

The Ghost of Christmas Future

by Nelson Kingfisher

“What should I call your mother?” Millicent asked.

“Ingrid should be fine.” Carl kept looking out the window. The wheels clacked as the streetcar rolled past Woodland Golf Club. The snow lay smooth and white on the golf course—unlike the filthy black snow he saw piled curbside back in Cambridge.

“And your father?” Millicent asked.

“Cornelius.”

“Sounds awfully formal.”

“My mom calls him Corney.”

“I’ll call him Mr. Fischermann.”

Carl turned toward Millicent on the plastic bench seat. “*Herr* Fischermann.” He smiled as he corrected her. “*Herr Doktor* Fischermann.”

“I’ll just avoid his name.” Millicent crossed the ends of her scarf. “I did that with my college boyfriend’s parents for like eighteen months.”

“That may not be long enough.”

“What’s that mean?”

“What do you think it means?” Carl leaned forward and touched Millicent’s left knee. She wore heavy white stockings under her plaid skirt. “You’re coming to my parents’ house for Christmas dinner.”

“On Christmas *Eve*.” Millicent smiled and laid her hands on Carl’s. “My family has dinner on Christmas Day. I can avoid names tonight. I’ll just wait till he looks my way, then say please pass the turkey.”

"There won't be any turkey."

"There won't? What will they serve?"

"Carp." The brakes screeched as the streetcar neared Riverside terminal.

"Carp? What kind of family eats carp for Christmas dinner?"

"Germans. There he is."

The station was deserted at 4 pm on Christmas Eve, but Cornelius Fischermann stood near the edge of the platform, leaning forward in his gray wool car coat as though he meant to hop the train as it passed.

"He's so thin," Millicent said. "And he stands so straight. How old did you say he was?"

"He's sixty-four." Carl grabbed the pole next to their seat and pulled himself up. "And he looks it. You'll see when we get close. But he skis in the woods every day that there's snow. And he climbs mountains every summer."

"Are you planning to look like that when you're sixty-four?"

"Not at all. I'll be morbidly obese, with a comb-over."

"Oh, good. Because I'm planning to totally let myself go."

"I'll see you on stage. 'She's unrecognizable,' I'll say. 'We had a fling for like eighteen months.'"

The doors opened and Carl stepped out. Cornelius shook Carl's right hand and clasped his shoulder with his left. "My boy." Cornelius stood five inches shorter than Carl, but his gesture was utterly possessive. "So good to see you."

It was true that you could see Cornelius's age up close. He wore bifocals, his neck craned forward, and the laugh lines next to his eyes ran halfway to his ears.

Millicent stepped off the streetcar, and Cornelius sidestepped in front of her. He took both her hands in his. The gesture looked warm to Carl, though they were both wearing gloves—his leather, hers knit.

"And this obviously is the lovely maiden of whom you have told us," said Cornelius.

"I'm Millicent," she said. "But everyone calls me Mill."

"Call me Corney."

When Cornelius turned toward the parking lot, Millicent turned to Carl and mouthed two words. *No. Way.*

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Cornelius drove them past the golf course and across the Charles River. The houses grew larger as they drove further from the streetcar terminal. The two-lane road turned and turned again. Woods cropped up on the right. Cornelius braked to let a herd of deer cross.

"I love how open everything is out here," Carl said. "I feel like I can breathe. In Cambridge all the buildings are cheek-by-jowl, and if I take a deep breath all I smell is the Necco wafer factory."

"I like Necco wafers," Millicent said from the back seat.

"I as well," Cornelius said, as he shifted gears. "My favorite flavor is Wintergreen."

Cornelius turned onto his long driveway, and gravel crunched under his tires. He pulled into the garage that attached to his basement. Carl and Millicent followed him into the basement and up the stairs into the kitchen.

Ingrid greeted Millicent at the kitchen door.

"*Hallo,*" Ingrid said, as she took Millicent's coat. "What a lovely dress."

"Thank you," said Millicent, who wore a plaid wool dress, black on cream. Ingrid wore a shapeless brown frock under an apron.

"What a lovely house," Millicent said. "You have woods right behind."

