Christmas in Prague

In a house in Oxford three people are having breakfast – Carol, her husband Jan, and his father Josef. They are talking about Prague, because Carol wants them all to go there for Christmas.

Josef was born in Prague, but he left his home city when he was a young man. He is an old man now, and he would like to see Prague again before he dies. But he is afraid. He still remembers another Christmas in Prague, many long years ago – a Christmas that changed his life for ever . . .

(Word count 4,720)
Do you know everything about your family – your parents, your grandparents, your brothers or sisters, your uncles or aunts? Does your family know everything about you? All families have secrets – they can be big secrets, small secrets, things to laugh about, things to cry about.

Jan lives in Oxford with his English wife Carol, and his father Josef, who is Czech. Jan was born in Prague, but he came to England with his father when he was a baby. He never knew his mother – she died soon after he was born. And he knows nothing about her because his father never talks about her. But Josef still carries a photograph of his wife in his pocket – after all these years.

Carol plays the harp in an orchestra, and the orchestra is giving some concerts in Prague at Christmas. Carol wants to go, and she wants Jan and Josef to go too. ‘Prague is a wonderful place,’ she says, ‘for a family Christmas.’

But there are family secrets waiting for them in Prague – wonderful secrets, happy secrets, and very sad secrets . . .
Christmas in Prague
Stage 1 (400 headwords)

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For Ralph and Stania Hrdličková
JOYCE HANNAM

Christmas in Prague

OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS
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It is night, and the fields near the village are white with snow. The village is quiet, but not everybody is sleeping. Eyes are watching the roads and the fields near the village, because this is Czechoslovakia and the year is 1957. Across the fields, only half a kilometre away, is the Austrian border, but the people of Czechoslovakia are not free to go to Austria. The border guards watch day and night – and they carry guns.

In a house in the village a man and a woman are talking. The woman holds a six-month-old baby boy in her arms.

The border guards watch day and night.
She is excited, but she is afraid, too.

‘Tell me again,’ she says. ‘Did he get to Austria all right last night?’

‘Yes, he did,’ the man says. ‘Nobody saw him, nobody heard him. But last night was easy because the sky was dark. Tonight it’s more difficult – look at that moon!’

‘But it’s Christmas night,’ the woman says, ‘and the guards are drinking in the guardhouse, yes?’

‘That’s true,’ says the man, ‘but sometimes they come out and drive up and down the road for a time. So you must be careful, and you must run fast – very fast.’ He looks at his watch. ‘It’s time to go.’

The woman puts on a white coat and a white hat. The baby wears a white coat too, and the woman carries him on her back.

‘Good,’ the man says. ‘White is best when there’s snow. Nobody can see you. Now, are you ready? Let’s go.’

They leave the house and walk quickly out of the village. After a time they stop and the man says, very quietly:

‘OK. Do you see those trees? Turn right there and go fifty metres. When you come to the road, go across it quickly and run down the hill through the trees. Then you come to the river. Turn left and go 500 metres. The trees finish there and you can walk through the river easily. Across two more fields, and you’re in Austria. Our friends are waiting for you in the second field. Go now. Goodbye.'
She does not see the black car under the trees.
– and good luck!’

The woman begins to run. The baby on her back is sleeping, but now he opens his eyes and begins to cry. The woman is afraid and runs more slowly, but the baby’s crying is loud in the night. At the trees the woman turns right and soon she is at the road. She does not see the black car under the trees, but the men in the car see her.

Suddenly there is a noise in the night – the noise of guns. Then it is quiet again.

The woman’s body lies in the snow on the road. Now the only sound is the crying of the baby.
England 1995

‘Hey, Jan, look at this!’ Carol said. She had a letter in her hand and took it across to her husband at the breakfast table. ‘It’s from the Oxford Orchestra,’ she said. ‘They’re giving concerts in the Czech Republic this Christmas. They’re doing three concerts in Prague and they’re asking me to go because they need a harpist. Shall we go to Prague for Christmas? I can play with the orchestra, and you can come with us.’

‘When are the concerts?’ asked Jan. ‘I always have a lot of work in the weeks before Christmas. I must finish writing my new book then.’

Jan taught Czech at Oxford University and wrote books about languages. He was born in Czechoslovakia, but came to England with his father when he was very young. He met Carol when she was one of his students at university.

‘The first concert is on December 20th,’ Carol answered. ‘Are you free then?’

