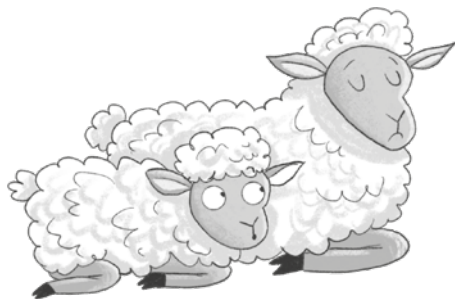


Operation
Nativity



*To my agent, Sam Copeland,
this story wouldn't be what it is without you.*



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Operation Nativity



JENNY PEARSON

Illustrations by Katie Kear



USBORNE



The First Noel at Burlington Hall

I'm going to tell you the story about the birth of the baby Jesus. You might have heard about it from your teachers at school. You may have been in a nativity play yourself, with either tinsel on your head or a fake beard strapped to your face, so I'm sure you know the gist – Mary, Joseph, donkey, journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem. Well, that part is spot on the money.

The bit that they won't have told you about is the accidental detour Mary and Joseph took to Chipping Bottom, a pretty and characterful village in Hampshire, which came about thanks to a less-than-professional spot of angeling.

Yes, that says *angeling* not *angling* – there is no fishing involved in the story of the birth of Jesus Christ. There is, however, a bit of a bump in the journey thanks to the Angel Gabriel messing things up ever so *slightly*.

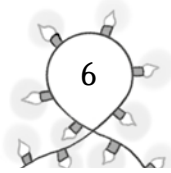
And when I say ever so *slightly*, I really mean ever so *massively*. But you have to remember, back then, he hadn't been in the job that long. It was an awful lot of pressure – announcing the arrival of the actual Jesus Christ – and let's just say he got a bit carried away. He couldn't have known that the explosion of light he came down to Earth in would be so powerful that it would transport Mary, Joseph, Balthazar the wise man, a shepherd named Steve *and* himself not only to another place (Chipping Bottom) but to another time (last December).

But how do *I* know all this?

Good question.

And the answer is because I. WAS. THERE!

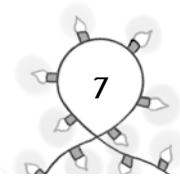
Big claim, I know. You are well within your rights to say, *Oscar, are you possibly a teensy-lot confused? You were most certainly not present at the birth of Jesus Christ Our Lord, and the Angel Gabriel most definitely did not mess things up.* But I'd say this: people will always make big claims and it's up to you to choose whether to believe them or not.



For example, I do not believe Dad was beamed up to Kepler-452b by some aliens, like he told Mum that time he came home late from the rugby. I also suspect Tyronne in my class was lying when he said that when he was eight, Santa Claus woke him up and took him on his round-the-world delivery flight because he'd been the best-behaved boy on the planet. And there is no way the chocolate Santa that I had been saving in the fridge vanished in a puff of smoke one night like Mum tried to get me to believe. There was no evidence to support any of those claims.

But there is also no evidence I can show to convince you that I was around when Jesus was about to be born. Other than a two-thousand-year-old donkey at Lady Asster's donkey sanctuary. But, to be honest, Mary's donkey looks pretty much the same as all the others. Even I struggle to tell him and his stablemate Zipper apart – and I spent quite a few hours plodding through the countryside on the back of Mary's donkey.

So really, all I can do is tell you my story and all you can do is listen, if you want to, and then decide if you think it's true. Hopefully, I'll be more convincing than Tyronne at least. I mean, nobody could be *that* good, and definitely not Tyronne. But I suppose it doesn't really matter if I can



convince you or not. People will always believe different things and I actually think that's okay.

For example, I believed Christmas was important for two reasons. Number one: presents. And number two: it was the day my parents met. And if there was no Christmas, then they might not have met, and then they wouldn't have had me. And that would be an *actual* tragedy.

