



The
Quickening
A Last Sister
Short Story

The Quickening:
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by
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*For Lina,
who taught me how to be a mother*

The Quickening
December 24-25, 1761
Ninety Six District, South Carolina

Amelia's eyes were open as she kissed her husband of two days on Christmas Eve. Beyond the curve of Owen's cheek, studded with fine blond stubble and chilled and flushed with the late December wind, she could see the bunch of mistletoe hanging from a nail in the door frame. It made her think of other Christmases, the rounds of parties she had attended as a girl living outside Charlestown that began in mid-December and lasted until Epiphany. Owen had shot this bunch from the top of an oak the day before they were married, and she knew he meant it as a gift, a sort of guarantee from a dour Scots-Irish Presbyterian to the half-pagan ways of an English Anglican that he would try to make her happy, even if he had to go halfway to hell. Amelia imagined it was the first mistletoe ever hung in this house where Owen had grown to manhood.

Standing on her toes to reach Owen made her back ache, so she broke the kiss and rested her cheek against his chest, but still she kept her eyes open. Amelia had met her husband in a war. They had come to love each other slowly when each was the only companion remaining to the other, after the fortunes of war had killed or drawn away their families and their other friends. Wounded in body, he had needed her, and wounded in spirit, she had needed him. Now she feared closing her eyes even to sleep, feared she might wake and discover herself back in the crowded frontier forts where she and Owen had passed the last year and a half, waiting for South Carolina's war with the Cherokee to end so that those still in possession of their lives could go on with them. Feared she would relive the loss of her first husband, Adam, and their infant twins over and over in dreams. Sometimes she dreamed the twins were alive and still with her, and those were good dreams, almost worth the waking that broke her heart.

Owen's hands rubbed over her shoulders and down her arms. Amelia was the only person on earth who could tell that the pressure from one of his hands was ever so slightly less than that from the other, the legacy of the hatchet that split his forearm open the spring before last, and of the burn that stopped the bleeding and saved his life. The rough fabric of Owen's coat was cold

against her body, and she stepped back to close the door and help him out of the heavy garment. She ran her free hand along the sleeve that covered the scar.

"Does it hurt in the damp?"

He shrugged and held his chapped hands to warm at the fire on the wide hearth.

"No more than the rest of me."

These late December evenings were foggy and cold, and Owen had spent the greater part of every day in the open since their return to the backcountry in early December. First he had made repairs to the damaged house so that it would see them through winter, and since then he had been out hunting the scarce winter game, or walking the property and planning for spring, trying to fulfill his promise to make what had once been one of the finer holdings in the district thrive again, to give Amelia the kind of life she might have had, if not for the war.

She hung the coat on a peg by the door and plucked a white berry from the mistletoe. She tossed it past him to the hearth, where it snapped in the fire.

"You're awfully particular about the rules, Amelia."

She put on one of those flirting smiles she had known how to mean once and laughed.

"You know the trade. A berry for a kiss."

Owen laughed as he stood and reached for her. "Toss as many berries on the fire as you like. The woods are full of mistletoe."

She felt her lips curve into a smile under his and soon they were both laughing, and for a few moments Amelia surrendered to the warm dizziness of anticipation. Owen's body was warm now from the fire, and the room was small, and she knew, as he ran his hands down her back and into the folds of her skirt, that she would let herself have this happiness, this connection to the quick world, on Christmas Eve.

He backed her under the ladder that led to the loft and into the corner where the bed was. Still festered the niggling guilt that said she did not deserve this, she who yet lived when her husband and children were gone. She wanted so badly to be a good wife to her new husband, and she did love him, but she paid in fresh guilt for every smile, every laugh, every time she closed her eyes under Owen's kisses and forgot for a moment what made her so sad.

Owen's fingers pressed against her collarbone as he pushed aside her neckerchief and kissed the soft skin beneath. Her cheeks flooded with warmth despite the season, and her fingers laced through his hair, catching on the leather tie. When she leaned her head back, she caught the

shine of the bottle she had set to warm by the hearth on the morning of their marriage, and she wanted to cry.

"The supper will burn," she said instead.

Owen's hand slipped from her hip and around her waist. "Let it."