‘No, I’m sorry, Carol,’ Jan said, ‘but I can’t come before December 24th.’

‘Well, it doesn’t matter. You can come for the second concert. It’s on December 25th.’
'But what about my father?' said Jan. 'We can’t go away and leave him at Christmas time. He loves a family Christmas with us – you know that.'
Josef Vlach was sixty-eight years old, and his eyes were bad. He couldn’t see very well, so he lived with Carol and Jan.

‘Josef can come with us,’ Carol said. ‘He often talks about Prague at Christmas. He says it’s the most beautiful time of the year there because of all the snow on the old buildings.’

‘I know,’ said Jan. ‘But he only talks about Prague. He never wants to go there. Every time we ask him to come with us, he says no. I don’t know why, but I think it’s because of my mother. When he thinks about Prague, he remembers her. You know, sometimes he cries when he looks at his photo of her – after all these years!’

Just then the door opened and Jan’s father came slowly into the room.

‘Good morning,’ he said, and sat down at the table. ‘Is there any coffee?’

‘It’s cold now,’ said Carol. ‘Shall I make you some more?’

‘Thank you, my dear,’ he answered. ‘You’re very good to me.’

Carol went out for some coffee. Jan looked at his father carefully. ‘I must ask him now,’ he thought, ‘while Carol is out of the room.’

‘You’re very quiet, Jan,’ said the old man. ‘Is something wrong?’

‘No, no,’ said Jan quickly. ‘Nothing’s wrong. It’s just . . .
I want to ask you a question, but I... I... it’s difficult.’  
Jan stopped. His father smiled.  
‘Difficult? Why is it difficult? Are you afraid of an old man?’  
‘Of course not,’ said Jan. ‘But I am afraid of your answer. You see, Carol wants to go very much. She loves playing her harp, but it’s Christmas time and—’  
‘Stop!’ said Josef. ‘What are you talking about? Where does Carol want to go at Christmas?’  
‘To Prague,’ said Jan. ‘And I would like to go with her. We want you to come too.’  
‘Ah!’ said the old man. ‘To Prague. I understand now.’  
The room was suddenly very quiet. Jan drank his cold coffee and waited.  
The old man took something out of his pocket. It was a photograph of his dead wife, Jan’s mother. He spoke very quietly – not to Jan, but to the photograph in his hand.  
‘Perhaps now... before I die... just once I can go back again...’  
Carol came back with some hot coffee. She looked at Josef, then at Jan.  
‘Shhh... He’s thinking about Prague,’ Jan said quietly.  
Carol put the coffee on the table and sat down. The hands on the clock slowly moved through two long minutes. Then the old man put the photograph back in his pocket.
‘All right,’ he said. ‘Let’s all go to Prague for Christmas. It’s beautiful there when it snows. I remember it so well . . . so very well.’
Christmas in Prague

ACTIVITIES
ACTIVITIES

Before Reading

1 The title of the story is *Christmas in Prague*. Find the answers to these questions.

1 Where is Prague?
2 Was life in Prague in 1957 very different from life there in 1995? How?

2 What do people do at Christmas in Britain and many other countries? Make three sentences. Use some of the words from this list.

*dinner, family, music, presents, children, holiday*

3 Read the back cover of the book. How much do you know now about the story? Tick one box for each sentence.

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Carol and Jan are married.
Carol’s father is called Josef.
Josef is English.
Josef lived in Prague a long time ago.
Josef is afraid to go back to Prague.
ACTIVITIES: Before Reading

4 Read the story introduction on the first page of the book. Are these sentences true (T) or false (F)? Change the false sentences into true ones.

1 Jan was born in London.
2 Jan’s mother lives in Oxford with her son.
3 Josef often talks about his wife.
4 Josef has a photograph of Jan’s mother in his pocket.
5 Carol plays the guitar.
6 Carol wants to go to Prague for Christmas.

5 What are the family secrets in the story? Can you guess? Tick one box for each sentence.

1 Someone in the family is dead. □ □
2 Someone in the family is alive. □ □
3 Someone in the family is in prison. □ □
4 Someone in the family has got a lot of money. □ □
5 You guess! __________
ACTIVITIES

While Reading

Read Chapter 1. Underline the mistakes in this paragraph and then correct them.

