

Winter Light

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When her husband Jake died, nineteen years ago, Amanda Cleary announced to her four children that she would move from the ranch to town. She declared that she needed her friends, the library, and the church—the bustle of life in River Springs. None of her four grown children remarked that she hadn't attended church in years, or that she had only one friend they could name. They could see that Amanda—"Gram" to her family—had worked it all out in her mind. She wanted to trade the huge quiet of the prairie for another kind of quiet—the absence of people: her daughter Lynn and her husband, who ran the ranch now, her son Tom, who worked for them and lived in a trailer on the property, their children, the hired hands. Amanda insisted that she had the right, as an 82-year-old widow, to a life no longer shaped around anyone else's.

Her children were amused by this. "When was the last time mother 'shaped her life' around any of us?" Lynn asked her sister Grace. Grace grinned, "Maybe when the first grandkid was born? If you ask me she's been cranky for at least a decade unless she's off in a corner by herself, reading a book."

Amanda grew to love her one-bedroom brick house in River Springs, and managed well through her eighties. By the time she was into her nineties, though, it took most of her day to cajole her body into rising, eating, eliminating, bathing, and dressing before it was time to undo it all and get into bed again, eyesight failing, stomach refusing, bones aching. Still, she clung to her privacy, not wanting any of her children to witness what she thought of as "this daily disintegration." Even when the town lost its tourist business and seemed to have dried up and peeled off around her house, Amanda rejected Lynn's urging to move back to the ranch. She'd leave her place when they carried her out feet first, she said repeatedly. Why let her children see up close the waves of depression that rolled over her more and more often?

"Who wants to burden their kids?" she told her friend Mae. Only Mae, arriving unannounced one day in late October, saw Amanda at her worst: weeping, unkempt, her bathrobe stained, one sleeve torn, the small house smelling of rotting food, books scattered everywhere. Mae rang the doorbell and rapped on the door for ten minutes before Amanda pulled back the curtain at her front window.

"Go away," Amanda mouthed through the glass.

"Let me in, or I'll call Lynn," Mae hollered. Deaf as she was without her hearing aids, Amanda heard and opened the door.

Inside, Mae looked around with amazement. "Mandy, what in the world happened?"

"Nothing." She waved a bony arm at books on the floor. "I had a temper tantrum." She saw the look on Mae's face. "Please don't call Lynn," she begged. "I can't bear to turn myself over to her and Grace, and have them decide what to do with me."

"You don't trust your own kids?"

She shook her head.

"Why?"

"They don't know me. I'm their mother, or grandmother, the old lady who's lived too long, whoever they want me to be. Tom and Dave are too busy to think about it, but Lynn and Grace—they don't know who I *am*, Mae."

"What are you talking about? Who *are* you that they don't know?"

"Someone with a brain. A crazy-hungry brain. They'd just fuss over my... decrepitude."

Mae cocked her head and squinted at her friend. She often bragged that Amanda was the smartest woman she'd ever known. "Maybe she's not so practical, but Amanda is book-smart," Mae said to anyone who would listen. "Downright brilliant." In River Springs, this was not a good recommendation. Most people steered clear of Amanda, who could be caustic, but Mae was a good friend. She drew a bath and made Amanda soak, put the books back on the shelves, threw out the moldy food. She promised not to tell about what Amanda called a "bad bout of blues."

"And you'll call me before things get like this again, right?" Mae asked. Amanda agreed, and as the weeks passed, she did feel better. She put up a good show during Thanksgiving dinner at the ranch, passing even Lynn's eagle-eyed inspection.

The next challenge would be Christmas. Lynn and her husband Rob upheld a three-generation tradition of hosting the whole family for the holidays. Grace and her family, and Amanda's youngest son, Dave, stayed at the ranch for the entire week between Christmas and New Year's. In the years since she'd moved to town, Amanda's grandchildren had married and had their own kids. Every year it seemed there were several more young people at Christmas. Sometimes they brought girlfriends and boyfriends. Amanda stopped trying to remember all the names years ago.

She asked Lynn two weeks before Christmas, "How many *great*-grandkids do I have? People keep asking me. I can't keep track anymore."

