

*Sharing the Smiles, Heart, and Hope of Christmas*



*An excerpt from 12 Stories of Christmas*

by Robert J. Morgan

# That's My Boy!

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Ana Dübendorf leaned against the refrigerator and closed her eyes, oblivious to the commotion around her -- pots clanging, cleavers chopping, oil sizzling. Retreating into her own mood, she thought of the twists and turns that had made her a premier chef on the Continent, and which had, in their unfolding designs, brought her to this evening—to the final seating of her last night as proprietor of Switzerland's best-known restaurant.

Ana had grown up in Geneva where her mother was an air traffic controller and her father worked for the United Nations. Neither parent cooked. All their meals were taken at restaurants until Ana, at age eleven, spied a large book in the library, an illustrated cookbook. In opening its pages she found her future. Soon she was pulling pots and pans from the pantry and making investigative trips to neighborhood markets. Through trial and error, she taught herself to cook.



The next year, Ana was cast as the innkeeper's daughter in the Christmas play at Geneva's Central Church. Her job was to bring a jug of soup to Joseph and Mary in the stable after Christ was born. Ana spent days perfecting her Christmas Soup, which she handed to Mary in a pottery mug during the main performance. With the babe in her lap, the Holy Virgin lifted the soup to her mouth, got a whiff of the spices, tasted the luxurious liquid, and drained the cup with a large unscripted slurp. Forgetting her lines, Mary exclaimed for all to hear: "This is the best soup I've ever tasted!"

At that moment Ana was certain she wanted to be a chef.

After secondary school, Ana enrolled in the best cooking institute in Geneva, then went on to culinary school in Paris and Berlin. At twenty-five, her first cookbook, *The Stable Table*, became a bestseller, leading to a television program by the same name. When she was thirty, Ana opened *The Stable Table*, an exclusive restaurant near Langenbruck in the Juro Mountains near the Alps. Though the restaurant was one of Europe's finest, its motif was humble, modeled after the setting of the Christmas play where Ana had discovered her life's calling. The restaurant resembled a rustic stable with wooden beams and half-timbered walls and custom made lanterns for illumination. It was the epitome of Old World charm, evocative, transporting diners to another world.

As time went by, Ana built a culinary empire. She never married; she loved her work more than anything. But time took a toll. At fifty-five, she suffered a mild heart attack—too much butter and cream said doctors; too much stress and strain said friends—and the ensuing depression left her ready to retire and spend her days working quietly with publisher Klaus Adler of Munich on revisions to her cookbooks. After tonight's eight o'clock seating, *The Stable Table* would lock its doors as Ana Dübendorf retreated from public view.

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Marco broke her contemplation. "Ana," he said, "the first sleigh is entering the gate. Time to meet the guests." Ana made her way to the porch as the first horse-drawn sleigh arrived with the occupants of Table Number One—Bruno Burgin, famed Vienna opera star, and his wife Therese. The rotund, pompous Bruno swung



theatrically from the carriage with cape and cane, his thick black hair tossed by the wind. "Bruno!" said Ana. "Therese! Come in. Marco will take your coats and give you some hot soup from the sideboard." The Bergins ambled into the restaurant with a nod and a scowl. Watching them, Ana wondered how Therese could live with a man famous for his foul moods. But of course, there was the fame and the acclaim; there was the money.

As Marco seated the Bergins by the window, Ana prepared to greet the next guests—Private First Class Hubert Holloway of the United States Army, stationed at Wiesbaden, and his wealthy Aunt Louise Berkley from Chicago's North Shore. Hubert was his aunt's sole heir, but the relationship was strained. The original quarrel had involved Hubert's father; but the grievance had spanned a generation. Now the elegant, elderly woman was in Europe for the holidays, hoping to repair the breach. They were seated at Table Two near the sideboard.

The third sleigh bore a single occupant, Anna's publisher, recently widowed Klaus Adler. The distinguished gentleman from Munich, with gray hair and trim mustache, emerged from the carriage with a warm greeting: "How are you, dear?"

