

A child wearing a black beanie and a red and black striped sweater sits on a wooden bench. Behind the child is a green door with a white wreath and two nutcracker figurines. Snow is falling around the scene.

*Penelope Marzec*

MAKING

CHRISTMAS

*Again*

# Making Christmas Again

Penelope Marzec

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**Making Christmas Again**  
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## *Dedication*

For Mom who taught me about antiques and Tara who  
is a real sweetheart.



# 1

Celeste's fingers grew numb from her tight grip on the steering wheel. Driving through the thick veil of snow, she almost passed Mom's cul-de-sac. Inching the car slowly along the street, the wheels slid and bumped into the curb. Weary to the bone, she leaned her head on the steering wheel hoping she didn't damage the rented vehicle.

She took in a deep breath, lifted her head, and saw an aging red minivan in Mom's driveway. Celeste wanted to scream or cry. Or both. Leaving the rental car on the street meant it would be buried in a mountain of snow when the plow went by.

With her life already a nightmare, Mom's death made Celeste's life a complete disaster. After an interminable flight delay, she drove straight from the airport to the funeral director's meeting and set up all the arrangements. During the time she spent in that meeting, the storm intensified. The predicted snow in Apple Hill, New Jersey could be anywhere from six to ten inches.

There wasn't any snow in Kentucky when she left. That was one good thing about the state. It usually got less than half as much snow as New Jersey.

She pulled the hood of her coat over her head and

stepped out of the car into snow well above the height of her sensible flats, reminding her that she'd neglected to pack boots. She probably forgot several other items like her toothbrush or hairbrush. Still, Mom always kept extras for her. She could count on that.

Even if Mom wasn't here anymore.

Celeste bit her lip and swallowed the sob rising in her throat.

She pulled her luggage out of the trunk and started toward the house. The engine of the minivan cranked but didn't catch. Celeste didn't realize someone was in the vehicle. The motor cranked again but failed. A third time, the engine merely clicked. A tall man got out of the car and opened the hood. She couldn't see much of him since he wore a scarf, hat, and a heavy coat.

"Call a tow truck," she shouted at him above the sound of the wind as she tried not to slip on the snow in the driveway.

"Maybe it's flooded," he called out as he slammed the hood down.

"It sounds like a dead battery." She stood a few feet away with the snow pelting her face. "I want to park my car in this driveway."

His dark eyes pierced her, and a shiver ran down her spine. "Are you Celeste?"

She nodded.

He came toward her and stretched out a hand covered with black engine grease. "I'm so sorry about your mother."

"Thank you." She did not touch his hand.



He drew his hand away. "I'm Sawyer, by the way." A comforting softness lingered in his tone.

Celeste managed a wan smile. "Nice to meet you. Knock and let me know when I can park my car in the driveway."

She turned and walked to the porch where a lovely Christmas wreath adorned the front door and the usual four-foot-high nutcrackers stood at attention on each side of the porch. Mom always decorated the Saturday after Thanksgiving, without fail.

Celeste steeled herself to be brave and opened the door. Her gaze landed first on the wooden Christmas Nativity scene, which graced the hall table. Her father carved the figures and painted them in soft tones. Most Nativity sets had one angel. Her father had fashioned five angels for his set. He always said there was more than one.

*Angels we have heard on high...*

A flood of old memories swamped her with pain. Tina, her little sister, used to play with the figures and Celeste played with her. After Tina's death, Celeste never touched the figurines again, but Mom continued to put them out every Christmas. Even after Dad died.

Celeste gritted her teeth as a spark of anger ignited in her. She had prayed fervently for her younger sister, but it did no good. While Mom continued to believe in a loving God, Celeste lost faith in a God who did not answer prayers and allowed a dearly loved twelve-year-old to die.

When Celeste's father died, Mom sold the hardware store and went into business selling

antiques. Now Mom was gone, too. An empty ache of loneliness settled into Celeste's heart.

She turned toward the living room, but the Christmas tree wasn't in its place in front of the bay window. Mom must have decided not to put it up because Celeste did not plan to come home for Christmas this year due to an impossible situation at work. The lawyer reassured her that she did the right thing in reporting the fraud, but she felt like a tightrope walker whenever she went to work.

Now she was home with Christmas only weeks away. After the torment of the past two months, learning of her mother's death overwhelmed her. Anguish wrapped her in grief. She found a pair of warm slippers and stepped out of her icy shoes, but she continued to shiver. Rubbing her arms to keep warm, she checked the thermostat, which was set at fifty-five. Mrs. Zuccarelli, who lived next door, must have turned it down. The neighbor promised to take care of the house, which was kind of her.

