

Happy Holidays



By Chantal Bellehumeur



Twenty year old Emily Jacobson woke up on the Sunday morning of December first with a smile on her pretty face. She and her husband William Mancini had planned to go out and buy a Christmas tree today with their ten and a half month old daughter Nadia. They also planned on decorating their apartment for the upcoming holidays and taking Nadia to see Santa Claus. A store near their home was offering free photo sessions.

Nadia could be heard joyfully playing in her crib through the baby monitor. Emily decided to remain under her warm blankets for a little bit longer because, even though she was eager to start her day, she was still very tired. It was rare that Nadia let her sleep past six thirty and the digital clock on the nightstand showed that it was now five past seven.

Unable to get back to sleep, Emily looked out of her bedroom window from her queen sized bed. The sun was shining brightly and thick snowflakes were slowly coming down. It had not stopped snowing since Friday afternoon and Emily could hear the snow plow passing on her street. Its giant shovel scraped the ground.

Emily knew that the neighbourhood sidewalks would not all be completely plowed by the time her and William would be outside. The smaller plows always came later on in the day. She turned around in bed and lightly shook her husband, who was lying on his left side towards her. "Are you awake?" she whispered needing to talk to him. "Barely" William sleepily answered without opening his eyes. Emily debated on whether she should continue talking and finally decided to speak again. "I need to ask you a small favour," she said in her sweet voice.

William just gave a little grunt and didn't move or open his eyes so Emily turned back around and continued to watch the snow come down.

Yesterday, Emily had observed the snow rapidly fall from the sky. The wind had been pushing the flakes slightly to the left. They fell heavily onto the ground and also landed onto the bare branches of tall trees outside as well as the roofs of her neighbour's houses and cars while some people shovelled their driveways. Emily appreciated not having to do such labour and being able to stay in the warmth of her home when snow piled up. On snowy days her superintendent always shovelled the pathway from the front door of the apartment building to the sidewalk, so neither Emily nor William had to bother with that. Also, they didn't own a car so they didn't even have to dig a vehicle out of snow banks like a lot of their apartment neighbours had to do when snow accumulated or got pushed aside by the snow plows.

Although she preferred the summer season because it was warmer, Emily was still able to fully appreciate how pretty the snow could be; especially when the sun shined on it because it sparkled like diamonds.

Emily remembered building snow forts as a child and sometimes pretending that she was in a mine. She and her best friend Katy Smith would collect the snow in sand buckets and pretend to sell them to jewellers for a lot of money. On one occasion they gave the buckets to their mothers as a present. Both Mrs. Jacobson and Mrs. Smith had played along and had thanked the young girls for all the pretty “diamonds,” which soon turned into liquid. Emily did a lot of fun and creative things with the snow, and also made paper flakes to decorate the inside of the house she grew up in as well as her elementary school classrooms.

Emily felt William stir. She turned around to face her husband again and politely asked William, who was still half asleep, if he could get Nadia’s sleigh out of storage at the same time as all the Christmas stuff later. They would not be able to use the stroller today. “After my coffee,” he responded while yawning. He then put a pillow over his head. Emily got the hint. She had to stop talking. Her husband really wasn’t a morning person, especially during the winter season. He could be grumpy.

The baby started to fuss so Emily got out of the comfort of her bed and put on her slippers. Feeling cold, she put on William’s fire engine red housecoat over her flannel pyjamas because he barely ever wore it. Emily then walked to her daughter’s room.

Nadia greeted her mother with a big smile like she did most mornings. Emily always returned the smile. “Good morning sunshine!” Emily said as she picked up her happy baby.

Nadia was patient as Emily changed her diaper and got her dressed. She knew the routine.

William joined Emily and Nadia in the kitchen fifteen minutes later. Emily had already turned the coffee machine on for him and was eating a toasted bagel with cream cheese on it while Nadia munched on her favourite cereal-Cheerios.

The baby sipped on diluted apple juice while her father drank his coffee.

After breakfast, William got the three cardboard boxes labelled “Christmas decorations” as well as the metal tree stand out of storage. Emily was happy to see that he remembered to also take out Nadia’s small wooden sleigh. It had been donated from Emily’s friend Veronica, and Emily was quite thankful to have it. She could not imagine having to transport Nadia outdoors without it all winter.

As Emily thought about all the other things Veronica had given her for Nadia (baby toys and musical instruments, lots of clothing, a security gate, a baby gym, a jolly jumper...)

William carried the taped up boxes full of Christmas decorations one by one into the living room and placed them on the floor. He then set the tree stand by the window, beside the patio door.

Ready to leave, the young couple put on their winter gear and headed outdoors with Nadia and her sleigh. The walkway from their apartment building to the sidewalk had been shovelled as well as part of the sidewalk, but Emily and William soon found themselves in a foot of snow.

William sat his daughter in her sleigh and pulled it forward using the thick rope it was attached to; one end on each side of the front. The baby seemed to really like the ride. She laughed whenever her father would attempt to run and make the sleigh move faster.

Emily randomly decided to throw a few snowballs at her husband and giggled as much as Nadia when he failed to hit her back. She ran off ahead of him, daring him to try and catch her. William ran as fast as he could while pulling Nadia in the deep snow, but only caught up to Emily after she had stopped running.

Emily was patiently waiting for her husband and daughter by the parking lot of the grocery store, where a large selection of chopped down pine trees were available to purchase. She loved the pleasant aroma they provided. Closing her eyes, Emily took a big whiff and smiled. As she was about to exhale, she got hit in the face with a snowball.

"Sorry!" William said laughing. "No you're not!" Emily responded laughing as much as William as she wiped the cold dripping snow away with her mitten. She then started making a snowball but never got a chance to throw it.

A middle-aged bearded man wearing a red and black chequered jacket came to see them and announced the prices of the trees. "Twenty dollars for a small one like this," he said pointing to a pine that was Emily's height. "Thirty for a medium sized one, and forty for the big ones over there." Emily and William politely thanked him for the information. "I only take cash," the salesman precised. The couple thanked him again.

Emily knew that the big trees would never fit in their apartment and felt that the small ones were not big enough. She expressed her thoughts to William, who confirmed that he agreed with her.

