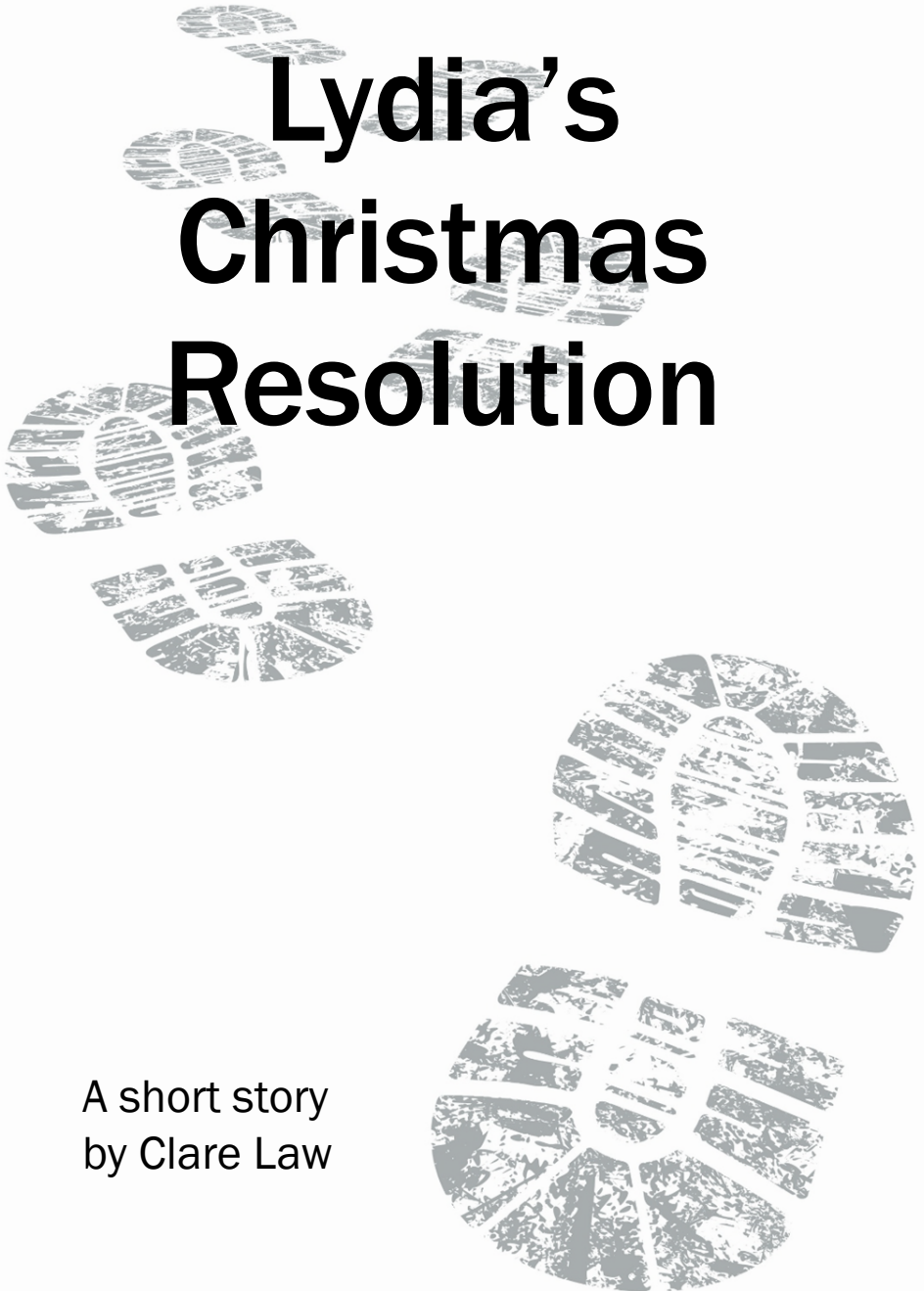


# Lydia's Christmas Resolution

A short story  
by Clare Law



The second Christmas without my husband, and the second after the sale of our family home – Longview – I resolved not to repeat the previous year’s mistakes.

I would not say, ‘We always watch the Queen’s speech at 3pm before we have our presents.’ It caused some coldness when I insisted last year, and I was mortified when my son Johnny told me that he’d never liked that tradition.

