

An Amish Family Christmas

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AN AMISH FAMILY CHRISTMAS

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*For Nana Doede, who loves all my stories,
with all my love.*



One



Naomi glanced out the window as one black buggy followed another along the lane leading away from the house. Rain streaked the glass and distorted the shapes of the wheels and the horses' heads. One part of her felt nothing as she watched them leave, another part felt as gray as the Lancaster County sky, and a third part began to count the buggies as if she were a child again and learning her numbers.

Seven, eight, nine, ten, eleven.

"I've made us some tea." A young woman in a dark dress and dark bonnet stood at her side.

"Danke. I don't know if I can drink, Rebecca."

"Of course you can drink." The young woman took Naomi's hand gently but with a measure of strength. "Come sit by the fire."

Naomi took a chair on one side of the woodstove, and Rebecca took a chair on the other side. The stove had a glass pane that allowed them to see the yellow flames curling up and over the wood. Nearby, a box of split logs stood ready to feed the fire. A small table between them held a teapot, cups, and a plate of biscuits. Naomi gazed at the fire but made no effort to pour herself any tea, so Rebecca did it for her, handing her a cup and offering the plate of biscuits.

Naomi took the cup but shook her head at the plate. "I can't."
"Try."

"I can't, Rebecca."

Rebecca put the plate down on the table and curled her fingers around her own cup of tea. Neither of them spoke. When the fire began to turn into red coals, Rebecca got up and placed several more pieces of wood inside the stove, closing the door tightly. Flames leaped up orange and white.

"Two weeks before Thanksgiving." Naomi hadn't taken a sip from her teacup. "What kind of Thanksgiving will it be? What kind of Christmas?"

"The church will be at your side. I'll be there. You won't be alone."

"My family is gone."

"Luke is with you."

Naomi lifted her head sharply and stared at her friend. "Luke? Luke is with me? Luke is catatonic. Who knows but God where Luke is?"

"He won't be that way forever."

"He won't? How do you know that? The doctors say the odds in his favor are less than twenty percent."

"I'm praying. The whole community is praying."

"Yes? And praying for the drunk who drove into our buggy too?"

"Of course, Naomi," Rebecca said quietly. "It's our way."

"He kills my father and mother and sister and leaves my twenty-year-old brother half dead in the ditch. Drives away. Doesn't even call nine-one-one. For all we know my sister or mother could have been saved."

"Hush. I know."

Naomi had been looking for an argument for days and had finally found it. Her eyes blazed black fire. "You know? But all you can think of to do is pray for the murderer?"

“What else should I do? Throw his children under a Percheron’s hooves so there can be even more death and suffering?”

Naomi gazed at the flames. “He will have a fine Thanksgiving. Sit down to a fine meal at Christmas. All the chairs at his table will be occupied. His whole family will break bread with him.”

“It does no good to dwell on such things. God has a plan.”

Naomi snapped up her head, and her eyes flared. “A plan? This is his plan? To snatch away my family in a heartbeat and leave me alone and broken?”

“You are not alone. I will help you. Your husband’s family will help you.”

Naomi’s eyes returned to the fire. “I have no husband.”

“Shh now.” She smiled gently. “If you have no husband, then I have no brother. He binds you and me together, Naomi. Our family is now your family. We will take you in.”

“I do not wish to be taken in. I’m staying in this house. I’m going to die in this house.”

Rebecca raised her eyebrows. “This big farm? You’re going to run it on your own?”

“Yes. I have two hands and a strong back.”

“You can’t undertake such a thing. Especially once Luke returns from the hospital and you have to care for him.”

“I can do it.”

“It’s too much.”

“I’m going to do it. The church can help me or not help me. God can help me or not help me.”

“Of course God and the church will help you.”

Naomi had both hands around her cold teacup. She dropped her head. “I’m not ungrateful. But I’m staying here in this house. It’s my home on earth.”

Rebecca gazed at her and finally nodded. “Very well.” She got to her feet. “Bishop Fischer said Luke would be home by next

Wednesday. There's nothing more they can do for him in town, and the care is expensive."

"I know that."

"So I'm going upstairs to clean and tidy his room."

Naomi rubbed her forehead with her hand. "I haven't touched it since the accident. I haven't even opened the door to look inside. I haven't looked in any of the rooms—not Mama and Papa's, not Ruth's—"

Her voice broke, the cup fell from her fingers and shattered on the hardwood floor; her body began to convulse, and loud cries came from her throat. "*Mein Gott, mein Gott, warum hast du mich verlassen!*"

Rebecca rushed over and threw her arms around Naomi. "No, no, he hasn't forsaken you. He is with you. It's the valley of the shadow of death, but he remains by your side. He is here."