"Let me know when you decide on a tree," the salesman said. "I'll be around." He then started whistling to the tune of "Jingle Bells" and left to go help other customers.

The couple started to examine some of the medium sized trees while Nadia sat patiently

in her sleigh. She looked pretty funny in her light pink puffy hooded winter snowsuit. The edge of a pink hat covered the baby's forehead, matching thick mittens were tucked under her sleeves, and a wrapped up knitted scarf covered her mouth and nose. The only part of Nadia that could be seen was her blue eyes. Emily had placed a small blanket on her baby for extra warmth even though it was not that cold out. Her pink boots were completely hidden.

Emily and William found a tree they both liked and signalled to the salesman. "That one please," Emily said once the man arrived. "No problem," he joyfully said. "That'll be thirty dollars."

William took out his leather wallet from his jacket pocket and gave the man two crisp twenty dollar bills. "We'll also take a small wreath," he said.

The salesman took the money with his gloved right hand and told the couple to choose their pine wreath. While Emily made her selection, the man wrapped the selected pine tree in clear plastic. He was now whistling to the tune of "O Christmas Tree."

With a mix of Christmas songs playing in her head, Emily pulled Nadia on her sleigh with her right hand while holding the pine wreath with her left. William carefully slid the pine tree all the way home. It wasn't an easy task for either one of them, but they made it.

Back in their apartment, Emily hung the wreath on the inside of their front door. "The front hall smells really good," she happily commented after taking in the pine scent. Emily looked forward to letting the tree out of its wrapping and making her living room smell like pine too.

Emily got Nadia out of her winter clothes and wiped the wet sleigh down with a dry cloth before leaning it sideways against the wall for future use.

Nadia was put in her playpen with her favourite toys and Emily helped William put the tree in its metal stand. Some pine needles fell on the hardwood floor as they worked. "Uh-oh!" Nadia said as she stood against one of the wider sides of her playpen, curiously observing her parents. "It's okay. Mommy will sweep it all up later," Emily responded.

The tree ended up being a little crooked so Emily had to loosen one of the three metal bolts from the stand so that William could straighten it. More pine needles fell to the ground. "Mess!" Nadia pointed out. She was already a neat freak like her mother.

After Emily had retightened the bolt, William backed up a few steps to see if the tree was now okay. "Perfect," he told Emily. She got up from under the tree to see for herself. "Yup.

Perfect. I'll go get some water."

Emily returned seconds later with a tall glass of cold water and poured it all into the tree stand.

William wrapped strings of small multicoloured lights as well as red garlands around the tree while Emily went in the kitchen to bake some sugar cookies using pre-made dough. By the time William finished his job, the cookies were ready. Emily came into the living room, still wearing her forest green baking apron, and offered her husband and child a treat from within a circular tin jar that had images of angels on it.

Nadia was taken out of her playpen to eat her snack with some milk. The baby excitedly took the cookie her mother gave her, but ignored the milk at first. "Mo?" she asked, meaning more. Her mouth was still full of cookie bits. Both parents laughed. "That's all for now," Emily said. She quickly finished her own snack and the tin of freshly baked cookies was moved out of the baby's sight.

"Have some milk," Emily said as she gave her daughter the sippy cup that had been left on the floor. Nadia took the two side handles with both of her hands and drank without taking a pause.

When Nadia was finished drinking all of her milk, she was placed right back in her playpen.

Despite the fact that the pine had not fully opened up yet, the couple hung their ornaments on the tree branches, starting with glass, gold, and silver coloured Christmas balls, while listening to one of their Christmas CD's. Nadia danced to some of the music but eventually got bored of being in her playpen.

Emily picked up her daughter and included her in the decorating process. Most of what was left to hang on the tree now were homemade ornaments Emily had crafted herself last December.

Nadia picked one ornament at a time and handed them to her mom until there were only two left.

Emily had purchased a "baby's first Christmas" ornament for Nadia during her summer trip to New York City. It was currently missing a picture inside its small frame but she hung it on the tree with the other ornaments anyways. Emily planned on putting a picture of Nadia with Santa in the frame later on.

The last tree decoration was the angel, which William placed on the top branch.

“I almost forgot the candy canes,” Emily said as she rushed out of the living room. She came back with a pack of cherry flavoured ones and mint ones as well. She and William hung them in the tree and each took a few steps back to admire their finished work.

Nadia stared at the decorated Christmas tree looking completely amazed. Emily wished that she had been able to capture that moment on film, but William wasn't able to get the digital camera on time.

The baby started rubbing her tired eyes with her tiny hands, so Emily put her down for a nap. Normally the couple tried to take advantage of their free time to either rest or be intimate, but today they chose to complete their decorating job.

William hung strings of large red Christmas lights on the railing of the balcony as well as icicle looking ones around the outside of the living room window while Emily put up decorations inside the apartment.

Several red and green candles of various sizes were arranged on a gold coloured platter, which Emily placed in the centre of the coffee table. On each side of it, Emily put some Christmas tree shaped bowls filled with individually wrapped chocolates and candies. Realising that Nadia would have access to all this, she moved everything to the kitchen table.

After secretly indulging in a mint chocolate as well as a caramel, Emily took out some festive doorknob decorations for the outside of each door, a felt Advent calendar for the front hall, a small collection of wooden nut crackers, a music box that played the tune of “Jingle Bells” after being cranked, a snow globe of Santa's workshop in the North Pole, and many other Christmas trinkets. She found good places for all of them out of Nadia's reach.

In the bathroom, special white towels with embroidered pictures of Santa and his reindeer were hung. Emily replaced the usual seashell shaped soap dispenser from the counter with a Santa shaped one.

Finally, Emily placed three stockings under the Christmas tree.

Nadia woke up just as Emily and William were kissing under a mistletoe that was hanging from the living room doorway. The couple gave each other a disappointed look, but both went to see their daughter with a pleasant smile on their faces.

After eating a quick lunch of tomato soup and soda crackers, Emily changed Nadia into a

pretty red dress with white frills. She and William headed off to the store so that Nadia could meet Santa.