She pulled his face up to hers and kissed him. "Later. It's only corn pudding, but it's taken me the better part of the afternoon, and I promise you, you will be sorry if it burns. And your pine tea will be absolutely vile if you let it get cold."

She forced down the tears that wanted to come and smiled as she led him to the table and made him sit. The heat of the fire dried the threat of tears as she scraped the glowing embers from the top of the bake kettle and lifted the lid.

"Perhaps it's not ready just yet," she sighed, lowering the lid and shoveling hot ash on top.

Ignoring her own bottle as best she could, Amelia proffered the pine tea she had brewed and kept warm in a hot spot on the hearth.

Owen grimaced as she set it before him.

"Drink it down. Focus on the heat, not the taste. It will keep you in health until the garden comes in."

He grabbed her hand and winked. "I don't see you drinking it. Want me to save you half?"

Amelia tried not to laugh and not to cry. "That's gallant of you, but I'll let my own continue steeping overnight and drink it in the morning." She turned again to the hearth. Please let him not ask. "I spent time in your stepmother's kitchen garden today, as it happens. It's gone wild, of course, but I think much can be salvaged, and I'll add my own plants to it."

The paper packets of cuttings and seeds and costly imported spices she had carried everywhere, from the coast to the mountains and finally to this place between them. Since the loss of her twins, they had traveled in the folds of two small baby gowns. She reached to the mantel for the garments and unfolded them, slipped the fragrant packets of paper from the linen into her hands. She set the packets on the edge of the table and returned the gowns to their place.

"Would you bring the turkey inside while we wait?" she asked. "I'll rub the herbs in to rest tonight, and then he'll be ready to boil first thing tomorrow."

It was a small bird, wild and no doubt gamey. Amelia had never quite gotten used to the taste of hunted meat, or to the bits of shot that sometimes crunched between her teeth. Owen went to do as she had asked, wincing and stretching as he rose from the table.

"I'm sorry, I should have asked before you were settled inside," she said, when he entered with the bird by the feet. She pressed her palm against his back and felt the knotted muscles. "I'll make more liniment with the fat."

He laid the bird on the hearth. At the table, Amelia finished preparing the herbs, but when she made to shove them under the turkey's skin, her stomach heaved and she leaned with one hand against the rough chimney bricks and pressed the other to her lips. She forced her tongue against the top of her mouth, swallowing as her stomach clenched on nothing.

She heard the scrape of a chair and felt Owen's hand on her shoulder, hesitant, as if she were made of glass. She tried to turn away, but his hand closed, turning her back.

"Are you unwell?"

"No, no. I haven't stopped to eat today, and I felt faint for a moment, but it will pass." She smiled. "I've done with the turkey, if you'd take it back out. I'll put it in to boil in the morning."

His hand didn't leave her shoulder. "Amelia, I'm sorry. It's not much of a Christmas for you. Next year will be better. There'll be more people, more of a community. People won't be afraid to live here now that the war is over. Now that this is a safe place."

She tried to find some way to tell him it was all right.

"Oh, Owen, this is lovely. We're at peace, we're in our own home. There was a time I thought I'd never have my own home again."

"There will be more, Amelia. Soon." The urgency in his voice unsettled her.

She took his hand from her shoulder. "Enough," she said gently. "Just take the turkey outside."

As he did as she asked, Amelia dabbed the sudden sweat from her face and picked up the bottle warming by the fire. Shaken, it exuded a sweet, spicy scent that scalded the offensive smell of raw meat from her nose. Cardamom, snakeroot, gum-myrrh, and saffron, among others. Drinking it would be a fine Christmas gift to herself, but it had to be done.

By the time Owen returned she had pinched color back into her cheeks and messed forth the corn pudding onto two wooden trenchers he insisted would be pewter plates in a year.

"Are you a conjuror, too, now?" she teased. Anything to keep him distracted.

It bought her half a smile. "You know what I mean."

"It's a bit overcooked now, as I feared. I haven't gotten used to this hearth yet, where the heat and cold gather. They're all different. And I haven't even attempted the bake oven, though I must soon, if you want real bread."

"You've lived here less than a month, Amelia. And it tastes fine."

