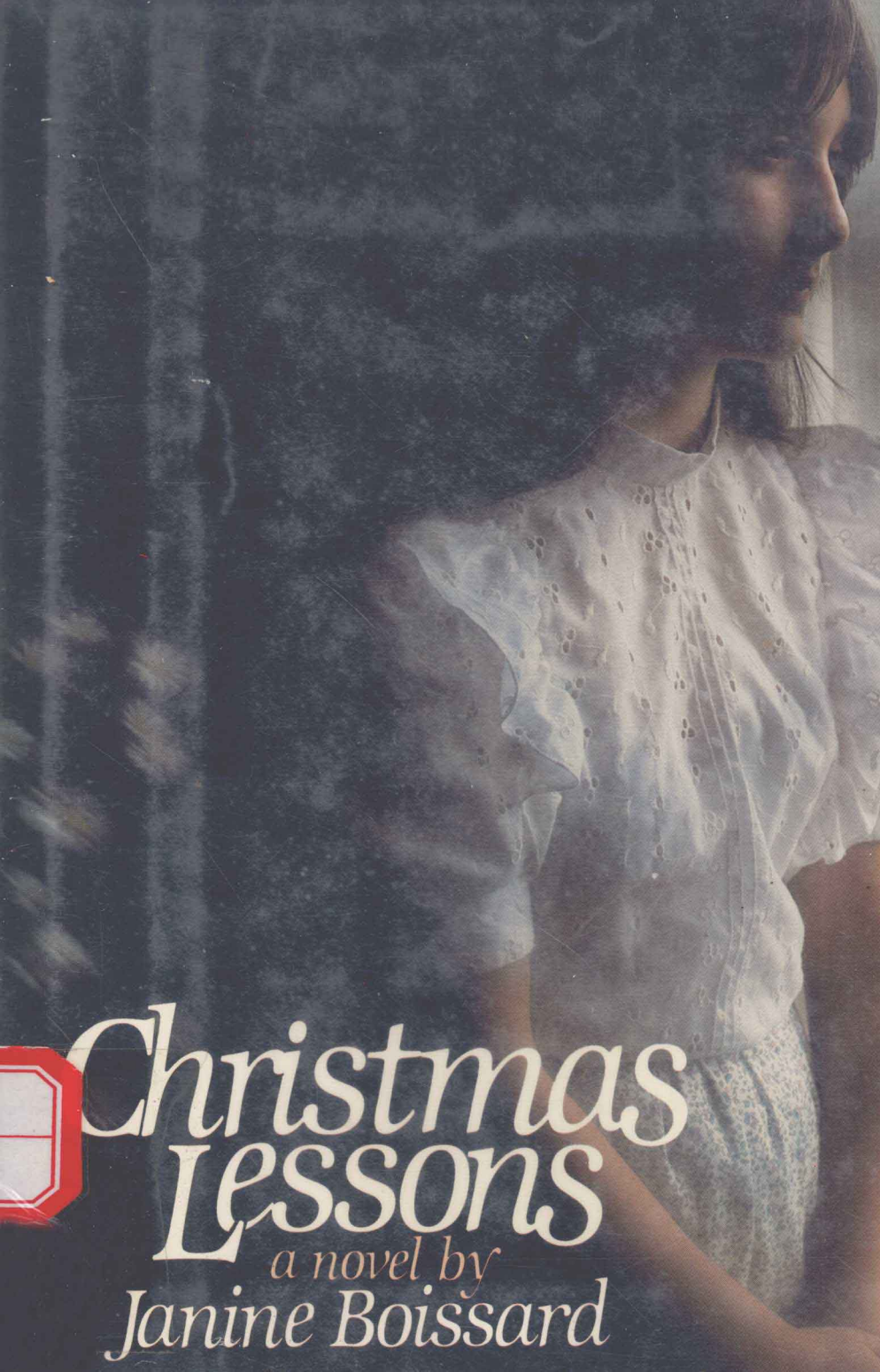
Christmas
Lessons
a novel by
Janine Boissard

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CHRISTMAS LESSONS

Translated by Mary Feeney

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I

The Feast of St. Aimé

It was the feast of St. Aimé, a nice-sounding morning to start back to school. The yard was the same as yesterday, fragrant and golden with its sudden showers of leaves; the pond had been emptied and cleaned, and if you walked unhurriedly beneath the tall walnut tree, you'd feel the first nuts, still in their brown shells, cracking under your feet. It was all open space and freedom, but for me that was over now. Five mornings a week I'd leave before the clock on the village church's steeple struck eight. I would no longer be sent to pick up warm bread for lunch, and every morning when I left, it would be a little darker, a little colder.