There was a small lineup of hyper kids as well as patient parents in front of a jolly man with a long curly white beard sitting in a chair fit for a king. He wore a thick red suit as well as a matching pointed hat with a white pompom at the end of it, a wide black belt, black boots, and thin white gloves. Behind him, there was a backdrop with an image of a decorated Christmas tree and nicely wrapped presents underneath.

Each young child took their turns to sit on the fat man's lap. "Ho! Ho! Ho! Merry Christmas!" he would joyfully say before asking if the child had been good and inquiring as to what they wanted for Christmas. Some of the children were very shy while others looked like they would talk forever if they could.

One little boy whispered something in Santa's ear that made the fat man laugh. Emily wished she knew what he had said. She clearly heard a little girl say what her mute sister wanted for Christmas. "We didn't know we were gonna see you today, so she didn't write nothing down for you." Santa replied that he knew sign language and communicated with the mute girl. That made both girls as well as their parents smile.

The young female photographer wearing a green elf outfit complete with pointy shoes would eventually ask Santa and the child he was conversing with to smile for the camera, and she snapped a picture.

Nadia had been pretty patient while she waited and Emily thought that she would take a great picture. However, when her turn came she started to cry. She did not seem very pleased at being handed over to a stranger. Neither Emily nor William were able to comfort their daughter so the photographer had no choice but to take the picture of Nadia bawling on Santa's lap.

Santa handed Nadia a small candy cane as well as a thin holiday themed colouring book with three crayons like he had done with the other kids, but she didn't take them. She just held her arms out towards her parents and looked at them with tears still coming down her cheeks. It was the most pitiful face they had ever seen on her.

Emily took her daughter in her arms and wiped her tears with a soft tissue. William accepted Santa's present for Nadia, apologizing for the unexpected scene. "Ho, Ho, Ho! It's alright," Santa replied.

The baby continued to sniffle as they walked away. "That went well," Emily joked.

Although Nadia's picture did not turn out so well, Emily and William still bought small wallet sized copies for themselves and the family. As originally planned, Emily placed one of the prints in the baby's first Christmas tree ornament once they were back home. It would be something they could laugh about years from now.

Nadia pointed at the picture and said "hohoho." "That's right," Emily told her daughter. "That's what Santa says." "Santa," the baby repeated. She then gave a big yawn.

While Nadia took her usual afternoon nap, Emily and William signed Christmas cards and addressed envelopes.

Emily took a pleasant walk to the post office so that she could mail the greetings, but realised once she got there that it was closed on Sundays. The trip was not a total loss though. Emily had planned on doing a bit of shopping and found some great gifts at discount prices in the pharmacy. Wrapping paper and tape was also on sale.

By the time Emily got back home, supper was waiting for her. William had even set a nice table with a red tablecloth and matching cloth napkins, lit white taper candles, and a bottle of red wine. Emily found that it was a very nice surprise. She embraced William to show her appreciation. He was so warm compared to her.

"Where is Nadia?" Emily suddenly enquired. "Your mother offered to take her for a couple of hours," William responded with a smirk on his face. He then took Emily's right hand and led her under a mistletoe that was hanging from the kitchen doorway. "Shall we finish what we started earlier?" he suggested. Emily giggled. "Can we eat first? I am starving." The food smelled really good.

The couple ate the pasta William had prepared and sipped on their wine. Without taking the time to do the dishes, the couple moved on to the living room. William plugged in the Christmas tree lights. The ones around the window as well as the balcony railing were already lit for outsiders to enjoy. Emily and William could both see that it was still snowing outside.

"You know, I always wanted to make love in the snow," William told Emily. "Does fake snow count?" she asked grabbing a thick white blanket from the couch and placing it on the floor underneath the tree so that she and William could lie down on it. William joined Emily on the floor to answer her with a kiss and...

Their romantic evening was soon interrupted by the sound of the buzzer. Emily's mom had come back with Nadia. "Already?" Emily and William said together.

Emily went to the front hall and buzzed her mother in. She opened the door and waited for her mother to arrive.

Mrs. Jacobson handed Nadia over to Emily and told her daughter that she wasn't going to stay. The smell of pine forced her in though. She loved the scent as much as Emily did. Mrs. Jacobson was curious to see the Christmas tree and all the other decorations so she ended up taking off her winter boots and explored the apartment. She finished her tour in the living room. "Everything looks lovely," Mrs. Jacobson said with a smile.

"Santa," Nadia said pointing at the illuminated Christmas tree. "Yes. Santa will be visiting soon," Mrs. Jacobson replied. "Smart girl." Emily had noticed that Nadia was advanced for her age. She had taken her first steps a couple of weeks ago, and was starting to comprehend as well as speak more and more words.

Emily showed her mother the picture of Nadia and Santa taken earlier today. "Poor baby!" Mrs. Jacobson said, half laughing. "I know. We are such cruel parents, taking our child to see Santa." Emily sarcastically said. "The worst," William added. Everyone laughed.

"What would Nadia want for Christmas?" Mrs. Jacobson asked. "I don't know mom. She already has so much." After a short pause, Emily added "I can tell you what William and I would want though." "I think I can take a guess," Mrs. Jacobson responded and winked. Emily had told her mother many times that her and William were in need of an uninterrupted romantic evening.

"The question is, have you been good this year?" Mrs. Jacobson joked. "She's been good to me," William responded. Emily thought that was a sweet comment. "You've been good to me too," she told him. "And naughty too," she mouthed when her mother had her back turned. William didn't have the chance to mouth anything back to Emily.

"Well. I should get going," Mrs. Jacobson announced. She kissed her granddaughter on the head and gave both Emily and William quick hugs. It took a while for Mrs. Jacobson to actually leave the apartment though because she loved to talk.

When Mrs. Jacobson was gone, Emily and William introduced Nadia to some classic Christmas cartoons even though she didn't really understand everything that was going on. The baby seemed to really enjoy them; Emily figured it was because of all the movements and songs.

The shows were played over and over again many times before Christmas. It kept Nadia happy and made Emily feel nostalgic. She remembered being allowed to stay up later than usual when they aired on television, even if the shows aired on a school night. She usually

drank soda and ate chips when she watched the shows. That was usually reserved as a weekend treat.

Aside from the fun family TV nights, Emily enjoyed hearing her parents read stories to her before bedtime. She did the same for Nadia now. During the month of December, Emily took out several books about Santa from the library.