"I don't feel him here," sobbed Naomi. "I don't feel his presence."

"He is with you. He who wept at his friend's grave is with you."

"I thought... I heard his voice at the funeral... but no, it was the wind, only the wind..."

Rebecca rocked her. "Hush. You're exhausted, worn out with grief. You have not slept."

"There was nothing. Only the clouds and the rain and the wind in the grass. Nothing else. Nothing, Rebecca."



Naomi eventually steeled herself and helped Rebecca, her sister-in-law and friend, clean and tidy the rooms of her parents and sister and Luke. The next day the families in the Amish community brought meals for the two women as well as jars of preserves of meat and fruit and vegetables. The day after that, *Englisch* families did the same thing. Rebecca remained by her side the entire time, sleeping in a spare room, eventually bringing over her clothing

and settling in, determined that Naomi shouldn't be alone. Naomi protested the first two days. After that she didn't protest at all. She didn't talk about it, but inside, where her pain and grief and desolation twisted around her soul with sharp spikey thorns and black vines, the only things that gave her relief were long bouts of prayer, gold and crimson sunrises, and Rebecca's gentle but strong presence.

Bishop Fischer and the ministers hired a driver with a van to take themselves and Naomi and Rebecca to the hospital and back. Two doctors spoke with them for half an hour. Nothing new was said. Naomi sat with her cold-weather bonnet on her head, her hands clasped in the lap of her black dress, eyes focused on the doctor's shoulders as she rehearsed his instructions.

Catatonic stupor. Deficit of motor activity. Such activity may in fact be reduced to zero. Luke will avoid bathing. He will avoid caring for his hair or nails. He will not make eye contact. Sometimes mute. Sometimes rigid. Sometimes flexibility that is out of the ordinary. No attempt to socialize. Extreme negativity. May refuse food and drink—if this occurs he will have to return to the hospital for an IV. Benzodiazepine must be administered regularly. Excellent chance he will respond to the BZD regimen. The exact causes of catatonia are unknown. In his case we speculate head trauma from the accident. Keep his room dimly lit and peaceful. Don't be discouraged. Patients suffering from catatonia often respond swiftly to medication. A family setting is a positive influence and may help him on the road to recovery. Keep in touch.



"Here you are, Luke."

Naomi stood with her brother outside the door to their home. The bishop and ministers and Rebecca were behind them.

"Can I help you to your room?"

Luke didn't respond. His pale blue eyes were far away from her.

She took his hand. It was like holding a rock. Slowly she tugged him up the steps to the porch and drew him into the house. She gently coaxed him up the staircase to his bedroom. His eyes didn't even flicker when he saw his bed and books. He had loved to read since he was a boy, but now he showed no interest in the three or four dozen volumes or anything else in his room.

"Would you like to lie down, Luke? Are you tired? Perhaps a nap would help you feel better."

Luke made no move toward his bed. He remained at his sister's side, silent and rigid as stone.

"How about your chair? The one you like to sit in when you read?"

Luke didn't respond.

Rebecca was at the door. Naomi turned to her. "Will you help me get him into his chair? I want to prepare a hot lunch for him, and it would be better if he were sitting up."

"Of course."

Together they led Luke to the burgundy armchair with its large armrests and large soft seat and back. Getting him to bend his knees and lower himself into it was almost impossible, for he would not cooperate. Finally Rebecca placed her hands on his chest and pushed him, and he fell back, his knees flexing despite himself. There he sat like the statue of a man on a throne.

Her eyes dark and large, Naomi looked at him. "I'm going to fix your favorite chicken soup, Luke. The one with the dumplings. All right?"

Luke stared straight ahead.

"Will you sit with him, Rebecca?" she asked.

"I will."

"I'll bring soup and some of Mrs. Yoder's sourdough rye for you as well as him."

"*Danke.*" Rebecca smiled. "I should like that. Hot food cheers me up."

The bishop and ministers were in the hall outside the room.

“Daughter, let us pray for you,” Bishop Fischer said.

Naomi bowed her head. The men had already removed their broad-brimmed black hats when they entered the house.