Straddling my moped, I looked up at the still-drawn curtains at Claire's bedroom window, and for once I envied my older sister, "the Princess," her idleness.

I'd made a point of dressing the same as the day before, even though my pants had walnut stain on the pockets, or maybe because they did. But I hadn't gone so far as to put my bathing suit back on under my clothes. Last year's bookbag would make it through three more terms, and I knew when I felt inside it there would be old chewing-gum wrappers and pencil shavings, composting into memories. No

pencil pouch, because I hadn't used one for ages. No notebooks either, just a huge folder.

Cécile, my little sister, over twelve and starting sixth grade — not exactly "ahead of herself" — had been ready for several days.Every year she demands a complete new set of school supplies, makes a big fuss over them for a week, then forgets all about them. She can't forgive Mom for buying her used textbooks. In her shiny green bookbag was a new transparent plastic pencil pouch, showing off her colored pencils, ruler, compass, eraser, and pen. She also had a box of stickers, but not the self-stick kind because "what's your tongue for?"

The sight of her all excited over her new gear made me envy her, too. I remembered feeling the same near-certitude: that the carefully sharpened pencils, the untouche ' eraser, the straight ruler, the blank pages would make schoolwork (and good marks) come easy.

But for two years now I'd been hanging on to my old things. I'd beg the shoemaker to make one more repair on the game bag I use for my books. The leather smells of fish and is cracking at all the seams. And my favorite pencil was only three toothmarked inches long.

Fall was on the damp brown road, in the morning light, but most of all in my heart. Riding toward the suburban train station, toward my last year of high school, I thought how much I hated the word *senior.* This year would mark an end to six years of secondary school. Then what? The saving grace was that I'd be back together with Beatrice — Béa — my best friend.

Every year on the night before school started, ever since we were kids, Daddy would pay us a visit in our bedrooms. He hardly ever set foot in them otherwise, unless we were sick, and he seemed almost shy. First he'd look around and try to find something nice to say about the room. Cécile had rugby posters plastered everywhere, so he'd talk scrum, try, tackle, until he made a subtle connection between the

athlete in training and the pupil beginning a new school year. Cécile had to realize she was working for herself and not her parents, even if good grades would make said parents very happy.

For the last two years, over my protestations, Cécile (her nickname is "the Pest") had hidden a cassette recorder in her top dresser drawer, leaving it slightly ajar so she could tape the parental state-of-the-union speech, solely for the edification of her future offspring, she claimed.

Daddy didn't pay a call to Claire last night, because, as the Pest put it, the Princess was in her second year of post-secondary Leisure Studies, and there was nothing left to say on the subject. But he did go in to see Bernadette, who'd just gone back to her riding-school job.

What he told her, big surprise, was not to overdo it. Bernadette's fiancé, Stéphane, would leave soon for Toulon to do his year's service in the Navy. Daddy was afraid she'd compensate for his absence by working harder than ever with the horses. I don't know what he said to her, but Bernadette's laughter practically raised the roof, and her room is in the basement.

Then Daddy went up to see the Pest. He begged her to change the "could do better" comments she was always bringing home to "well dones." Why not? Cécile showed him her cheerful bookbag, her pencil case and new notebooks, and eagerly promised to do as he asked. Daddy, by the way, apparently wasn't known for collecting "well dones" until his last year in school. And yet he already knew he wanted to be a doctor and had started his practice on a number of unsuspecting girl cousins.

When he came into my room, I was sitting at my desk writing. I'd arranged a superb bouquet of autumn leaves to give him an opener. As I expected, he complimented me on it and said that given his choice of rooms, he would have taken my garret.

He lingered over my favorite painting, a Brittany sea-

scape. The sea is methodically assaulting the shore but doesn't manage to disturb the small white house huddled in the broomflowers in the background.

The white house is me. It has only one window, enough to enjoy the sky when it's not too dark. The waves and foam are all the beautiful and terrifying forces we sense at work around us.

I went to my father's side and looked at the picture with him. I told him how much I love Brittany even if it scares me a little. The boulders are rough with barnacles and sea snails, and sheets hung out to dry there end up smelling like mainsails.