The location of Mom's car was an odd detail bothering Celeste. She wouldn't need the rental if she could use Mom's car. However, there were too many other things to worry about now. She left the suitcase in the hall and went to the kitchen to put water on to boil. She ate pretzels on the plane but skipped breakfast to arrive in time to meet the funeral director.

The refrigerator was empty, but she found a can of tuna and a box of crackers in the cabinet. A bowl of clementines sat on the counter so she ate a few of those, too. As the lack of sleep weighed on her, she moved

into the living room.

Pulling Mom's antique quilt around her shoulders, she sat on the sofa. The built-in bookshelf next to the fireplace featured some of Mom's treasured pieces. A ceramic vase stared at Celeste. The vase appeared to be the head of a fashionable woman from the 1950s with imitation pearl earrings and a matching necklace.

Mom claimed the strange item could bring in a great deal of money. Celeste thought it might be useful as a pencil holder. Nobody wanted or needed the fashionable—and empty—head of a woman from the 1950s.

"Save everything," Mom stated on many occasions.

*Why?* Celeste wondered. What good was all this *stuff*? After Tina's death, Mom started collecting Depression Glass at flea markets, yard sales, and auctions. Once she opened the antique shop, she expanded her collection to include everything from a souvenir table from the 1939 World's Fair to an antique highchair for an infant that converted to a rocking chair.

A tear rolled down Celeste's cheek, but she brushed it away. She assumed she would get married someday and give Mom a grandchild. She never expected Mom to die at the age of fifty-five. Celeste let out a sob. She grabbed a few tissues, wiped her eyes, and took a deep breath, imprisoning her grief.

Desmond, the CEO of Value Yield Accounting, argued with her before she'd left Kentucky. He told her he expected her to be back from the funeral in a week. She did her best to be as discreet as possible at work,

but the news about the fraud would soon be apparent to everyone. It began when she found irregularities while doing an internal audit, which was her job as a CPA at the firm. From that point on, going to work made her miserable.

She tried calling Mrs. Zuccarelli, but the neighbor didn't answer.

Weariness overwhelmed Celeste and she drifted off into a deep sleep.

*Sweetly singing o'er the plains, and the mountains in reply echoing their joyous strains.*

Celeste woke with a start. She dreamed of angels, but what woke her was not sweet singing. It was the sound of bells, drums, and a few high-pitched squeals. She blinked her eyes and grabbed her phone. It was five o'clock in the evening and dark. Stumbling around, she turned on the lights.

The drumming stopped but not the squeals and the bells. The sound came from the basement. There wasn't anything in the basement. Or there shouldn't be.

A deep, low voice ended the squeals.

Fear ran up Celeste's spine. She dialed 911. She fought to keep hysteria from creeping into her voice as she explained the problem.

Seven minutes later, a policeman came to the door. He appeared calm. He said he would check the back entrance to the basement. He didn't pull out his gun. In fact, he smiled at her as he tipped his hat and walked around the house.

He knocked on the basement door and the door

opened. Deep voices rumbled back and forth along with a few more high-pitched squeals. And laughter.

What was funny? Someone was in the basement. Nobody was supposed to be in the basement.

The basement door closed. The policeman returned to the front door of the house and knocked.

Celeste opened the door.

"Hi, ma'am." He tipped his hat again. "The noise you heard in the basement came from Sawyer and his son, Glenn."

"Sawyer? The guy with the minivan?"

"Yes, ma'am." The policeman shrugged. "He's tried to get it towed but the trucks are busy. There are quite a few accidents on the roads since it's so icy."

"Why is he in the basement?"

"He's been renting the basement and brings Glenn with him most of the time. He promised he'd get Glenn to pipe down."

"My Mom rented the basement?" Celeste was appalled. Mom never said anything about that.

"Yes, for storage, not for living quarters. There aren't any codes against that in this town if the basement has a separate entrance, which it does."

She didn't like this news, but she bit her lip. "Well, I'm sorry for calling you out here for...nothing."

"I'm very sorry about your mother's passing," the policeman said. "She's long been a wonderful asset to this community."

"Um...thank you."

"Goodnight, ma'am." He tipped his hat again and went down the steps as his radio crackled with another

message.

Celeste stared out at the snow, which now appeared to be six inches deep on the porch, judging from the policeman's tracks in it. There would be far more flight delays if the snow continued.

When was the last time it snowed in New Jersey two weeks before Christmas?

