

ELEPHANT SHOE

By

Andrew Shaughnessy

Jennifer Garland grasped the birthday present wrapped in pink paper and pretty bow—the colour, her best friend’s favourite—and stomped off ahead of her parents. “We’re going to be late.” *Stomp, stomp, stomp.* She kicked at the snow, coming down like thick cotton balls, boot deep, as if it were intentionally slowing her down. The girl and the sidewalk were illuminated by gas lamps that had just come on to mark the passing of the day into evening. The glow coming from inside the blue house at the end of the street called like a beacon.

“Why do you have to walk me?” Jennifer grumbled.

“Because you’re ten,” her father replied, almost in unison with her mother. “Because it’s getting dark. And look, Jenn,” her mother said, pointing to the crowded verandah of the Matthews’ house ahead, “we’re not the only one doing a drop off.”

Jenn looked up. Yes, the porch was full of parents. But she could make out Gwen’s face in a side window anxiously awaiting Jenn’s arrival. “Come on, can’t we move faster?”

Gwen Matthews and Jennifer Garland had been best friends since the first day of Grade Two, two weeks after Gwen’s father had moved the two of them to the town. They became friends the minute Jenn put her hand up to serve as the class ambassador for the new student. They became best friends soon after that, and since then Jenn had not missed any of Gwen’s birthday parties—large noisy affairs to which everyone was invited—always held on the night before Christmas.

“Can we *please* hurry up?” she urged, as if suggesting that her parents were somehow physically holding her back.

“We’re almost there,” her father reassured her. “Then you can give her the present.”

“But it can’t get cold,” she complained. “The wood might crack.”

Her mother sighed. “It’ll be fine. Besides, it’s the thought that counts.”

When the Garlands arrived, Gwen stepped in stocking feet from inside the house onto the snowy doormat of the porch. A booming voice roared from inside. “Gwendolyn Matthews! You’ll catch your death of cold!” Gwen grabbed Jenn’s hand and pulled her inside before Dr. Matthews could escalate his rant to a joyless rendition of the sad refrain of the only Christmas Carol he knew: “I don’t need to bury another child on Christmas Day!” The refrain was commonly muttered during this fraught season.

Dr. Matthews’ fondness for joy departed the day he lost a son (Gwen’s twin brother) and a wife during a troubled childbirth on Christmas Day. In the years that followed, Dr. Matthews refused to celebrate Christmas. But he allowed Gwen to have a birthday party so he could retreat to his study with the strong drink that now marked his passage through the season.

Gwen dragged Jenn to the closet near the vestibule. “Jenn! You’re the last to arrive.”

“They’re all here?”

“All of them.”

“Even Suzy?”

“She was the first. Her dad wanted to show off his new car.”

Jenn had seen the unfamiliar tire tracks in the snow. “My dad *thought* those were from an automobile. My mom said it was probably Suzie’s dad showing off.”

Gwen raised her eyebrows and made a face like she was about to say something she shouldn’t. “My dad’s not impressed. He said,” she aped him, lowering her voice, and grimacing, “he didn’t go to medical school to stitch people back together because of those hideous new contraptions.” She leaned in, to whisper into Jenn’s ear. “It’s just Christmas. You know how he gets.”

“I know. Come on. We have to celebrate.” Jenn thrust the birthday present into Gwen’s hands. “Happy Birthday!” she shouted, loud enough for Dr. Matthews to hear. Then Jenn leaned in herself to Gwen’s ear: “*Merry Christmas!*” she said in a whisper.

“*Can I open it?*” Gwen whispered back.

“*When the others have gone.*”

“*Okay, but you’ll stay as late as I want, right?*”

Jenn turned to ask her mom. While Jenn’s dad was greeting Dr. Matthews—he usually tried to avoid it but interceded when another father was about to wish the doctor a Merry Christmas—Jenn’s mom kept watchful eye on her daughter.

Her mother gave the approving nod. “We won’t come back too early.”