She talked because she found she could make herself swallow only a few bites. The memory of the turkey was that strong, and she was half glad she would be too ill to rise tomorrow, by the time the bird was cooked. She might drink the broth for her Christmas dinner.

As Owen ate, the room grew rapidly darker. Perhaps she would go to bed soon. The sooner she slept the sooner she could wake and drink her purgative and feel better, in mind if not in body.

She rose to scrape her uneaten supper into the bake kettle, and when she returned for Owen's empty trencher, he grabbed her hand. His sleeves were rolled back and she looked down at his arm, the healed skin hairless and shiny with scars in the firelight.

"Don't drink it, Amelia. Not this time."

"Don't drink what?" she asked, pretending she didn't know.

"That mixture you made up two days ago."

"Owen, I have to drink it, I didn't make enough pine tea for both of us, and anyway it keeps me in good health."

"It makes you sick for days."

Her tone turned waspish. "It's for women's complaints and I feel the need of it."

She hoped the dark and forbidden world of women's complaints would be enough to deter him, but it was not. He turned his chair from the table and tugged her down onto his lap, where he slipped an arm around her waist and twined his fingers through hers.

"Amelia, I know what it is. I had a stepmother, and I'm not as stupid as I look." He smiled, tried to make her smile. "Every time you drink it, I'm afraid of losing you."

She knew the risk she took and did not need to be reminded. Every woman heard the whispered warnings, the tales of bleeding that, once begun, could not be stopped. She willed her body to relax against his, found she could not, found she was trembling with fear and confusion and desire and hope.

Owen's other hand stroked her arm. "I know you've put yourself through this twice already. I know the other women in the forts helped you through it. I didn't say anything because under the circumstances it seemed for the best, but now, Amelia, there's no need. I've promised you a decent home, and I'm going to give it to you. Things are going to get better and better. The war is over."

She still shook as with a fever, and Owen held her tighter against him, one arm around her shoulders, the other over her legs. "You're safe now, Amelia. We're safe."

"It's nothing, it doesn't matter, they aren't even alive until the quickening, and that's, oh, so far away."

"How far?"

"Two, even three months. I don't know exactly. I always thought it could be I felt the twins move earlier because there were two of them, but that might not be true, it's just something I thought after they were born. I didn't know they were two, you see, before."

She had not understood, then, how women could do this with such regularity, could give up the chance to know their babies, whatever the risk. And then she had lost her babies, and she had understood all too well.

"Must you decide now?"

She nodded, sniffing. "The earlier the better."

"Oh, Amelia." He rested his forehead against her shoulder.

"You don't know what it's like, Owen. You don't know how afraid I am."

"What do you fear? The pain?"

She felt her face fall blank as she searched in the shadows for some way to tell him, some way to explain what she felt, the mix of grief and guilt that she called fear.

"No, not the pain, not of bearing them. That's over so fast, after all, and pain is part of life." She ran her hand gently over his scarred forearm. "It's the fear of losing them, they...Children die all the time, I know, but expecting it doesn't make it any easier. I don't think I can be that brave again."

She was explaining it badly.

"Then let me help you, Amelia. Let me be brave for you, and perhaps you will find you recover your own courage. Please." He paused. "I know this," he gestured at the bottle on the hearth. "Whatever this is, I know it hurts you, too."

She nodded and her voice hardened with controlled rage, with a secret anger at the world. "The cramping is painful. Any way I go there is pain, both in bearing and in not bearing children. It's inescapable for women and you can't change it, nor can I. I'll try to bother you as little as I can. You may have to fend for yourself for a day or two."

Delicately, she twisted out of his arms and tapped her feet against the floor and stood. Owen leaned forward, elbows on his knees, and pressed his fingers to his forehead.

"Amelia, I'm your husband. I want you to bother me."

And there it was, the other fear, the other anger, the feeling that she was present but second best, nothing but comfort and consolation.

"Owen, you married me because I am here and Catie isn't. Isn't that true?"

She was being cruel, prodding at a wound. But if he intended to flush into the open what she would rather deal with in shadows, then she would do the same to him.

