

Note: This copyrighted story is from The Christmas Swap, a complete novel by Janet A. Martin that is currently in search of a publisher. A book synopsis follows. Interested parties may contact Ms. Martin at jamcommunications@mac.com Thank you for your comments. --JAM

Excerpt from *The Christmas Swap*
A Novel by Janet Martin
~ Book Synopsis follows ~



Chapter 32

For the Love of Chocolate

Frank Midland loved the Grounds of the University at night, its historic Rotunda, modeled after the Pantheon in Rome, lit from within by dazzling 19th-century windows overlooking Thomas Jefferson's Academical Village. He admired the balanced composition of the central quadrangle known as the Lawn. Distinctive pavilions and colonnades flanked the tiered stretch of green to form a living museum peopled with faculty and students. The Italian architect Palladio, one of Frank's own favorites, had inspired the nation's third president, and the ambience of classical elegance made this place, in Frank's estimation, one of the most special in all the world.

Tonight, at the far end of the Lawn, Frank could hear the plaintive strains of melodies floating in the wind, wafting from Cabell Hall. Every year Christmas concerts were scheduled there in December, before the student vocalists and symphony musicians left for winter break. The orchestra was tuning up.

This Tuesday, December 14, Frank had collected his final exams, at six that afternoon, and wished his architecture students Happy Holidays. Within three days, he told them, he would have the exams graded and their semester grades posted online according to the last four digits of their social

security numbers. Meanwhile, he advised them, to go home, forget school, dismiss stress from their minds and spend time with their families. That's what he intended to do.

He stood a moment, shifting his briefcase and buttoning his coat higher around his neck. His advice, for the first time in his life, sounded hollow. *Spend time with your family. That's what I intend to do.* Frank had no family but the one he had adopted. His parents had both died. And now, his family of choice, well, his wife mostly, seemed distant. And for the past four Tuesday nights when he had called during mid-class break, she had not answered her cell phone. It made him nervous. He began to think the unthinkable. And he had begun to do incautious things, like ask Francine Urbane where she and Jan had gone the Tuesday night they had met for dinner. Francine had listened and then brushed him off. "After dinner at the Blackbird," she said, "Jan went her way and I went mine."

At that, Frank had gone silent. But in the middle of the same night that he'd queried Francine, Frank had been unable to sleep. He had gotten up, poured a glass of milk and noticed Jan's cell phone charging on the kitchen counter. He hesitated, hating himself. Then he had flipped open the cell phone and spotted a new number. It appeared several times on her listing. He had written the number down and tucked it in his coat pocket hanging in the closet, the pocket that housed his gloves. He reached for them now and unraveled the small square of paper. In the outdoor lights of Cabell Hall, to the strains of *The First Noel*, he read the unfamiliar string of local digits. Should he call it?

Earlier that afternoon, he had suggested that Jan come to the concert on the Lawn. "After my exam," he said, "we can go for hot chocolate on the Campus Corner. We can talk about a million things the way we used to do, over a mound of hot chocolate with whipped cream."

But she had rolled her eyes and said, "Can't do it. Can't do whipped cream."

And he had said, "Okay then, how about coffee?"

And she had said, "Can't do it. Not tonight."

Frank pocketed the phone number. He began to walk down the Lawn to his valued faculty parking space behind one of the Pavilions toward Cabell Hall. He could smell the wood smoke from

student rooms, stacks of firewood provided in neat bundles outside the brick walls. It was a nice amenity to rooms that had no bathrooms, only communal toilets and showers reached by treks outside, retrofitted in quarters that once stabled the horses of university students in Jefferson's day. Frank nearly ran into one young man bolting out his door in a raggedy bathrobe, carrying a pail stocked with toothbrush, soap and shampoo. The fellow looked up and laughed, swinging his towel over his shoulder. Frank said adroitly, "Happy Holidays," and walked on briskly, the music of carols from Cabell Hall following his steps.

Lately, Jan had seemed different to him. She stood sometimes, lost in thought, in almost a pose, her head to the side as if seeing things that were not there. She kept trying on the same old pair of jeans, then taking them off. She began to hum, a low, constant hum. So irritating! And what she hummed were classical melodies. Jan! Classical music? No way! He had tried to get her interested when they first married. She said Mozart was okay; she couldn't handle the others.

The other day, he could swear, he heard her humming Tchaikovsky. What could have turned his wife onto Tchaikovsky? Or who? That's the pronoun that worried Frank.

On his way home, Frank approached the town circle where the neon lights of the Circle Market beckoned yellow and green. He reflexively looked at his gas tank and decided, yes, less than half full, he might as well stop. After filling at the pump, he decided he was hungry, and not wanting to go home to an empty house, Frank looked for a parking place in the queue of cars before the market. Not a vacant spot in sight.