On Christmas Eve, Emily set a plate of thin bell shaped ginger cookies as well as a small glass of milk on a small wooden fold out table by the Christmas tree. Nadia tried to grab one of the cookies. As Emily gave her one, she explained to Nadia that Santa would be stopping by their house when they would all be asleep to bring them presents, and that the cookies and milk was his snack. "Just like in the stories," she added.

"Now we are going to go hear the story of Baby Jesus." Emily told Nadia.

Emily and William had both been raised Catholic but didn't go to church on Sundays. However, they had agreed to attend the early Christmas Eve mass to please William's religious parents. William's three brothers were supposed to go as well.

There was a slight change of plan when Emily's grandmother, who had recently lost her husband, told Emily that it would mean a lot to her if Emily and everyone else in the family came to church with her like they used to do years ago. Emily couldn't refuse.

There was just one small problem. Since the Jacobson's went to a different church than the Mancini's, William had to either go to the Christmas mass at his parents' church without Emily and Nadia or inform his parents of the new plan. He chose to go with Emily. His parents were a little bit disappointed when he told them over the phone, but they understood his decision. They had come to accept that William had started a family of his own and that compromises had to be made.

Emily had originally invited Grandma Jacobson over for Christmas Eve dinner so that she would not be alone to eat, but she already had plans with some of her elderly friends who lived in the same senior residence as her. Emily met her later on at the church, along with her father and other family member who were able to make it.

Mrs. Jacobson had been invited to attend the Christmas mass with Emily, but since her divorce she preferred to go to the midnight mass.

Some of the Jacobson family members met outside the church despite the cold and wished each other a Merry Christmas. Everyone was in a really good mood.

As they walked into the old stone building, the short balding priest greeted them with a

nice smile and suddenly looked like God had spoken to him directly. "You three would be perfect!" he exclaimed looking at Emily, William and Nadia. "Perfect for what?" Emily nervously asked.

The priest explained to the couple that they were going to have a brief re-enactment of the nativity, but that the young girl who was supposed to play Mary became sick so they desperately needed a replacement. Plus, they simply had a plastic doll to represent Baby Jesus. On top of that, the man playing Joseph was in current need of crutches because he had slipped on some ice and injured his left leg.

Emily understood that the priest wanted her to play Mary, William to portray Joseph, and Nadia to represent Baby Jesus. She didn't really like the idea on performing unrehearsed, but how could she say no to a priest?

Emily realised that participating in the nativity story would make more than just the priest happy. Everyone in the church was expecting a little show. It was tradition. Emily looked at her grandmother, who seemed very thrilled that the priest had asked her grandchild to play the part of the Holy Mother, and great grandbaby to represent Baby Jesus. An image of her deceased grandfather popped into Emily's head. She knew that he would want her to accept the priest's request.

"What do we need to do?" Emily finally asked without even consulting William. He didn't show any objections to Emily's decision though.

The priest happily took them to a back room where other churchgoers in costumes were waiting, and he explained their parts. Nobody had any lines to speak except for the narrator.

It was simple really, but Emily's stomach still turned. She didn't really like the thought of hundreds of people focusing their attention on her. What if she made a mistake? What if she did something embarrassing like trip? What if Nadia started crying uncontrollably and she could not get her to calm down?

The amateur actors came to thank Emily and William. Emily was happy to be able to help, but that did not make her nervousness go away. "You'll do just fine," she heard her grandfather's pleasant voice. "I will make sure nothing goes wrong." Even though Emily knew it was all in her head, she felt a boost of confidence.

When it was time for Emily and William to play their parts, Emily took a deep breath and walked out into the silent crowd. Everyone looked so serious.

As the male narrator spoke about Mary and Joseph going to the city of Bethlehem, Mary-Emily slowly walked by Joseph-William's side. Nadia was snug in a baby sling, concealed by a light blue blanket that matched Emily's costume. This made Mary-Emily look pregnant.

The narrator explained that the couple had a hard time finding a place to stay for the night when they arrived in the city, but that a man had kindly offered them his stable.

Mary-Emily and Joseph-William reached the fake stable with cardboard animals and real straw. Emily felt like it had taken an eternity to get there but that was based on her nerves. She understood that Mary and Joseph had traveled a much longer distance than she and William, and that it must have felt like an eternity to them as well; especially for Mary who was about to give birth. Emily remembered how much her back hurt and how heavy Nadia felt in her stomach during her last month of pregnancy. The baby actually felt heavy right now too.

While the narrator talked about the fact that Mary and Joseph had lied down in the straw with the barn animals, Emily and William prepared themselves for the next scene by discretely getting Nadia out of the sling. Nadia was obviously much bigger than a newborn, but Emily understood why people would prefer seeing a real baby rather than a plastic doll.

Nadia woke up and started to cry, but that was okay because it made things look more real. Baby Jesus, the King and saviour, was now born. Emily wrapped her baby in cloths and put it in a wooden manger on top of some straw, the same way Mary had supposedly done with Jesus according to the Holy Bible.

A large image of the Star of Bethlehem was projected onto the wall above the stable as the narrator explained that it had miraculously appeared in the dark sky to let the Magi know that Jesus had been born. The unique bright star had been used to guide them to him.

Emily gave Nadia her pacifier and the baby stayed quiet for the rest of the short performance, which included visits from some shepherds who had been contacted by an angel, as well as three wise men bringing rich gifts for the baby.

At the end of the excellent performance, all the lights in the church were turned off except for the image of the Star of Bethlehem.

Emily and William were able to join the others sitting on the wooden church benches afterwards. They did not want to disturb anyone by trying to find their families so they

stayed in the back. They had to stand like many others because the church was full. Emily realised that her and William were not the only ones who only attended church during the holidays.

A choir of children dressed in long white robes sang beautifully while people got their sacred hosts from the priest during the Holy Communion. Kids that had not already done their First Communion could get a piece of pita bread at a special table if they wanted. Emily went with Nadia.

After mass, Emily and William were driven back home by Mr. Jacobson and found a surprise. There were two new nicely wrapped presents under their Christmas tree as well as an antique wooden rocking horse, and their stockings looked full. Emily and William looked at each other in confusion. "Who put those there?" They both whispered. Maybe it was my mom, Emily thought to herself. She had the keys to their apartment.