The bishop prayed in High German. He asked that God bless the home and all who dwelled in it. He asked that Luke be healed and speak and laugh as he had done so easily less than two weeks before. He asked that Naomi be touched in a very special way. All the ministers prayed. Then Bishop Fischer concluded with a plea, his voice rising, his tone almost desperate.

“Mein Gott, wir brauchen einen Ihrer Wunder.”

“Yes, God, we need one of your miracles,” whispered Naomi. “No matter what it looks like, no matter how it comes, no matter how strange or unusual it appears. Even if I don’t recognize it. Even if I don’t believe it. Come, Lord Jesus. Come to us in whatever manner you wish. Please. I cry out to you. Amen.”

The bishop heard her words. His eyes met hers as she raised her head.

“Amen,” he repeated. He and the ministers left, the harnesses on their horses jingling as the buggies pulled away from the house.

The soup was not a great success. Half of it dribbled down Luke’s chin.

But the other half went into his mouth and into his stomach, Naomi told herself.

They helped Luke into his bed that night, and Naomi got him into his pajamas while Rebecca washed dishes downstairs. Naomi found she couldn’t sleep because she was thinking about him constantly, so she finally took a blanket and pillow and went to his room. The candle showed her that his eyes were closed, and she could hear his breathing, deep and even.

That is something. Thank you, God, for his sleep.

She curled up in the chair with her pillow and blanket and quickly fell asleep herself.

In the morning she shaved him and washed his body with a cloth and soap and a basin of warm water. He wouldn't take the hash browns she offered him or the muffins or the eggs fried sunny-side up the way he liked. But he did drink a mug of coffee with cream and sugar in slow sips.

That also is something. Not much, but something. Thank you for this.

Feeling more tired than she had in days, she left him sitting up in his chair, staring at the wall, and went down to clean the kitchen with Rebecca. She carried the plate of eggs and hash browns and the empty coffee cup.

"No to that as well?" asked Rebecca, whose arms were up to their elbows in suds as she washed dishes in the sink.

"Ja," replied Naomi wearily. "But at least the coffee he tried."

"And he drank it all? Or only some?"

"All."

Rebecca smiled. "Good. He will make it then. Many of the men I know live on coffee and nothing else in the mornings."

For the first time in weeks Naomi gave a short laugh. "Ja. This was true of Papa."

But the memory brought a dagger with it that pierced her moment of light. Rebecca saw Naomi's face fall into lines of darkness as she picked up a dishtowel and began to dry plates and forks.

"I can do this," Rebecca protested.

But Naomi carried on as if her friend had never spoken.

My Lord, I feel like I myself am dead.

"Who is that?" asked Rebecca looking out the window.

Naomi kept her head down, drying a cup. "Someone with a meal?"

"No, it looks like...a soldier."

Surprised, Naomi looked out into the farmyard. "A soldier? What would a soldier be doing here?"

He was in a desert uniform and carried a duffel bag over his shoulder.

Ice shot through Naomi, and she put her knuckles to her mouth.

Rebecca stared at the man as he made his way to the door. "Oh, Naomi, I can't believe it!"

"It's your brother." Naomi continued to gaze out the window, dishtowel and cup still in her hands. "Rebecca, it's your brother."

Rebecca glanced at her sharply. "And your husband."

"No." Naomi shook her head. "No. I don't have a husband anymore."

A tear cut across Rebecca's cheek. "It doesn't matter what you say. He *is* your husband. And God has brought him home alive from the war."



Two



“Micah!”

Rebecca, her hands and arms still wet from the dish-washing, threw open the door and ran into his arms. He dropped his duffel bag and gathered her in, kissing her on the cheek.

“I can’t believe it!” She hugged him as tightly as she could, tears on her face. “Praise God! We knew nothing about how you were, nothing!”

“I wrote. I wrote you all. Every week.”

“But we never saw the letters. We were not permitted to see the letters.”

He kissed the top of her head, holding her closely. “I know. It’s all right. I’m home now.”

“Mama and Papa will want to see you.”

“I went to our house first thing and spent an hour with them. Then I walked to the bishop’s place and spent another hour with him.”

“The bishop?” Rebecca pulled back to look at his face and eyes. “And how was that?”

“We talked over everything just like we did a year ago. He told me he thanked God that I had come home alive but that

nothing has changed as far as the church is concerned. I'm still to be shunned for going to war...if I don't repent."

"And he knows you're here talking with me? That you spoke with Mother and Father and our brothers and sisters?"

"*Ja*. I have three days to repent. If I don't, the *bann* is back in force."

