



*To the readers who so graciously shared their own cherished Christmas memories,
planting the seeds of this tale
May you find wisps and snippets of your stories
folded with care into this one.*

*Two homes in the mountains
Snowed in for winter's keep
A river in between them,
A rope tight o'er the deep*

*A mother and her daughter,
A father and his son,
A cottage and a cabin,
A story yet unspun*

*But time did freeze a tin can
Dangling from that rope
A messenger from days gone by
Echoing long lost hope.*

Until one day...

Are you the girl that got my boat?

*Greetings, New Neighbor!
Do you mean the river-faring vessel
that moored beneath our dock?*

*Many warm greetings,
Genevieve Hartfield*

My boat got away in the current and
I saw it across the river.
Do you have it? Can I have it?
My name's Tim.

Good sir Timothy, I send thee thy boat by this pulley, tied 'round the handle of this tin can, and with it two biscuits from our tea. We had four, and there are only two of us—me and Mother— so please share in our bounty.

I shall bid thy vessel bon voyage at the riverbank tomorrow, mid-day, if you plan to sail her again. I will bring my whitest handkerchief.

Sir Timothy, do you know how this can came to be on this rope?

Alright, I'll sail her. Here's a peppermint stick. The biscuits were tasty. You use some mighty fancy words though. See you tomorrow.

Oh. I don't know where the can came from. We only moved in a week ago. Sorry. Maybe Pa might know. He lived here before.

Goodness, what fun that was! I could see you hollering, but the river is so loud, I couldn't hear you. I imagined you were saying "O CAPTAIN! my Captain! our fearful trip is done!" like Mr. Whitman. Were you? My father was lost at sea.

Mother says I mustn't send too many messages in the tin can, or I'll tire you out. I asked her how she knew, and she said "You're not the only one who's used that tin can, Miss Jenny-Pen." She tapped my nose like she does when she's teasing, but she looked a little bit sad.

Do I make you sad? Do I tire you out? I promise not to use so many fancy words, Timothy, if you'll only say I don't tire you out. Mother says all my words make up for all the ones she didn't know at my age. She smiles when she says it. She didn't know how to read back then.

I was hollering at you to get back! All that prancing around you were doing, thought you'd a fallen in! Glad you didn't.

I don't mind the messages. Sorry about your pa. My ma's gone too, since I was a baby.

It's ok about your words. Pa can talk like that too, only he doesn't. He has a whole room full of shelves of books, but he says they never did much for him, and now the only one he reads is his Bible.

He says that one keeps him going, and I keep him going too.

Mother cried when I told her about your Ma's passing, dearest Timothy, you dearest of dear ones. And then I gave her my whitest handkerchief, the very one that bid adieu to the VALOR (You don't mind if I name your ship, do you? Isn't it gallant? I think you're quite gallant yourself.) And then do you know what Mother did? She said "There's only one thing to do. Get your apron, Genevieve!" I curtsied and donned my apron and we made you cinnamon rolls. Cinnamon rolls! We never make them but on Christmas morning, and that's two months away yet! She must think you're special. I do! I'm sending my whitest handkerchief round them to help keep them warm. But do send it back, dear Timothy. I haven't any others. Don't tell anyone.

p.s. Mother went white when I said your Pa reads the Bible. She didn't say a word, but her eyes were as big as saucers.

Boy! Those were good! Pa thought so too. He said he hasn't had any like that since we left the city, but even so, he's glad we left. That's why we came here. He needed some place quiet, he said. Away from people. Well, he got that! Did you know you're the only one we've seen since we got here?

Pa wants to do something nice for you and your ma.

But with that bridge washed out down river, don't know what he's going to do. And then he said he didn't know if it'd be looked upon kindly, says your Ma's got some spirit, if she's anything like the girl he once knew. But he stuck his chin out and said "No matter. We'll do it." And when he sticks his chin out like that you can bet something's going to happen.

Does your Ma make other good things like the cinnamon rolls? Can you ask her—what makes the dough rise? Pa says your Ma knows scientific things. He tries to answer all my questions, but sometimes he gives me a book instead when he doesn't know, and I'm not much for books. So could you ask her?