Daddy was amazed. As far as he knew, we'd only gone to Brittany once and I was little then. . . . But someone special had told me so much about it I felt I'd just been there.

Charles — that's Daddy's name — looked at me for a few seconds and I think he understood.

He had no advice to offer me about my schoolwork: steady as she goes. He asked me what I planned to do after graduation. The answer spilled out: "Write!" Once I said it I felt peaceful. I saw where I was headed.

"Write what, darling?"

Poems, short stories, novels, all that you can't say out loud, that sleeps within you, blooms without your knowledge, and about freedom, suffering, the end, and the beginning — everything.

He gave me a look that seemed to see me differently, not quite so clearly, not so well into the future. Then he told me that except for a lucky few, even very gifted writers don't make money, and that I should think about finding another way to earn a living. But that didn't mean I should give up on the idea of writing, certainly not. And he'd be happy to read my work and offer me advice if I'd let him.

I said I would, but later. When I was ready for criticism. He stood up to go, and when he kissed me I felt like he was

telling me how he'd like to let me know more clearly and more often that I was part of his life.

I heard him going down the stairs. The third step creaked, as usual. When he was back downstairs, I stretched my hand out in front of me, sideways and slightly curved. I looked at it so hard it seemed like a fine plaster cast executed by a great artist and lover of literature.

In front of the plaster cast was a nameplate made out of something rare and noble. It was engraved, "Hand of Pauline Moreau." And hovering over the name was renown.

2

The War of the Primroses

In the meantime: cows!

Ten o'clock at night. We'd been back to school for three days and already felt like we'd never had a summer vacation.

When Cécile shouted from the window, "There are cows out in the yard!," no one paid any attention. We were on to the Pest's practical jokes. From her armchair, Mom signaled her to shush, pointing at Daddy immersed in a pharmaceutical journal, reading what must have been a deadly dull article, since his head was bobbing and behind his glasses his eyelids fluttered. And anyhow, Daddy prescribed drugs sparingly. He'd rather let nature do its work.

But when Cécile, after another few minutes with her nose to the windowpane, defied the maternal warning and yelled at Charles, "They really look like they're enjoying your willow tree!," Daddy woke with a start, dropped his journal, and joined the Pest at the window, walking over calmly to show us he wasn't falling for anything.

He peered out where Cécile was pointing and instead of bursting out laughing, turned to Mom and said accusingly, "I see three of them."

Then we were all at the window, even Claire, who'd been

looking like a martyr all evening — I wondered why, since she was the only one whose life hadn't changed a bit that September, when millions of students and workers had to go back to the daily grind.

We could see the cows in the light of a streetlamp a little farther up the road.

"They're from the dairy," said Cécile. "That's Marie-Toulouse, you can tell by the spot the shape of Ireland on her back. The other two are heifers."

The Matons, an older couple, own the dairy farm at the outskirts of Mareuil, our village. We buy our milk there. Sometimes they have rabbits, and their potatoes are much better than the ones in the stores. In late fall, I'm sorry to say, they sell what are supposedly excellent Brussels sprouts.

"It looks like they're settling in for the night," Bernadette said with a loud and delighted laugh.

She opened the window and a breeze ruffled the pages of Daddy's journal. Fall is even more palpable at night.

"How on earth did they get in?"

"Madame Cadillac is letting the Matons use her field," Cécile informed us. "They were bringing the cows over there when I went to get the milk. I ran into them. That Marie-Toulouse is really lame."

Madame Cadillac runs the bakery; her field is next to our yard.

"I'll run over to the farm and tell them," Bernadette said.

Daddy followed her out to the front steps. When he turned on the front light, a sort of floodlight we mostly use when we eat outside, the cows stirred in surprise.

By that time Daddy was genuinely upset. He eyed his English mixed border.

"If they come over this way, they'll ruin everything."

And he looked sadly across the yard to the Taverniers' window.

The fact is, there's an undeclared war between Daddy and Monsieur Tavernier, the next-door neighbor we call

Roughly Speaking because that's what he says every other word. The war is over their flowerbeds.

It started when Roughly Speaking gave his mournful analysis of our soil, not rich enough, it appears, to grow anything that isn't hardy. The ultramodern tiller our neighbor bought didn't help matters any, despite the sophisticated irrigation system Daddy installed. But what brought it to a head was the aphids.