Jenn kicked off her boots, hung her shawl, and found a hook for her hat in the hall. She joined the other children in the large sitting room in the front of the house where one of the children sat cross-legged on the carpet, back to the fire, facing a semi-circle of children with fire-flushed red faces. They were reading aloud from a picture book—one someone had brought back from the City as a gift to Gwen. The book had a wonderfully colourful glossy cover, and the underlying text was accompanied by pictures that, fortunately, bore no relation to Christmas because otherwise Dr. Matthews would have forbidden it. But the book reading was a big tradition and the children loved it, each taking turns at mesmerizing the others.

As Gwen ran back to her spot in the circle, Jenn knelt by the hearth beside a small three-legged stool. Behind the stool stood a coat tree—another tradition. Gwen would always move the coat tree in from the hall and drape a toque over the top. At the base of the tree were piled the unopened presents that her friends had given her. Among them was the pretty pink box with the pretty pink bow.

As the girls listened to the story, Jenn spied the small figure of a boy entering the room from the shadows of the dining room. He wore a red cardigan, brown corduroy pants and plaid slippers. He moved silently to the small three-legged stool beside Jenn and took a seat. He looked at the pink parcel at the base of the coat tree, then glanced at Jenn. He pointed at his chest: *Is that for me?*

Jenn smiled and gave him a nod and a wink before looking over to Gwen. She was smiling and winking, too. None of the other children could see the boy.

If you were outside the Matthews’ house on the night before Christmas, just after the gas lamps were turned on, you would see the atypical evening glow that

surprisingly occurred in that part of town every December 24th. Some had theorized that the recurring phenomena was a weather event. Others thought that it was the refractive glare put out by the gaslights. To two young girls, however, sitting among other children oblivious to the glow outside (and in), there was no mystery.

Jenn looked at the small boy. He was enthralled with the story, as he had been every year since the first child could read aloud. Jenn looked at the pink box. She knew it wasn't what was inside that mattered. It was what the present brought—as it had done every year.

She caught Gwen peeking at her.

Jenn mouthed the words. “Elephant shoe.”

Gwen mouthed them back. “Elephant shoe, too”

Gwen winked at the small boy and blew him a kiss. He caught it, pretended to place it in his heart, touched his finger to his eye, and pointed back at her. She mouthed the words once more: “I love you, too.”

Suzie's parents were the first to arrive at pick-up, so that her dad could show off the new car. But, one-by-one, the other parents arrived in turn, each whipping around the house to help with the tidying up and the sorting of the next few days' meals. The community all knew the sad story of the Matthews family, were respectful of Dr. Matthews' wishes, but equally wanted to be helpful and thoughtful in the holiday season. Under the rubric of “birthday presents for Gwen” the parents, neighbours, and family friends dropped off a supply of pots and dishes full of home-cooking. When Jenn's mom would finally arrive, she would sort, list, label, and put the food in the fridge to help Gwen and her dad navigate the days ahead.

After the others had gone, and before Jenn's mother returned, Gwen and Jenn sat by the fire, the pink parcel between them. Gwen pulled the loose end of the pink ribbon and watched its looped knot unfurl. She pulled the rest of the ribbon free and began to quietly tear at the tape on the paper.

“You're killing me, Gwen,” Jenn said.

“It’s such pretty paper. I don’t want to wreck it.” She pulled back the paper and opened the box, to reveal two internal boxes, each elegantly wrapped. She tipped the opening of the box toward the three-legged stool. “One for you and one for me,” she said to the small boy, Gregory, who was peering in. He clapped his hands.

“Gwen, hurry!” Jenn said.

“Jennifer Garland, I’ve never known anyone in such a rush to hurry through a season as you.”

“Or a birthday.”

The small fellow on the stool pointed at his chest.

“You tell her,” Gwen said, pulling the wrapping back on the first box.

Gregory held up two fingers.

“Two birthdays,” Jenn said. “I know.”

Gwen opened the first of the two smaller boxes and pulled out a small brass fixture mounted to a wooden frame with a small metal hand crank on the side. “You didn’t,” she said. “I’ve always wanted one of these.”

“I had some help from my mom.”