Lynn sighed. “How come you can always remember characters from some book you’ve read, and not your own family?”

“People in fiction are more memorable.” Amanda added “usually” a minute too late, remembering that Lynn thought it strange and disloyal for her to favor any subject over her own children and grandchildren. She peered carefully over her glasses at her daughter, pursing her mouth, hoping to penetrate Lynn’s disinterest in the world outside the ranch and family. “Lately I only remember people from what I’m *currently* reading. Unless you count stories I’ve read repeatedly. For instance, I can tell you most all of Faulkner’s people, and—”

“I know, I know, Ma.” Lynn had no patience for this kind of talk. Amanda understood. Lynn’s load of cooking and cleaning and caring for sick calves would make anyone short-tempered and dull. Not much interested in Faulkner. Amanda hadn’t forgotten her own long years on the ranch, and Lynn had the heaviest load. She was so dutiful, ready to take on trouble.

Amanda told Tom, when he called, that she’d like to stay in town for Christmas this year.

“It wouldn’t be Christmas without you here, Ma. What would you do in town all day?”

“Go to church with Mae, come home, eat soup, get in bed, read.”

“That sounds awful! You can rest out here, if you get tired. You should be with family. It’s *Christmas*, for Christ’s sake.”

So on Christmas morning Amanda found herself bundled into boots, hat, and the ridiculous puffy coat they’d bought her last year, on her way to another holiday of noise, chaos, abundant food, and confusion. Her oldest great-grandson arrived to pick her up. She wasn’t sure of his name, and was too embarrassed to ask, although she thought he was her grandson Bill’s boy, Billy. When he helped her climb up into the beat-up Chevy pick-up, his silver eyebrow stud glinting in the sunlight, she tried to stifle a groan. He had to practically lift her to get her on the seat. She straightened her back, although it made her neck hurt, and turned to look at him as he drove.

“Are you Billy?” she asked. He grinned and nodded. Of course, it would be a teenager, itching for any chance to drive a car or truck, who would be willing to make the forty-mile trip from the ranch to her house in town. He told her there were twenty-seven this year for dinner. She saw them all in her mind’s eye, gathered around the tables Lynn pushed together and covered with green and red tablecloths. Each year when they toasted her, their matriarch, Amanda knew they wondered how much longer she could last. She was so small now, her back so curved, she could hardly see out the pick-up’s window without straining her neck.

She wondered how she’d muster the energy to talk to this boy with jewelry in his eyebrow. But before they’d passed the cemetery north of town he turned the radio on, found a station he liked, and turned up the volume. *Jingle Bell Rock* the announcer said. As the song blared, Amanda leaned back and closed her eyes.

For most of the drive, she dozed through awful music and shouting ads, interrupted only once when Billy braked sharply. She lifted her head to see a half-dozen antelope leap across the road. After they disappeared over a snow-covered shelf of rock, she looked at Billy. He was bobbing his head up and down in time to the music.

“You ever see anything on this earth as fast and graceful as antelope?” she shouted over the radio. He grinned at her, jabbed his thumb at the air, but didn’t answer, still moving his head to the music. She let her chin fall to her chest again.

She knew the turns and dips of this road in her bones. Five miles from the ranch she opened her eyes, straightened her back and with some effort, turned her shoulders and head a few, painful inches to better see from the passenger window. Oh, this made it worth coming, she thought. Mile after mile of flat, snow-covered prairie. She felt her spirits lift.

Lately she could be transported in seconds from despair to a rush of what she called *quick-bliss*, then back again. She blinked at the brightness. Snow lay over the sagebrush like crisp, thin frosting, jewel-like under the winter sun. *Resplendent*, she thought. Everything so still. Only the posts of the fence bordering acres of grazing land showed dark against the white landscape. Winter under this uninterrupted sky seemed both more cruel and more beautiful than in town. It’s a terrible thing, she thought, to give up this open empty whiteness for the dirty, plowed snow and salted sidewalks of town, just to get away from your own family. She sighed. Dave had asked, “Why so disagreeable?” at Thanksgiving when she’d insisted he drive her home right after dinner. Grace had raised her brows but said nothing; she had it easiest because she lived furthest away. It was Lynn who took the brunt. She’d frowned at Amanda just last week and said, “Mother, I *suspect* your heart is soft, but your tongue is sharp.” It wasn’t that she’d stopped loving them, Amanda reminded herself, it was just that she had an overwhelming need to be alone with her aches, body and soul. Ironic, since so many of her years out here were lonely. And most people in town didn’t even know who she was anymore.

