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## **The Song I Cannot Sing**

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# THE SONG I CANNOT SING

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Sharon Eubank

## Scene One

The story of her birth is a raucous family tale that begins with her arrival into the world on December 19. Her parents named her Joy. She was the youngest in a line of eight children, and every one of them could tell a story, so a person couldn't breathe for laughing. One or another of them would string this story up over the family dinner table each year — rushing to tell it, piling on top of each other's words. And then they would sit back in their chairs as the room pealed with laughter like big, singing bells.

Their father went to fetch their mother and the new baby from the hospital on Christmas Eve. For an unaccountable reason, he left the family station wagon in the driveway and loaded the other seven kids up in the back of an old, secondhand Provo City truck. The words *Provo City Sanitation* still faintly showed through the new green paint. In those days before seatbelts, nobody noticed a bunch of kids tumbling around in the bed of a pickup truck.

They pulled up to the curb at the hospital, and a nurse wheeled their mother out, holding the tiny baby wrapped like a stocking. Both the mother and the nurse looked aghast at the mode of transportation he had chosen. The truck? All the kids in the truck? Hike up her skirt and climb into the cab after just giving birth? He sheepishly smiled. She climbed in. The nurse handed her the baby, and they all drove home like the loads.

I've always believed Christmas is for coming home. For a noisy, but complete family. For forgiving his ridiculous choice. For not falling out of the truck. For tucking everyone in bed — warm and safe. For gifts to be spread out on the stairs while we were sleeping. For knowing Joy is in the house.

## Scene Two

I arrived in Finland in the middle of December 1984. The city of Tampere was in a deep freeze. Bitterly, biting cold that winter, the temperature hovered between -32 and -36 for almost three weeks. I remember the dim winter rooms lit by a single bulb or possibly a candle where I first taught “Christ is Our Cornerstone” to papery widows who still had the war on their faces. The arctic ice hung heavy in our clothing, and while we sat for awhile on a couch or a stale chair, it thawed around us in puddles. Hyacinths poked up from pots on the coffee tables, letting out their heavy scent into the dark rooms. I wished so many times to know the secrets of thawing or letting out perfume.

The Lindgren family invited us for Christmas Eve. Their big table was heavy with the ham and prunes, the beet salad, the rye pies, and the fruit soup. I couldn’t understand the conversation rushing and flowing around me. I smiled until my face was creased and aching. Their mother played the piano, and I mumbled through unfamiliar carols as the night grew late. Then we pressed into their car so they could drive us back to our small apartment. I was nodding and drowsy when they pulled into the cemetery, and we all jumbled out into the car park.

The cold air smacked my cheeks. My eyelashes frosted over in ice. I walked arm in arm with Sister Lindgren, who chatted earnestly to me, trying to explain something that was lost in mystery to me. We trudged up a steep path salted with pea gravel under our boots. An organ played hymns from the Lutheran chapel at the top of the hill. She and I slipped and slid until we crested the hill, and then I sucked in a breath, which made me cough.

Spread below us as far as the eye could see were small flickering candles set on the gravestones. Acres and acres of twinkling lights. Snowballs piled around the candles made a kind of ice lantern. It was breathtaking in its contrasts: warm and cold, bright and dark, alive and dead. The Lindgren daughter saw my wondering expression and explained in English: “For Christmas. To wish our dead families Merry Christmas. To show we do not forget them. Because of Jesus, their bodies will rise up. We will have each other again. Alive in Christ.”

Christmas is for the dead. It is for the hope that cold markers in the snow are not the ultimate end of us. It is for dead relationships, dead hopes, dead dreams, dead children that are promised to be restored.

### Scene Three

This December, Joy is the mother coming home from the hospital. Her sister or sometimes her husband drives her back from the infusion center and walks her gingerly into the house. She gets online late at night and orders Christmas gifts, trying to stay on top of the pain from the tumors breaking her back and stiffening her lungs. She and her husband will spread out a Los Angeles Christmas on the stairs for their two little girls. There may be many more or there may be no more Christmases together. Nobody knows that answer. Why does a non-smoking, 38-year-old mother of little girls have lung cancer? I don't know. Nothing about it can be right. I rabidly stare down anyone who starts talking to me about meaning in the trial. There isn't one.

The grief of her leaving rips and unravels things. It cries out and soughs through the nights. It creates a white space and a white noise. The pain is a blizzard, making unrecognizable humps out of my life. It turns me cynical and sneering when other people are stringing up lights over their tables and telling stories. I try to pretend it hasn't happened. I close my eyes and shut my ears so I can hear the siblings in their red elf hats singing "Joy to the World" to their new baby sister, giggling and nudging each other knowingly at the pun. Joy to the world, the Lord is come. But my pretending does nothing to stop the white noise from raging on.

Into this endless, white wasteland, one day a man did come wading through the hip-deep snow. I could see him from a long way off and, God help me, I wished he wouldn't. I didn't have the emotional energy to deal with him. Undeterred by what I wanted, he patiently climbed over my frozen fences and beat a new track through the arctic yard. I barely greeted him though our eyes met. We knew each other well. I was angry and he knew it. Well — since he had insisted on coming — what would he do now? Fix things. That's what he did, right? Melt the whole damned world to spring.

Ignoring my outburst, he simply sat down. We didn't talk. He didn't probe for an emotional baring of my soul. We spent a silent night. And in the days afterward, wherever I went, he simply followed and sat down next to me. After quite a bit of this, I noticed he was taking the windy side, keeping me between the storm and the wall.

Christmas is for grief. The grief of why and how and when. The grief of things that cannot be changed, no matter how much wanting or faith. I know that now.

It's much easier to love Jesus as a little baby in the hay. But that just gets us to climb up into the truck. First and foremost, Jesus Christ

is a man of sorrows, acquainted with grief. Rather than remain the sweet baby asleep on the hay, he accepted to be the man bearing all the messiness of our mortality. Jesus of the garden, the cross, and the tomb is harder to worship, but he also gives more in return. He rebukes the white noise that is stealing little bits of my soul. He sits on the storm side and puts me by the wall. He holds back the greedy, sighing night and gives me space to catch a breath. The chastisement of my peace is upon Him, and with His stripes I am healed.

I absolutely cannot sing “Joy to the World.” Not this year and maybe not any year. But I also in all honesty cannot forget the December when the Man acquainted with grief had me prove the wonders of His love. This Christmas turned out to be for the song I cannot sing.

**Sharon Eubank** for many years owned a toy store in Provo, Utah, and spent endless hours advising Santa Claus on the coolest stuff for kids who had been good. She is currently the director of LDS Charities, the humanitarian organization of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.



