

Christmas in Prague

JOYCE HANNAM

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Christmas in Prague



In a house in Oxford three people are having breakfast – Carol, her husband Jan, and his father Josef. They are talking about Prague, because Carol wants them all to go there for Christmas.

Josef was born in Prague, but he left his home city when he was a young man. He is an old man now, and he would like to see Prague again before he dies. But he is afraid. He still remembers another Christmas in Prague, many long years ago – a Christmas that changed his life for ever . . .

[Word count 4,720]



◀ STAGE 6

◀ STAGE 5

◀ STAGE 4

◀ STAGE 3

◀ STAGE 2

◀ **STAGE 1**

◀ STARTER



**HUMAN
INTEREST**



**AUDIO
AVAILABLE**

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STAGE 1 400 Headwords

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MP3-CD

LEVEL 1

CHRISTMAS IN PRAGUE

Do you know everything about your family – your parents, your grandparents, your brothers or sisters, your uncles or aunts? Does your family know everything about you? All families have secrets – they can be big secrets, small secrets, things to laugh about, things to cry about.

Jan lives in Oxford with his English wife Carol, and his father Josef, who is Czech. Jan was born in Prague, but he came to England with his father when he was a baby. He never knew his mother – she died soon after he was born. And he knows nothing about her because his father never talks about her. But Josef still carries a photograph of his wife in his pocket – after all these years.

Carol plays the harp in an orchestra, and the orchestra is giving some concerts in Prague at Christmas. Carol wants to go, and she wants Jan and Josef to go too. 'Prague is a wonderful place,' she says, 'for a family Christmas.'

But there are family secrets waiting for them in Prague – wonderful secrets, happy secrets, and very sad secrets . . .

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Christmas 1957

It is night, and the fields near the village are white with snow. The village is quiet, but not everybody is sleeping. Eyes are watching the roads and the fields near the village, because this is Czechoslovakia and the year is 1957. Across the fields, only half a kilometre away, is the Austrian border, but the people of Czechoslovakia are not free to go to Austria. The border guards watch day and night – and they carry guns.

In a house in the village a man and a woman are talking. The woman holds a six-month-old baby boy in her arms.



The border guards watch day and night.

She is excited, but she is afraid, too.

'Tell me again,' she says. 'Did he get to Austria all right last night?'

'Yes, he did,' the man says. 'Nobody saw him, nobody heard him. But last night was easy because the sky was dark. Tonight it's more difficult – look at that moon!'

'But it's Christmas night,' the woman says, 'and the guards are drinking in the guardhouse, yes?'

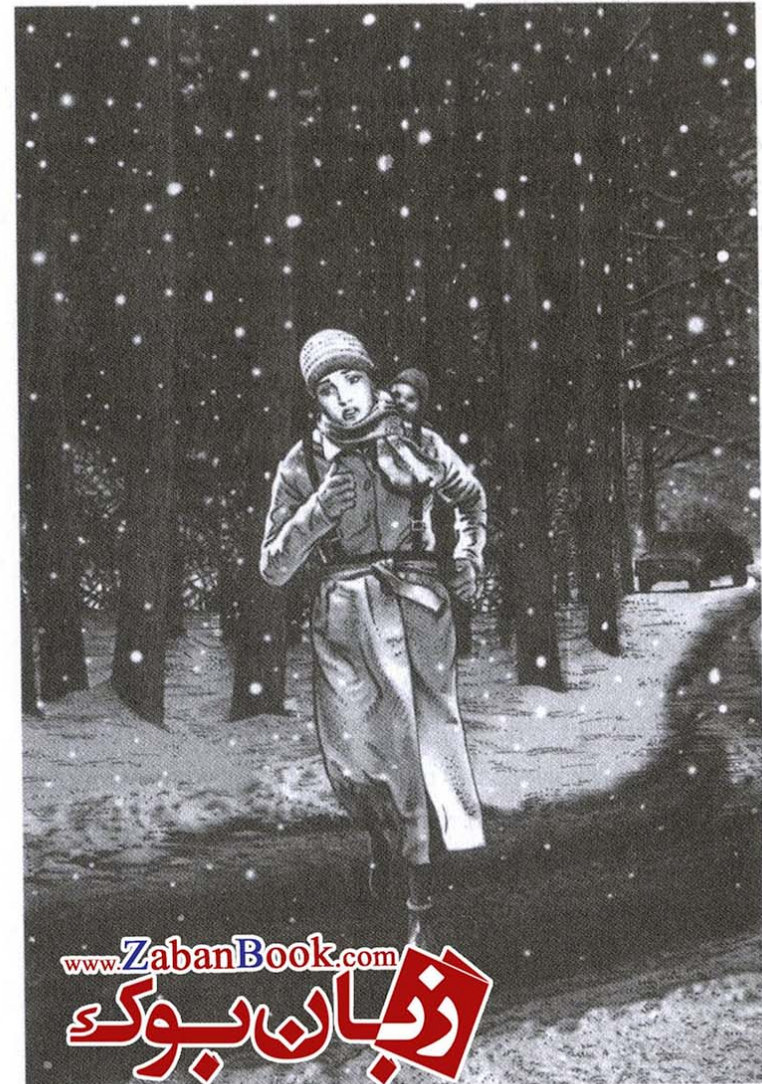
'That's true,' says the man, 'but sometimes they come out and drive up and down the road for a time. So you must be careful, and you must run fast – very fast.' He looks at his watch. 'It's time to go.'