“What I’d really like is a hermit’s hut up in the trees in Elk Mountain,” she’d told Lynn after one of their arguments about her returning to live at the ranch. “Like in that old song.”

“What song?”

“You know, I used to sing it to you: *I wish O Son of the living God, O ancient, eternal King, for a hidden little hut in the wilderness, that it may be my dwelling.*” She hated the way her voice wobbled, weak and thin.

“I don’t remember any such song, Mother, and that’s ridiculous. How could you take care of yourself in the wilderness? How would you eat or get to the doctor, or get your library books?”

“I’d take my own best books with me.”

She wished she *could* be content with her own books. They sat, their hard covers faded to dull browns and grays, on the shelves in the tiny living room—books she’d had in college, and when she taught high school English, before she’d met Jake. She’d fallen in love with a man who was determined to make a success of a ranch that his own father had barely hung onto, worn-out land owned by his family for eighty years. Jake had spent himself on the place, and she’d become a rancher’s wife with only a shelf of books to remind herself of who she’d been.

Now she had what she thought of as a ravenous greed for more books than she owned. The library, only a block from her house in town, was what got her up some mornings, when every bone ached. Some days, the idea of standing in front of the *New Books* shelf was what kept her from dumping all her pain pills into her morning tea.

Every day after breakfast, she slowly walked the length of the block, tapping the rubber tip of her cane against the sidewalk. The librarian usually greeted her with a terse nod. Most days, Amanda sat and read until she couldn’t hold her head up any longer. Then she leaned back on the cushion of the chair and rested, books piled on either side of her thin legs. Once in a while she talked briefly to a woman she’d met there, a newcomer around town, but most days she spoke to no one. A tender quiet seemed to enter her body. She’d let her eyes slide slowly over the stacks. Sometimes she sat up, used her cane to help hoist herself off the seat, then took small, stiff steps to a shelf and pulled down a book she’d never held before, opened it, and breathed deeply of the scent of ink, paper, other people’s hands. Sometimes when she lifted a book, rubbed her palm over its cover, opened it and flicked through its pages, it felt as if she teetered on the brink of finding something she’d lost. After two or three hours at the library she’d walk slowly home, knowing she’d repeat the same routine the next day. There were more books than she had time to read, but this did not distress her as it once had. She’d read what she could in the time she had left.

Now they arrived at the ranch, and Billy helped her climb down from the pick-up. She put her hand, with its twisted fingers and thin, discolored skin,

on his arm. “I want you to be the one to drive me back, understand?” That way she wouldn’t have to start from the beginning with one of the others, she thought, wouldn’t have to make conversation.

“Awesome,” he said, and made his thumbs-up gesture. As they made their slow way up the shoveled path to the house, he kept looking down into her face. She held on tightly to his arm; the path was still icy in places. He put his big ski-gloved hand over hers where she clung to his jacket.

“Gram, can I ask you a question?”

“Ask away.”

“What’s it like to be ninety-three? I mean, like, do you feel like the winner? Like you outlasted everybody?”

She said nothing. It took all her concentration to hold on to him, her purse dangling from her elbow, the thick coat making it hard to see her feet, which she placed carefully on the uneven path. This was how she kept from falling, by walking slowly, concentrating. Her fingers ached with cold where they curled around the cane. Lynn would scold her for forgetting her gloves.

The boy persisted. “I mean, is it cool?”

“Cool?” Was he serious? She tried to read his face as he held the heavy storm door open for her and the sounds of her family poured from the house—a phone ringing, music playing, pots and pans from the kitchen, a television, doors banging, a dog barking, someone yelling at the dog to stop. In the mudroom, as Billy stomped snow from his boots, Amanda looked up at him again, “It’s plain tedious. At best. Does that answer your question?” He grinned, shrugged, and backed away.

