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## ATLANTIS SHORT STORY CONTEST

### WINNING STORY

#### Christmas Belles

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This story also won 8th place in the genre fiction category in the  
85<sup>th</sup> Annual Writers Digest Contest.

By Erin Bauer

**Word Count: 2.286.**

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Holly sat at the window and watched as the soft rain ran in rivulets down the glass. Her hand was shaking again, and she placed it under one of her thighs; this always made it stop temporarily. It wasn't the shaking itself that bothered her, she had never been one to worry excessively about her health, but what it signified...her decline and ever growing weakness. It is what had led her to this lonely place, somewhere she had told herself in her youth she'd never go. "That's for old people," she'd always thought, during the naivety of her 20's when she, like so many others, believed themselves to be immortal and untouchable. The long ebony hair, toned thighs that looked sexy in mini-skirts, and taut skin were 50 years gone now, replaced by the wrinkled, liver-spotted arms and silver hair of an 83 year old woman.

The first signs of growing older had hit her at 40; her slowing metabolism made weight loss difficult, she tired more easily doing everyday things, and her once extroverted personality was becoming more reclusive. It was so unfair. How could she no longer be interested in parties and camping trips and karaoke with friends? And yet these things no longer appealed to her. She had always thought of herself as being young, carefree, the world before her, and in her mind, she still felt this way. But her body was betraying her, and had been for years; then, in her 60's, the palsy settled in to take away even more of her independence. She had never been interested in knitting or sewing or any hobby that required minute hand coordination, but the shaking now came so often that even reading a book was nearly impossible. And her life's work, studying the small single-celled organisms under the microscope in the biology lab at the university, steady hands mounting slides with tweezers, stain, and cover slips, was a distance memory. She supposed she should be grateful that her disease had not hit until after retirement.

Holly had never married, never had children, she was alone in the world. This had not concerned her when she was younger, as becoming a senior citizen seemed a lifetime away and

she was always confident she would find the right man someday, as these things always came in a natural order, and would certainly fall in line when they were meant to. But she never did find her true love, that one special person that she couldn't imagine her life without. So she had thrown herself into her work, had a few pets, and socialized with family and friends as much as she was able. Her investments had grown and allowed her to own a house and to have the money needed for her current nursing home costs. But now, with old friends spread across the country or passed away, her parents gone, and her only brother killed in the Vietnam war when he was 28, she no longer had anyone to turn to but the staff and a few of the other residents. These people were friendly enough, but she always felt they looked upon her with pity when their own grown children and grandchildren came to visit.

This time of year was especially difficult. It was early December, and despite the warm temperatures that kept the precipitation to rain rather than the more seasonal snow, the mood around Meadow Grows was festive. This only served to depress Holly all the more. What would she do on Christmas? She'd eat the "nutritional mush" they provided, and try to act enthusiastic about the lit tree, the fragrant wreaths, and the carolers who visited them every year. But December also marked another birthday, and these were no longer a welcome event for Holly. It meant that time was teasing her again: additional wrinkles, stiffer limbs, more prescription pills. Even her name was a sad reminder of days past, as her parents had named her Holly because she was born so close to Christmas. She used to revel in the attention this brought in her school days, but now the sight of the red-berried plant she was named after decorating the care center just deepened her melancholy.

After sitting at the window with her thoughts for nearly 20 minutes, Holly sighed, resigned to the reality that brooding would do nothing to improve her situation. Her back was

getting stiff and she needed to get off of the hard chair she was sitting in. She removed her hand, now numb, from underneath her leg, as the shaking had subsided...for now. She glanced over at the only other seat in the room, her favorite armchair, green and tattered but sentimental; she had bought it when she moved to her first apartment. The place had been tiny, full of hand-me-down furniture and in a questionable neighborhood, but it was cheap and it had been all hers. She'd built a lot of memories there, despite the noise and the smell of pot permeating the paper-thin walls.

Holly slowly got up, groaning at the sound of cracking joints, and moved over to the more comfortable, welcoming chair. Next to it sat a small table that contained an old family photo and one of her and her friends at a 1920's costume party, decked out in creative outfits that everyone had worked hard to make perfect for the occasion. A stack of books also lay there, and because her palsy had temporarily dissolved and reading was still a comfort to her when she was able to do it, she nestled into the armchair and covered up with an old, but soft, brown and white afghan her aunt had made for her. She picked up one of the volumes: Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*. Why could she have never found love like Austen's heroines? It wasn't that they had an easy time of it, no, but in the end, they had gotten what and who they had desired. Of course, poor Austen had died a spinster at 41, so, like Holly, her own romantic notions had never come to fruition, either.

Willing these self-deprecating thoughts away, Holly was just opening the novel when she heard a light tap at her partially open door. It shook the mandatory wreath that had been placed at the entrance to each resident's room, and she wished the darn thing could just crash like a broken vase to the floor, not to be replaced. The thought of disrupting the idyllic Christmas atmosphere the decorations were supposed to create filled Holly with satisfaction. Of course having anything

break in this tightly run nursing home was highly unlikely, but Holly could still daydream about such things. It wasn't that Holly was a Scrooge, but Christmas was no longer the same, and never would be, so why emphasize its imminent arrival?

The visitor at her door was Don, one of the day nurses, looking in at her, friendly smile on his face. Holly had to admit that he was handsome, and extremely kind, probably no more than 30 years old with short black hair, broad shoulders, and a rounded face with just a hint of stubble. He was responsible for helping to lift immobile patients, so his arm muscles were also very toned under his short sleeved uniform. Holly found herself jealous, once again, of her robbed youth.