But now, after everything, I truly believe there are more important things than presents. And more important things than me.

Even my family believe different things about what happened. Like my grandmother – she's a bit of a traditionalist when it comes to Christmas. She loves the nativity story and she'd never believe that the Virgin Mary and Joseph ended up in Chipping Bottom, even if she did bump into them in the post office and not realize.

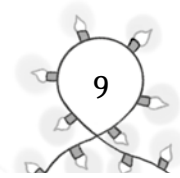
Whereas my little sister Molly...let's just say she's the open-minded type. She really will believe *anything* you tell her, without question. As her school report said, *her imagination knows no bounds*. She's convinced she can speak to animals and she's certain that one day wings will sprout from her shoulder blades. But then she's only five-and-a-bit.



I suppose that if Molly wasn't the way she is, none of what happened last Christmas would have happened. But after we had both seen something crash-land in the field behind our grandparents' house, she was the one who convinced *me* that it might be something spectacular and we should go and check it out.

The only reason we were even there was because we'd received a very fancy invitation in the post from Barlington Hall – a summons to head back to my dad's family home for Christmas. Which, if you think about it, is a little bit like the summons Mary and Joseph were given to travel to Bethlehem by Emperor Augustus. I'm not saying Grandmother is *exactly* like a Roman Emperor – but there are a few similarities.

Anyway, if we hadn't gone to Barlington for Christmas and if we hadn't very bravely ventured out into the field that night, I don't think it's too big-headed to say that basically Christmas would have been destroyed. Well, actually it would have never existed in the first place. But I don't think there's a word for destroying something that never existed. So, if you do believe everything I'm about to tell you, you can thank me for saving Christmas later.

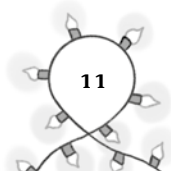






I don't know why, but I had a feeling that Christmas was going to be a bit different to normal as soon as the invitation arrived. Usually, we just have Mum's mum, Granny Roberts, over, but she'd booked a cruise around the Canary Islands with her friend, Irene, who she met on the number 67 bus. They were starting at Santa Cruz in Tenerife and ending in Las Palmas in Gran Canaria. Molly *really* wanted to go with them, but when we explained that they weren't visiting islands full of little yellow tweety-birds and that Father Christmas did not live in Tenerife, she changed her mind.

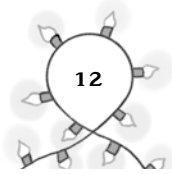
I was actually excited to be doing something different



for a change. I love Granny Roberts, but I can't say I was too worried about not spending Christmas with her. No offence, but she doesn't really add that much to the day. See, she doesn't have a lot of stamina for fun, what with her being a-gazillion-and-one years old. Every year, Mum tells her to go steady on the Buck's Fizz, but Granny Roberts doesn't listen. She spends the morning grabbing hold of me and my sister Molly and squeezing our faces while telling us we're her favourite grandkids. I mean, that's nice, but even Molly knows that as we're her *only* grandkids, there's no actual competition.

Sometimes, Granny Roberts will suddenly break into a very warbly version of "Deck the Halls" and Dad will say, "Cathy, your mother has peaked too early again," and Mum will say, "She's fine, Christopher, let her be!" But she'll always fall asleep around three o'clock.

This one year, she slumped down on top of the Monopoly board just as Dad had landed on my Park Lane where I had two hotels! That took some forgiving, I'll tell you. Another time she spent the entire afternoon snoring and farting in front of the TV. It was funny at first – I mean, who doesn't find an unconscious old lady trumpeting along to the Queen's Speech hilarious? But when the room became so unbelievably



stinky that I couldn't watch *Home Alone* without my T-shirt over my nose, I began to question Mum and Dad's wisdom in allowing her to have a third helping of sprouts. And then, the year before last, she almost didn't even make it through the meal! She nearly nodded off in her gravy and sausage-meat stuffing. Really, I think if you're a guest at someone's house, you should bring a bit more Christmas spirit with you.

