. In the meantime – you know we both have the whole of the daytime tomorrow.'

She failed to resist the urge to be pedantic. 'Eight hours. Slightly less.'

'Hey, the days are getting longer! As of, er, yesterday.'

'Which means the nights are getting shorter.'

Lydia grinned. 'Better make the most of them, then. Come on. This poem's going to be fine.'

\*

It was. The carol service was a roaring success; the crib service, on Christmas Eve, surprisingly moving. Colette, who had spent most of the morning making mince pies, and brought half of them to church because there was no way the two of them were going to get through a stack like that, was pleased to have her cooking skills appreciated. And they were out by six o'clock, which was sooner than either of them had expected.

Lydia asked, as they walked home, 'Can you face midnight mass? I could really do with going to a service where I'm not responsible for anything.'

Colette thought about it, and about the alternative possibilities of: whatever was on the TV; or going to bed. 'Actually,' she said, 'that sounds really nice. Also it'd be worth it just to hear you call it *mass*.'

'It's such a lovely bit of alliteration.'

'Gosh, any excuse to show off that degree of yours.' She threw an arm around Lydia's shoulders and realised that she was, suddenly, very happy.

\*

She made a not particularly festive spaghetti bolognese while Lydia took a bath, then phoned her parents while Lydia did the washing up. A succession of Boggle games filled the strange dead hour before it was time to set out for the cathedral. In the streets, cheerful groups drifted from pub to pub, wishing merry Christmases indiscriminately to everyone they passed.

In the cathedral, too, it was packed and friendly, an environment in which they knew nobody and yet nobody was a stranger, with an easy welcome transformed into worship by the organ fanfare. If Lydia was grateful to be able to take her girlfriend to church, Colette was glad to have a girlfriend who wanted to go. And this was wonderful, standing beside her in the middle of the sound of five hundred singing voices, the light of a thousand candles, and as midnight approached, the intense hush of expectation, and the clock striking the twelve strokes of the holiest of nights. *O rest beside the weary road, they sang, and hear the angels sing.*

\*

Afterwards, hoarse after *Hark the herald*, the congregation flowed out into the square, dispersing into the quiet city, taking Christmas home in ones and twos. Colette and Lydia had walked perhaps half a mile before they had the street to themselves, and Colette took Lydia's hand.

'Did you see that?' Lydia breathed.

The sky seemed unchanged, a gentle mist softening the edges of the moon and muffling the stars. But Colette had seen it: one lone bright meteor streaking across the night. 'Yes.'

'It's wonderful.'

She smiled. 'Do you remember...?'

'Yes?'

'Do you remember that night when all the lights were out, and you asked me out, and we stopped on the bridge over the railway...'

'I'll never forget it.' But Lydia was shivering, and so Colette only dropped a fleeting kiss on the corner of her mouth.

'It was warmer than tonight. Come on, let's get home.'

\*

It wasn't far, now. They weren't the last people up: there were other lights on in the building, but they didn't meet anybody as they made their way up the stairs. Colette was glad of it; she wanted to hold on to this mood of playful, reverent intimacy as long as she could. She opened the whisky that someone had given her for her birthday and poured out a bracing smoky measure for each of them while Lydia hung their coats up.

'Happy Christmas.'

Lydia clinked her glass against Colette's. 'Happy Christmas.'

They sat down on the sofa to drink, pressed close against each other, hip to hip, Lydia's leg hooked under Colette's. They didn't say much, and Colette thought that it was perfect: the warmth of each other's bodies after the cold night air; the sweetness and fierceness of the whisky; the security of being in their own space; the sense of being known, of being loved...



At last, Lydia took Colette's empty glass and put it, with her own, on the closest flat surface, then pulled Colette into a kiss that seemed to break through contentment and come out the other side into something dynamic and urgent, that left her breathless.

'Let's go to bed,' she said, when she could speak.

'Tired?'

She smiled, slowly. 'Not as tired as all that.'

'I thought not.'

\*

Eleven months – since Lydia's birthday, that was the first time – five months here, in their own place, their own bed – and still, Colette thought, while she had the space to think, it was new, it was surprising, every time she was taken apart and reassembled more completely, every time they understood more of each other...

She buried her face in the soft skin of Lydia's shoulder and let Lydia take her hand and lead her where she wanted.

Afterwards, they lay quietly, entwined, and she picked up the thread of her thought. 'This is new,' she said, after a little while.

'Mm?'

'Sex. Christmas. I like it.'

'Mm.' Lydia had her eyes shut, but she wasn't asleep. 'This is what it's about. Becoming human. Loving the only way we could love, suffering because that meant suffering. It's amazing. It really is. I couldn't have begun to understand that last year, and I'd have been scandalised if I had.'

Colette would have been scandalised even now, but for the fact that this was so very Lydia, so well beloved and so reliably surprising in her wholehearted embrace of whatever life and love presented to her. 'Thank you,' she said.

'What for?'

Colette wasn't the one who was good with words. 'For being you. For sharing it with me.'

'I'm sorry it's all been so chaotic.'

'Don't worry,' Colette said. She couldn't be cross, not comfortable as she was in the warm nest of the duvet. 'We're making it up as we go along. We're bound to get it wrong.'

'Yes.' Lydia's voice was drowsy. 'We have years and years and years to get it right.'

\*

When she woke, it was daylight. Not the grey light of dawn, not the pink of sunrise, but an emphatic full golden sunlight. Lydia was already awake, but not moving. 'Merry Christmas. Again.'

'And to you.'

She sat up. 'We'd better get up, or we'll be late for church.'

'Mm. We don't have to hurry.'

She laughed at Lydia, now sprawled luxuriously across the bed. 'No?'

Lydia smiled. 'No.'

'You aren't doing any readings.'

'No.'

'You aren't serving coffee.'

'No.'

'You aren't singing or leading the prayers.'

'No.'

'We can turn up at twenty-five past ten like any ordinary mortals.'

'Yes.'

'Excellent.' She slid back down under the covers. 'Happy Christmas.'