And I resolved not to bring the wrong shoes for the walk. When my daughter-in-law Annalie said we would have a seaside walk on Boxing Day, I assumed that she meant a stroll along the prom just like we always used to do. Not on Boxing Day, of course, because we always watched a film on Boxing Day at Longview, but some time before New Year we would always go to the seaside – Eastbourne, Brighton or Bexhill – and walk down the prom and then back again with the wind behind us. I’ve got a stack of photos of Richard – that’s my husband – and Johnny with their hair in various lengths, but always wind-blown, leaning on the prom railings. After our walk, we’d drink tea from a flask in the car park and go home to Longview for turkey soup.

But Annalie drove us straight through Hastings to a country park, which is not at all my natural environment. We walked along the cliffs through scrubby gorse and orange bracken near a place called Fairlight.

The name ‘Fairlight’ gives me a funny feeling. The reason is that a girl – a woman now, of course – that I went to school with lives there. Paulette and I were very good friends, too. You know how passionately and deeply you care about your boarding school chums when you’re twelve? But one year she didn’t come back to school. She

had to go away for a long time because of schizophrenia. It still troubles her to this day – not all the time, but every so often. She never married, never got a job but stayed living in her parents' house in Fairlight.

All these years, she's sent me a Christmas card full of news about her garden and her nieces, and funny stories about the parish council and bowls club, and every once in a while we have a long phone conversation. I send her flowers when her sister writes to say she's poorly. Sometimes she says we must meet up and have a good old face-to-face chatter, but I've never done anything about that. In those days, of course, one didn't visit people with schizophrenia. But now I know that most of time she's just dear old Paulette. It's just got a bit embarrassing to suddenly change my habit. I don't think I've even let on that John and Annalie live nearby.

All the while I was ruining my suede boots plodging through the mud in Fairlight Glen and trying to keep up with Annalie, John and the boys and their au pair, I was thinking, What if we run into Paulette? Would she be well or poorly? Whatever would I say?

But my mind was taken off that embarrassment by a muddy scramble down to a narrow strip of rocky shore that I'm not even sure we should have been on because there were signs warning about naturists.

Anyway, this year, on arrival at John's house, I put my sturdy trek shoes with ankle support in Annalie's boot room. Clumpy trek shoes with ankle support are not a good look for me – but then neither was being pulled and shoved back up the cliff by John and Annalie and the au pair.

The au pair is another mistake, but not one of mine. They are all nice girls, of course they are: Annalie would never employ someone who isn't nice. The one they have this year has gone back to her family for Christmas, and you'd think that I could use her bedroom, which has an en suite shower. But I'm once again relegated to Max's room.

'She's not even going to be here, Johnny,' I said when we were discussing Christmas plans over the phone.

'I know, but we can't ask her to move all her stuff out, Mum. It's not fair on her.'

Max sleeps in Tom's room while I'm visiting, which is fun for them, but last year it left me in a bedroom decorated with dinosaurs and full of Lego. Surely you'd give your mother-in-law her own bedroom at Christmas? And isn't it part of the au pair's job to clear some of the Lego off the floor and make up the bed? I had to do that myself: I know Annalie likes everyone to muck in, but sometimes you just want to be looked after – like a guest.

'But I can use the guest en suite, can't I?' I said to John.

But no. Annalie asked me not to. 'I'm very sorry Lydia, but all the au pair's stuff is still in there and it's her private space. She sighed. 'It's been such a rush this year: last-minute crisis at work; school term didn't end until late; and you heard about my parents.' Both of them down with flu, it turned out. 'But the boys' bathroom is done ready for you.'

So I'm sharing a bathroom with the boys, which I don't mind, but when you get to my age you like to know you can go when you want to.

Last year, we ate something called a cranberry protein wreath, which was very festive-looking, but it didn't sit at all well on my stomach. I got the feeling that Annalie had pulled it at the last minute from her freezer. Afterwards, I realised what had happened. You see, my mother always used to bring the turkey to our family Christmases, and John must have assumed I'd do the same. No one had asked me to, though, so I refuse to feel in the wrong. So this year, I brought a thirteen-pound bird with me.

'Johnny,' I said handing him my car keys (he loved being allowed to open my car when he was a little boy), 'Would you bring the turkey in?' I happened to be standing at such an angle that in the mirrored frame of a print reading 'Live Laugh Love' I caught Annalie's expression.

It turned out we would be eating cold poached salmon on Christmas Day – did you ever?

Later, while I was jointing the bird for the freezer (luckily I'd brought my poultry shears, because that kitchen is very under-equipped) Annalie asked me to take the whole thirteen-pound turkey home with me. 'I don't tend to serve farmed meat,' she explained.