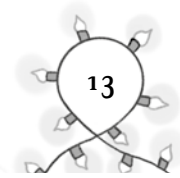
Mind you, there's Christmas spirit and then there's an angel with an eye-blindingly bright halo in your downstairs toilet.

But at the time, I didn't think it was possible to have too much Christmas spirit, so when an invitation to spend Christmas at Barlington Hall with Dad's side of the family, the Cuthbert-Andersons, turned up, I jumped at the chance.

The invite was very fancy, with grand-looking handwriting on the front, and sealed with a red blobby wax thing of the family crest. Oh yeah, Dad's side of the family are super rich. Old money, Granny Roberts says – whatever that is.

My rich grandparents live on a huge country estate in Hampshire. Molly says Barlington Hall is *majestifful*, which isn't a real word, but is spot on as descriptions go, because Barlington Hall is both majestic and wonderful.

The house itself is set in acres of land and you have to



make your way through these huge iron gates with lions on them and head up a really long driveway before you even get to the front door! There are so many massive rooms, including a library, two kitchens, loads of bathrooms, spare sitting rooms and a ballroom! Half of it isn't even used because it is so expensive to look after. Imagine that! Having a bit of your house that you never even go in.

The closed-off wing was actually very useful though – for storing lost angels and wise men. But more about that later.

We usually visit Barlington Hall in summer, for a week of the school holidays. Mum is never that thrilled when we go. She says she and my grandmother are very different people, which is a fair statement. I love it there though. We spend our time climbing the best trees you'll ever find to climb and fishing for minnows down in the stream at the bottom of one of the fields. One year we even built a chicken run with Grandfather. It's also where Dad taught me to ride a bike and where we lost Molly for almost an hour during the most epic game of hide-and-seek. But we'd never been there for Christmas before. I thought that was because we had to look after Granny Roberts, but I soon realized there was more to it than that.

When the invitation arrived in the post that morning, I

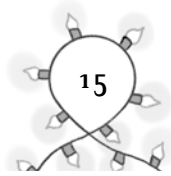


immediately started imagining Barlington Hall at wintertime, with its fireplaces lit and the house decorated all festively. I knew that a Christmas there would be absolutely majestic, and I just had this feeling that it was going to be way more exciting than our regular Christmases.

Obviously, I had no idea just *how* much more exciting it would be and that I would meet some very important people and be involved in saving Christmas and all it stands for. I don't think anybody, even Molly, could have had the imagination to predict *that* was about to go down.

But the first thing I needed to do was get Mum on board with the whole Barlington trip and I realized that might be tricky when she picked up the invitation from the doormat, took one look at it and said, "Oh no. No, no, no! Not the family nativity!"

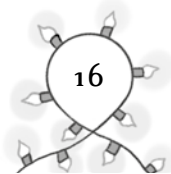
Now, of course I'd heard stories about the family nativity – it's some big production that Grandmother puts on in her local church. The first ever one was in nineteen-twenty-something and was started by my great-great-great-grandmother, Lady Cordelia Cuthbert-Anderson, who was a bit of a character by all accounts. Her shows were known to be quite the spectacle. Apparently, you can still see scorch marks on the altar where Cordelia let off an indoor firework



to announce the arrival of the Angel Gabriel in the 1929 production.

Generation after generation of Cuthbert-Andersons have prided themselves on putting on a grand show in the village, trying to make each performance better than the last.

I thought it sounded like a lot of fun, but Molly and I had never been involved because Mum and Dad always said something about *liking to do our own thing at Christmas*. But I got a strong suspicion we might not have been told the full story when Mum stood there glaring at that invitation, muttering, “No, no, no, I said never again, not after the last time...” And then she bellowed up the stairs to Dad, “CHRISTOPHER! WE HAVE A PROBLEM!”