"Santa!" Nadia said pointing at the cookie crumbs on the plate as well as the empty glass that had contained milk earlier.

The couple decided to stay in the moment and take a closer look at the presents. One was addressed to Nadia, from Santa. Another was for Emily and William, also from Santa. "Shall we open them now?" Emily asked. William thought about it for a few seconds and suggested they wait until morning.

The following day, Emily woke up earlier than Nadia and could not hold in her excitement. She had not felt like this on Christmas morning since being a young child. She woke William up and asked him if he was ready to go unwrap the presents. "After coffee," he sleepily responded.

Emily couldn't wait so she jumped out of bed, quickly slipped on her slippers as well as William's housecoat, and went to prepare coffee for her husband. She brought a fresh cup to him in bed. "Get up!" she said laughing. William looked at her the same way her parents used to when she would run into their room on Christmas morning to announce that Santa had come. "What time is it?" he grumpily said. Emily innocently told him that it was five forty five in the morning.

William started to complain about how early it was. "Can't we wait until the baby is up?" Emily thought it was a fair request so she sat beside William in bed.

Nadia was soon heard through the baby monitor. "She's up!" Emily announced, bouncing out of bed. She soon disappeared out of the bedroom.

"Hi Sweetie," Emily joyfully said to her daughter when she walked into her room. "Did you have a nice sleep?" The baby didn't reply to her but looked ready to get out of her crib. She extended her arms towards her hyper mother. Nadia looked confused. Emily wasn't a grump in the morning, but she usually wasn't this chirpy either.

Emily picked up her daughter and changed her diaper at a faster pace than usual. She didn't get her dressed; simply pulled her pyjama pants back up.

"Let's go wake up daddy," she said with a big smile on her face. When Emily walked back into her bedroom, William was sitting up in bed drinking his coffee. "I'm getting up," he said sounding unconvincing.

Emily put some milk in a sippy cup for Nadia and some cereal in a plastic bowl, then waited for her husband in the living room with the baby. The tree was lit and Christmas music was playing by the time William joined them. He had his mug of coffee with him.

"Ready?" Emily asked looking very eager. "I am not fully awake, but we can start," William responded with a half smile. He then put a Santa hat on his head.

William took a medium sized present from under the tree and gave it to Nadia. Emily ripped part of the colourful wrapping to show the baby what she had to do. Nadia ripped off more of the wrapping, but Emily had to finish the job. She opened the tall rectangular box and took out a rag doll. Nadia seemed more interested in the pieces of ripped paper as well as the empty box.

Nadia was given another present. She seemed to know what she had to do this time and ripped all the paper off herself. Emily took out some cute pink pyjamas with feet from the small rectangular box. Again, the baby seemed more interested in the wrapping than her gift.

William gave Emily a small present with a tiny silver coloured bow on it. She unwrapped it to reveal a red velvet box. Inside was a nice necklace with matching earrings. Emily's face lit up. "Thank you!" she told her husband. Emily then gave him a hug and kiss on the lips.

Wanting William to open up a present next, Emily picked up two uneven packages that were held together by a thin white ribbon, and decorated with a matching white bow. "It's not much," she said. "Your real present is actually in that envelope over there."

William took the gifts Emily handed him. He had trouble separating the two packages so Emily ended up having to go get a pair of scissors from the kitchen. She took the time to

refill William's coffee mug at the same time.

After taking a sip of hot coffee, William cut the white ribbon and then stuck the bow on Emily's forehead before unwrapping the first gift. Emily didn't bother removing it because she knew that William would just stick it right back on. Her father used to do the same thing to her as a child.

"Socks and boxers! Just what I needed! Thanks," William said to Emily. "You're welcome," she replied. The other package contained black cotton pyjama pants.

Emily took a big brown envelope and handed it to her husband. He ripped the top part open and put his right hand inside. William took out a piece of paper and read that it was a reservation for two adults at the ice hotel. "We won't be sleeping on snow, but close enough," Emily shyly said. "It's absolutely perfect," William told Emily before giving her a hug and kiss. Emily was happy that William liked his gifts. She showed him that the package also included a three course meal at the ice restaurant. "You're amazing," William responded.

"Time for Nadia to open another present I think," Emily said. She took the present that was from Santa and helped the baby unwrap it. Inside was a big silver jingle bell with a silk red ribbon and the name Rudolf engraved on it. Nadia took it and started shaking it like a rattle. She seemed to really like the noise it made. It didn't take long before she was back to playing with wrapping paper again though.

"I wonder what's in here," Emily curiously said as she took the big present addressed to her and William. "Open it and find out," William encouraged. Emily suggested that they unwrap it together so that is what they did. Inside the unnecessarily large box was a voucher for an hour long horse drawn carriage ride in the Old Port of Montreal, good for the entire winter season.

"It's supposed to be nice out today. Not too cold," Emily told William. "Maybe we can go sometime after dinner and try to catch the Christmas fireworks afterwards." "Good idea!" William responded.

William had another present for Emily and fetched it from under the tree. Emily unwrapped it and found a short leopard print spaghetti strap nightgown with matching slippers as well as a housecoat. "Do you like it?" William asked sounding unsure that he had chosen right. "Of course I do!" Emily answered. "You know I love anything with an animal print on it. Unless it's real of course. And let's face it, it's time I got rid of these old pyjamas and slippers," she continued. The colour on her pyjamas had faded in the wash and her slippers were not as fluffy as they had once been.

Emily took off William's fire red housecoat and replaced it with her new one. "Here. You can have it back now," she said giggling. "Thanks! How nice of you," he sarcastically replied as he put it on. "Santa," Nadia said pointing at her father. William and Emily laughed. He did kind of look like Santa Claus in his red housecoat and hat.

There were more presents under the tree but they were for family and friends so William left them there. Emily decided to put the family presents in large recyclable bags and placed them by the front door so that they would not forget to leave with them later. She left Nadia's packed diaper bag there too.