"Crowded tonight," he reflected. He eased his car around the corner of the market to a darkened graveled space that separated the structure from the open field next door. He entered the front glass door; at once he was cheered by the smell of coffee and burgers, and the sight of Flossie wiping her hand on her brow as she hurried from customer to customer. She glanced up at him.

“Full house?” Frank said. She nodded and indicated a spot at the end of the counter. Frank picked up a local paper on his way to the counter and put it down in front of him.

“Excuse me,” he said to a solid pair of shoulders in a heavy black jacket to his left.

“Certainly,” a deep voice replied, laced with the gravelly sound of age. Frank looked up.

“Why, hello,” he said.

“Evening,” the man replied.

Frank flipped his paper on the counter to the headlines below the fold. “I hear you’re working at the BuyWay,” he said.

“That’s news?” the heavy-set man chuckled.

“In this town? Are you kidding? Anything’s news. Look here, a front-page story about a two-headed pig born on a farm not far from here.”

“Strange things happen.”

“Sure do. Have you seen the local TV news reports on the white fawn?”

“Nope,” the old man said.

“Well, supposedly there is an albino deer. I know people who have seen it.”

“Hmmm.”

Frank took this for interest, so he rattled on casually,

“A guy named Larry Layman, for one. In fact, he’s the guy who told me you were working a forklift at the BuyWay.”

“Nice man.”

“Yes he is that. He saw the white deer while hunting on the Bennington property.” Frank left out the part about Larry’s killing the mother of the fawn. “And then my wife saw it at the foot of our driveway one night. She said it was simply magical. But that’s Jan’s way of expressing things.”

The old man smiled. “I believe in magic.” He said and shifted his robust frame on the stool.

At that moment Flossie put before the heavy fellow a generous mug of hot chocolate mounded with whipped cream.

“This is the only kind of magic I know,” she said grinning through teeth that always had been a little wide for her narrow face.

“And what is that? Frank’s eyes crinkled.

“Kitchen magic.”

“I’ll have some of that, then,” Frank said. “Just like his. And –“

“Your usual burger?” Flossie whisked her tablet from her apron pocket.

Frank paused. “Tuna salad with lettuce on toast.”

“Got it,” she said, spinning around.

“Trying something new?” his counter companion asked.

“Something new,” Frank sighed and once more thought of his wife. The usual things aren’t working so well, he reflected, and he glanced down at his newspaper. Frank scanned the headlines to find a story about the upcoming Chamber Ball. The talent auction hoped to realize \$25,000 toward the Habitat House charity this year. As he read, he could feel the old man raising his arm, sipping the cocoa, and he could smell its rich aroma of chocolate mingled with cream.

Lets split one of the chocolate chunk cookies. They’re wonderful when warmed, Jan had said at their first encounter in the local Barnes & Noble Bookstore years before. She loved chocolate. But tonight—tonight--she did not want chocolate with her husband. Not tonight. Frank bent lower over the newspaper as if to blot out his consternation. And then, out of the blue, he heard his wife’s voice.

“Two bottles of water, please.” Jan handed a few bills to the young boy helping Flossie with the cash register at the Circle Market. He was new and efficient. He did not linger with customers nor engage in small talk. He handed Jan back a few coins, and she smiled and said “Thank you” and was gone.

Frank looked above the edge of his newspaper. He felt as if a two-by-four had smacked him in the chest. Jan didn't see him seated as he was at the corner of the counter near the back. But he saw her. She was dressed in a two-piece crushed velvet jump suit. Frank watched her spin with her bag of two bottled waters and bounce out the front door. Then he followed her with his gaze as Jan climbed into her car parked catty-corner behind the solid row of vehicles in front of the store.

Frank twisted on his seat to get off the stool as if to follow his wife, but at that instant Flossie put his chocolate and sandwich down before him. So he sat there, dumbly, and watched over the heads of farmers and town folk coming and going, eating and buying and laughing and talking. He sat there and watched his pretty wife, shiny brown hair pulled high in a ponytail, lean forward to start the ignition, and he watched her drive away.

Frank bit into his sandwich and found it too mushy. He sipped the chocolate and found it too hot. He wiped his mouth in irritation, while he felt the old man's gaze upon him. He looked up and saw a question in the blue-black eyes buried within lines of kindness in his bearded, weathered face.

"That was my wife," Frank said, feeling ridiculous.

"I thought you knew her," the man said.

"Maybe I do and maybe I don't," Frank said, and then he was ashamed. He slapped a \$20 bill on the counter and got up without speaking. He walked by the cash register with the fresh-faced boy standing there behind hundreds of incidentals, chewing tobacco, cigarettes, lottery ticket machines and small boxes of chocolates. Impulsively he picked up a little yellow box of Nunnally's, and waved it at the boy.