When the aphids had infested our Dutch tulips three months before, Daddy applied an insecticide according to directions. It killed the few surviving tulips; then the aphids, stronger than ever, attacked the lupine. When Roughly Speaking got wind of this, he had the audacity to tell Charles he hadn't mixed the spray right — you could tell from the lumps left in the nozzle — so Daddy decided to shut him up for good. He secretly grew some cape primroses in his cold frame, then transplanted them by night into the mixed border.

The cape primrose is a sumptuous flower, with a wide throat and wavy edges. Tavernier quickly spotted its unusual blue from his window and turned green with envy, according to Charles. He'd been green for a week now.

And tonight the cows were grazing on the lawn between the pond and the cape primroses.

Bernadette got her moped out of the garage, made the mistake of starting it in the driveway, and sent the cows galloping into the flowerbeds.

Oblivious to danger, Daddy took right off after them, in his old velvet slippers, yelling so loudly he drove the cows a little deeper into the flowers.

"Get the hell out of there, you idiots," Daddy roared. "You stupid beasts!"

Cécile fell down on the steps laughing. Mom tried hard to give her a stern look.

"Do you know how much time your father has invested in those flowers?"

"I know," gasped the Pest, "I know! That's just the point."

Daddy got the cows to beat a retreat. Out on the road they stared at him, puzzled.

"Thanks a lot for your help," he shouted at us.

"What do you want me to do?" Mom yelled.

"Use your head and bring me the lantern," he hollered.

Cécile ran to get it in the basement and brought it to Charles, going around the back of the house to stay clear of the cows.

He didn't want to use the lantern to scare off the culprits, but to assess the damage. The whole town must have heard him groan.

"Believe me, old Maton is going to hear about this. When you keep cows, you keep track of them."

Claire had returned to the living room. Cécile was back on the front steps.

Then the three cows, flank to flank, were edging toward the concrete pond where the grass is thicker and also very slippery. Every year some much lighter and less awkward visitor falls in and we have to furnish hot drinks and dry clothes.

"If they fall in, it won't be any trouble," Cécile pointed out. "At least you won't have to lend them your bathrobe."

"Very funny," Daddy said. "Really. Very, very funny."

Finally we heard the whine of the moped coming up the road, followed by the whinny of the Matons' old car. The cows turned nervously toward the front gate. If they backed up now, they were sure to fall into the pond.

A dreadful-looking dog came hurtling into the yard ahead of the Matons, who looked as sleepy as their cattle. She had a scarf on over her curlers; the next day was Sunday. The dog headed straight for Daddy, barking up a storm. He jumped backwards.

"Go ahead, Zero. Let 'em have it. Show these troublemakers your stuff."

Marie-Toulouse recognized the dog. Mooing in terror, she disappeared into the darkness, the heifers at her heels. There was a racket of rustling leaves, crackling branches.

"Not over there," Daddy howled. "My cold frame!"

"Wouldn't you know," old Maton said. "Wouldn't you know."

He came over to greet Daddy, dumbfounded.

"Our gate's broken down, and it must have been Marie-Toulouse," his wife was explaining. "When she feels like a snack, there's no stopping her."

Over by the fruit trees, Zero was barking louder and louder.

"Do you think he'll be able to herd them?" Daddy moaned.

"In nothing flat," old Maton promised. "Back to the barn, the party's over, and no dessert."

"Maybe you've noticed, Dr. Moreau," Madame Maton interrupted, "what a terrible limp Marie-Toulouse has. Well, the vet swears her leg is sound as a dollar. He says it's all in her mind. That she does it to get attention."

Madame Maton looked proud of her speech. Daddy had no diagnosis to offer. Cécile was in seventh heaven.

"Maybe she needs a shrink," Bernadette suggested.

Alerted by Zero's barking, Roughly Speaking then emerged from his house, at the very moment the three perpetrators where straggling back into the streetlight.

He strode over, a crimson velvet dressing gown topping his suit pants. At a glance he took in the family, the Matons, the cows, Daddy.

"Going into livestock, my dear Doctor?" he gently inquired.

Old Maton thought this was a scream. Tavernier went to check out the cape primroses, but Daddy, one step ahead of him, switched off the lantern.

"And organic fertilizer, I see," Tavernier added. He ges-

tured toward Daddy's right slipper, and only then did Daddy see what he'd put his foot into.

