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Time to  
pretend  
we're a  
perfect  
family.

# This Winter

A *Solitaire* novella

Alice Oseman

# This Winter – a Solitaire novella

Alice Oseman



HarperCollins *Children's Books*

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“Caroline decidedly says that none of the party will return into Hertfordshire this winter. I will read it to you:

‘When my brother left us yesterday, he imagined that the business which took him to London might be concluded in three or four days; but as we are certain it cannot be so, and at the same time convinced that when Charles gets to town he will be in no hurry to leave it again, we have determined on following him thither, that he may not be obliged to spend his vacant hours in a comfortless hotel. Many of my acquaintances are already there for the winter; I wish that I could hear that you, my dearest friend, had any intention of making one of the crowd – but of that I despair. I sincerely hope your Christmas in Hertfordshire may abound in the gaities which that season generally brings, and that your beaux will be so numerous as to prevent your feeling the loss of the three of whom we shall deprive you.’

“It is evident by this,” added Jane, “that he comes back no more this winter.”

*Pride and Prejudice, Jane Austen*

## VICTORIA ANNABEL SPRING, 16

I wake up two hours after I fall asleep. The amount of sleep I get on Christmas Eve seems to be steadily decreasing each year, probably because each year my average falling-asleep time gets steadily later, probably because I'm an Internet-addicted idiot. Maybe, eventually, I'll just stop sleeping altogether and become a vampire. I'd be good at that.

Not gonna bother complaining about my sleeping pattern right now though, because it's Christmas and this is the one day of the year when I should at least try not to complain about anything. This is hard when your seven-year-old brother is hitting you in the face with a pillow at six o'clock in the morning.

I say something along the lines of "nooooo" and retreat under my duvet, but this doesn't stop Oliver from following, tearing back the covers and crawling on to my bed.

"*Tori*," he whispers. "It's *Christmas*."

"Mm."

"Are you awake?"

"No."

"You are!"

"No."

"*Tori*."

"Oliver ... go wake Charlie up."

"Mum said I wasn't allowed because he's ill." He starts ruffling my hair. "Toriiiiiiii—"

"*Ugh*." I roll over and open my eyes. Oliver is completely under the covers, looking at me, wriggling with excitement, his hair sticking up on end, like a dandelion. Charlie and I have discussed at length how it is possible that Oliver can be at all related to us, since he's the literal

embodiment of joy and we're both miserable fucks. We concluded that he must have got all of the happy genes.

Oliver has a Christmas card in his hands.

"Why do you have a—"

He opens the card and a disgustingly cheerful version of *We Wish You A Merry Christmas* begins to play right into my ear.

I groan and shove Oliver off the bed with one hand. He rolls on to the floor and bursts into giggles.

"So annoying," I mutter, before sitting up and turning on my bedside lamp, resulting in a shriek of "YAY!" from Oliver. He begins to wander around my room, opening and closing the card, repeating the first two notes over and over again, and my eyes are opening and closing like they do in my early morning English lessons. The realisation that it's Christmas Day is creeping over me and I guess I feel kind of ... I don't know. It's not exactly a normal Christmas Day this year.

Christmas is okay at our house. It's chilled. Quiet. Dad calls it a Spring Christmas, which he thinks is hilarious, for some reason. We open presents when we wake up, then family come over for Christmas dinner and stay until late, and that's it. I play multiple video games with my brothers and cousins, Dad always gets drunk, my Spanish grandfather (Dad's dad) has an argument with my English grandfather (Mum's dad) – truly wonderful stuff.

It's not a normal Christmas this year though.

My fifteen-year-old brother Charlie had to go to a psychiatric hospital back in October because he has anorexia and some really shitty stuff happened. Don't really want to think too much about it on Christmas Day.

He ended up staying there for two months and he only got back two weeks ago.

I don't really think there was a reason he got so ill. That stuff just happens, like diseases or cancer. So it's not his fault. Actually, I think it was probably my fault he had to go to hospital. When he stopped eating meals with me in the summer, I didn't tell my parents and I didn't ask him why. I didn't talk to him enough. I didn't even ask him "How are you?" or anything like that. I didn't think it was weird that he stayed in his room all the time. I didn't think about it. About anything.

So, yeah. Everything's been pretty stressful because Charlie's got this food regime that he has to follow and he hates it, and Mum and Charlie

aren't really getting along and Charlie doesn't want to join in Christmas dinner and, to cut a long story short, nobody has been feeling very Christmassy at all.

I sometimes feel Christmassy because everything is pretty and not boring for once, but at the same time, the amount of Christmas couples kissing under the mistletoe on my Tumblr dashboard really needs to calm down. And this winter I haven't been feeling very cheerful or anything. I thought maybe it was because of the Charlie stuff, or the fact that I've started Sixth Form and it's even more boring than I thought it'd be, but I think it might just be me. All I do is mope around sadly and spend extreme amounts of time alone in my room on the Internet – just being another self-pitying sixteen-year-old girl for newspapers to criticise, I suppose. I'm sure I'll get over myself eventually.