"I don't know, Klaus," Ana said honestly. "I'm just concentrating on tonight. How are you?"

"It's been lonely," he replied. "But we can chat later. I'm staying in the village a few days. But Ana—quickly—I want to tell you. An idea came to me while riding up the hill, almost an epiphany, as I saw The Stable Table lit up through the snow."

"Yes?" Ana said.

"You must not close this restaurant," said Klaus. "Let's keep it open—but maybe just one day a year. Think of it! You can have seatings all day on Christmas, breakfast to midnight. It'll give you something to plan each year. We can build a cookbook around the idea, maybe a television special. I'll help you."

"Oh my," said Ana, "I've never thought of such a thing and I can't think of it now. Look, here comes Table Four. Help me greet them, Klaus."



The next sleigh glided to a halt, and out lumbered the evening's most unlikely guests—a medical school dropout named Brigitte Gallio who lived in Dijon; and her brother Philippe, a photographer from Genoa whose camera hung from his shoulder like a permanent attachment. The brother and sister, both unemployed, had won their reservations in a contest. They were clad in threadbare coats and rough hats; but Ana put them at ease and Klaus accompanied them into the restaurant, chatting to them as if to old friends.

Table Five arrived next—Arthur and Isabelle Blanc, a young jet-setting couple with royal blood in their veins. Ana frequently saw their pictures in magazines. Jumping athletically from the sleigh, Arthur assisted his glamorous wife, Isabelle, who was quite pregnant. From newspaper reports Ana knew the child—their first, a boy—was due in early February.

The occupants of Table Six were Ana's friends, Johannes and Emmalina Mossman, circus owners from Berne. Their show horses were the ones drawing the sleds up the hill. Ana had rented them for the night. These were the finest steeds in Europe, especially a four-year-old Andalusian named *That's My Boy*, the horse of a thousand tricks. He was a favorite at fairs and festivals across Europe, but tonight he was on sleigh duty alongside his fellow horses, making guests feel they were being swept into a Curries and Ives painting. Yet Ana knew the Swiss Traveling Circus was in trouble. Bookings had fallen off; expenses were high; and even amid the cheer of the holiday, she saw the strain on the face of friend Johannes.

Table Seven belonged to Sébastien Brahms from Zurich, a former banker who battled depression. His family was gone; his friends were few; his health was failing; and his money was running low. Those who knew him called him Sad Sébastien, for he had forgotten how to laugh.

And so they came, more and more, table-by-table, arriving in a parade of jingling sleighs drawn by circus horses, gliding over the mountain pass and through the deepening snow. It was a fairy-tale night in the foothills of the Alps of Switzerland.

After the final guests were seated and drinks poured, a small army of white-clad servers entered the room, bearing aloft platters that descended to each table like flying saucers making orchestrated landings. The room hummed with "ahs" and



"ohs" as food was ladled onto dishes; and the din of conversation gave way to the clinking of silver to china. The spirit of Christmas settled into the room like the very fragrance of joy.

But that's when everything went wrong.

The problem started at Table Two when Private First Class Hubert Holloway was halfway through the opening course. "This is delicious," he said, dabbing his mouth and smiling for the first time. "I wonder what it is?"

"It's called boris-crowder," his aunt said nonchalantly. "I've had it occasionally, but never as good as this."

"I've never heard of boris-crowder," said the soldier. "What's in it?"

"It's a mixture of meat wrapped in casings and fried till it's crispy."

"But what kind of meat?" asked the soldier. "I've never tasted anything like it."

"Well, if you must know," said Aunt Louise, "it's rabbit. It's small bits of rabbit organs – bunny brains and tongues and hearts -- encased in their intestines and fried in their own fat."

The simple words of that sentence hit Private First Class Holloway like bombshells exploding in slow motion. His face went white, then took on a green hue. His eyes lost focus. The regions of his stomach felt rising turbulence. A reaction seized him, as violent and as sudden as a volcano, and as unstoppable. Nothing like this had happened to him to before. He was taken by surprise.