When Emily came back in the living room, William stretched over to get everyone's Christmas stockings. He gave Nadia hers first, taking things out for her. It was filled with cute hair clips, sample sized bottles of baby shampoo and body wash, a mini toothbrush, a small stuffed bear, and a Christmas tree ornament of Santa Claus. "Santa," Nadia said when she saw the handcrafted wooden figure. It had become the word of the month.

At the bottom of the stocking, there were individually wrapped snacks Nadia loved. When she saw them, she became very excited. It was obvious that the baby wanted to eat something right away so Emily opened one of the packages of animal cookies for her. She put the rest back in the baby's stocking so that she would not ask for more.

Emily handed William his stocking and told him to take his turn. He took out candies, a pack of mint gum, a dark blue mini travel toothbrush as well as a tooth paste tube, a travel size bottle of shaving cream, men's body wash and shampoo, after shave, a mini deodorant, a red apple, a lottery ticket, and a twenty five dollar gift card to an Italian restaurant him and Emily loved.

Emily was given her stocking next. It was filled with Belgian chocolates, a pack of fruity bubble gum, a pink mini travel toothbrush as well as a tooth paste tube, nail polish, long nail files, lip balm, fancy soaps, a small bottle of bubble bath, travel sized bottles of shampoo and conditioner, body spray, a vanilla scented candle, a crystal ornament of an angel, an orange, a lottery ticket, and a twenty five dollar gift card to the same Italian restaurant as William.

"I bought similar things to put in your stocking," William said. "I did the same for yours," Emily said laughing. They each took turns to go get what they had bought for the other's stocking.

In addition to toiletries and sweet treats, Emily had gotten William a pocket agenda and William had bought Emily a few scrapbooking things. Emily and William had planned on

putting snacks and small fruits in Nadia's stocking, but they didn't bother going to get any of it at the moment.

Emily tried to get Nadia interested in her new rag doll as William started to pick up the pieces of ripped wrapping paper, bows, ribbons and empty boxes. He took the white ribbon that was still on Emily's forehead. "Hey! I wanted to keep that," Emily joked. William played along and stuck the ribbon back on Emily's forehead. She removed it and put it in the plastic bag William was holding. William pretended to be insulted. "What? You don't like it anymore?" "Nope!" Emily responded.

Nadia finally took the rag doll. "Baby," she said. The doll was bigger than a baby and had the face of a young child, but Emily did not correct Nadia.

The couple looked at each other, wondering what to do next. William's parents had invited them over for brunch but they had a lot of time left before they were scheduled to get picked up. They finally decided to go build a snow family in the side yard.

They dressed up warmly and headed outside. It wasn't too cold, except for when the wind blew.

Nadia mainly just sat in the snow and watched her parents make three snowmen; a big one to represent William, a medium sized one for Emily, and a small one for Nadia.

"Santa," Nadia randomly said, so William built a fat snowman while Emily attempted to make snow reindeer. They were basically just long boulders with a rounder one on top of one side with two short sticks coming out of them for the antlers.

Emily went inside to get some accessories as well as her camera. She came back with scarves and winter hats for every snowman, including Santa. She also had a red cherry to use as Rudolph's nose. Closed pinecones were used for the other reindeer noses and baby carrots were placed on the snow people. Long sticks were placed for the arms. Small rocks were used as eyes, and short pieces of thin red yarn were used for the smiling mouths.

Once the project was complete, Emily took pictures. A passing neighbour walking her large dog stopped to look at the snowmen and snowreindeer. "Wow! Looks good!" she said nodding her head in approval. "Thanks!" Emily and William both said as the dog pulled its owner away.

Emily had to take the hats and scarves off the snowmen before going back inside because she knew that they might never be seen again otherwise.

The couple warmed themselves up with some good hot chocolate and then changed into dressier clothing. William's father, Mr. Mancini, arrived minutes later.

When they arrived inside the Mancini's house in Vaudreuil, William's siblings and their significant others were already there. They were all comfortably seated in the living room holding beverages in their hands and munching on light snacks that had been placed on the long coffee table. Mrs. Mancini was in the kitchen. "She refused our help, as usual," William's younger brother said.

Everyone wished each other "Merry Christmas." William then placed the gifts him and Emily had brought for his parents and siblings under the fake, yet realistic looking, Christmas tree near the small crèche.

"It's ready!" Mrs. Mancini yelled out before her husband could offer Emily or William anything to drink. She had prepared pancakes, bacon, breakfast sausages, ham, as well as scrambled eggs, and had cut up pieces of various fruits and cheeses. She had also set up plates of breads and pastries.

Everything was set in the middle of a nice table just like at a buffet. Everyone served themselves and went back into the living room with their plastic plates. They didn't hesitate to go get seconds or even thirds later. All the food was delicious.

When everyone was done eating, gifts were exchanged. Emily took note of who gave them what so that she could write thank you cards for everyone. Mrs. Mancini demanded they all do this, even though everyone verbally thanked each other.

Emily had told her mother that she would try to drop by before going to her father's for dinner, so soon after all the gifts were unwrapped she told William that they should probably get going. She quickly called her mom to let her know that they would be there soon.

The couple had planned on taking a taxi over to Mrs. Jacobson's but Mr. Mancini insisted on driving them there himself. Emily and William said "bye" to everyone, collected all their things, and were on their way.

Mrs. Jacobson was waiting for them outside her condo building so Mr. Mancini took the opportunity to wish his son's mother in law a Merry Christmas. She wished him the same.

"Are you moving in?" Mrs. Jacobson jokingly asked while looking at all the bags that were being taken out of the car. "It sure looks like it doesn't it?" Emily responded. They had received so many gifts and still had some to give out.

Mrs. Jacobson took Nadia in her arms so that Emily and William could easily carry their bags.

Nadia had become quite fussy by the time she got inside her grandmother's place. Emily apologized. "Don't worry. If you need to put her down for a nap I understand," Mrs. Jacobson said.

It didn't take long for Nadia to fall asleep once Emily put her in the playpen Mrs. Jacobson had already set up in her bedroom.

Emily joined William and her mother in the small living room and sat down. Soothing Christmas music was playing.

Mrs. Jacobson offered her two guests a warm beverage and told them to help themselves with the snacks she had put on the small round coffee table; assorted nuts, dry fruits, candies, chocolates, chips and her special dill dip, cheese and crackers..." We just ate," Emily said but grabbed a few things anyways.