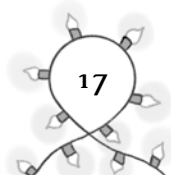




On the morning the invite arrived in the post, Molly ran to the door, shouting, “POSSSSSST!” I dropped my games controller and raced out to see if I could beat her to it. There’s always a bit of a bundle between us to see who can get there first, even though Mum tells us off for it.

Molly pointed at me with her foam cutlass. “Back off, Osky! It’s MINE!”

She was dressed in one of what our family calls her “casual day outfits”. Molly point-blank refuses to wear normal clothes. Today she was wearing the bottom part of her Tin Man costume, the top part of a pirate outfit and her



Christmas reindeer bopper headband.

I tried to dodge round her, but she waggled her weapon in my face and did a big pirately “ARGGGH!”.

That’s when Mum swooped in, gasped as she realized what was in the envelope and then deafened us both by shouting, “CHRISTOPHER! WE HAVE A PROBLEM!”

Clearly, this wasn’t usual post.

Molly started to yank on Mum’s top. “Is it post for me?”

“No, darling... CHRISTOPHER, would you get down here?”

Molly stuck out her lip. “I never get post.”

“That’s because you’re only five,” I said.

“Lucky you, I don’t think I want this post, Molly-pops.”

Mum turned the letter over in her hands, then closed her eyes and whispered what sounded a bit like a prayer.

Dad came down the stairs. “What is it, love?”

“Is it bad-bill post?” Molly asked.

“I fear it’s worse than that, darling. It’s from Barlington Hall,” Mum said, pulling the cord of her dressing gown tighter. She looked at Dad. “It’s the Christmas invite from your mother. I presume you know something about this? You told them, didn’t you, that we don’t have my mother for Christmas this year!”



“Ah, yes, I probably need to talk to you about that.”

“Yes, you probably do. I thought we’d made our feelings clear on this. You promised I’d never have to take part in the family nativity ever again!”

“Come on, love, it’s not *that* bad,” Dad said, sounding wholly unconvincing.

“Christopher,” Mum seethed, “your mother had me dangling from the church balcony dressed up in a gold leotard pretending to be a star!”

“And a very lovely star you made too!”

“Until the rope came loose! And what about the time I was put in charge of Morris?”

“Who’s Morris?” I asked.

“A sheep,” Dad said.

“I think you’ll find he was a ram! I had bruises for weeks after he went on that rampage! And if that’s not enough to remind you of how horrendous the whole thing is, let’s not forget your mother’s approach to directing ‘her actors’!”

Dad looked at me and said, “Your grandmother can get a little passionate.”

“Passionate!” Mum yelled. “Christopher, she’s a monster. No – no way is this happening.” She then headed off down



the hallway, muttering something about how she must have done something really bad in a past life to get letters from Lady Lucifer.

We followed her into the kitchen, and I sat down at the table which was covered with all Mum's cake tins. She's gone part-time at the pensions company so she can spend more time learning to bake professionally. She'd had a go at stollen that week, and I reckon by the sixth attempt you would definitely think it was the marzipanny-fruity Christmas loaf from Germany and not a crunchy baguette from France.

Mum stuck the kettle on and Dad sat down at the table.

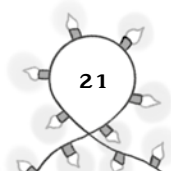
I could tell it was going to be one of *those* adult conversations, because Mum got rid of Molly by sending her off with her advent calendar to find the next window. They couldn't trick me though. I was going to stick around for this one.

Molly disappeared into the sitting room and I heard her start up her battery-powered lightsaber and begin launching her daily attack on her Sylvania family collection.

"Can I have a look?" I asked, grabbing the invitation from the table. "Who's Lady Lucifer? Grandmother?"

"Nobody. You never heard that, understand?" Mum said, then chucked teabags into two mugs. "Hot chocolate, Oscar?"