So was Aunt Louise. Seeing disaster hurtling toward her, the woman leaped from the table like a pedestrian vaulting from the path of a runaway car. Losing balance, she landed on the sideboard as her oaken chair flew backward, striking the soup tureen with the force of a baseball bat. With a mighty crash, the whole table collapsed—soups and drinks and ice and china tumbling downward like an avalanche. The noise was deafening.

Conversation in the room ceased as if frozen in mid-air. Ana Dübendorf and her



staff—every cook, server, apprentice, bus boy, and dishwasher—rushed to the calamity with feelings of horror. The humiliated soldier and his aunt made mortified exits to the bathrooms while the kitchen crew ran for mops and towels and buckets.

No sooner had employees cleared away the mess than another misfortune arose. Smoke billowed from the kitchen, triggering smoke alarms like emergency sirens. "Something's burning!" Marco shouted. The whole staff—every cook, server, apprentice, bus boy, and dishwasher—raced back to the kitchen to face the fire. It was caused by untended rabbit grease splattering onto the burners. Out came the fire extinguishers, and with great plumes of vapor the flames were doused. The alarms fell silent, and Ana Dübendorf, disheveled and shaken, reentered the dining room with an announcement.

"Friends," she said coughing, "We had a little fire on the stove, but it's extinguished and we're safe. So is the food. There will be a slight delay before the next course; please bear with us. We'll open the windows to clear the air. In the interval if you need your coat, Marco will fetch it. I apologize for the inconvenience. Dinner will resume presently."

Like an army regrouping from a defeat, bus boys mobilized toward the large windows, throwing them wide open, including the one behind the famous opera star, Bruno Burgin, who in turn barked an order to Marco: "Young man, bring my cape and cane!"

"Yes sir, at once!" said Marco, heading toward the checkroom. But he had taken only a few steps when another catastrophe occurred. Johannes, the circus owner, glancing in the direction of Bruno Burgin's barking order, jumped to his feet, eyes wide with dismay. Pointing to the window, he shouted, "That's My Boy!"

But it was too late. That's My Boy, the horse of a thousand tricks, smelling the food and spying an audience, had stuck his head through the large window. His long grinning yellow teeth descended right onto Bruno Burgin's scalp. In one seamless swoop, the horse pulled a thick mane of black hair from the top of the great tenor's head. Bruno, it turns out, was bald as a boulder.

"That's My Boy!" Johannes again shouted in alarm.



At that moment a flash blinded the diners. It was from the camera of the unemployed photographer, Phillipe Gallio. Bruno lunged beneath the table and hid like a child under the tablecloth while Phillipe, now on his feet and running around the room, kept snapping, his flash cutting the room like strobe lights.

Johannes Mossman was on his feet too, tearing after his horse like a tornado, jumping out the open window and running through the snow, shouting, "That's My Boy! That's My Boy!"

Watching all this unfold like a distorted fantasy, Sad Sébastien at Table Seven felt an unexpected chuckle. He stopped himself, but it came again like a hiccup. He began giggling like a girl, then laughing like a drunken fool. He laughed till it hurt and his eyes filled with tears; still he couldn't control himself. His mirth was infectious. It spread from table to table, and soon everyone was holding their sides and wiping their eyes with Ana's white linen napkins.

But the worst was yet to come. Endeavoring to evade the laughter, Bruno wrapped his head in the tablecloth like a Middle Eastern sheik and made a dash for it, dragging place settings and china behind him with sickening crashes. Boris-crowder rolled across the floor like marbles. Pop went another flash; and Bruno, in a state of disorientation, tripped over his tablecloth and tumbled into Table Five, which was occupied by Arthur and Isabelle Blanc, the young jet-setting couple awaiting the birth of their first child.

They didn't have to wait long. Isabelle, who had been laughing convulsively, now rolled onto the floor trying to dodge the descending Bruno. Hitting the hardwood, she felt sudden surges of constrictions and contractions that told her the time had come.