Something nice! Oh, what a delight! But don't you know your moving here was something nice? We stay here because it's the only home we know, but it does get awfully lonesome up here atop the mountain when Winter comes-a-rapping at the door.

I see you haven't found my other message yet. No matter. I'm adding another, to tell you a secret.

I told Mother what your Pa said bout her, and her cheeks turned as pink as fairy floss! Did you ever have fairy floss in the city? Like eating a pink cloud made of sugar and light and all the goodness in the world.

Mother said your Pa was the one with spirit. She said nothing would stop him when he got an idea in his head. And then, Timothy, her smile disappeared under a shadow and she looked so utterly sad.

I've pulled the tin can back over three times now to add these messages. Oh, won't you ever return? It's been two days now! Are you lost forever? And with my handkerchief, too...

I bet you met a band of pirates in the woods, and had to use it as your white flag of surrender. That's alright. At least it met an adventurous end. But how shall we save you?

Never fear. I'll think of something.

We weren't lost, and if we'd found a band of pirates you can bet they'd be the ones to need help. We were gone getting something for you.

Pa says kindly tell your Ma to step to the riverbank tomorrow morning, get the arrow he shot across, untie the rope from it, and then tie it tight 'round that big pine you got there. Tight. And then pull on the rope until the surprise crosses the river. Got it?

And he says if she doesn't want to see him, fine, but for the love of molasses, get the arrow. Pa's a genius, and he rigged up something great. Just you wait.

Why wouldn't your Ma want to see my Pa, anyway?

Good gracious! Did you ever see such a thing? A mountain of firewood, towering high and fording across the river! Why, it's enough to last a month or more!

Ma Mother and I usually cut our own firewood, but don't tell. People don't know what to make of two ladies doing such things. But it's just us, and we don't mind. And you were right, Timothy. Your Pa is a genius, building that raft just perfectly. Tell him it was simply beautiful. No, no. Don't say that. Please say it was—it was—splendidly awe-striking and positively brilliant! I wish you'd have come over on the raft, Timothy. What a grand time we'd have. I could show you my castle! It's only a grove of trees, but I think it's much better imagined as a castle. Why don't you come over in that boat I see tied to your dock sometime? I'm sure Mother wouldn't mind. She even asked me to send this letter to your father. Would you kindly deliver it to him? And Timothy—how odd that your father would think Mother wouldn't want to see him. She's never said a word about it!

Thank you for the firewood! We'll have the glow of firelight tonight, and perhaps we'll pop corn over it. I'll save some for you if we do.

I told Pa what you said, about him being awe-striking and all that. He laughed, but not to make fun. It was that laugh from deep inside him which is good. He doesn't much laugh like that, and you made him do it. Then I gave him your Ma's letter. But I saw it on our closed-up piano, still sealed and collecting dust right along with the piano.

Do you ever wonder where this rope came from, anyhow?

The rope? Why, you don't know? It was here before the bridge. Or at least that's what mother says. She says it's how folks used to cross the river— in a little cage, pulling themselves across in the air! Can you imagine?? Well. That was ages ago, and after the bridge came along, they took the cage down. Where the can came from, I still don't know. I wonder if we could cross the river again using the rope? Oh, wouldn't it be grand? I know the water's too low now to use your boat. I asked Mother if I could wade across, but she said, "Jenny Marie, don't you dare. Your feet will freeze before you're halfway across!" But if we could cross with the rope, we could launch the VALOR every day together and never have to holler and not be heard! Anyway. The rope was always here. It's the can I don't know about.

Pa says no one crosses that way now. He says it's too weak, and only one person has crossed since the bridge's time, and that person shouldn't have. He looked me straight in the eye and said it just like this: "Never, never cross the river on that rope, Tim. Understand?"

Don't get angry, but I asked Pa how two womenfolk could survive all winter out here on their own.

He laughed deep and said if anyone could survive out here, it was your Ma. That she's more than cinnamon rolls and frills and books.

Good gracious, Timothy. What did he mean??