"Yes please," I said, turning the invitation around in my



hands. The paper was thick and creamy in colour, with gold edging. It was covered with Grandmother's fancy calligraphy writing, which told us we had been cordially invited to Barlington Hall for the one hundredth Cuthbert-Anderson Christmas nativity. I have to say, I was sold on the idea immediately. Who doesn't want to be cordially invited somewhere?

"Has it really come around again already? It can't be three years." Mum sighed.

"I'm afraid so," Dad said.

Mum poured the hot water into the mugs, then squirted some whippy cream on my hot chocolate.

"I think the family nativity sounds fun. Let's do it!" I said, because if there was a chance I'd get to see my mum dangling from a harness in a shiny outfit, I did not want to miss that.

Mum put her cup down, closed her eyes, then shook her head as though she was trying to forget some terrible memory – could have been the church balcony-dangling, but maybe it was the ram-butting, who knows?

"That," Mum said in a slightly unnerving voice, "is because you've never been involved."

I said, "But it's a family tradition and I am part of the Cuthbert-Anderson family, so I want to be a part of it and



I'm glad we've received an invitation."

"*Summons* more like," Mum said.

"Your grandmother does tend to get quite wrapped up in the whole thing," Dad said, then swallowed hard.

"That's one way of putting it," Mum said. "You may have grasped that your grandmother is quite a ferocious dictator."

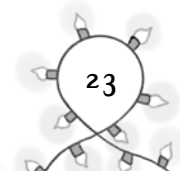
"She means director," Dad said to me.

"Do I? The first year I did it, after having met your father, I was demoted to a non-speaking part – a palm tree, would you believe? All because I could not portray an angel 'authentically'. Oh, Christopher, she'll be even worse if it's a hundredth celebration! You know how she gets!"

I thought about Grandmother Cuthbert-Anderson and, sure, she does have lots of rules – about where we sit at dinner and the order of cutlery, for example. And yes, she was a big one for manners, but I couldn't imagine that she could be as bad as Mum was making out. And she was family after all. Dad says you just have to accept family and love them for who they are, and I reckon he's right about that, even if they do go a bit extra about a nativity play.

Mum passed Dad and me our mugs and sighed. "It's all quite an..."

"Experience?" I suggested.



“Ordeal,” she said, then swallowed hard.

Frankly, she was starting to sound a bit melodramatic. An ordeal to me is accidentally getting blasted into space on a pogo stick, or being attacked by a herd of sealions, or forgetting to wear underpants to school on a PE day.

An ordeal was *not* a family nativity play.

Or so I thought...but then I had no clue as to what the Angel Gabriel was about to do two thousand years ago and what I’d have to do to fix it.

I began lapping up the whippy cream. “Sounds alright to me,” I said, taking a big slurp. “I don’t understand why you don’t want to go.”

Mum sat herself down on the kitchen worktop. “We just prefer doing Christmas *our way*.”

“It’s nice to keep it as just us. Christmas Day is when your mother and I met, which makes it extra special,” Dad said, smiling at Mum.

I groaned inwardly – they were going to tell the how-they-met story again.

“Yes, it’s the day you rolled up to my door dressed as an elf while carol-singing – if you can call it singing.”

“I had no elf-control and asked your mother out immediately.”

“Dad, that joke wasn’t funny the first time you told it.”



“Anyway,” Mum continued, “we usually have Granny Roberts to think about.”

“Well, she’s off to the Canaries, so I think this year we should change things up!” I said.

“Can’t we think of another reason not to go?” Mum asked. “We’ve always managed to come up with some excuse.”

“What excuses?” I asked.

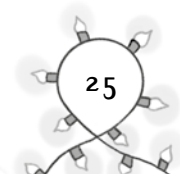
“We can’t always use Granny Roberts, so usually, we find another reason to avoid all the family...*drama*. Last time we said we couldn’t go because you’d had your tonsils out. The time before that, it was your grommets,” Dad said.