I pick up my phone, ignore the notifications, and text Becky, my best friend. Well, I say best friend, but what I really mean is the-only-person-who-doesn't-find-me-completely-dull. I have told her about what Charlie did but not all the gory details and I don't know how well she understands mental illnesses. I think she just thinks he had a sort of tantrum.

**(06:16) Tori Spring**

HAPPY CHRISTMAS. Be thankful you don't have siblings. I am tired.

Oliver threw a pillow at me. Enjoy sleep. Bye. xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx

Mum and Dad said we can't wake them up until at least 7:30. It's 6:17 now. I get up and open my curtains to find the world still dark, tinged yellow from the street lamps. I fall back into bed and put the radio on. It's playing a quiet hymn for once, instead of *All I Want for Christmas Is You*. It's nice. Oliver is spinning around in my desk chair and a choir is singing *Silent Night*, my eyes are closing again and Oliver's sitting in my bed with me, the musical card on a pile of clothes on the floor, it's 6:29, 6:42, 6:55 ... Oliver's pulling my hair gently, he's talking about what presents he wants and whether Father Christmas ate the biscuits we left him and I'm mumbling something, I don't know what, I'm drifting off ...

And then my bedroom door opens again.

“... Victoria?”

I wake up for the tenth time. It's Charlie, just visible through the dim light standing at the door in a navy Adidas sweatshirt and checked pyjama bottoms. He looks tired but he's smiling. "You awake?"

"No," I say. "I'm having an out-of-body experience. I'm just my ghost."

Charlie snorts and enters my room, shutting the door softly behind him. I turn to Oliver, who has fallen asleep against my shoulder, and give him a little nudge with my elbow. He snaps awake and sees Charlie.

"CHARLIE'S HERE!" he yells and charges from the bed towards him, slamming into his legs and almost causing him to fall over. Charlie laughs and picks Oliver up like he's a baby, which he does at least once a day, causing him to giggle. "Wow, you're very awake, aren't you?"

"Can we go downstairs yet?"

Charlie carries Oliver towards my bed. "Nope, Mum said seven thirty."

"Arrghhhh." Oliver wriggles in Charlie's arms and drops down next to me, immediately snuggling under the covers, and then Charlie sits down next to him against the headboard.

"Ugh. Younger brothers are annoying," I say, but I'm sort of grinning too. I curl up under the duvet. "Couldn't you stay in your own beds?"

"Just doing our job," Charlie smiles. "Are you listening to Radio 4? What's with the church music?"

"I don't think I can deal with Mariah Carey at this time of the morning."

Charlie laughs. "Me neither." Like Oliver, his hair is sticking up from his forehead, though it's not as manically curly. He's got purple circles under his eyes and I can't remember what he looks like without them any more. Aside from that, he looks almost his normal self, all long-limbed and gentle and healthy. Like he was early this year, before he stopped eating.

"I only slept for like two hours," I say.

"Same," he says, but I think his lack of sleep might be from different reasons to mine.

"How many presents does Father Christmas give you when you're seven?" asks Oliver, who's now standing up on my bed and trampling over the duvet. Charlie and I laugh.

"Seven," says Charlie, decisively. "The same as the number of years you've been alive."

"So ... when I'm eighty, I'll get eighty presents?"

Charlie prods Oliver in the chest and he falls over with a wide smile. “Only if you’ve been good!”

“I can’t wait till I’m eighty,” says Oliver.

“Me neither,” says Charlie.

It’s good that we’re all back together now. It felt weird, just me and Oliver and Mum and Dad. Oliver’s still too young to talk to properly, and I don’t hate my parents or anything but I don’t feel like I’m too friendly with them either. Mum has this thing where she avoids talking about anything even slightly deep or emotional. Dad’s the same, but he makes up for it by talking about books all the time. We all get along fine, but I don’t feel like we ever talk about anything important.

Even now that Charlie’s really ill they still don’t like talking about that stuff. I thought things might change; that we might start being more open about feelings and stuff.

But we’re not.

“Can you imagine being a *really old man with a walking stick?*” Charlie says, putting on an old man voice, and Oliver giggles, shuffling up to join us against the headboard. Charlie’s smile is contagious.

They start playing I-spy. Today’s going to be difficult for everyone, but everyone has difficult days, I guess. I used to think that difficult was better than boring, but I know better now. There have been a lot of difficult days in the past few months. There have been too many difficult days.

“Happy Christmas,” says Charlie, without any warning. He leans over Oliver and rests his head on mine. I lean a little too, my head on his shoulder. The radio plays. I think the sun is rising, or it might just be the streetlamps. I’m not going to think about the past few months, about Charlie and me, about all of the sad. I’m going to block it all out. Just for today.

“Happy Christmas,” I say.

I try not to fall asleep again but I still do, Oliver’s laugh ringing in my ears.

It’s ten to twelve and we’re still in our pyjamas, sitting on the sofa playing *Lego Harry Potter* on the Xbox, which is essentially exactly the same as *Lego Star Wars* except the characters are less exciting. It was a present for