When she closed the door, Mom's landline rang. Maybe it was Mrs. Zuccarelli. Celeste hurried to answer it.

"Hi, I'm Sawyer. Sorry about disturbing you." That slow cadence in his deep voice possessed such an unusual calming quality. "Glenn got a bit rambunctious with the drums."

"Why are you renting the basement?" she asked.

"It's a long story, but your mother was a very kind woman. I'm very sorry she's gone. Please accept my condolences and if there's anything I can do—"

Celeste sighed. "What about the minivan in the driveway?"

"It succumbed to old age. I'm searching online to see if I can get any money for it or else I'll donate it and get money off my taxes."

Celeste did not like the idea of a stranger in the basement. "I'll drive you home. Where do you live?"

"In the apartments on the corner of Broad and Spring."

"The Madison Arms?" Celeste always wondered about the place. Mrs. Zuccarelli's alcoholic brother lived there until his death. "That complex is at least eighty years old."

"I'm sure Madison would be insulted to know the apartments were named after him." A squeal of laughter sounded in the background. "That's Glenn again. He's watching his favorite video. You don't have to drive me home. Glenn and I can walk."

Celeste glanced at the thermometer that hung outside the kitchen window. "It's about twenty-five degrees." She rubbed at the headache building in her forehead. What if Sawyer and his son froze to death on their walk home?

"That old van never had heat so we've adapted to the cold." He chuckled. "At any rate, the reason I called, in addition to apologizing for the noise, is to let you know you'll be getting a pizza delivery very soon. It's the least I can do."

"I don't—"

"Bye." He hung up.

Celeste stared at the phone for a moment. She drew in a long breath and closed her eyes. "Mom, what is going on? Why didn't you tell me about this guy in the basement?"

Fifteen minutes later the pizza delivery arrived. The pizza smelled wonderful, but it was huge. It would take her days to demolish it. Her conscience bothered her. What about the guy in the basement? Wasn't he hungry, too?

*Share your bread with the hungry.* Mom quoted Scripture whenever she donated to the church's soup kitchen.

But...Celeste really didn't know the guy in the basement.

Her mother knew him. The policeman knew him.  
He probably wasn't an ax murderer.

She went to the basement door in the hallway. A new deadbolt lock had been installed, which wasn't there last year. She knocked on the door.

"Coming." He called out. The deadbolt clicked and the door opened. "Any problem with the pizza?"

With his curly dark hair, dark beard, jeans, and a plaid flannel shirt he looked like a lumberjack. He bent his head, so it didn't hit the sloping ceiling.

Celeste swallowed her unease. "The pie looks great and smells delicious but it's really too big for me."

"You can always save some for tomorrow." His beard did not hide his slight smile and again, that soft cadence in his voice soothed her.

"Would you like to join me in eating some of it?"

"But I've got Glenn with me."

"How old is he?"

"Three."

"Does he like pizza?"

The grin widened on his face. "Glenn loves pizza."

"Good, bring him up here." A sense of benevolence warmed her even though he was the one who bought the pizza.

"Thanks. I'm getting tired of all this accounting stuff anyway." He went down the stairs.

"I'll set the table," Celeste called out to him.

She returned to the kitchen, turned on Mom's small television and listened to the weather report while getting out dishes, glasses, and napkins. As she



suspected, the weather wreaked havoc on travelers. All over the northeast, people were sleeping in airports.

The wind whistled around the house. The weatherman called this phenomenon a bomb cyclone.

Celeste's nerves tightened. Would she be able to return to work in a week as she promised? Would Desmond fire her if she didn't?

Heavy footsteps brought Sawyer into the doorway of the kitchen. His height surprised her. He would have no trouble playing basketball.

"You don't have to share the pizza." Sawyer stood with his hands on his hips. "I can go home and heat up leftover spaghetti and meatballs. Another of Glenn's favorites."

Celeste stared at him. When he stood in the stairway, the light was dim, but now in the brightness of the kitchen she stared at his eyes, dark brown with flecks of gold glimmering around the pupil.

"Well, should we go?" he asked.

She blinked. "Um...no. I mean...company would be nice. Especially on a night like this."

"Great!" He smiled. "Come on, Glenn. It's time for pizza."

A boy sauntered into the kitchen and looked up at her with a huge grin. "Pizza, yum," he said.

Celeste immediately understood why her mother took pity on Sawyer. Young Glenn's facial features indicated he had Down Syndrome. A small pain stabbed at her. Tina had it, too.

She struggled against the pain of loss and pasted on a smile. "Hi, Glenn. Nice to meet you." She bent

down to shake his hand.