Then there was the Christmas cake. I put it, pristine white, on the kitchen table and pulled out my bag of decorations – little plastic reindeer and such, some of which had belonged to my grandmother. 'Max, Tom, would you like to come and decorate Granny's Christmas cake?'

Max looked up from his phone, and said, 'No thanks, Granny. Maybe later.'

Tom didn't even acknowledge me.

'They don't like cake,' said Annalie.

'Well I know Johnny does, don't you Johnny.'

'John has been trying to eat less sugar lately,' she said. 'We all have.'

'It's fruit cake,' I told her. 'It's healthy.'

'Nonetheless, we won't eat it. I'm just telling you now.'

John and Annalie were drinking gin and tonics (at 5pm, you'll note) but they didn't offer me one. I don't drink in the evening as it doesn't agree with my medication, but it would be nice as a guest to get the offer. Annalie said, 'Kettle's there if you want a tea.' I did, and I'd even brought my own teabags because all they've got is a box of dusty Earl Grey, with a 2018 use-by date: Annalie doesn't drink tea, so John has to make do.

In the room where I was to sleep the bed was stripped but not made up, which I'm sure was an oversight on the au pair's part. I did not like the bedding Annalie gave me last time, and I let her know that it smelt odd and gave her some laundry and linen tips, as well as a big box of my usual washing powder. This time she hadn't even put a set ready for me. Luckily, I'd brought my own so there was no need to mortify her by mentioning it.

I asked Tom if he would like to help me tidy up. 'I don't want to mess up any of your special Lego models, but I would like to be able to walk across the floor without worrying,' I said.

He just grunted and went back to his video game.

I do worry about how much time they spend on screens, but I'd said my bit last year, and I wasn't going to say it again.

\*

Christmas Day was pleasant. Annalie only asked me to take four of the boys' presents back to my flat. 'They don't really go for puzzle books.' ... 'Football is okay for the park, but I don't allow it in our garden.' ... 'Oh. No. No marbles, not after last time.'

Hand on heart, the kazoos were a bit of mischief on my part: it's something my mother gave Johnny one year, and I really thought he'd see the funny side.

Last year, I tried to give thoughtful gifts that I was sure they'd love: personalised luggage for Johnny, and a perfume designed around Annalie's star sign and biorhythms. If only you'd seen their faces... But lesson learned. I bought off their Amazon lists this year, exactly as asked. I couldn't even remember what I'd got, because I'd had it all delivered, pre-wrapped, straight to their house. Some sort of earphone affair for Johnny, and for Annalie, an odd-looking piece of clothing in an unflattering greenish colour.

I'd asked for a donation to The Salvation Army Christmas fund instead of a present. That led to a bit of confusion, with Annalie thinking I'd want to go to church in the village.

'I'm not really a church person,' I said. And I'm not – but The Salvation Army is the church at the end of my road, and my downstairs neighbour asked a number of times if I wanted to go with her. So many times that I thought she

must have dementia and was forgetting that I'd said I'm not really a church person. In the end, it got embarrassing, so I go every once in a while just because it seems so rude to keep saying no. That's where I heard about their Christmas lunch. I thought it would be fun to pay for the crackers – but I didn't tell John and Annalie that because they were so upset by the box of crackers I brought with me last year.

'I need to ask you to take all this non-recyclable rubbish home with you,' Johnny had said handing me a bread bag filled with foil cracker casings and snaps and tiny plastic puzzles. 'We're a zero-waste house.'

I assumed we'd toast absent friends at the start of lunch – as we always used to at Longview Christmases. But Annalie immediately started slicing great cold pink and silver chunks off the fish that lay on a bed of wilting salad, its eyes and mouth wide as if it was shocked to have ended up here. Such chilly fare for a dark wintery day. At least salmon is easy on the stomach.

When all our plates were filled, Johnny still didn't toast absent friends, so I thought I'd do it. I coughed politely, and Max, who was seated next to me, halted with his fork halfway to his mouth. 'I'd like to propose a toast to the people who are missing from our table today,' I said.

'To my parents,' said Annalie. 'My parents who couldn't be here because our table just isn't big enough.'

'Oh them, of course,' I said, lifting my glass, 'but also, to my darling Richard. Merry Christmas, sweetheart.' I'm not a sentimental type, but I had already drunk a glass and a half of champagne before lunch, and tears blurred



Annalie's centrepiece of silver and gold fake flowers, though my vision wasn't so obscured that I missed her eye-roll.