"Sure, it's covered in my money on the counter," Frank told him.

Flossie came through the aluminum swinging doors from the kitchen and registered surprise that Frank was leaving without eating. The boy turned and asked,

"Is the chocolate covered?" Frank held up the small box for Flossie.

"Sure, it's covered," the waitress said, palming the \$20 as she walked toward the boy.

“Gotta go, Flossie,” Frank said into her startled face. “Something’s come up.”

“Don’t want your sandwich to go?” She called.

“No time,” Frank huffed. He ran outside and stood before the glassed doors glancing right and left. Far down Main Street he saw the rear lights turn bright red as Jan braked for a stoplight. He bolted around the side of the market and jumped in his car.

From his seat at the counter the white-haired man caught a glimpse as Frank zoomed past the market windows into the dark. He shook his head over his mug; then he buried his white mustache into the melting mound of whipped cream.



“Do I want to do this?” Frank asked himself, trailing the vanishing taillights of Jan’s car. “Do I want to know what she has been so careful to hide?” He shook his head. Then he saw her left blinker flash. The car slowed near the railroad trestle that divided the town. It turned left and sped along away from Main Street. Frank slowed without putting on his blinker and made the same turn.

Jan followed the road, which twisted and turned, skirting past houses, a small neighborhood park, the baseball field, the community swimming pool. Frank stayed several paces behind. He saw her right blinker signal. He slowed. He made the right turn behind her at a crawl. He squinted at the street sign on the passenger side. This part of town was remote to him. What did it say? Old C— Street? He couldn’t read it, the lettering rusted and bent as it was. When he returned his eyes to the road he realized Jan had disappeared. He felt a sharp stab of panic.

“Where did she go?” And that brought him up short. Where, indeed, did she go? Not only tonight but a week ago, and the week before, and a month before? Frank felt nauseated. Hunger, maybe, but the coil in his stomach roiled angrily, and instinctively he pulled to the side of the road. He hit the window button and leaned out, gasping for air. The chill made him sneeze. He fumbled with

the glove compartment, hunting a tissue, a napkin, something for his nose. And blowing his nose, there in the car, he heard the night stirring around him in wind and leaf rustle and music.

“Music?” Frank held his breath. The twinkling of piano keys drifted from somewhere in the branches overhead. What was it? The melody, so familiar. A whiff of high notes trickling down, ending in a swirl.

“Sugar Plum Fairy! *The Nutcracker Suite!* Tchaikovsky!” Frank sat a moment, the music playing in his mind. Then he eased his car off the shoulder of the road and crawled forward, listening, listening.

He slowly drove through the dark, his headlights fanning two upcoming bends in the road. A small brick house on the left, a small steepled church on the right. Frank passed the church and the music began to fade. He backed up and turned into the gravel driveway divided into irregular spaces by old oak trees. He could hear the music coming from inside. The church windows, tall, narrow and pointed—obviously old glass—wavered with light, reminding him of flickering candles. He shut off his car engine and sat a moment. Then he opened the car door.

Feeling like a foolish peeping Tom, he crept to one of the windows, wedging between flanking boxwoods as tall as himself. He cupped his hands around his eyes and peered inside.

“Huh!” He said, and then ducked down between the bushes. He couldn’t believe it. How odd! Within the old church the chandeliers were left in place, but the pews had been torn out. But near what must have been the altar, at an upright piano a grayish little birdlike woman pumped the keys. And on the high step with a cane in her hand was another woman—lithesome, tall, imposing, her hair in a silver-black pompadour, stamping the rhythm with her rubber-tipped wood cane and calling out words in French!

Glissade, glissade, arabesque! Repeat! *Glissade, glissade, arabesque!*

Back and forth, their arms waving like garlands, their toes pointed curls, their bodies swaying rhythmically together, in black leotards and gauzy black skirts, the ballerinas flitted across the sheen of

highly-polished hardwood floors. In shell pink tights and rose pink shoes, they twirled and bent and bowed like children's tops. In the midst of them, Frank found his wife. For the second time that night he felt stabbed in the chest--this time with relief. It rushed him so suddenly, Frank inhaled a sob. He wriggled from between the boxwoods and ran to his car. He sat there disbelieving his own emotions. Unexpected tears brimmed in his eyes.

His dear wife. His crazy, dear wife. That is why she tried on jeans to check their fit. That is why at times she stood erect, her neck arched, her gaze reflective. That is why she folded her hands in a low arch, fingers laced, while her husband intoned on one topic or another. Frank had thought a) she was obsessed with weight, b) she was not listening to him, and c) she was bored by his topic of the moment but politely trying to stay awake. Instead, she had been measuring her weight-loss progress and also practicing in private what she had learned secretly in ballet.