"Yes, they suit Carl and his father. Such woodsmen both." Ingrid took Millicent's coat to the closet. "Please. Take a rollmop."

"Um"—Millicent looked at Carl—"sure."

Carl put his arm round his mother's shoulder. "She thinks you want her to clean the floor," he said. "Mill, *Rollmops* is pickled herring." He took a skewered fish off a tray on the counter and put it on a small gold-rimmed plate.

"Thank you." Millicent looked at the herring uncertainly. "I'm a little out of water, I'm afraid."

"Of course," said Cornelius. "Would you like to see the carp before he is cooked? He swims now in the bathtub."

Mill nodded wordlessly.

"You must not take my husband at his word," said Ingrid.

"Oh," said Millicent. "Okay." She smiled.

"We have removed the carp from the tub this morning," said Ingrid.

Mill looked at Carl. He nodded gravely. Then he shook his head, smiling. Then he nodded again.

Mill smiled, locked eyes with Carl, and extended her middle finger along the rim of her plate.

"*Mutti*," said Carl to his mother, "do you need any help with the cooking?"

"It is under control," Ingrid said. "*Alles in Ordnung.*"

"Allison who?" Millicent asked.

All the Fischermanns laughed. Cornelius put his hand on Millicent's shoulder. "You would like perhaps a glass of Riesling?"

"Yes," said Millicent. "Please."

"Come into the living room." Cornelius gave her a little push.

The Riesling sat in an ice bucket next to the encyclopedia case. Cornelius worked a corkscrew into it. "Carl tells us you are a musician, *neh?*"

"Yes," Millicent said. "I study flute at the New England Conservatory."

"Ingrid and I have since many years tickets for the Boston Symphony. Perhaps ten rows back on the left side. From there we can see the hands of any pianist. You like Mahler?"

"He has a couple of good flute solos. The Ninth Symphony. The Tenth."

"Ah, the Tenth. Would you like me to put it on?"

"Pop," said Carl, "Mahler? It's Christmas Eve."

"Quite right." Cornelius poured Riesling into three crystal glasses and handed them round. "*Fröhliche Weihnachten!*" He lifted his glass, then stopped and asked Millicent, "Do you understand?"

Millicent smiled. "Something to do with wine?"

Cornelius and Carl smiled at each other.

"Is it not to do with wine?" Millicent asked.

Cornelius sipped from his glass, still smiling.

Carl sidestepped next to Millicent and squeezed her hand. "*Weihnacht* is Christmas," he said.

Millicent let out a puff of air and lifted her glass. When she set it down it was half empty.

"How go your studies?" Cornelius asked Carl as he refilled Millicent's glass.

Carl shook his head. "MIT is a like drinking from a fire hose."

"Anything worth doing is much work. *Leben ist kämpfen, kämpfen leben.*"

"Life is a struggle," Carl translated for Millicent. "It seems like hazing, though. I just finished an exam on theory of algorithms and big-O notation. Who in industry thinks about big-O notation?"

"Opportunities will flow from this," Cornelius said. "Millicent—Mill—how do you find your studies?"

"I keep busy," Mill said. "Classes, rehearsals, finding gigs. When I'm free I can always practice more."

"How much do you practice?"

"Three hours is about my limit. Two ninety-minute sessions with at least a fifteen-minute break. Any longer and I lose my embouchure."

"Your embouchure?" Cornelius asked.

"You have to hold your mouth a certain way to play the flute. It's a kind of pout." Her lips made an illustrative bow.

Carl smiled appreciatively.

"Dinner is served," Ingrid announced from the dining room.

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The carp looked faintly blue and tasted of vinegar. Carl covered his mouth with a cloth napkin to pick the fine bones out of his teeth. He saw Mill watch him and then do the same thing.

Cornelius flaked a scale off the carp's skin and tucked it in his wallet. "It brings money," he said.

"I don't have a wallet with me," Millicent said.

Carl opened his wallet and dropped in two scales. "For both of us."

The new potatoes had boiled till they burst. Carl added horseradish to liven them up. He slid the horseradish boat toward Millicent and nodded. She dropped a ball of horseradish onto one potato and put a forkful in her mouth. Her eyes filled with tears. She picked up her wine glass, and when she put it down it was half empty again.