It is midday. This is Czechoslovakia and the year is 1967. Across the fields is the German border. In a house, a man and a woman are talking. The woman holds a baby girl in her arms. She puts on a black coat and a black hat. They leave the house and walk slowly out of the village. The man says goodbye and the woman begins to run. The baby opens his eyes and is very quiet. At the trees, the woman turns left and soon she is at the river. She sees a black car but the men in the car do not see her.
ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Joyce Hannam is an experienced teacher and lecturer. She has taught English in several European countries, including Greece, Spain, Turkey, and the Czech Republic. She now lives in York, in the north of England, and works mostly with Japanese university students and business people from Germany, Italy, France and Spain. Her stories for the Oxford Bookworms Library also include *The Death of Karen Silkwood* (at Stage 2), in the True Stories series.

Joyce Hannam is married to a musician and has one young daughter. All three of them enjoy singing at all times and in all places. Her story *Christmas in Prague* was inspired by a visit to that city.
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GRADING AND SAMPLE EXTRACTS

STARTER • 250 HEADWORDS
present simple – present continuous – imperative –
can/cannot, must – going to (future) – simple gerunds ...

Her phone is ringing – but where is it?
Sally gets out of bed and looks in her bag. No phone. She
looks under the bed. No phone. Then she looks behind the
door. There is her phone. Sally picks up her phone and
answers it. Sally’s Phone

STAGE 1 • 400 HEADWORDS
... past simple – coordination with and, but, or –
subordination with before, after, when, because, so ...

I knew him in Persia. He was a famous builder and I
worked with him there. For a time I was his friend, but
not for long. When he came to Paris, I came after him –
I wanted to watch him. He was a very clever, very
dangerous man. The Phantom of the Opera

STAGE 2 • 700 HEADWORDS
... present perfect – will (future) – (don’t) have to, must not, could –
comparison of adjectives – simple if clauses – past continuous –
tag questions – ask/tell + infinitive ...

While I was writing these words in my diary, I decided what
to do. I must try to escape. I shall try to get down the wall
outside. The window is high above the ground, but I have
to try. I shall take some of the gold with me – if I escape,
perhaps it will be helpful later. Dracula
STAGE 3 • 1000 HEADWORDS

... should, may – present perfect continuous – used to – past perfect – causative – relative clauses – indirect statements ...

Of course, it was most important that no one should see Colin, Mary, or Dickon entering the secret garden. So Colin gave orders to the gardeners that they must all keep away from that part of the garden in future. The Secret Garden

STAGE 4 • 1400 HEADWORDS

... past perfect continuous – passive (simple forms) – would conditional clauses – indirect questions – relatives with where/when – gerunds after prepositions/phrases ...

I was glad. Now Hyde could not show his face to the world again. If he did, every honest man in London would be proud to report him to the police. Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde

STAGE 5 • 1800 HEADWORDS

... future continuous – future perfect – passive (modals, continuous forms) – would have conditional clauses – modals + perfect infinitive ...

If he had spoken Estella’s name, I would have hit him. I was so angry with him, and so depressed about my future, that I could not eat the breakfast. Instead I went straight to the old house. Great Expectations

STAGE 6 • 2500 HEADWORDS

... passive (infinitives, gerunds) – advanced modal meanings – clauses of concession, condition

When I stepped up to the piano, I was confident. It was as if I knew that the prodigy side of me really did exist. And when I started to play, I was so caught up in how lovely I looked that I didn’t worry how I would sound. The Joy Luck Club
One-Way Ticket

JENNIFER BASSETT

Tom Walsh had a lot to learn about life. He liked travelling, and he was in no hurry. He liked meeting people, anyone and everyone. He liked the two American girls on the train. They were nice and very friendly. They knew a lot of places. Tom thought they were fun. Tom certainly had a lot to learn about life.

This is a collection of short stories about adventures on trains. Strange, wonderful, and frightening things can happen on trains – and all of them happen here.

Ned Kelly: A True Story

CHRISTINE LINDOP

When he was a boy, he was poor and hungry. When he was a young man, he was still poor and still hungry. He learnt how to steal horses, he learnt how to fight, he learnt how to live – outside the law. Australia in the 1870s was a hard, wild place. Rich people had land, poor people didn’t. So the rich got richer, and the poor stayed poor.

Some say Ned Kelly was a bad man. Some say he was a good man but the law was bad. This is the true story of Australia’s most famous outlaw.
Christmas in Prague

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