"Arthur," she cried, "the baby! I think he's coming."

"Is there a doctor in the house?" hollered Arthur.

"That's My Boy!" came a shout through the open window.

"I'm a nurse," said Brigitte, medical dropout from Dijon. "Well, not technically; but





I've had training. I can help. Someone call an ambulance."

"The snow is too deep for an ambulance," said a voice.

"We'll have to take her down by sled," said another.

But it was too late for that. Isabelle was helped to a side room, and there, aided by Brigitte, little Arthur William Harry Blanc made his debut at 9:47 p.m. on Christmas Day. When the sound of the baby's cry wafted into the dining room, the tension eased, a cheer went up, there was a soft and grateful round of applause. The Munich publisher, Klaus Alder, spoke for all when he said, "Thanks be to God!"

It took a long time for medical personal to reach The Stable Table. In the interval, That's My Boy was corralled, the horses were re-harnessed, and the guests delivered down the hill. Meanwhile Ana Dübendorf brought a hot cup of Christmas Soup to the new mother. In trembling hands and with the baby in her lap, Isabelle Blanc lifted the mug to her mouth, got a whiff of the spices, tasted the luxurious liquid, and drained the cup with a slurp. "This is the best soup I've ever tasted!" she said.

Ana beamed as if life had been reborn.

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It took time for the patrons of The Stable Table to recover from the events of that never-to-be forgotten night. But in looking back, they all agreed: Everything that evening worked for the best of all concerned.

Philippe sold his pictures to the leading tabloids of Europe, putting his career as a photo journalist on the fast track. The photographs and accompanying stories became the buzz of the media for a full week, during the slow-news days between Christmas and New Year's.

Philippe's sister, medical dropout Brigitte Gallio of Dijon, decided to give nursing another try, encouraged by the success of her Christmas day delivery.

Bruno Burgin benefited from his lesson in humility. For a change, he listened to his



wife when she told him not to take himself too seriously. Besides, his picture appeared in the world's leading tabloids; and for an opera singer any publicity is good publicity.

Private First Class Hubert Holloway was nursed through Christmas night by Aunt Louise; and by the next day they laughed every time they recalled their story. Whatever disagreement had threatened them, it was never again mentioned. The two bonded like buddies in a foxhole.

Circus owners Johannes and Emmalina Mossman, aided by the notoriety, encountered no further problems with bookings. That's My Boy performed to capacity crowds, who laughed uproariously when the horse came onstage in a large wig and pretended to sing while a majestic operatic voice boomed through the speakers.

Sad Sébastien returned to Zurich with a dose of the best medicine in the world—the elixir of laughter.

Little Arthur William Harry Blanc gained weight rapidly and seemed to thrive despite his precarious beginning.

And as for The Stable Table, well, it had to remain open—at least for one more Christmas, because all the guests received rain checks.

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And so it was—to Ana's delight—that every single patron reassembled exactly one year later, all at their original tables, for the eight o'clock seating. Everyone showed up as if no time had passed at all. Everything was exactly the same, with the exception of boris-crowder, which was forever stricken from the menu; and the desert, which this year was a large Black Forest Cake in honor of the youngest guest who was celebrating his first birthday.

Taking little Arthur William Harry in her arms at the end of the meal, Ana led the guests in a round of "Happy Birthday" and hugged the child with great affection; and when he giggled at her, she giggled back, and said proudly, "That's my boy!"



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To which Klaus Adler replied, "Thanks be to God."

And on that magical night in the snow-draped Juro mountains of Switzerland, at the eight o'clock seating of The Stable Table, everyone pondered the great mystery they had all experienced in the intervening year, and the lesson they had learned: No matter what goes wrong in life or what disasters befall us, the birth of a little boy in a rustic stable on Christmas Day somehow makes everything turn out just right.

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You can find the audio version of Robert J. Morgan's Christmas book, *12 Stories of Christmas*, at <https://www.robertjmorgan.com/>