“Oh, Christopher, I really hoped that they’d got the picture that we’re not keen,” Mum said. Then she turned to me. “I don’t suppose you have any more body parts we could have removed so we don’t have to attend?”

“How’s your appendix feeling?” Dad said and gave me a wink.

“My appendix is fine,” I said. I was not completely clear on what an appendix was, but I did not like what he was insinuating.

Mum sighed and said, “Shame,” in a way that sounded like she actually was disappointed about my appendix being fit-for-purpose.



“Hang on! You didn’t make me have my tonsils out so we didn’t have to do this nativity thing, did you?”

“No!” Mum said, sounding a little too flustered for my liking.

“Hmmm.” I gave them both a look.

“I suppose there’s always Molly. She hasn’t had her tonsils out yet,” Dad said. Then he grinned at me. “That is, if you’re one hundred per cent sure your appendix is feeling A-okay. Are you sure there are no little twinges?”

I gasped and Mum laughed and threw a tea towel at Dad.

“No,” I said, “and even if it was twinging I wouldn’t tell you, because I think we should go! I like the idea of some festive family tra-la-la-ing around the Christmas tree! I bet the tree at Barlington will be massive! And Grandfather and Grandmother are bound to decorate the place all festive and fancy – it will feel extra Christmassy there!”

Mum frowned and turned to Dad. “Christopher, I do not think we can harvest any more body parts from our children to get out of it this year. You’ll just have to say a polite ‘Thank you, but no thank you.’ Make it clear this time.”

Dad stopped smiling and for a moment I didn’t recognize the look on his face. He suddenly looked very small – a bit like a kid. Well, a stubbly, slightly wrinkled kid, but you get

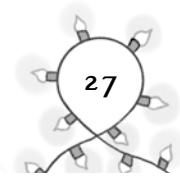


what I'm trying to say. "Normally, I would – you know how I feel about the whole Barlington Hall Christmas *thing* – but this year, I really think we ought to go. It's my dad, see..." He took a big swallow of his tea and Mum and I looked at each other while we waited for him to continue. "He's not well. James called yesterday – they're all getting the ferry over for it this year. Camilla and Patryk are going too."

James is my dad's brother. He's married to my Auntie Marigold. They both work in something financy and have twins called Hugo and Fenella. I didn't know my cousins *that* well. They live in Jersey, which is closer to France than us. We used to see them at Barlington in the summer holidays, but we hadn't overlapped for the last couple of years so I hadn't seen them since I was about eight.

Camilla is my dad's little sister and Uncle Patryk is her husband. Auntie Camilla used to write a column in a magazine telling everybody what it was like being a single girl in London, but then she met Uncle Patryk and she couldn't do that any more. Since then she's been writing about pregnancy and soft furnishings, according to Mum. I don't really know what soft furnishings are, or what she's got against hard ones.

"Poor Reginald. It's not gout again, is it?" Mum asked.



I know what gout is because of *Horrible Histories*. Henry VIII had it a lot. It's when your joints get sore and painful because you eat too many boar heads and drink too much wine.

"It's a bit worse than gout," Dad said very quietly and looked at the floor. "A lot worse, Cathy." Then he looked at me. "Oscar, maybe you shouldn't be here for this, it might upset you."

I put my hot chocolate down. "Is Grandfather sick? If he is, I want to know. I'm almost twelve, that's practically a teenager. I can handle it."

Dad looked at Mum and she nodded.

"Yes, he is rather ill," Dad said.

"Is it bad?" I said quietly.

"I'm afraid so, champ. And I know how difficult you find the nativity, Cathy, and usually I wouldn't ask, but I think this may be the last time..."

"Right, goodness," Mum said, putting her mug down on the draining board. She slid off the worktop and onto her feet. Then she turned the tap on full blast and started filling the washing-up bowl. Mum has a habit of *doing things* when she doesn't know what to do.