He felt ashamed; then he succumbed to an unrecoverable wash of tears. His Italian father had wept at sappy television shows, sentimental movies and operas on the radio. Frank favored him, with his Italian heritage of strong emotion. What Frank felt now was the weighty mix of relief and joy. *It is not too late!* He thought. His wife was working on--what had she told him that night in *La Frutta*, their favorite Italian restaurant? "the new me." And he had said automatically, "I fell in love with the old you." But he was wrong. What a fool! "The old you." Dolt! Frank flat fell in love. Irrevocably, heedless and headlong. He had fallen for Jan--all the Jans--old and new, bright and crabby, twins' mother and schoolteacher. Jan was his partner. Jan was his life. And blind supercilious jerk that he was, Jeepers! He only saw it, now!

Leaning against the steering wheel, Frank pulled out a handkerchief from his tweed jacket pocket. He wiped his eyes and blew his nose once again. He gave a huge sigh and turned from the oak-sheltered driveway. He pointed his headlights toward town.



“No class next week! Holidays begin. See you in January!” The imperious voice of Madame Adrienne followed Jan as she opened the front door of the church. The blast of arctic air seemed to freeze on her perspiring face and neck. Her coat was unbuttoned. She fingered a pair of woolly gloves.

“Oh, delicious cold!” Jan said to a companion alongside.

“Yes, but better get warm,” the other dancer answered, wrapping her coat and hustling to her car in the tree shadows created by the tall church windows. Jan exhaled a cloud of vapor and whimsically looked up beyond the tall branches, her eyes inhaling the swirl of overhead stars. She sighed with quiet contentment. The moon was filling toward full. She walked toward her vehicle humming the *Nutcracker* melodies that had recently stirred her feet. A little smile played at the corners of her mouth and her heart was light. She watched her ballerina classmates hurrying to their cars, the vehicles sputtering in the cold, leaving trails of oily-smelling exhaust as they pulled from the pointed window lights in the church, leaving the parking area virtually deserted. Then she heard a voice,

“Can you help me?”

Jan started. Then in the parking area, half-lit by the moon, she saw the familiar silvery hair, the broad shoulders, the tweed coat and the rugged smile—a man leaning against his car. Frank was holding two thick paper cups in front of him. He cocked his head to one side and said,

“I am the Handsome Prince in search of the Sugar Plum Fairy.”

“Hah!” Jan snorted.

“Okay then, I’m an architect in love with a ballerina who loves chocolate. Would you be the one?”

At this, Jan smiled. Then she frowned. “Have you been following me?”

“The truth?” Frank said, putting gingerly into her gloved hands a cup of hot chocolate.

“Tonight, yes. For ten years, yes. Hell, I guess I’ll be following you ‘til the day I die.”

“Well, then you know my secret.” Jan cradled the chocolate, inhaling it dreamily.

“And I’m proud of you. And, actually relieved.” Frank’s eyes found hers.

“Why?”

“For all the reasons any man married to you would be relieved.”

Jan squinted. “You know, Frank?” She said, her head cocked to one side. “You are an architect, true. But you’re also a romantic.” And suddenly her irrepressible laugh slid up and down as if scampering across a xylophone. Impulsively, she stood on tiptoe and kissed his lips.

“Yes!” She exulted. “I am the one! You have found me! I am the ballerina who loves chocolate!”

“Good,” Frank nodded, “because I brought us a small box of chocolate candy and a huge chocolate chunk cookie.”

“Oh!” Jan gasped. “Is the cookie warm? You know they are wonderful when—“

“Warm,” Frank said, and he put his long tweedy arm around her and nestled her in his warm car for a small chocolate picnic beneath a half-wafer moon.



The Christmas Swap

By Janet A. Martin

Synopsis:

The Christmas Swap is the fictional story of three families in the small, rural community of Clearview, VA, whose lives become entangled as the result of a dare. Disgusted by their wives' obsessive busyness during the holiday season and feeling unappreciated in general, three husbands unexpectedly meet in a local diner and impulsively pledge to swap their spouses for one day to "teach them a lesson," in perspective. In response, the women reciprocate with an ice-cream toast to "Lady Liberty," and the vow of revenge. In the span of four weeks, plans go awry, secrets are spilled, and the tension mounts with the arrival of a mysterious stranger, the antics of a greedy developer, and the evanescent presence of a rare white fawn. By story's end, the people of Clearview discover that their best efforts are defined by the words of a small boy, as "Together, One," a slogan that not only aligns comfortingly with modern physics to underscore the unity and value of every living thing, but also holds the wondrous possibility that earthly love just may reach beyond the stars.



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