Whatever it was, our bread will never turn out now because of him! I told Ma, and she punched the dough she was kneading. And she went white as the flour on her hands and said "Grant Morrow said that?" She pursed her lips and didn't say another word all afternoon. "More than books," she kept muttering. "Irony indeed."

And then this evening, when I was supposed to be reading, it was so quiet upstairs I tiptoed into her room and saw her kneeling on the floor, surrounded by letters. I got pretty close before she noticed me there, and do you know what I saw? Well, not much. But the year of the letter in her hands was 1892. That's seven years before I was born! Six years before Mother and Father married.

Just before Mother turned and saw me, I saw one tiny part of the letter. It said:

Someday I'll play you a song that will change your mind, Marian...
And it won't be a waltz.

But then she saw me, and shot to her feet, and lickety-split we were downstairs again, reciting Latin like nothing had ever happened.

I don't know what you need to learn Latin for. You already talk like you live in some other land. But that's alright.

Pa sat at the dust-covered piano tonight and stared at it for a good half hour. The letter was gone, I don't know where. He just stared at the piano keys. I stuck around because I thought he might play—and he never plays. Sometimes on my birthday, as a treat, but that's all.

But he didn't play. He stood up, shook his head, and picked up his Bible and read to me by the fire like usual.

The river's getting lower, might not be good for launching the VALOR any more, but maybe we could race sticks. It's quieter now so I might be able to hear you. Slowing down for the winter I guess. Does it ever freeze?

One winter it froze and do you know what Mother and I did? We skated! Just me and her, out there in the cold, spinning like the snowflakes above us. Well, if you want to know the truth, Sir Timothy, I didn't precisely "spin." I mostly fell. But mother would pick me up, laugh a silver melody into the air, and on we'd go. Afterwards we sat on the bank and sipped steaming chocolate, and sang "It Came Upon a Midnight Clear" until the cold air made us choke over our words.

The river hasn't frozen since then, but maybe it will this year! If it does, then we'll be able to cross! Do you have skates?

Do I?! You bet I do. ...do you think your Ma would make those cinnamon rolls? Pa sits by the fire downstairs most nights now, even after the fire has gone out, with a candle in the window. He holds his Bible on his lap, and looks out toward your house a lot. Maybe I shouldn't have spied, but I did. You know something? His Bible pages are so soft, when he turns them they hardly make a sound. That's how much he reads that book.

Oh, Timothy! Isn't it romantic? Your Pa, and my mother, sitting by their windows, separated by the rushing river! Stop it, I know you're rolling your eyes at me. Stop that at once. So what if the river is not rushing anymore? It sounded nice.

Does your Pa build the fire every evening? I bet you take turns. Mother and I do. And what does he read to you from that blessedly-quiet Bible? I bet it's strong and hefty, isn't it? I bet you're Pa's strong, too. And I bet when he reads, it's with a steady voice, deep and smooth and full of whatever that-magic-something is that can wrap someone in comfort, just in their voice. I suppose he could even fix our jammed door in a flash, if he wanted. We'll find a way; we always do. Never you fret. I know you're fretting. Stop that, Timothy. And whatever you say, Timothy, it is romantic.

Loony is more like it. Listen to this:

The other day when your Ma was out getting kindling and my Pa was out pulling in the boat for the winter. He stood up and watched her and waited until she finally looked at him. After a while Pa waved. And your Ma stared. She put the kindling down and dusted her hands on her apron and waved back. And he stared longer and then raised his hands and made some sort of motions in the air I didn't understand. I thought he'd lost his marbles. But then she made some batty motions back! And then shrugged. It's like they had their own language! And then Pa pointed at our rope, walked over to it, put some card in the tin can, and pulled the rope till it reached your side. I don't know what the paper said. Your Ma plucked it out like it might bite her. She held it for a second, turned it over a few times in her hands, and then opened it. Her head jerked up and looked across at Pa like he'd just told her bandits were coming. She looked that wonky! She looked-well, you'd say she looked stricken, or awe-struck, or some other fancy word.