Cornelius refilled her glass. "You are accustomed to the creamy English horseradish, I fear. Ours is somewhat more potent." He shook the bottle, which was empty, and went to the refrigerator for a new one.

"How have you met each other?" Ingrid asked.

"At a concert," Carl said.

Cornelius, at the refrigerator, laughed. "Since when are you going to concerts?"

"It was at a bar," Millicent said. "I was playing in a rock band."

"On the flute, rock and roll?" Cornelius asked. "This is something?"

"Of course," said Ingrid. "Jethro Toll."

"Jethro *Tull*," Carl corrected.

"He was an inventor, yes?" Cornelius asked.

"Yes." Carl nodded. "Shall we have dessert?"

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They moved to the living room, and Cornelius opened a round folding wooden table.

Cornelius went to the kitchen and came back with a third bottle of Riesling and a pink cardboard box.

"Ah, the pink box," Carl said.

"*Natürlich*," Cornelius said. He opened it and lifted out a misshapen loaf dusted with powdered sugar.

Cornelius sliced the loaf with a cheese knife, and handed slices round. There were nuts and dried fruit in the buttery dough. Carl shut his eyes.

"This is delicious," Millicent said. "I thought it was fruitcake at first, but it's so much better."

"It is *Stolle*"—Cornelius cut her a second slice—"from Schmidt's bakery in Quincy Market."

Cornelius brought in an armada of pink boxes. He brought out cookies made with chocolate, marzipan, nuts, gingerbread, pepper....

"Have you left nothing behind for the other customers?" Ingrid asked.

"I have not known what our guest would like," Cornelius said.

"I like it *all!*" Mill said. "I could get *used* to German pastry!"

Cornelius opened a bottle of Riesling.

"How many bottles is that?" Carl asked.

"Three?" Cornelius stopped and squinted. "No, four."

Carl leaned toward Millicent. "You have to watch my pop," he said. "He'll top you off every time you take a sip. Your glass is always full and you have no idea how much you've drunk."

Mill smiled back at him. "I have *some* idea." Her gaze looked pleasantly blurred.

Carl lowered his voice. "How soon can I take you home?" he whispered.

Mill smiled and leaned back.

She look up at the painting above the mantelpiece. In the foreground a fox sat at the base of a tree, and an owl sat on a branch above him. Their backs were to the viewer. They peered down a woodland trail, watching a moose walk away.

"Where have I see this painting before?" Millicent asked.

"Nowhere, unless you have spied on us," said Cornelius. "My Ingrid made this."

"You *painted* this?" Millicent asked Ingrid.

"Ja." Ingrid answered without lifting her eyes. Mill realized Ingrid had been silent a long time. She held a sketchbook in her lap.

"It's incredible. So natural, but so full of feeling."

"The moose is me," Carl said. "Mom's been painting me as a moose since I was in second grade."

"He was always so big for his age," Ingrid said. "His voice changed when he was just twelve. Always looking ahead, impatient for the next thing. Like a moose rubbing his antlers against a tree."

"I am the fox," Cornelius said. "The owl is Ingrid. She painted this when our moose left home."

Mill frowned. "It's sad," she said. The light in the painting was orange-yellow and came almost horizontally through the trees, as though the sun were setting. The moose's head turned just slightly toward its right shoulder, as though it wanted to look back but wouldn't allow itself.

"All sadness is temporary," said Ingrid. She took the sketchbook off her lap and laid it on the dessert tray.

On it she had roughed out the forest path again. The owl sat on the same branch. The fox was still at the base of the tree, but standing now, its ears and tail erect. The moose was coming back up the forest path. Its mouth was agape, and three of its hooves were off the ground.

Next to the moose was a smaller, sleeker hoofed animal. Its legs were thin and it had no antlers.

"Mom, that looks *nothing* like a female moose," said Carl, laughing.

"This girl is no *moose cow!*" said Ingrid, rounding both words emphatically with her mouth. "So slim, elegant, reserved. Large eyes, small nose. A deer."

"A dear," Cornelius stood up. "Shall I drive you woodland creatures home?"