The woman puts on a white coat and a white hat. The baby wears a white coat too, and the woman carries him on her back.

'Good,' the man says. 'White is best when there's snow. Nobody can see you. Now, are you ready? Let's go.'

They leave the house and walk quickly out of the village. After a time they stop and the man says, very quietly:

'OK. Do you see those trees? Turn right there and go fifty metres. When you come to the road, go across it quickly and run down the hill through the trees. Then you come to the river. Turn left and go 500 metres. The trees finish there and you can walk through the river easily. Across two more fields, and you're in Austria. Our friends are waiting for you in the second field. Go now. Goodbye



She does not see the black car under the trees.

– and good luck!’

The woman begins to run. The baby on her back is sleeping, but now he opens his eyes and begins to cry. The woman is afraid and runs more slowly, but the baby’s crying is loud in the night. At the trees the woman turns right and soon she is at the road. She does not see the black car under the trees, but the men in the car see her.

Suddenly there is a noise in the night – the noise of guns. Then it is quiet again.

The woman’s body lies in the snow on the road. Now the only sound is the crying of the baby.

England 1995

‘Hey, Jan, look at this!’ Carol said. She had a letter in her hand and took it across to her husband at the breakfast table. ‘It’s from the Oxford Orchestra,’ she said. ‘They’re giving concerts in the Czech Republic this Christmas. They’re doing three concerts in Prague and they’re asking me to go because they need a harpist. Shall we go to Prague for Christmas? I can play with the orchestra, and you can come with us.’

‘When are the concerts?’ asked Jan. ‘I always have a lot of work in the weeks before Christmas. I must finish writing my new book then.’

Jan taught Czech at Oxford University and wrote books about languages. He was born in Czechoslovakia, but came to England with his father when he was very young. He met Carol when she was one of his students at university.

‘The first concert is on December 20th,’ Carol answered. ‘Are you free then?’

‘No, I’m sorry, Carol,’ Jan said, ‘but I can’t come before December 24th.’

‘Well, it doesn’t matter. You can come for the second concert. It’s on December 25th.’

ACTIVITIES

Before Reading

- 1 The title of the story is *Christmas in Prague*. Find the answers to these questions.

- 1 Where is Prague?
- 2 Was life in Prague in 1957 very different from life there in 1995? How?

- 2 What do people do at Christmas in Britain and many other countries? Make three sentences. Use some of the words from this list.

dinner, family, music, presents, children, holiday

- 3 Read the back cover of the book. How much do you know now about the story? Tick one box for each sentence.

- | | YES | NO |
|--|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| 1 Carol and Jan are married. | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 2 Carol's father is called Josef. | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 3 Josef is English. | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 4 Josef lived in Prague a long time ago. | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 5 Josef is afraid to go back to Prague. | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |

ACTIVITIES: Before Reading

- 4 Read the story introduction on the first page of the book. Are these sentences true (T) or false (F)? Change the false sentences into true ones.

- 1 Jan was born in London.
- 2 Jan's mother lives in Oxford with her son.
- 3 Josef often talks about his wife.
- 4 Josef has a photograph of Jan's mother in his pocket.
- 5 Carol plays the guitar.
- 6 Carol wants to go to Prague for Christmas.

- 5 What are the family secrets in the story? Can you guess? Tick one box for each sentence.

- | | YES | NO |
|---|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| 1 Someone in the family is dead. | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 2 Someone in the family is alive. | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 3 Someone in the family is in prison. | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 4 Someone in the family has got a lot of money. | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 5 You guess! _____ | | |