Unwrapping the gifts and preparing the holiday meal seemed to take forever. It took six women what seemed like hours to set the table in the dining room, bringing in platters and bowls of food, bottles of wine, beer, and soda, high chairs, booster seats, baby cups, bibs and cloths to clean up spills. Then they passed dishes, all the time toasting, laughing, eating, more passing, talking, teasing, joking, arguing. Amanda didn’t eat much and was exhausted just watching them. Lynn must have spent weeks shopping, planning this meal. How had *she* managed the fifty or so Christmas dinners she’d cooked herself? She’d fed her sisters, brothers, and parents, her husband’s family, and her own four kids at the same table every year from the time she was a newlywed at twenty-six until the year Jake died. I should have been dead years ago, she thought, and a quick laugh escaped from her throat. She coughed to disguise it. No one else would find this amusing, least of all her children. Yet a kind of desperate laughter seemed the only truthful response to being so old, so frail, and so aware of it.

Some of the men had to leave, as soon as they'd eaten, to check on a fence in the east pasture. When they returned, the women cleared away turkey and ham, vegetables and rolls, other bowls of food Amanda couldn't identify, and covered the tables all over again with desserts. They all talked so fast she couldn't begin to hear anyone.

Finally the last dishes and pies and cakes were cleared. The women moved to the kitchen, putting food away and talking, while the men and children spread themselves over the family room couches and floor in front of the television. Crumpled wrapping paper was knee deep in a corner near the tree. Bright plastic toys and machines spouting twangy music and halting, recorded voices all seemed to be going at once. The youngest kids were either wailing or shouting for joy, it seemed to Amanda. Some of her grandchildren were plugged into their various mechanical gifts; others were sitting or lying on the floor near the fireplace.

Amanda watched her granddaughter Nellie put a new red outfit on her toddler. Nellie said, "I can't imagine how you dressed kids, Gram, before they had sweats."

"I can't imagine how I dressed myself this morning," she muttered, and Nellie laughed. It was still possible to joke with some of them, the ones in their thirties. It was harder with the younger ones, who stared at her with unapologetic curiosity.

Lynn came from the kitchen, helped Amanda out of her chair, and led her towards one of the couches, but Amanda pulled her arm away.

"Don't want to sit," she said.

"Stand, then? Or lie down?" Lynn gave a little half-smile.

She means well, thought Amanda, so why do I want to slap her? "Go on back to the kitchen," she said, unable to hide her irritation. "I *can* move on my own, you know. Do it all the time." She was relieved to hear Grace calling Lynn's name over the racket. "Go see what your sister wants."

Lynn went bustling down the hall to the kitchen, her shoulders hitched up in anger, her heels clicking on the wood floor. Amanda felt a sharp stab of regret, and reprimanded herself for her sharp tongue. She stood in the doorway of the family room for a few minutes, rocking a bit from side to side to relieve the stiffness in her back and legs. She noticed new green curtains Lynn had made for the picture window. From the window she could see the barn and sheds, snow-covered and leaning, across the yard. A memory fell over her: standing here long ago, Lynn clutching her legs, Tom squirming in her arms, hearing newborn Grace crying from the bedroom, fighting tears of rage as she watched the wind yank the line that held her clean laundry off the

pole and toss it down into the muddy yard. How had she survived hundreds of days like that one? It made her tired just to think of the weeks, months, seasons, years she'd never remember again.

She went slowly down the hall and into the bathroom. Her knees felt weak when she stood up after using the toilet, and her hands shook as she pulled her wool slacks up over her bony hips. She flushed the toilet, wrestled with the faucets to get warm water, washed her hands. She couldn't make herself open the door. Exhausted by peeing, she thought, and wanted to weep. She sat down heavily on the side of the tub, her knee and hip joints giving way to gravity with relief. Once sitting, it seemed too great an effort to rise. She sat for twenty minutes, her head in her hands, her shoulder against the wall, telling herself that if she went to bed now, at 6 p.m., they'd all see it as evidence of her weakness, her failing health, proof she should move back to the ranch where Lynn could take care of her. Someone knocked several times, each time louder.