"I'm not reserved," Millicent said, almost to herself. "I just don't speak German."

Carl set his hand on Millicent's knee. "You're in no condition to drive," he told his father.

"We'll take a cab."

"You will find no cabs out here on Christmas Eve. I will drive you at least to the station."

Ingrid stood. "*Komm nach oben,*" she said to Carl. "*Ich hab' etwas für Dich.*"

Carl followed his mother upstairs. When he returned, Cornelius and Millicent were waiting in their coats.

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"I hope you enjoyed yourself," Carl said when they got back on the train. "I know my mom's not the greatest cook."

"She's a great artist, though," Mill said. "That painting of the woodland path is incredible. Are there more?"

Carl nodded. "All over the upstairs bedrooms. You can see me without antlers sometime." He raised his eyebrows, then leaned in and kissed her. "I like your *embouchure*," he said softly. "What's that technique you were practicing for *The Nutcracker*?"

"Flutter-tongue." Mill pulled away. "I've told you before. Why isn't your mother famous?"

Carl shrugged. "Who gets famous for painting anymore?"

"She ever in a museum, a gallery?"

"She never wanted strangers to see her work. It's all so personal."

"She could be an illustrator. She has such an eye for character."

Carl shook his head. "Never came up."

"Your father encouraged her?"

Carl shrugged. "He didn't *discourage* her."

"You know I'm not like that," Mill said. "I want a career."

"Of course," Carl said.

"There aren't many openings for orchestral flutists. I can't just walk onto the stage at the Boston Symphony."

"I expect that's true."

"You want a seat in the Boston Symphony, you wait for someone to die. And then there are 300 applicants."

"You need to network, right?"

"No." Mill shook her head. "It's blind auditions. You play behind a curtain. You could know every judge and still lose out to a nineteen-year-old who just flew in from Korea. But you probably don't want to stay in Boston anyway. All you MIT boys end up in California."

"I'm sorry, *all* you MIT boys? Am I a type to you?"

Millicent shook her head. "But you want to move to California, don't you?"

Carl shrugged. "That's where the best opportunities are. But it depends."

"What if the only orchestra that will hire me is in Omaha?"

"I don't know." Carl squinted at her. "You want to live in Omaha?"

"That's not the point."

"What *is* the point?"

Millicent stood. "I just—I feel like I've seen the ghost of Christmas future." She walked to the sliding door.

Carl stood. "Where you going?"

"I'm getting off at Brookline Village," Mill said. "I can walk to my parents' house from the station."

"Come on." Carl followed Mill to the door. "Come to Kendall Square. I'll take you to your parents in the morning."

The train slowed and stopped. Mill stepped off. Carl followed her onto the platform.

"At least let me walk you to your parents' house," he said.

"It's perfectly safe," Mill said. "There's nobody on the street."

"It's *not* safe," Carl said. "There's nobody on the street."

Mill stopped and let Carl catch up with her. She turned round and put her hand on his chest. "Let me go by myself." She tipped her head up and kissed him on the chin. "There's been enough parent-meeting for one night."

Carl stood on the platform and watched Mill walk down Station Street. When she turned out of sight, he crossed the tracks and picked up the pay phone on the outbound side.

His father answered. "*Ja?*"

"I dropped Mill off at Brookline Village. OK if I come back out and sleep there tonight?"

"Certainly. Everything all right?"

"Fine."

Cornelius waited for Carl to continue. When Carl didn't, Cornelius said, "It will be good to have you home on Christmas morning."

Carl swallowed. "I think I see a train coming. Should get to Riverside in half an hour."

"I will come and retrieve you."

"You're all right to drive?"

"It is perfectly safe. There is no one on the roads."

Carl hung up.

He dug into his pocket and pulled out the little white box that his mother had given him after dinner. He opened it and pulled his grandmother's ring from the gray velvet. It was a thick gold band, the outside carved with twining leaves and a dove. The inside was inscribed with the words *Myn Genyst*. The German was archaic. Jewelers usually translated it *my heart*, but the real meaning was closer to *my soul, my spirit*. Even *my ghost*.

Carl snapped the box shut and dropped it back in his pocket.

"Well," he told himself, "maybe next Christmas."