Harassed by Zero, who seemed to be all over the place, the cows walked by us in single file. Cécile gave them a friendly look.

"I've heard that during the war the cows dropped like flies because there was no one to milk them," she explained. "Their udders were hard as rocks and scraped on the ground. How awful not to be able to milk yourself!"

Old Maton loved it, couldn't stop laughing.

"I wish you'd teach them to. Then we'd be able to sleep in!"

Once the cows were herded out the gate, Maton shook Daddy's hand.

"About your cold frame: see if there's any damage and we'll talk about it tomorrow."

Roughly Speaking's ears perked up at the mention of "cold frame."

"Don't worry, it's just an old thing I never use," Daddy said pathetically.

Marie-Toulouse gave one last regretful look behind her before disappearing down the road. Madame Maton, who's never managed to pass her driver's test, started up the car and took off with a roar.

"You really have all the luck," Tavernier told Daddy. "One day it's aphids, the next it's cows. I don't think those cape primroses would have made it anyway. Flowers are like sick people. They don't always do so well when they're moved."

Daddy didn't even have the strength to answer. Our neighbor closed the gate very quietly, as if someone had died. Suddenly everything was quiet again, and when we turned off the outside lights we could hear the wind rustling in the trees.

Mom timidly suggested that her husband leave his slip-

pers on the doorstep. He did so without a word and went directly to their bedroom. He seemed like a child being punished.

We heard strains of Mozart coming from the living room. The Princess was curled up in her chair, eyes closed. Cécile went and stood in front of her, incredulous.

"Mozart you can listen to anytime, but this was a once-in-a-lifetime thing. You don't have any idea what you missed."

Claire opened her eyes and looked at Cécile as if returning from somewhere far, far away.

"Is anything wrong?" Mom worried aloud.

And as I watched the Princess try hard to smile, heard her voice say no, no, nothing is wrong, no problem, I saw clearly that in fact something *was* wrong with her, terribly wrong.

But what?

3

Claire's Silences

You notice a problem, promise yourself you'll do something about it, and the next day you forget or maybe ignore it, who knows, out of selfishness or laziness. . . .

But then we were so used to Claire's silences, her self-contained ways, her ups and downs.

It was Bernadette who nicknamed her the Princess. Even as a little girl, apparently, she was already different: quieter than most children, always neat and clean, silently weeping when she didn't get the ring on the merry-go-round, the tail on the donkey, Boardwalk, all the aces when we played War, or, of course, to be King of the Hill.

Later, when she was attending school in Paris with Bernadette, she always bought first-class commuter tickets, leaving our horse-loving sister behind in second class. And then there is the fact that she's very pretty and stands straight, head high, as if the sky's the limit.

Some people couldn't understand why she was allowed to stay home, doing nothing. That's just the way it was. After she ran away, our parents gave up. If people didn't like it, too bad. It was too hard on us when she was gone. And that's that.

It often seemed to me that Claire's refusal to work simply had to do with the fact she couldn't do anything that wouldn't be truly fulfilling, anything "average," which was exactly what she didn't want to be. But what *did* she want?

In the meantime, she read a lot, listened to music, went on long walks, and when we all got home, there she was. She had a knack for using the bathtub just when everyone else wanted to, even though she *was* home all day. She didn't seem to have many friends. She said she was just living.

And that Wednesday when I got home, a conference on Claire was being held in the kitchen.

Bernadette hadn't even taken off her riding boots or the pants she wore in the stables, which certainly created atmosphere. Some people like that, I guess. A few weeks earlier she had taken a bad fall. Her head had been shaved for her operation, and her hair was growing back slowly, very thick. She looked a little boyish but in a way it was becoming, or at least sexy. You weren't quite sure who she was. You wanted to keep looking at her to check. And from the way Stéphane looked at her when he took her in his arms, he seemed to be keeping close tabs.

Straddling a chair, Bernadette looked intently at Cécile, who was sitting by the stove with a stack of cookies.

"Well, first she asked me to lend her the money I got for my birthday, said she needed it right away," the Pest told us. "I promised I wouldn't tell anyone."

"Nice work," Bernadette said. "We'll be sure to tell you our secrets, too."

"You two aren't anyone," the Pest shot back.

After we said thanks, she continued: "Right after lunch she said she was going for a walk, but she went into the city."

"How do you know?"

"Madame Cadillac dropped her off at the station."