Micah looked at Naomi, who was standing in the doorway. "Hello."

"Hello," she replied.

"It's been a long time."

"Yes."

"I wrote you every chance I could."

"You knew I wouldn't be permitted to see the letters."

"Someone must have them. There are more than fifty."

Naomi dropped her eyes. "What good did it do to make the effort? I asked you not to go to war and you did anyway. You knew how hard it would be on me."

"On both of us," Micah said quietly, leaving his sister and walking toward the door.

"It's the same old argument. You wanted the war more than you wanted me. Or our way of life."

"I didn't want the war. I wanted to save the lives of the men in the war, friends and foes. I went as a medic and I wanted you to understand that."

"Well, I didn't understand a year ago and I don't understand today. So what's the point of our getting together again?"

"You are my wife."

"That made no difference to you when you enlisted."

Micah put his hands in the pockets of his desert uniform. "The bishop asked that we resume living together. But we're not to eat with each other or share the same bed or have any relations with one another, and I may not attend worship services or do business

with anyone in the Amish community. I can work the farm, and we can sit under the same roof.”

“And never talk.”

“Not after Sunday, no.”

“Unless you repent.”

Micah shook his head. “Naomi, how do you expect me to stand before God and tell him I’m sorry I saved the lives of hundreds of men and women—American, Canadian, British, Dutch, Afghan? How could I honestly say that to him and mean it? I didn’t take life, Naomi, I gave it back to those who had almost lost it. I gave it back in the name of God and Jesus Christ. You want me to say that was wrong?”

Naomi didn’t reply.

“This isn’t how I wanted our first meeting to begin.” Micah’s voice grew soft, the softness she remembered. “I’m here because my combat tour ended and I’ve been discharged. I knew nothing of the accident that took the lives of your parents and Ruth. I’m so sorry. God himself knows how sorry I am. I may have left here because I felt the Lord wanted me to bind up the wounds of the fallen. I may have enlisted and been shunned by our people. But when I left, I left loving your family. They knew that.”

Naomi’s eyes were still lowered. “Yes, they did.”

“I left loving you.”

She was silent.

“I wanted you to understand,” he almost whispered.

“Understand what?” Her voice took on a sharp edge. “What did you expect me to understand?”

“That I couldn’t sit back and watch soldiers and civilians being killed without doing something about it. That I needed to do my part to ease the pain and suffering. That I needed to heal like Jesus healed. That I felt it was a calling in my heart from God.”

“But you are Amish.”

"I didn't kill."

"You helped the war effort."

"I helped women and men and children return to their homes alive. That was the effort I made. I love you so much, Naomi. I need you to understand that was the effort I made."

Again she didn't know what to say to him.

After a moment he asked, "Where's Luke?"

"Upstairs in his room."

"I'm going to look in on him."

Naomi lifted her face. "He won't know you. He won't speak."

"In three days you won't speak to me again, so what is the difference?"

Micah brushed past her and went into the house and up the staircase. Naomi and Rebecca looked at each other.

Rebecca shrugged. "How can we argue with him? Everything he says sounds right."

"Not for an Amish man."

"But God is not an Amish God, is he? He is everyone's God. How can I say the Lord didn't put in his heart this desire to save people from the bombs and bullets of war?"

Naomi glanced away. "Let's finish the dishes."

"I should go."

"Why?"

"Because your husband has returned, and you need to live with him in this house, not me."

Naomi made a face. "Some life. We'll be like ghosts to one another. How can I ask him to help me with Luke when I can't even explain to him what I want?"

Rebecca bit her lower lip. "I feel out of place."

"Please don't go. It's going to be hard enough without losing you too."

"You're not losing me."

"You'll be a mile away. Of course I'm losing you."

Rebecca folded her arms over her chest. "Well, I'll speak with Micah about it. And my parents. And the bishop. Let us see what they will say about such an arrangement."

Naomi nodded. "All right."

"Until then I will remain here with you."

Naomi smiled. "*Danke*."

Rebecca offered her a small smile in return. "*Bitte*." She came over and took her friend's hand. "And I'll be praying for you, *ja*, for you and my brother. He has come home alive. This should be a happier day for you, my sister by marriage and by God."

"Of course I'm happy to see that he's alive. I just don't know what to do. I'm an Amish wife but he's not an Amish husband."

"Are you sure?"

"He won't repent, so the shunning will continue. How Amish is that of him to keep doing this to our marriage?"