Of course you can understand her being put out: she'd worked hard to make a perfect happy Christmas, and of course she misses her own mum and dad. So I swept away my tears with my index finger – my mother taught me that as a way not to ruin your eye make-up – and pasted on a smile. I did think, though, that John might have said something; after all, it was his own father. But everyone grieves differently, and Richard always liked to bump us over any difficulties with a hearty, 'Onward and upward!' Johnny must have internalised that.

'Well,' I said brightly. 'I'm sure it will be less raw when I come next year.'

I spotted the look that John gave his wife, and thought that of course, I'd been leaning heavily on their hospitality.

Much later, after Annalie had gone up to bed and we were sitting by the fire he said, 'Mum, we need to talk about next year. We've had you here every year since Dad...'

'Ohh, I don't think we'd all fit at my flat,' I said. 'I've only got four chairs round my table. But perhaps we could go to a restaurant and –'

'It's time we gave Annalie's parents a turn,' he said quickly. 'Do you have some friends you could visit? Or there's that Christmas lunch for the lonely at your church?'

I could volunteer at the church, I suppose, if they want helpers who aren't really church people. And I was sure I

did have some friends who would take me in on Christmas Day. Caught on the hop, though, I just couldn't think who they were.

'Well, we can decide nearer the time,' he said, poking the fire to embers. 'I'm going to lock up and take myself to bed. Do you want anything else?'

\*

I must admit, I was dreading that Boxing Day walk, and the possibility that we might run into Paulette. Over a lunch of more cold salmon, I said, 'Perhaps we could walk along the front—'

'No,' said Annalie. 'That won't be possible. I always go to the beach at Fairlight Glen on Boxing Day. It's my tradition.'

So I laced up my trek shoes, put on a cerise-coloured windproof jacket and got into the back of the car. This year, I made a point of not sitting in the middle where there is no leg room, even though it caused an argument between Tom and Max.

It was a not unpleasant, mild afternoon and we set out walking under a sky lidded with low grey cloud. Annalie beeped the car shut and led us across the heath and down into a woodland of stunted, twisty trees. The boys clumped ahead and jumped out at us from the bushes so we could pretend to be startled.

And of course, silly old woman that I am, I went and spoiled it by falling over. It wasn't a bad fall, and I caught myself on my hands and knees. It's more the shock and the embarrassment of it. Luckily Annalie didn't see, so it

didn't spoil her walk. John righted me and quickly brushed me down. I stared hard up at the sky through the branches – looking up is a good way to suppress tears – and assured him that I was okay to start walking again.

I'd decided that as I was wearing sturdy trek shoes I could manage the path down to the beach this year. But there had been a landslip, and part of the way lay across the bank of loose earth and stones. And I thought, No. This is not for me. 'Oh dear,' I said. 'That doesn't look very safe.'

Annalie glared out to where the sea stops being greyish and starts being blue. 'I don't want to turn back now. We're so nearly there. We've got to go to the beach at Fairlight Glen on Boxing Day. I've done it every year of my life.'

'Oh, look, I'll be all right. I can wait here,' I said, not really meaning it. I assumed that John would stay with me, after all, it's not his tradition to go down to the beach at Fairlight Glen on Boxing Day.

He said, 'Mum, why don't I give you my key fob and you can go back and sit in the car. We'll just quickly see the waves and then come back. Got your phone?'

I patted the rectangle in my pocket to show that I did indeed have my trusty little Nokia. I realise now that I should have switched it on, but I never thought that Johnny would want to call me.

I'll admit I felt discouraged watching him set off across the landslip after his wife and sons. I wondered if I'd made a mistake further back than last year. Had I let him hear me grumbling about my elderly mother, or my aunts? But of course, as a family man he needs to put his boys and his wife before everything else – I know Richard always did.

At least it was a mild afternoon, and not getting dark. But I was starting to feel a need for the ladies, not least to wash my grazed hand.

Once I started walking, I found the reason for my stumble. My trek shoes were not so sturdy after all: one of the soles had come loose and was flapping with each step. As I walked carefully back up the hill the graze on my knee kept catching on the fabric of my trouser leg.

The trouble is that the way back looked a bit different to the way out – and I'd been looking at the boys or, rather, not looking at them so they could hide and jump out. Anyway, I took a right when I should have taken a left. So instead of finding the car park and the toilets I found a bowling green, a tennis court and a children's playground. Paulette had mentioned the bowls club – from her letters, some of the players are great characters. I didn't go too close just in case she was there and recognised me.

I followed a twitten between two back fences and found myself in a street of low brick houses. I went right, as that way I could see a junction, and I thought I might find a road name or some clue that would direct me to the centre of Fairlight. And by now, I really did need the lavatory, and at the same time I was parching for a drink. There wouldn't be anywhere open where I could buy a cup of tea, wash my hands and perhaps ask for a plaster – that's the trouble with Boxing Day. But surely there would be a public convenience. Then I could message John and explain where I was.