When Mrs. Jacobson returned with a hazelnut coffee for William and a special hot chocolate with whipped cream and sprinkles for Emily, Emily complimented her mother on her beautiful Christmas tree. It was a small pine tree that was very nicely decorated. "As you requested, I placed a new decoration on one of the branches," Emily told her mom.

Mrs. Jacobson had given Emily some money to buy an ornament for her. She was now looking for it and found a white figure skate. "That is perfect! I love it!" She went on, saying that it reminded her of her childhood and all the times she went skating on the outside rinks with her friends. "You don't really see kids doing that anymore," she sadly said. "We used to have supervised rinks with music blasting from tall speakers and everyone had so much fun. I even knew how to do a few tricks," she proudly added. "Now kids have all those videogames and don't play outside as much."

Emily promised her mom that they would go skating together this winter, and that she would teach Nadia to skate as soon as she was old enough so that they could all go together. That made Mrs. Jacobson smile. "I don't have skates anymore though," Mrs. Jacobson reminded Emily. "I will have to buy some."

Emily took a present she had placed under her mother's tree earlier and gave it to her mom. Mrs. Jacobson sat down and unwrapped it slowly, almost like she was afraid to rip the paper. She finally revealed a box with figure skates inside. "Thank you so much!" she exclaimed. Emily was happy to see her mother so content.

Mrs. Jacobson expressed her gratitude by giving her daughter and son in law big hugs.

“So. Did Santa bring you guys nice presents?” Mrs. Jacobson asked as she sat back down. “Yes mom,” Emily responded. “The gifts were great. Thanks! I didn’t know you worked for the fat man though.” “Ah! Well now you know. I also work for the Easter Bunny,” Mrs. Jacobson joked.

Emily and her mom went back in time, remembering past holidays and discussing them. William just listened, content with hearing all the fun stories. Him and Emily munched on food the whole time.

“I am never going to forget the day you realised that the store Santa was not the real one,” Mrs. Jacobson said laughing. “You were so smart, and even at the age of three you realised that people’s eyebrows usually matched the colour of their hair. You saw that the store Santa had black eyebrows that did not match his pure white hair and beard. You said wait a minute and then pulled on the man’s beard. When it slid off, you announced in front of a lineup of kids that he was a fake. You thought you had done well, revealing an impostor. You even asked that the police arrest him.”

Emily was red in the face because she was slightly embarrassed. She still laughed at herself though. “You made me believe that he was the real Santa,” Emily defended herself. “Well. After that, I had to come up with a story as to why the man was posing as Santa,” Mrs. Jacobson said. “I told you that Santa was very busy during the month of December and had hired many ambassadors to help him out and act on his behalf. You asked A LOT of questions after that.”

Nadia made herself heard as Mrs. Jacobson was elaborating on Emily’s childhood questions about Santa. “I can go get her,” Mrs. Jacobson offered. She left and came back with a smiling baby.

Emily looked at the time and jumped out of her seat. “Sorry mom, but we really have to go!”

Nadia had napped much longer than usual and Emily knew that they would arrive late for her father’s Christmas dinner. After making arrangements for a taxi to pick them up, she called her father to let him know they had not left yet. “The taxi company said that they were pretty busy so we won’t be able to get a ride until at least forty five minutes from now,” Emily added. “We would take the bus, but it only comes every hour today. Plus, we have a lot of stuff to lug around.” It was days like today that Emily wished that she and William had a car. Mr. Jacobson offered to go get them. “I don’t want to take you away

from your guests," Emily said. "They will be fine without me for a few minutes," Mr. Jacobson responded.

Emily had to call back the taxi company to let them know that their services would no longer be needed before leaving her mother's home.

Mrs. Jacobson decided to wait with her departing guests in the condo lobby. When Mr. Jacobson's BMW pulled up, she opened one of the two glass doors for Emily and William then helped carry things to the car. She gave them both hugs and thanked them again for the gift. She then kissed Nadia and let William place her in the car seat while she politely wished her ex-husband a Merry Christmas. He wished her the same while putting bags in the trunk.

Emily said "bye" to her mother once more before giving her father a proper greeting. "Merry Christmas!" she said giving him a hug. He returned the hug and greeting. Mr. Jacobson then exchanged Christmas greetings with William, and everyone got in the car.

Mrs. Jacobson waved them all goodbye as Mr. Jacobson drove off.

The car was completely silent. Emily thought it was strange since her father always had music on. She asked him why nothing was playing at the moment. "Honestly? I needed a break from the same Christmas songs," he replied. Emily knew how he felt. She was kind of tired of hearing the same tunes over and over again herself.

Mr. Jacobson pulled into his driveway twenty minutes later. Emily had fallen into a light sleep so William had to wake her up.

"Here we go again," Emily said before entering her father's house.

Most of Emily's family was there, including her grandmother. It was good to see them all so cheerful, although it was weird not to have her grandfather present. A round of hugs and Christmas greetings was done.

They were originally supposed to exchange gifts before eating, but it would have to wait. Everyone was hungry.

Emily quickly placed her gifts under the Christmas tree before rejoining her family in the large dining area. She laughed at how ugly the tree was. Being a lawyer, Mr. Jacobson was nothing but poor. Yet, he had kept the same artificial tree since before Emily was even born. It really looked awful.

Everyone sat down to eat a catered Christmas dinner, which included turkey with stuffing, mashed potatoes, glazed baby carrots, and lots of gravy. Pickles, olives, and sliced marinated beets were also set out as well as warm bread and butter. For dessert, a few ice cream logs were cut.

The gift exchange took place after everyone confirmed that they had enough to eat. Bowls of chips, popcorn, pretzels, and cheesies were brought into the living room along with candies, chocolates and cookies. Everyone made comments about how full they were, but still kept eating.

When all the presents under the Christmas tree were unwrapped, the family decided to play some games. They were first divided into two teams for charades, and then four teams to play pictionary. Everyone had a great time and were laughing together.

Nadia was being such a good baby, keeping herself entertained with the company of other young children. They mainly played with their new toys.

Time just flew by.