She looked and looked and Pa just nodded twice, and she turned and went in. And Pa did the same, looking as downcast as a cast that's fallen down

They're a bit strange. Don't you think?
Can you find out what it said, Jenny? I don't know what it said.

It said:

You were right.

"You were right"? That's it? Well phooey.

That was it.

Mama says your Pa's music used to make her heart dance. But don't tell him that.

I hereby swear you to silence, Timothy the Clandestine!

I told him. But don't worry, he liked it. His face got all red, but in a good way.

Timothy!

Sorry.

Mother asked me today about our pulley. She wants to know how it's holding up. "Why?" I asked her.

"Well—" she stammered, Timothy my good fellow? Stammered. Mother does not stammer. "It's been up so long is all. And you've been using it so much... and it used to carry such weight, it might not be much longer before it snaps."

I asked her if she meant all the times people used to cross it, when the little cage used to be there.

"Not exactly, no..."

"What, then?" asked I, as sweet as can possibly be. Cheerful and inquiring, not nosy or pushy. One must take care when digging for clues, you know? And I do care, Timothy, so stop scrunching your nose at me, as I know you must be doing!

Well. She pursed her lips and looked me in the eye and said "come with me."

She took me into the attic, pulled down a box—a box that had very recently been opened and dusted off. I might add.

Book after book she pulled out. A birdhouse. A metronome. A length of red velvet ribbon. A spyglass. She set them before me, and let me look. And do you know what she told me? She said when your Pa was your age, and she was my age, she put that tin bucket up. The bridge was open and no one had need of the pulley anymore, so she used it to make friends with the boy across the river.

Timothy. Prepare yourself. It was... (are you ready? Sit down!)... Your Pa!

But she didn't know how to write or read, so she sent little gifts and crafts, twigs and interesting rocks, and he did the same, until he began sending books, and teaching her! He came across the bridge every evening and taught my Ma to read.

And she taught me.

Aren't you ever so gloriously glad, Timothy of the clan of the brave?

Anyway, Mother says to ask you how you like bonfires.

Bonfires? They're the best!

Jenny. Do you mean you didn't know they used the pulley way back when? I had that figured a thousand years ago.

That's alright though. Don't feel bad. Now we know for sure.

Now what's all this about a bonfire? Here's a sundial for you. I carved it from some pine for your castle so you'll know what time it is and can holler out what o'clock it is, and "all's well". Does your Ma know how the sundial works? I have a theory and I want to check.

Mother says to tell your Pa, if he'd like, would you two join us for a mid-December bonfire on the banks of our river? Of course we can't cross, and neither can you, but we can celebrate together from afar. Two nights hence. (That means Thursday.)

Pa lit right up like a lantern when I told him. But he didn't say anything right away. Only later he said he had an idea, and then he clapped me good on the shoulder and we got straight to work on a fire ring right across from yours.

I don't know if the fire ring was the idea, or if he's got something else up his sleeve.

I could simply die this moment, Timothy, for I shall never witness anything as lovely and divine as what transpired tonight!!! You were right (I say in my most confiding of tones). He did have an idea. And if you could have seen up close the look on Mother's face!

We came out to lay our fire, and what do you think? We both jumped right out of our boots when we saw a giant mound of white over on your bank. Something covered in a sheet, and you two nowhere in sight. Well I tin-canned the cookies we'd made right on over, hoping you'd show up (which you did, and promptly devoured them all but one, was it? I certainly hope your Pa enjoyed his one Gingerbread man!). And the bonfires began and the sun sank low and the sky was summery-pink in the middle of winter and then. **THEN!**

Your Pa looked at Ma, and lifted the sheet.
She gasped, Timothy. And then said nothing.
She is never speechless.

But she was tonight. Because when your Pa wandered his fingers over the keys of that piano that he'd rolled out onto the riverbank (how did you two do that without our seeing?? You masters of disguise and trickery, you!) She didn't move a whit as the sun slipped away and our firelight danced on her face. Mother is always lovely, but she never looked more breathless and beautiful, just waiting.