He looked up. "Catie? Is that what this is about? You might just as well say that you're only my wife because Adam died. And, while I suppose that is true, I did think..." He raised his arms and crossed them behind his head. "Amelia, I thought you knew, I thought you understood, I..." He laughed, and it startled her. "Catie Blair would fight with the wind if she thought it would hit back. I guess at one time I found that appealing or enticing or something, but Amelia, you have to understand that growing up out here, there weren't many families like ours, and Catie and I knew from childhood we were each other's only real choice, so we made the best of it. But she's not anything like you, she's not a very restful person, and that highlander she ran off with is more than welcome to a lifetime of her." He dropped his hands. "I wish him good luck."

Amelia found herself smiling at Owen's description, drawn back to his side by the invisible force of his assurance.

He took her hands and kissed her fingers. Tears caught and glistened in her eyelashes.

"Amelia, do you want more children? I imagined you did, I thought all women did, but if you don't, we can make it work. I'd have to hire help until they were old enough, in any case."

She could not stop the tears then, and she dropped into his lap and pressed her face into his chest, soaking spots through his shirt. She felt his hand on the back of her head and she nodded.

Her voice was muffled, which was as well. She couldn't look at him, couldn't bear anyone to see her confession. "But I can't have them. I feel so guilty already because I let my babies die."

I can't, I can't have any more children. I don't deserve them, and I'm so afraid, I'm so afraid I'll forget my babies. I know how much I already have forgotten."

Little things, details like how old they were when they cut their first teeth, the direction their hair curled. Time's cruel mercy eroding the edge from her grief.

Now that her tears had begun she could not stop them. She pushed against Owen's chest, trying to turn away, to stop crying, but he held her shaking body close.

"Your shirt..." she protested.

His voice was firm. "Don't worry about my shirt, of all things."

They sat in silence for some time, until Amelia became conscious of the heat on the side of her body facing the hearth and Owen let her pull away and stand. She still trembled, and Owen took his coat from the peg by the door and wrapped it around her shoulders, clasping it tight at her front. He pushed the lock of damp dark hair stuck to her cheek behind her ear.

"Can you tell me about your twins?"

Somewhere she found breath to speak. "So often I've wanted to tell you, Owen. I've wanted to talk to someone about them, but I was so afraid it would remind you of Adam, that I had a life and a family before you, and you've been so good to me that I didn't want to do it."

"Amelia, how can you think so little of me? I didn't know Adam well, but he must have been a decent sort of man if you loved him. Talk to me about your children. Talk about Adam, too, if you want to. We can't pretend there's no past, we can't let it keep coming between us like this."

There it was, the past. The fear that the future meant losing the past.

"My babies are the past." Every word felt like a betrayal.

"I know." He kissed her forehead. "But they are also the future, if you want them to be."

He put an arm around her shoulders. "You are very tired. Come to bed, dearest. Sleep will help you."

"Owen, I don't think I can."

He shook his head. "Only sleep. Sleep will help you."

"The fire..."

"Can take care of itself for a few hours. I'll make sure it doesn't go out."

She was tired, so tired she felt she might drop where she stood, but still she broke from him. She took the bottle from the hearth and placed it by the bed, where it would wait for the

morning. Owen said nothing, only watched her and helped her out of her layers of clothes down to her shift and stockings.

As he prepared for bed, he asked, "What will happen if you don't drink this?"

The question, and its answer, caught her unguarded. She had been thinking only of what would happen if she did drink it.

"We...I think we will have a child. But I can't be sure, it hasn't quickened yet. I could be wrong, it could be nothing."

She felt the bed shift as he got in beside her and turned, drawn by his warmth. "When?"

She waited to answer, pretended to calculate, as if she had not done this days ago. "Late July. Perhaps August."

Amelia closed her eyes, less fearful now of sleep than of words. In the talking it was all becoming real, and every real thing she said would make it that much harder for her to drink, to deny herself what she wanted, what she despised herself for wanting.

She was meant to empty the bottle early, before rising. When she woke she sensed she had slept past her usual time. Owen was gone from the bed, but she heard movement above her head, in the remains of the loft. She knew she should rise, but she closed her eyes again, hoping for sleep, for just a little more time to put off the decision. She was almost dreaming when she heard Owen call from the hearth.

"Amelia, get up. I have a gift for you."