Musical boxes were all the rage, having been invented about a hundred and fifty years earlier in Europe—either Switzerland or Germany. It didn’t matter where. What mattered was that Jenn’s mom knew the significance of purchasing two music boxes as a gift—one, that she could keep out year-round, to recognize her birthday; the other, to allow Gwen to celebrate (secretly) the season of Christmas. What Jenn’s mom didn’t know was the truth shared by Gwen and Jenn.

Gwen wound the handle of the first box. Tchaikovsky’s *Nutcracker Suite* began to play, its staccato-like notes sparkling up the room with a warm glow, like that which had illuminated the gloms of thick snowflakes falling earlier. Gregory clapped his hands. He lifted his slippered feet off the floor in his excitement.

“He likes it.” Gwen smiled, watching him as if nothing in the next three-hundred-and-sixty-five days would matter as much as this moment.

“Open the other one,” Jenn said.

“I’ve got all year to enjoy that. I know I’ll love it. But tonight,” she said, winding the handle again as Gregory dismounted the stool and sat on the floor beside her, with his legs stretched out in front of him, “I’m going to enjoy this one.”

“I’m glad you like it.”

“I love it!” Gwen looked at Gregory, enthralled with his gift. “I couldn’t love anything more than your gift and this moment. Thank you.”

Jenn was happy. She would have to go soon, to her own Christmas, but she knew that Gwen would have the Christmas she needed, the one she deserved.

“You’d better tell me the song on the other one,” Gwen said, “in case my dad asks what’s the noise that’s been playing.”

“Für Elise.”

“Good. My dad likes Beethoven. I can keep that one out. He can’t know about this one.” She wound the handle again and put the music box on the ground. Gregory pulled his hands to his chest, the action of a hug. “While this one will have to go into hiding, there isn’t a big fat chance I’m going to play anything other than this one for the next couple of days.”

“It brings out the best in Christmas.” Jenn smiled

“Merry Christmas, Jenn,” Gwen sighed. “Elephant shoe.”

Gwen looked at Gregory. “Elephant shoe to you.” He smiled and wobbled his little feet in the oversized slippers—his way of expressing the words he would say if he could speak.

Long after the sun had gone down, long after the last parent of the other kids had left, long after Suzy’s dad’s car had driven off down the street, but before Dr. Matthews would finally extract himself from his study to put Gwen to bed, Jenn and her mother left the front porch after an extra-long hug from Gwen—“your presents get better every year”—to begin the journey home.

“Did you have fun?” her mother asked on the snowy walk home.

Jenn kicked up the snow as if it had fallen just for her. *Scuff, scuff, scuff.*
“Best time ever.”

“Did she like the music boxes?”

“Shhh! Mom. Music *box.*”

“Sorry. Music box,” Mrs. Garland whispered. “*Which one did she prefer?*”

“*She liked them both.*”

“Better than the plaid slippers from last year?”

“She’s outgrown those now,” Jenn said, “but she still loves them.” *Scuff. Scuff. Scuff.* “Will you and Dad take me to see *The Nutcracker* this year?”

“Sure, but the last time we took you, you cried.”

“I did?”

“You were a lot younger. You were afraid of that rat.”

Scuff. Scuff. Scuff. She turned to look behind her at the Matthews’ house. The glow coming from bedroom window on the third floor of the blue house at the end of the street shone like a beacon. “I’ve grown up a lot since then.” Jenn kicked a pile of snow to make a cloud of snow crystals. “Besides,” she said, jumping through it, “I just love Christmas.”

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Andrew Shaughnessy is a Toronto-based writer and IP litigation lawyer. His works have appeared online with *Blank Spaces Magazine* and online and in print with Off Topic Publishing (OTP) and. His story, *Better Overlate Than Never*, was shortlisted and received the bronze medal for *Blank Spaces Magazine*’s June 2023 contest. In November 2022, OTP published *As Night Lifts* as part of its *Wayward & Upward Anthology*. Andy is the (soon-to-be-announced) winner of the 2023 Mississauga Library Poetry Prize. His poem, “The Words We Used,” was published in *Last Stanza Poetry Journal*’s Issue #13.