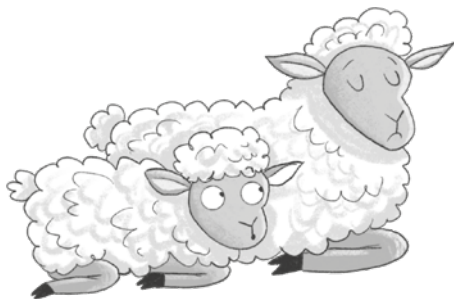


Operation
Nativity



*To my agent, Sam Copeland,
this story wouldn't be what it is without you.*



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Operation Nativity



JENNY PEARSON

Illustrations by Katie Kear



USBORNE



The First Noel at Burlington Hall

I'm going to tell you the story about the birth of the baby Jesus. You might have heard about it from your teachers at school. You may have been in a nativity play yourself, with either tinsel on your head or a fake beard strapped to your face, so I'm sure you know the gist – Mary, Joseph, donkey, journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem. Well, that part is spot on the money.

The bit that they won't have told you about is the accidental detour Mary and Joseph took to Chipping Bottom, a pretty and characterful village in Hampshire, which came about thanks to a less-than-professional spot of angeling.

Yes, that says *angeling* not *angling* – there is no fishing involved in the story of the birth of Jesus Christ. There is, however, a bit of a bump in the journey thanks to the Angel Gabriel messing things up ever so *slightly*.

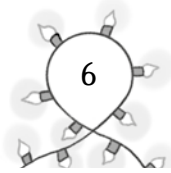
And when I say ever so *slightly*, I really mean ever so *massively*. But you have to remember, back then, he hadn't been in the job that long. It was an awful lot of pressure – announcing the arrival of the actual Jesus Christ – and let's just say he got a bit carried away. He couldn't have known that the explosion of light he came down to Earth in would be so powerful that it would transport Mary, Joseph, Balthazar the wise man, a shepherd named Steve *and* himself not only to another place (Chipping Bottom) but to another time (last December).

But how do *I* know all this?

Good question.

And the answer is because I. WAS. THERE!

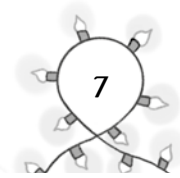
Big claim, I know. You are well within your rights to say, *Oscar, are you possibly a teensy-lot confused? You were most certainly not present at the birth of Jesus Christ Our Lord, and the Angel Gabriel most definitely did not mess things up.* But I'd say this: people will always make big claims and it's up to you to choose whether to believe them or not.



For example, I do not believe Dad was beamed up to Kepler-452b by some aliens, like he told Mum that time he came home late from the rugby. I also suspect Tyronne in my class was lying when he said that when he was eight, Santa Claus woke him up and took him on his round-the-world delivery flight because he'd been the best-behaved boy on the planet. And there is no way the chocolate Santa that I had been saving in the fridge vanished in a puff of smoke one night like Mum tried to get me to believe. There was no evidence to support any of those claims.

But there is also no evidence I can show to convince you that I was around when Jesus was about to be born. Other than a two-thousand-year-old donkey at Lady Asster's donkey sanctuary. But, to be honest, Mary's donkey looks pretty much the same as all the others. Even I struggle to tell him and his stablemate Zipper apart – and I spent quite a few hours plodding through the countryside on the back of Mary's donkey.

So really, all I can do is tell you my story and all you can do is listen, if you want to, and then decide if you think it's true. Hopefully, I'll be more convincing than Tyronne at least. I mean, nobody could be *that* good, and definitely not Tyronne. But I suppose it doesn't really matter if I can



convince you or not. People will always believe different things and I actually think that's okay.

For example, I believed Christmas was important for two reasons. Number one: presents. And number two: it was the day my parents met. And if there was no Christmas, then they might not have met, and then they wouldn't have had me. And that would be an *actual* tragedy.

But now, after everything, I truly believe there are more important things than presents. And more important things than me.

Even my family believe different things about what happened. Like my grandmother – she's a bit of a traditionalist when it comes to Christmas. She loves the nativity story and she'd never believe that the Virgin Mary and Joseph ended up in Chipping Bottom, even if she did bump into them in the post office and not realize.

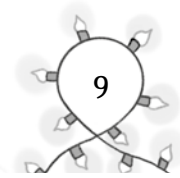
Whereas my little sister Molly...let's just say she's the open-minded type. She really will believe *anything* you tell her, without question. As her school report said, *her imagination knows no bounds*. She's convinced she can speak to animals and she's certain that one day wings will sprout from her shoulder blades. But then she's only five-and-a-bit.



I suppose that if Molly wasn't the way she is, none of what happened last Christmas would have happened. But after we had both seen something crash-land in the field behind our grandparents' house, she was the one who convinced *me* that it might be something spectacular and we should go and check it out.

The only reason we were even there was because we'd received a very fancy invitation in the post from Barlington Hall – a summons to head back to my dad's family home for Christmas. Which, if you think about it, is a little bit like the summons Mary and Joseph were given to travel to Bethlehem by Emperor Augustus. I'm not saying Grandmother is *exactly* like a Roman Emperor – but there are a few similarities.

Anyway, if we hadn't gone to Barlington for Christmas and if we hadn't very bravely ventured out into the field that night, I don't think it's too big-headed to say that basically Christmas would have been destroyed. Well, actually it would have never existed in the first place. But I don't think there's a word for destroying something that never existed. So, if you do believe everything I'm about to tell you, you can thank me for saving Christmas later.