...Waiting on a promise. (Stop rolling your eyes. It's a lovely phrase. Just let it be lovely and enjoy it, if you please, Timothy.)

The melody sailed across the trickling river and set our feet to dancing. We couldn't hear your voices, just the music. Do you think music has some agreement with the water? Mother would say it has to do with the properties of each, so scientific she is. But I think it's just that the music was made for the water, and the water for the music, dancing partners for all time. Pretty soon Mother and I were spinning each other around, twirling just like the notes, and laughter never tasted so full of hope. But you saw all of that, didn't you, Oh Keeper-of-Time? What a fine job you did, clapping us round and round from across the river.

But every time a song ended, Mama froze with the night, cheeks rosy even in the dim flickering light, shoulders rising and falling—and waited. Another would begin. She'd purse her lips, and stand silent as if the fate of the world hung on whatever came next. As if deciphering some message. Your Pa would start in with another merry tune, and then just for the tiniest moment, brokenness crossed her face. But she'd reel in a smile from somewhere far away, and off we'd go once more.

Later, as we lit our paper fireflies and watched the embers fly away into the dark, your Pa started the last song.

One note. Another note. Another.

I watched Ma's mouth move around silent words: one-two-three... one-two-three... Her face broke into utter joy, eyes swimming.

Then, Timothy, you dearest of dears, you put that message from him in the tin can as he finished his song, wheeled it over, and I plucked it out.

I could tell right away it wasn't from you, and it wasn't for me. With that strong writing of your Pa's, Mother's name was inscribed. When you both bowed so gallantly (I told you you were gallant!) and disappeared into your cabin, she held my gloved hand and led me in to our own warm hearth inside.

There, she said, "Jen-pen, would you put the tea on for us?" I ducked out of the room, and when I came back in afterward, there she was, bent over the letter and dabbing her eyes with her handkerchief.

"What's wrong, Mother?" I asked her. She shook her head, took me by the shoulders so gently. "Not a thing, my girl. Just... sometimes there is much to be thankful for."

And then she left the room.

Oh, Timothy. Forevermore and all the days to follow, I promise I'll never do this again. But... I read it. The whole letter. She slipped into the other room and was busy writing a letter back. The letter was just lying there, in her empty rocking chair, begging to be read. I know I shouldn't have, but—it was as magical as a dream! He began like this:

You were right, Marian.
All those years ago.

... and then the tale he went on to tell! Timothy the brave, I know now where you get your valor. It was your father who crossed the river on the pulley, in some rattletrap cage. Right over swollen spring rapids, with the bridge washed out, he braved the trek above the churning waters to ask my mother to marry him! She'd gone silent for weeks after an argument, their tin can empty and cruel. He couldn't take it.

In the middle of the night, he wheeled himself over, and begged her to listen. Begged her to let him be enough. Promised to prove to her that he could fill her whole heart, that he didn't need her Jesus in order to make a marriage. And mother told him—

"Marriage should be a waltz."

He said she tried to use his language—the language of music to tell him, but instead of listening, he just vanished to the city to prove he could be enough for her. "I loved you," he said in the letter, "but not in the fullness of the way you knew was possible."

Timothy, I could hear the ache in his words—just a few words, but in them he said so much. How during every lonely city night, every orchestra rehearsal, every music lesson he gave—the echoes of her cries haunted him, the memory of her tears drove him on. Well, he didn't use those words precisely, but oh! I could see it in my mind's eye! Those cavernous music halls filling with his emptiness!

He went on to describe the day he met "the Great Conductor." The God mother longed for him to know. He said—

I needed to be filled.

Like you were.

With Him.

But by then, it was too late for us.

You said it back then: Marriage must be a waltz. Three steps always. God, You, Me. One, Two, Three. I know that now.

And I know we may never have that now, but I wanted to say...

I'm sorry. And you were right.

So there you go, Timothy. Once upon a time, in a land right beneath our feet, your Pa and my Mother were sweethearts.

Can't you just picture them? In the glow of their youth?

This morning over our hotcakes, Mother looked out at the river, at the air so cold you could almost hear it rapping at our windows, and said to me, "do you suppose the river will freeze this year?"