Glenn didn't take her hand. "Pizza." He said as he struggled to climb into a chair.

"Hold on there. I've got your booster seat." Sawyer went into the hall and brought back the seat.

While he settled Glenn into the chair, Celeste opened a bottle of juice she found in Mom's cabinet. "I'm very grateful for the pizza. I haven't eaten much since yesterday."

"How long were you delayed?" Sawyer asked as he pushed Glenn's chair closer to the table.

"I guess it doesn't matter now." She poured the juice into glasses. "There are people sleeping in the airport tonight. I'm glad I'm not one of them."

"This morning, it looked as though we'd only get a few inches."

Celeste shrugged. "My dad had all sorts of gadgets to help predict the weather. Not just a thermometer but a barometer and an anemometer, too. Mom would laugh at him and tell him to simply look out at the clouds."

Sawyer tied a bib around Glenn's neck. "She was a practical woman and full of wisdom."

"Yes, she was." Celeste wondered if Glenn was born with a heart defect as Tina had been.

She put a slice of pizza on each plate.

Glenn reached for his pizza.

"No, Glenn. We say grace first." Sawyer pressed Glenn's hands together.

"Grace." Glenn smiled.

Celeste put her hands together. She never said

grace anymore. Not since she'd moved away. She did it for Mom whenever she came home for a visit, but that didn't change her mind about God.

Sawyer closed his eyes, "For all food yummy..."

"Yummy!" said Glenn.

"...that fills our tummy," Sawyer continued.

"Tummy!" Glenn repeated.

"Thank you, God." Sawyer opened his eyes.

"Amen!" Glenn beamed.

Sawyer patted Glenn's head and then proceeded to cut his pizza slice into smaller pieces.

"That does not sound like an official church blessing," Celeste commented.

"It's simple, Glenn understands it, and he can join in."

Celeste nodded. "It just doesn't sound holy."

"We're giving credit where credit is due." Sawyer bit into his pizza slice.

Celeste shrugged and started eating, but her curiosity about the man continued. "How did you meet my mom?"

"I'm an auctioneer and I saw her at a few auctions, but I didn't get to know her until my wife started a friendship with her," Sawyer answered while watching Glenn pick up the pizza pieces and eat them. "Your mom helped out at some of the Down Syndrome support group meetings."

"I thought she stopped volunteering with them."

He shrugged. "She was mainly involved with the fund-raising end of things, but she really took to Lila and Glenn. She seemed to adopt them." He closed his

eyes. "And then Lila died in a car crash."

Shock took Celeste's breath away. It took a moment for her to collect her thoughts and offer her sympathy.

Sawyer stared at his pizza, but he didn't pick it up. "Glenn was only a year old and needed constant care. I quit working for a while. Your mom found babysitters for me and sometimes watched Glenn herself. She suggested running online auctions, which allowed me to be more flexible for Glenn. That's when she offered to rent the basement to me."

Celeste nodded. Mom did things like that. That didn't mean Celeste liked the idea of him renting the basement. She intended to sell the house now that Mom was gone.

Why didn't Mom mention any of this? Whenever she spoke to Mom on the phone, everything was fine. Mostly, Mom asked Celeste how things were with her job. Celeste lied. She didn't tell Mom about the fraud or that she'd hired a lawyer. She didn't tell Mom she was a whistleblower. She didn't want to upset her mother.

Mom talked to her about the antique shop or about visiting Tina's and Dad's gravesites. She'd often reminisce about the funny things that happened in the family and after all this time, Celeste could laugh at the memories. They had good times in the past.

Now Celeste had nothing but memories and no one to share them with. Her throat closed again with an ache. She didn't want to talk anymore. She glanced at her phone.

"The governor declared a state of emergency."

Sawyer announced as he checked his phone.

"Sleepy." Glenn put his head down on the table.

Sawyer stood. "I figured this might happen. I'll get him cleaned up, but under the circumstances. We'll sleep on the futon downstairs. Glenn's used to it. We've done it a few times in the past."

"But the policeman said it's not for living quarters," Celeste said.

"It's not, but there are extenuating circumstances. Jason suggested I stay put since I didn't want him to drive me home when he was here."

"Jason?" Celeste asked.

"The policeman who came for your 911 call." Sawyer got a washcloth and gently wiped his son's face and hands. Glenn didn't wake up. "He's an old friend from elementary school."

"Why did he tell me something else?"

"Sometimes common sense demands an easing of the law depending on the situation." He lifted his son into his arms. "Besides, this way I can shovel you out tomorrow."