"Hi Holly, how are you today?" he said pleasantly. He made the rounds daily to see his assigned residents, the ones on the 3<sup>rd</sup> floor. This was the "semi-independent" floor, the one where people were still sharp in the mind but had some physical limitations. Holly certainly could attest to how the damn Parkinson's made her qualified to be here.

"Fine," Holly responded, even though Don knew better and she knew he knew it. Her face was neutral, mouth creased in neither a smile nor a scowl. If her crankiness would have had any effect on Don, she would have displayed it, but she had learned when she first came here that Don was too good humored to succumb to that. It's probably what made him good at his job, since she supposed there were a lot of elderly people who gave him grief, unhappy with their circumstances. Still, he seemed extraordinarily chipper today, and while he was a positive person in general, this seemed unusual even for him. Something could be up, but more likely it was the effect of the season. No doubt he had plans with a girlfriend or family to have a big Christmas feast and gift opening in a couple weeks.

“There’s someone who’d like to meet you,” he said without further hesitation, stepping over the threshold into the room and gesturing to a visitor behind him. It was a girl, maybe 12, skinny and blond, who smiled and shyly waved, then followed Don inside. At her heels, a large golden dog peeked around the corner, anxiously prancing around the girl’s legs in an effort to get past.

“This is Anna and Mama,” Don said, pointing at the girl, then the dog. “They are part of the Christmas Belles program.”

At the sight of the dog, Holly’s eyes had grown a bit wider, and she found herself sitting up a little more now. She’d resented Don’s interruption and excessive cheerfulness, but this turn of events had admittedly softened her feelings towards the man, who’d always treated her well and served as a sympathetic ear for her nostalgic reveries.

The elderly woman had always loved dogs and she had considered at one time training her own chocolate lab, Riley, as a therapy dog for hospital and nursing home visits. “Christmas Belles?” she asked, although suspecting she knew the answer already.

“It’s through my school, Ma’am,” Anna said, holding the leash firmly to keep the excited Mama close to her side. Holly prickled at being called “Ma’am.” She knew it was respectful, but even at 83 she didn’t like it.

“Meadow Grows has decided to partner with a local school on a pet visiting program. We hope it will benefit both the residents and kids,” Don explained.

“And the dogs,” Anna chimed in, giving Mama a pat. “Mama lost a litter of puppies a few weeks ago and she has been depressed. I thought getting her out might help, and so far she seems to like it here.”

Holly's heart stirred, she felt for the dog. She may never have had children, but she imagined to lose them would be even worse than never having them at all. She had, after all, watched her parents lose their son in the war. Dogs were maternal creatures, it would have been confusing and devastating to the animal.

"Each Belle team will be matched with a resident, and so I am going around asking who might be interested in the program. They will visit on Christmas." It was obvious that Don thought Holly would appreciate this. She found herself cursing and thanking him at the same time...confounded man, cheering her up when all she wanted to do was sulk.

"And once a month after if you'd like us to," Anna said enthusiastically. Mama showed her agreement with antsy pacing at the girls' side. "It's for people who don't have anyone."

"Now Anna," Don scolded, his face flushing red. Holly actually smirked, finding it more humorous than offensive now that her mood was lightening. She had said many embarrassing things in her day, and never intentionally cruel. She felt that the girl meant well.

"It's OK, Don," Holly said, reassuringly, with the hint of a smile. "Can I pet your dog?" She looked at Anna now almost pleadingly. It had been so long since she'd had a dog that she found she was missing it immensely and was longing to have Mama near her like a young child needing to sleep with a favorite doll.

"Sure." Anna brought Mama closer, then slackened the leash so that the dog could go say hello to Holly as she sat in the chair. Tail wagging, the retriever rushed to her, panting and burying her head in Holly's chest, standing on hind legs and pushing her front paws against the old woman's knees.

"Mama! Be good!" Anna cried, horrified that the dog was acting so out of control.

“She’s OK, really,” Holly assured her, relishing in the feel of the soft golden fur, the rush of air as the dog excitedly nudged against Holly’s arms and head, even the licks of unconditional affection. Holly felt her eyes swell with tears. Memories came flooding back, and yet they seemed bittersweet rather than bitter.

“My grandma died,” Anna said, calmer now that Holly seemed to be OK with Mama’s behavior. “Now I don’t have one, but I’d love to come here. And I definitely think Mama would too.” She smiled kindly at Holly, tugging just slightly on Mama’s leash now.

Holly now realized the child had not made a faux pas earlier, she was referring to herself when she said the program was for those who had no one. She suspected that the girl loved her parents and family very much, but that the death of the grandmother had been a significant loss.

“Well you can, you certainly can,” Holly said, a full smile crossing her lips for the first time in a long while.

And petting the elated dog, looking into the child’s gentle face, and seeing that Don had slipped out of the room to give them some privacy, as if he had planned this particular pairing all along, Holly no longer felt like an outsider, no longer alone. Her hand was shaking again, but this time with nervous joy.

### **About the author:**

Erin Bauer lives in Lincoln, NE, and her background includes degrees in Library Science and Entomology. She is currently a lecturer and academic advisor for students in the online M.S. in Entomology program at the University of Nebraska.

Erin is an avid reader, especially of mystery, historical, and dark fantasy genres. In addition to writing professional publications, she has always been interested in writing fiction, and is excited about the opportunity to share her work with others.



Erin's short story "Christmas Belles" was published in the Issue #3 (July 2016) of *Chantwood Magazine*, and also won 8<sup>th</sup> place in the genre story category of the 85<sup>th</sup> Annual Writer's Digest contest. Her flash fiction, "Carpool," was recently published in Issue #27 of *Blink-Ink*.