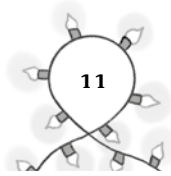






I don't know why, but I had a feeling that Christmas was going to be a bit different to normal as soon as the invitation arrived. Usually, we just have Mum's mum, Granny Roberts, over, but she'd booked a cruise around the Canary Islands with her friend, Irene, who she met on the number 67 bus. They were starting at Santa Cruz in Tenerife and ending in Las Palmas in Gran Canaria. Molly *really* wanted to go with them, but when we explained that they weren't visiting islands full of little yellow tweety-birds and that Father Christmas did not live in Tenerife, she changed her mind.

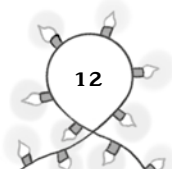
I was actually excited to be doing something different



for a change. I love Granny Roberts, but I can't say I was too worried about not spending Christmas with her. No offence, but she doesn't really add that much to the day. See, she doesn't have a lot of stamina for fun, what with her being a-gazillion-and-one years old. Every year, Mum tells her to go steady on the Buck's Fizz, but Granny Roberts doesn't listen. She spends the morning grabbing hold of me and my sister Molly and squeezing our faces while telling us we're her favourite grandkids. I mean, that's nice, but even Molly knows that as we're her *only* grandkids, there's no actual competition.

Sometimes, Granny Roberts will suddenly break into a very warbly version of "Deck the Halls" and Dad will say, "Cathy, your mother has peaked too early again," and Mum will say, "She's fine, Christopher, let her be!" But she'll always fall asleep around three o'clock.

This one year, she slumped down on top of the Monopoly board just as Dad had landed on my Park Lane where I had two hotels! That took some forgiving, I'll tell you. Another time she spent the entire afternoon snoring and farting in front of the TV. It was funny at first – I mean, who doesn't find an unconscious old lady trumpeting along to the Queen's Speech hilarious? But when the room became so unbelievably



stinky that I couldn't watch *Home Alone* without my T-shirt over my nose, I began to question Mum and Dad's wisdom in allowing her to have a third helping of sprouts. And then, the year before last, she almost didn't even make it through the meal! She nearly nodded off in her gravy and sausage-meat stuffing. Really, I think if you're a guest at someone's house, you should bring a bit more Christmas spirit with you.

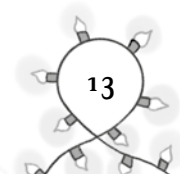
Mind you, there's Christmas spirit and then there's an angel with an eye-blindingly bright halo in your downstairs toilet.

But at the time, I didn't think it was possible to have too much Christmas spirit, so when an invitation to spend Christmas at Barlington Hall with Dad's side of the family, the Cuthbert-Andersons, turned up, I jumped at the chance.

The invite was very fancy, with grand-looking handwriting on the front, and sealed with a red blobby wax thing of the family crest. Oh yeah, Dad's side of the family are super rich. Old money, Granny Roberts says – whatever that is.

My rich grandparents live on a huge country estate in Hampshire. Molly says Barlington Hall is *majestifful*, which isn't a real word, but is spot on as descriptions go, because Barlington Hall is both majestic and wonderful.

The house itself is set in acres of land and you have to



make your way through these huge iron gates with lions on them and head up a really long driveway before you even get to the front door! There are so many massive rooms, including a library, two kitchens, loads of bathrooms, spare sitting rooms and a ballroom! Half of it isn't even used because it is so expensive to look after. Imagine that! Having a bit of your house that you never even go in.

The closed-off wing was actually very useful though – for storing lost angels and wise men. But more about that later.

We usually visit Barlington Hall in summer, for a week of the school holidays. Mum is never that thrilled when we go. She says she and my grandmother are very different people, which is a fair statement. I love it there though. We spend our time climbing the best trees you'll ever find to climb and fishing for minnows down in the stream at the bottom of one of the fields. One year we even built a chicken run with Grandfather. It's also where Dad taught me to ride a bike and where we lost Molly for almost an hour during the most epic game of hide-and-seek. But we'd never been there for Christmas before. I thought that was because we had to look after Granny Roberts, but I soon realized there was more to it than that.

When the invitation arrived in the post that morning, I

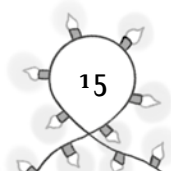


immediately started imagining Barlington Hall at wintertime, with its fireplaces lit and the house decorated all festively. I knew that a Christmas there would be absolutely majestic, and I just had this feeling that it was going to be way more exciting than our regular Christmases.

Obviously, I had no idea just *how* much more exciting it would be and that I would meet some very important people and be involved in saving Christmas and all it stands for. I don't think anybody, even Molly, could have had the imagination to predict *that* was about to go down.

But the first thing I needed to do was get Mum on board with the whole Barlington trip and I realized that might be tricky when she picked up the invitation from the doormat, took one look at it and said, "Oh no. No, no, no! Not the family nativity!"

Now, of course I'd heard stories about the family nativity – it's some big production that Grandmother puts on in her local church. The first ever one was in nineteen-twenty-something and was started by my great-great-great-grandmother, Lady Cordelia Cuthbert-Anderson, who was a bit of a character by all accounts. Her shows were known to be quite the spectacle. Apparently, you can still see scorch marks on the altar where Cordelia let off an indoor firework



to announce the arrival of the Angel Gabriel in the 1929 production.

Generation after generation of Cuthbert-Andersons have prided themselves on putting on a grand show in the village, trying to make each performance better than the last.

I thought it sounded like a lot of fun, but Molly and I had never been involved because Mum and Dad always said something about *liking to do our own thing at Christmas*. But I got a strong suspicion we might not have been told the full story when Mum stood there glaring at that invitation, muttering, “No, no, no, I said never again, not after the last time...” And then she bellowed up the stairs to Dad, “CHRISTOPHER! WE HAVE A PROBLEM!”