"What?" she said finally, immediately regretting her tone. There she went again. She should try to be upbeat, a word Lynn had urged on her. She'd been too cross to make anyone's Christmas bright for too many years. How could she be another year older already? Had it really been nearly seventy years since Jake brought her here on their wedding night, and made love to her on the same bed he'd been born in?

"Gram, are you okay in there?" It was her grandson, John, Lynn's youngest.

"Fine. Coming out." She added "dear" for the sake of being upbeat.

She flushed the toilet again, and fumbled with the lock on the door. When she opened it, he was still standing in the hall, his eyebrows turned up into a quizzical look that reminded her of Jake.

"You look just like your grandfather when he was fussing over a sick calf," she said.

John smiled at her the way they did lately. As if she were a child they loved, but couldn't reason with. "Mom said you'd been in there a long time. She was a little worried."

"She keeps close track of my bathroom time." He was so tall she had to lean sideways to look up at him. "How about you escort me to a spot devoid of human activity? I'll have a nap." They liked it when she napped; they didn't have to think about what to say to her.

He helped her settle into a rocking chair by the fireplace in the dining room, empty now, and quiet. She closed her eyes for a while, listening to the vague chorus of voices from the family room and kitchen; they all seemed very far away from her now. She sank back into the chair's cushion.

After a few minutes she heard a noise near the doorway and opened her eyes. It was Nellie's child, the youngest of the clan, dressed in the new red Christmas sweatsuit, looking like a miniature, beardless Santa. The little boy, she thought his name was Kevin, wasn't even aware of her presence in the room. He was staring at the mantle, where green pine boughs were clustered around one burning candle. John had blown out several candles that had burned down too close to the greenery, but he'd left this tall one.

The child wasn't completely steady on his fat legs, but he toddled closer to the mantle, working his dewy lips, staring at the candle, pointing. He was staring so hard he forgot about walking and fell with a plop onto his bottom. Hasn't been walking very long, Amanda thought. He helped himself to stand again by putting both hands flat on the floor in front of him, then took a few more steps until he was standing near her. Then he seemed to notice her, sitting in the chair.

"Wite," he said, pointing. Amanda looked from him to the mantle, and back to his round face. He was plump, with huge eyes. "Wite," he said again.

Amanda stared at him, sensing that he was making some kind of tremendous effort. She felt a sudden spurt of energy and interest, as if she was being called to witness something important. She got out of the rocker with great effort, careful not to disturb the boy. First she had to will herself to stand, then a moment to register the pain in her knees and the slow cranking up of hip joints, straightening her back as best she could. She found herself trembling, agitated, full of expectation.

Another moment—the child's eyes met hers and she drew in a quick breath. The boy was a wonder to look at: skin the creamy color of the writing paper Lynn gave her for Christmas, great brown lashes over blue eyes, dimpled hands and wrists that he—she could hardly believe this—held up towards her now as if he fully expected to be taken into her arms.

She didn't stop to think about whether it was wise, or even possible, to hold on to or lift twenty pounds of moving child. She bent, slowly, ignoring the pain in her shoulders and back, and drew him to her thin chest, holding her two bony arms tightly together under his bottom, letting him do the rest of the work by twining his arms around her neck, his legs around her middle. Oh, I could so easily fall and ruin us both! she thought.

And then, standing as erect as possible, holding him, she took a step. Very slowly she carried him, one foot placed carefully after the other, as if she were negotiating a mountain path, until they stood next to the mantle. She strained to lift him higher, he loosened one arm from around her neck and pointed with a small finger to the candle. Amanda leaned back to look at him.