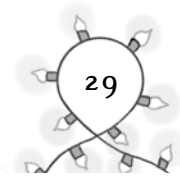
"Goodness, right, goodness, of course, of course, right,"



she repeated as she gave some innocent plates quite an aggressive cleaning.

I sat there, thinking about my grandfather. I don't see him nearly as much as I'd like because we live three hundred miles away in Middlesbrough. We moved here for Dad's job at the biotech and pharmaceuticals company, just after I was born. To begin with, apparently my grandparents were disappointed he didn't want to take on the responsibility of living in Barlington, although they've got over it now. I heard Dad talking about it with Mum once. He said that he didn't want the "burden of being a Cuthbert-Anderson and all that that entails". I didn't really know what that meant, to be honest. I failed to see how living in an enormo house could be a burden – all those rooms to run around in and a huge garden to play in. But there had to be something in it, because my Uncle James and Auntie Camilla didn't want to live at Barlington either.

Anyway, with us in Middlesbrough and my grandparents in Hampshire, it's not like we've ever been able to just pop round. We Zoom them every other weekend, but neither him nor Grandmother are that great with technology. We often end up having conversations with their bellies and they spend a lot of time saying, "Can you hear us? We can't hear



you!” but I like our chats. Grandfather is one of those people who seem to be made up of stories. You know how *stuff* just happens to some people? Well, he’s one of *them*.

Thinking about it now, I guess I am too.

But back to Grandfather. This one time, he got knocked off his horse by a low-flying pheasant. And one wintry February evening, he somehow managed to set fire to his pyjamas by bending over to warm his bum by the fire, and had to run outside and sit in the snow to put them out. And this one time, when we were there for the summer holidays, he let me drive the Land Rover and Mum went ballistic and called him a reckless old fish because I was only six and six-year-olds aren’t really supposed to drive Land Rovers. I don’t know where the fish bit came from. I think she was overwrought with emotion at seeing her son crash into the side of the house and it was the first thing that came out of her mouth.

Anyway, my grandfather – or Lord Cuthbert-Anderson, to give him his full title – really is quite a lot of fun. I know the Lord part might make you think that he’s a bit stuffy, but he definitely isn’t. I’m not even sure what a Lord does, other than dress up and go to occasional fancy dinners. To me, he’s just my grandfather, and a really very brilliant one.



I suddenly felt very, very sad and very, very determined that a Christmas at Barlington Hall was, for so many reasons, absolutely what we had to do.

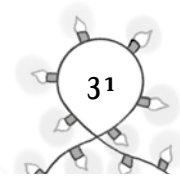
I turned to Mum. “Go on, I think we should do this nativity thing and spend Christmas at Barlington. Granny Roberts isn’t with us this year, so really, what else are we going to do? And Grandfather Cuthbert-Anderson is my only grandad, and I would very much like to see him before the thing that is worse than gout gets him. It is Christmas, after all. I say, let the family festive fun begin! What’s the worst that can happen?”

Quite a lot as it turned out, but how was I to know that the Angel Gabriel was about to make such a monumental mistake?

“Of course we’ll go,” Mum said. “Absolutely.”

Dad walked over and gave her a hug. “You never know, love, we might even enjoy it.”

Molly staggered into the kitchen at that moment, her face smeared with chocolate. Under her arm was a clearly ransacked advent calendar – every window of the Santa-and-his-reindeers scene was open. She did a massive burp, said, “I feel a bit icky-poops,” then promptly threw up on the kitchen lino.



I didn't think much of it at the time, but Mum clearly saw it as some sort of sign as to how the holiday season would pan out. Mums are weirdly psychic like that. Because she closed her eyes and said very quietly, "And so it begins." Like Molly puking was some proof that we were heading towards a Christmas catastrophe.

Which, as it so happens, was remarkably close to the truth.