Emily realised that they were supposed to go to the Old Port. "What time are the fireworks?" she suddenly asked William. He looked at his watch. "It's eight fifty. I am pretty sure they start at nine." Emily was a bit disappointed that she would not get to see the fireworks show tonight, but William informed her that there would be another one on New Year's Eve so they decided to go then instead. Emily was getting pretty tired anyways. It had been a long day.

Nadia eventually started fussing so Emily informed her father that they needed to go. "I can drive you home, or you can sleep here," Mr. Jacobson offered. "You know you are always welcome." Emily didn't think she would last much longer and could tell that William wouldn't either. "I think we need to go home," she finally said. Mr. Jacobson understood his daughter's decision. He told his guests that he would be back soon, but a lot of them got up and said that they needed to head back home too. Some of them had to work in the morning and others had a couple of hours drive ahead of them.

Everyone said "bye" while giving each other hugs. "If I don't see you again before the first, Happy New Year!" a lot of them said.

The house soon became very quiet, and Emily had trouble keeping her eyes open. "Are you sure you don't want to sleep here?" her father offered again. "I appreciate it, but it will be easier if we go home."

Mr. Jacobson drove very carefully on the slippery roads. Emily knew that he was watching out for any possible drunk drivers. He managed to get his daughter and her family safely home and wished them a Merry Christmas once more.

Nadia was put to bed right away and the couple got into their own bed afterwards. Neither Emily nor William took the time to change into their pyjamas because they were much too tired. They both slept fully clothed; even their socks were left on.

During the next few days, Emily entertained some friends and also had both of her parents as well as the Mancini's over for dinner on different nights. She and William were invited to other people's houses too.

Emily was getting exhausted from all the celebrating. She needed some rest.

"I hope you will have the energy to go out tonight," William said the day before New Year's. Emily just lied in her bed, looking almost comatose. She didn't want to move.

When it was time to leave the apartment later on in the evening though, Emily was full of energy.

Emily and William took the bus and metro to the Old Port with Nadia. They spotted a line up of horse carriages and let Nadia pick which one to go on. She simply pointed at the one right in front of them. A beautiful brown horse with a dark mane and tail neighed. It wore some fake antlers on its head so Nadia called it a deer. "I know it looks like a reindeer, but it's a horse," Emily said. The animal neighed again.

The owner of the horse and carriage looked like he belonged in a Charles Dickens story. He wore a long black jacket as well as a top hat. In a British accent, he asked Emily and William if they were interested in taking a ride. "As a matter of fact we are," William said and handed the costumed man the voucher him and Emily had received for Christmas. "Great! Hop on then."

Emily embarked first. She then took Nadia from William and sat her down on her lap. William folded the baby's stroller and the carriage owner leaned it on the seat in front of Emily. After William hopped on, the friendly man in Victorian clothing handed him a warm wool blanket to share with Emily and Nadia. He then took his place in the front of the carriage.

"Giddyup!" the driver said and the horse started walking forward on the stone street.

The driver gave Emily and William a bit of history as they passed by old buildings that

were beautifully lit up with festive lights. Emily listened to him talk, but paid more attention to the sound of the horse's feet as their hooves hit the ground. She really loved that sound.

The uneven ground made the carriage ride a bit bumpy but that was okay. Emily was enjoying herself and could tell that Nadia was loving the experience too. She looked at everything they passed by with her curious eyes wide open.

Emily could see her own breath as she breathed out. She was getting a little bit cold so she snuggled up to William.

After their fun ride, they got themselves some hot chocolate to go and headed towards the artificial lake. Several people were skating on the ice to the sound of classic Christmas music as they all waited for the firework show to start. This one was going to commence at the stroke of midnight.

William and Emily had thought about getting Nadia babysat this evening, but it would be her first New Years and they felt that she should be with them. Besides, Emily thought that this would be a good night to go skating with her mother, who was the only person available to babysit on New Year's Eve. Everyone else had plans.

The cold air made the baby sleepy, so she fell asleep in her stroller despite all the noise around. A lot of people were talking over the Christmas music.

Emily found her mother by the entrance of a small café, where they had planned on meeting. She already had her new skates on. "I didn't want to buy tickets in advance in case you arrived later." "That's okay," Emily responded. "Why don't you wait in line while I put my skates on now," she suggested.

William stayed with Nadia while Emily and her mom skated around the small rink for a half hour. Emily kept bugging her mom to show off some of her figure skating moves but Mrs. Jacobson didn't think she could still do them. "Besides, there are too many people on the ice right now." "Excuses, excuses," Emily joked.

Despite the fact that she was wearing two pairs of warm socks, Emily's toes were starting to freeze. It was beginning to hurt so she finally had to confess to her mom. "Mine are frozen too," Mrs. Jacobson admitted. Although they were both having fun, they decided to leave the ice to avoid getting severe frostbite.

Light snow began to fall as they took their tight skates off. Emily rubbed her toes with her bare hands to warm them up before putting on her winter boots. Mrs. Jacobson did the

same.

After packing her skates in her backpack, Emily got some hot chocolates for herself and William. Mrs. Jacobson bought herself a warm beverage too. They stood outside in the crowd and waited patiently for the New Year's countdown to begin.

A reporter came to see them and asked if they would mind being interviewed live. Mrs. Jacobson accepted right away but didn't say much into the microphone when the reporter asked his questions. Emily looked into the big camera and did her best to give more elaborate answers, but she was never good at thinking of things on the spot. When the reporter left she thought about how differently she should have said things. It was too late now.

Finally, a peppy man using a loudspeaker announced that it was going to be midnight soon. "Ten. Nine." he started, and everyone continued to count downwards with him. "Eight, seven, six, five, four, three, two, one..."

The sound of people wishing each other "Happy New year" as the first set of fireworks exploded in the sky to the tune of Auld Lang Syne, the traditional New Years Eve Song, startled Nadia awake. Emily pointed upwards and told her daughter to look. The baby seemed to really like the show. She didn't make a sound. She just looked up at the dark starry sky full of exploding lights with her mouth wide open in awe. Emily thought her baby looked precious and took a picture. She then snuggled up to her husband, whom she had been kissing minutes before.

This was definitely a great way to start the new year.



Chantal Bellehumeur 2013

(I would like to wish everyone happy holidays. Best wishes for the New Year!)

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