She couldn't remember ever seeing a face so beatific, so transfixed. The moment stretched. She tightened her grip on him. The shape of his small, round body in her arms, his baby smell, the first smell she remembered sensing in months, sent her plummeting back to a moment with one of her own babies. It must have been Dave, she thought. She'd held on to him, her last, the longest. She moved her dry cheek an inch until it touched this child's soft skin, and breathed deeply. A charged stillness surrounded them. Every object in the room stood clarified and intense in its space: the windows to her right with their plaid curtains, the emptied table with its rumpled cloth and poinsettia centerpiece, the sideboard on the other wall with its stacks of blue cups and saucers. The chair emitted a creaking sound as it settled back onto its rockers, the door left slightly ajar stood like a sentry, each separate strand of the brown fringe on the rug at her feet seemed alive and waiting for what would happen next. The boy's eyes grew larger and the light of the candle was reflected in them.

He looked away from the candle and into her eyes, and smiled at her with such unmitigated bliss that Amanda gasped. It felt like she'd taken in more air than her body could hold. The excitement nearly toppled them; her feet faltered, she wobbled, the boy slid down the front of her body but somehow managed to land standing upright, she grabbed his shoulder to steady herself, and sure enough, they were both still standing, intact, he clinging to her legs and she steadying herself by holding his small shoulders. His eyes moved from her face to the candle and back again, repeating, "Wite! Wite?"

"Right!" she said, "Light!"

Her breath was coming fast. She remembered reading about Helen Keller's moment at the pump, when the word "water" was spelled into the girl's hand and the water itself was felt. The child's eyes, as they moved from her to the candle, drove into her. She felt what she could only describe as a shimmering in her chest. "What if I'd died yesterday and missed this?" she said, and the little boy grinned, as if he understood. She laughed aloud, her shoulders shaking.

There was a step at the door. "What are you up to in here?" It was Lynn, a dishtowel over her shoulder, cranberry-stained apron tied at her waist.

"Light!" Amanda said in a breathless, high-pitched voice, and the boy repeated, "Light!"

"What?" said Lynn, looking from one to the other, frowning.

"Bright! Sight! Right! Excite!" Amanda grinned at the bewilderment on Lynn's face.

“Mother! Are you okay?” Lynn picked up the boy and carried him quickly out the door, called for someone to take him, and hurried back into the room. She steered Amanda to the rocking chair, searching her face as she helped her sit. “Are you dizzy?”

“All right! Ignite! Tonight!” Amanda shouted, still laughing. She pushed her feet against the floor to make the chair rock, forcing Lynn to jump back a step, staring at her. Amanda’s voice was pitched high, away from Lynn who still stood beside the chair, worrying her wedding rings, speaking softly to her.

“Mother, did you have some of that brandy after dinner?”

Amanda ignored the question. She shouted word after word now, gleeful at the sound of each one in her mouth, and with each word she rocked forward, then pushed backward with her feet again until she had a rhythm going between words and the fierce motion of her body. “High!” She rocked forward. “Fly!” She rocked back. “Try! Why! Cry! Die!”

Then all at once, she slumped back in the chair, exhausted and limp. She couldn’t answer Lynn, who seemed to be calling her name from far away. She thought for a moment that Lynn was nine again, calling, “Mother!” into the night, shattering her sleep. She fought to rouse herself, thinking she needed to hurry to Lynn’s bedside, that the child must have had another nightmare. But Amanda found she was too spent to move. Finally she opened her eyes and looked at her daughter, trying to comprehend how Lynn could have grown old so quickly. Lynn stared back at her. Amanda smiled then, a tired smile.

“What a sweet smile, mother,” Lynn said. “I don’t think I’ve ever seen you smile like this.”

Amanda managed one word. “Ever?”

“Maybe when I was little.”

Amanda tried to hold on to the smile. She felt its energy fade but worked the muscles of her face to keep it there, for Lynn, until it felt foolish, and fake, and she had to let it go.

Eventually Lynn put Amanda to bed, leaving the hall light on, coming in to check on her every hour or so. The family continued its noisy celebration until late. Amanda dozed, waking briefly, then drifting off again. She told herself that later, when she wasn’t so tired, she’d think about holding the child, becoming so excited, feeling words fly through her brain and out her mouth like wild birds. The boy, she told herself, would forget their moment together, although he might remember the candle, and the word *light*. But that didn’t matter. *She* would hold on to those few minutes. She’d warm herself with the memory when life got cold. But now she was exhausted, ready for sleep. ∞