Curious, still half asleep, she rose, pulling the blanket from the bed around her body.

"Christmas gifts are for children, Owen. I don't have anything for you."

The excitement in his voice made her smile, returned her for a moment to her own childhood. "Take it as you will, then."

She emerged from the dark corner, realizing with a mix of regret and relief that she had left her bottle behind.

She drew nearer the hearth, pulled by the warmth of the fire and the small pile before it, something covered with Owen's heavy coat. She kneeled and lifted the coat. Her throat caught and tears pricked at her eyes, but still she couldn't help smiling.

Owen crouched beside her, and she could have kissed him for the unaccustomed nervousness and quiet pride in his eyes.

"I made it," he said. "Well, most of it. My father helped with the hard parts."

She laughed. "You wasted no time."

"I'm surprised it was still there, but it's not easy to carry and not valuable for anything beyond its intended purpose."

Amelia pulled the cradle nearer and ran her hands over the smooth lines of the wood.

"It was my sister's," Owen explained. "Agnes. You have heard me speak of her."

His eyes were bright.

Of course. She was not the only one who had lost her family to war. This was the cradle of a dead child.

Owen covered her hand with his. "I know what you're thinking. But I like that our baby will have Agnes's cradle, because I'll think of her often, that way. And you can use the twins' gowns, and perhaps it will make you think of them."

"I hope so," she said softly, rising slowly to her feet. It was so fragile, this hope, this idea that it was all right to hope and all right to know some happiness again in this life.

When Owen stood she took his hand and placed it low upon the flatness of her belly. He pulled her over to the mistletoe by the door and kissed her, grinning.

"That justice at the courthouse the other day was so pleased to marry one backcountry bride who wasn't already quick with child."

She protested. "I'm not quick, Owen, I told you. Not for some weeks. Months, even."

But in its own way, this Christmas morning felt like its own kind of quickening, in Amelia's acceptance that she yet belonged in the world of the living and that it was all right to have love and hope, whether or not she believed she deserved them.

She raised herself on her toes to reach for Owen again, and when he reached to pluck the white berries from the mistletoe she stayed his hand.

"Leave them," she said. "I don't want them to run out." When he kissed her again, she closed her eyes.

Author's Note

For me, the greatest challenge in writing a Christmas story set in the eighteenth century is the difference between our own Christmas celebrations and those of the past. Many of our iconic Christmas traditions derive from the Victorian reinvention of the holiday, and this story predates the adoption of such seasonal staples as Santa Claus and Christmas trees in America. Another challenge is the widespread misconception that all Colonial celebrations either eschewed the more secular elements of the holiday in favor of a primarily religious observance or that the strict dictates of Puritanism forbade celebration entirely. The truth is that celebration of the holiday varied widely from one place to another, and even from household to household, depending on the culture, traditions, and beliefs of the people living there, much as it does today. In the southern colonies, especially in wealthy coastal Virginia and South Carolina, feasting and parties were common throughout the season, which did not end until Epiphany on January 6.

How, then, to write a Colonial Christmas story for a twenty-first century audience? In a lucky twist of history, South Carolina backcountry settlers began returning to their homes in early December 1761, as the British and the Cherokee came to terms at the end of the Anglo-Cherokee War, so I had my setting. For the story itself, I began with a baby. Nowadays, both religious and secular traditions emphasize the importance of children to the holiday, and in Colonial America, as Amelia notes, adults did not typically exchange gifts, which were reserved for children and were usually small.

The quickening, or the mother's first perception of the fetus's movement in the womb, was regarded by English folk culture and law for centuries as the beginning of life. Usually occurring about halfway through a forty-week pregnancy, it marked the line set by both religious and civil authorities as the point before which a pregnancy could be terminated. Today, with our batteries of sonograms and vigilant prenatal care, we note the quickening in passing, if at all, but in the eighteenth century it was a momentous event, often the only major sign between conception and delivery that things were progressing as expected. Oh, and far more eighteenth-century brides were pregnant than rose-colored historical memory allows. Christian missionaries particularly despaired of backcountry South Carolina.

Mistletoe, of course, is an ancient Yuletide tradition and is common in the eastern United States.