Timothy, I'm whispering now, so listen closely:

We must pray for that river to freeze.

Deep enough to walk on?

Deep enough to walk on.

Pa says, ask your Ma-if the river freezes, will she save a dance for him?

Why he couldn't ask her in one of his own letters, I don't know.

We're going to have to find another way for our own messages if Pa and your Ma keep hogging our tin can.

Good Sir,

Please be so kind as to convey this message from my mother to your Pa -

Yes.

*The river grew more solid
With every passing day
And on that snow-clad Christmas Morn,
It froze to make a way.*

*As they stepped out on the glassy floor,
Their children skating round,
He took her hand,
She gave her heart,
Their lives at last were bound.*

*He, too, was right, those years ago
In the promise that he made.
He'd said a song would change her mind...
A Tin Can Serenade*

The Merriest of Ends

Dear Reader,

This story began last July, when I asked on [Facebook](#) if anyone had special Christmas memories they'd like to share for possible use in this story. *What could be more delightful, I thought, than spinning a tale with readers and their own cherished memories in mind?*

So, woven into these little notes passed back and forth in the tin can are snippets to honor and hint at the memories you shared:

Katie

Every Christmas Eve, my family and I would buy graham crackers, frosting, and every candy that looked enticing and lay them all out on the kitchen table. We began the annual Gingerbread House Contest. This contest grew to include spouses and close friends once we started getting married. Now that I live far away, and cannot do this every year with my own family, I now do this in our new home with my little family and with families who are also away from their families at Christmas. One of my favorite Christmas traditions ever!

(Aside: It was also Katie who inadvertently inspired the waltz thread of this story, when she invited me to guest post on her wonderful blog, on the topic of marriage. You can read that blog post, *The Waltz*, by clicking through [here](#).)

Katie- the gingerbread cookies in this story were just for you and your beloved family.

Erin

My favorite Christmas memory was a year that we went to my grandparent's house. They gave me a brand new pair of pink ice skates on Christmas Eve and we woke up in the morning to find out that the pond on the golf course where they lived had frozen solid. So, we bundled up and headed out and spent the morning ice skating on the golf pond while sipping hot cocoa.

Erin, the ice skating on the river and cocoa-sipping in the story were all thanks to you!

Lisa

My most memorable Christmas was when I was a child, probably about 4th grade. My parents always put our gifts out after we were all in bed. This particular Christmas I received a tape recorder. When I turned it on it already had something on it. My Dad had recorded a message for each one of us. He told me he loved me. I have a picture of this time with him also. I would love to have that recording back, but as kids you just don't think about that. The special memories of Christmas: my kids took turns putting up the Christmas star on the tree, we enjoyed just watching the lights twinkle on the tree and most especially, my husband reading the Christmas story from Luke 2 on Christmas Eve before all went to bed.

Lisa, what a special element your memory was. The thread in this story of Timothy's father, reading the Bible in a strong and steady voice—that was all thanks to you, your dad's message to you, and your husband's Christmas Bible-reading.

Jill (Mom ☺)

One of my favorite memories was a Christmas when, instead of getting up and tearing into presents, our family decided to bless our friends by making tons and tons of pecan sticky buns, getting up early to bake

them, then hopping into our blue Vee-Dub bus, still in our jammies, and delivering them throughout our little valley. Our batch tasted much better afterwards!

Oh, Mom, I remember it well and I *cherish* it! So much that I couldn't bring myself to share our sticky buns with Timothy and Genevieve. Selfish, I know. Perhaps one day I'll outgrow that selfishness. In the meantime, they got cinnamon rolls as a subtle tribute to our beloved sticky buns. ☺

To anyone else who's found this story in their hands, thank you so much for reading it. It was such fun to read over the memories held dear by others that I'm already looking forward to making this a yearly tradition...(maybe? What do you think? Anyone up for it?).

In the meantime, I'd love to continue getting to know you on [Facebook](#), [Twitter](#), or my own little [corner of the web](#), created just for you.

Merry Christmas, friends!

With Joy,
Amanda