The road name was immediately familiar: I'd been writing it on envelopes for getting on sixty years. I turned round and went back up the road, the sole flapping along

the pavement. I wasn't quite at the point where I would knock on a stranger's door to ask to use the loo, but Paulette was not a stranger.

Perhaps she won't recognise me, I thought wildly, and I could get away with washing my hands and leaving without an embarrassing chat.

In the garden of Paulette's address, a woman in a wax jacket with the pocket half ripped off was pulling a dead clematis on to a bonfire heap.

I called to her, 'Lovely afternoon.'

She lifted her grey head and peered at me. And then she smiled, and there was my lovely friend. 'Lydia,' she said, coming slowly over, both hands held out. 'Lydia, how good it is to see you.'

So no chance of going safely unrecognised. I didn't like to offer her my own dirty, bloodied palms, but it seemed impolite not to.

'Oh, your poor hands,' Paulette said. The warmth and kindness in her voice was better than a flask of tea, and I nearly burst into tears.

'I hope you don't mind, but I'm having a bit of a lavatory emergency. Could I... er...'

'Why yes! Go straight through: cloakroom is the door next to the coat rack.' She waved towards her open front door.

'Will you stay for tea?' she called after me.

As I hurried up the steps, I told her I would.

‘I’ll put the kettle on and dig out a plaster for your hand.’

Once I was comfortable, I joined her in the kitchen. It was all decorated with holly and ivy, and peeping out from among the glossy leaves were the plaster angels I remembered from visiting her during the school hols.

She brought out a box of Marks and Spencer chocolates to have with our tea. ‘I’m sorry there’s no Christmas cake. I got a tiny one this year as I was a bit under the weather this winter. But with the community nurses coming in and my nieces and sisters sitting with me, it’s been one visitor after another, so there isn’t a crumb left.’

I told her about my beautiful white cake, and the little plastic trees that had belonged to my grandmother, and she exclaimed, ‘Oh how wonderful. Was it your mother’s recipe? I remember her Christmas cakes.’

Then I told her about that blimmin’ turkey. ‘I’m going to be eating it until March,’ I said rather glumly.

Paulette said, ‘I haven’t had a turkey this year. Drop in on your way home, and I’ll take some of the meat off you. I’ll swap you for a bit of frozen ham. It was a bit of a disappointing Christmas for me, too. Usually I have all sorts of people round,’ she said. ‘All welcome here. Everyone brings something to the table.’

I thought for a moment she meant like crackers and parsnips and brussels sprouts, but she continued, ‘Chap from bowls club brought this game with drawings on a folded paper one year; and another year we made miles of

paperchains from the Argos catalogue. Everyone has their own Christmas things.'

After a pause, she added, 'If you fancy it, I'm having a second Christmas to cheer up February, and I think I might have a third one in July down on the beach.'

'With the naturists?' I said, rather scandalised. I could tell from her smile that 'all sorts' did include the clothing averse. 'My naturist friends are great carol singers,' she said. The thought of them going round the village with their lanterns and carol sheets in the altogether was so funny that we got the giggles.

After we'd drunk one cup of tea, we put more water in the pot and had another. We were down to the second level of the chocolates when I remembered John and Annalie and the boys. 'I'd better call them,' I said.

They were understandably annoyed that I was not waiting in the car. 'God, Mum,' said John. 'Why didn't you switch your phone on? We were about to call the emergency services. Don't move, I'll come and get you.'

'My son's a bit cross. I'm going to have to do some grovelling,' I said.

'Oh dear,' said Paulette. 'How awkward for you. You're welcome here tomorrow as early as you like. We could cook one of your turkey legs for lunch, and make a feast of your Christmas cake.'

Then Johnny was beeping his horn to let me know he was outside. I could tell he was simmering because he did not even get out of the car to help me in, and it was down to me to ask Max to move over, which he did without

looking up from his phone. Annalie also kept her gaze off me, but I could see the muscles clenched in her jaw.

It occurred to me then that in coming to visit them at all, I'd failed in my resolution not to repeat my mistakes.

But there are as many Christmases as there are households, I thought. And from today, I have a whole twelve months to find one that suits me. I think I'll start with Paulette's Christmas in February.

Copyright © 2022 Clare Law

Email [clare@clarelaweditorial.co.uk](mailto:clare@clarelaweditorial.co.uk)