"Let's pray about all of it and see what God will do. It may be that my brother isn't the only one who has to budge on this."

Naomi's eyes widened. "What? Me? What can I do? Agree with him so that we're both expelled from the church?"

"I'm not thinking of you. I'm thinking of the bishop and the ministers."

"Them? When do they ever change their minds?"

"Let's wait and see. Meanwhile, I hope you have enough feelings left in your heart for my brother that you can embrace him and welcome him home."

Naomi passed a hand over her eyes. "I don't know what I'm able to do. Micah and I haven't talked in a year. We haven't been able to write. Now my family is gone and he is here, but I still feel utterly alone."

"Well, try a hug anyway. It can't hurt."

"I think it can."

They both went back into the house as Micah came down the staircase. His face had tightened, and its lines had deepened.

"What's Luke's prognosis?" he asked Naomi.

"Prognosis?" she responded. "You sound like a doctor."

"That's the way I've sounded for the past year. Is he on medication?"

"Ja."

"BZD?" asked Micah.

"Ja."

"Do they connect the onset of the catatonia with head trauma from the accident?"

"They say they understand so little about catatonic states. They can only guess."

"Well, if a person is fine before an accident and has catatonia immediately afterward, I think it's a good guess. What's become of the drunk driver?"

"His trial is set for the spring. He can't leave the state."

"So..."

"So he's home with his family and getting ready for Thanksgiving."

"And you were at home when the accident occurred?"

"Ja."

Micah nodded, turning over what she had just told him. Then he went to a closet by the door and took a dark winter coat off a peg. It was at least a size too small, but he pulled it on over his uniform. A broad-brimmed black hat that had belonged to Naomi's father went on his head. It also was too small, but he left it on.

"What are you doing?" asked Naomi.

"I'm going to pay my respects to your mother and father and Ruth." He paused as he opened the door. "Would you like to join me?"

"Oh, I don't think so, no."

Rebecca shot an annoyed glance at her, but Naomi ignored it, picking up the dishtowel and returning to the plates and cups.

Through the window the two young women could see Micah

leading the black gelding, Maria, from the barn and harnessing her to the buggy. He spent a moment talking to the horse, stroking the side of her neck until she nickered and bent her head to tug at his coat with her teeth. After that he climbed up into the driver's seat.

Words suddenly made their way into Naomi's mind, words and strong memories of her wedding ceremony.

"Do you have confidence, brother, that the Lord has provided this, our sister Naomi, as a marriage partner for you?"

"Ja."

"Do you also have confidence, sister, that the Lord has provided this, our brother Micah, as a marriage partner for you?"

"Ja."

"Do you also promise your wife that if she should in bodily weakness, sickness, or any similar circumstances need your help, you will care for her as is fitting for a Christian husband, Micah?"

"Ja."

"Do you promise your husband the same thing, Naomi? That if he should in bodily weakness, sickness, or any similar circumstances need your help, you will care for him as is fitting for a Christian wife?"

"Ja."

"Do you both promise together that you will with love, forbearance, and patience live with each other and not part from each other until God will separate you from death?"

"Ja."

Naomi dropped the dishtowel and ran to the door, flinging it open.

"Micah! Warten Sie eine Minute! Ich komme mit dir!"

He pulled back on the reins, and the mare came to a stop.

"Sind Sie sicher?" he asked her. *Are you sure?*

"Ja, ich bin mir sicher."

She pulled on her coat and wrapped a dark scarf about her throat.

"You'll keep an eye on Luke?" she asked Rebecca as she pulled on woolen gloves.

"Of course."

"I'm not sure when we'll be back."

"Take all the time you need."

"All the time we need? We need a lifetime."

Naomi rushed out the door and strode across the farmyard to the buggy, her head erect, her back straight. Micah watched her come and waited, the leather traces in his hands. Rebecca saw her say something to Micah, one gloved hand on the side of the buggy. Then she climbed in beside him.

Not for the first time or the last time, Rebecca marveled at the beauty God had bestowed on the slender, dark, and flashing-eyed woman who was Naomi Miller by birth and Naomi Bachman by marriage. But along with the beauty, he had also bestowed a fiery temper and a backbone as stubborn and unyielding as steel.

"I have no idea how you are going to bring the two of them together again, Lord," Rebecca whispered as the buggy rolled down the lane to the road. "But you made the marriage, and you put the desire to be a medic in Micah's heart, so it's your problem. All I can do is pray and remind you of that."