

A romantic couple is shown in profile, kissing. The woman is on the left, wearing a pearl earring, and the man is on the right, wearing a blue denim shirt. They are positioned in front of a Christmas tree decorated with red and white ornaments. The background is softly blurred, focusing attention on the couple.

A Very Short Christmas Story

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UNWRAPPED**

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Decatur Georgia, Christmas Day

Nikki yanked the handle of the shopping buggy. It stuck. She cursed and gave it another jerk but it remained jammed.

“Use your foot,” Shelby instructed. “Like this.” With one solid kick, Shelby wedged the buggy free. “I still don’t understand why you’re going through all this stress and aggravation, Nik. The man just gave you a ring. Are you really sure you want to risk cooking for him?”

Nikki grimaced. “Thanks a lot, Shel.”

“I’m just sayin’ he has to know by now that you’re no domestic goddess.”

“But I still *want* to do this for him,” Nikki insisted. “He’s come all this way from Montana. The least we can do is show him some Southern holiday cheer.”

“But didn’t you tell me his mother’s a Texan?” Shelby remarked.

“She is,” Nikki replied. “But Texas isn’t Georgia, Shel. I’d argue that Texas is even part of the south. They eat *tamales* on Christmas. We don’t do that.”

“Yeah, well they don’t exactly sell turkey and dressing at Walgreens either.”

“But there was no place else open. What am I even going to feed him?” Nikki lamented, nearly at the point of despair. “I thought it was only going to be us and you don’t eat meat so I didn’t even buy anything for a real Christmas meal.”

“Don’t worry about me. I already have plans with that hot guy from Home Depot who delivered our Christmas tree. You could always just go out to eat,” Shelby suggested.

“Where? Everything is closed on Christmas Day.”

“There’s the China Buffet on North Decatur,” Shelby suggested. “You could do the Peking duck like they ate in *A Christmas Story*. Or there’s always Waffle

House. They never close for anything.”

“I can’t believe you just suggested Waffle House for Christmas Dinner.” Nikki sounded an exasperated huff. “It just wouldn’t feel right. Christmas is meant to be spent at home.”

“All right. Have it your way. Let’s try the frozen food case.”

Nikki chewed her lip as they scanned the contents of the freezer. The first two cases held nothing but Lean Cuisine and frozen pizzas. The third held more promise.

“Lookie here, Nik,” Shelby exclaimed. “I think we hit the jackpot.” She tossed two boxes of Stouffers frozen mac and cheese into the cart with a grin. “A Southern holiday staple.”

“Great! What else is there?” Nikki asked.

“I think I even got you covered on the turkey.” Shelby tossed two Marie Callender’s turkey pot pies into the cart. Wheeling down the snack aisles, they added a big bag of pecans.

“What am I going to do about dessert?” Nikki asked.

Shelby paused at the breakfast foods. “If he likes cherries we’ve got desert covered.”

“I don’t know about cherries but he certainly has a thing for peaches.” Nikki recalled a certain night in a mountain cabin with a sudden frisson of desire.

Shelby tossed a box of cherry Pop Tarts into the cart.

Nikki snorted. “Pop Tarts?”

“Why not? A tart’s the same as a pie right?”

They proceeded down the aisle to the canned goods where Nikki picked up cans of jellied cranberries, French cut green beans, and cream of mushroom soup.

She was reaching for a carton of French's fried onions when Shelby grabbed her hand. "Don't! I beg you! No one ever eats that disgusting green bean casserole."

"But it's a Southern tradition," Nikki protested.

"One that needs to end here and now," Shelby insisted. "Here. Skip the veggie." She grabbed a can of fruit cocktail and some flaked coconut. "Make ambrosia instead."

"But I need whipped cream for that."

"Then I'll go to dairy and see if they have Cool Whip." Shelby returned a moment later with a can of Reddi-Wip. She dropped in in the cart with a shrug. "It's all they had."

Nikki took a dismal inventory of her cart. Tears blurred her eyes as they wheeled it to check out. "It's times like this that I truly miss Mee-Maw. She made every holiday special. And no one made a better fried turkey and cornbread dressing. I even miss sitting at the kitchen table with her stringing popcorn and making Magnolia wreaths."

"They why haven't you continued the tradition?"

"For who? It's usually just been you and me at Christmas and you've never been into any of that Southern Living kinda stuff." Nikki palmed her eyes with a sniff.

"Don't cry, Nik." Shelby wrapped her arms around her sister. "He doesn't expect anything. You didn't even know he was coming."

"Doesn't matter." She hiccupped. "It's our very first Christmas and it's going to be his lamest one ever. The worst part of this is that he gave me the best present I ever got and I don't even have anything for him to unwrap!"

"You do now!" Shelby snatched a sparkly pink Santa hat from a clearance end

cap and plopped it on Nikki's head. "Just put this on, add a matching bow, and let him unwrap *you*."

Hours later, with a wink at her sister, Shelby made an excuse to go out, leaving Wade and Nikki stretched out on the couch watching *It's a Wonderful Life*.

"I'm so sorry about dinner, Wade." Try as she might, Nikki couldn't suppress the quiver from her voice or the burning sensation behind her eyes.

Wade's warm strong arms tightened around her. She loved having his arms around her, being cloaked in his body, in his scent.

"Why's that sweetheart?" he asked.

"Because everything was just *awful*."

"What makes you think I'm so hard to please? For the record, one of the best meals I ever had was fried Spam and a can of cling peaches up in that mountain cabin with you."

That was their first time together and he'd made it a night she'd never forgotten either.

"I don't think it was the meal that you remember so fondly."

He grinned. "Probably not. But I sure liked the dessert."

"Stop humoring me, Wade." She gave him a playful swat. "You aren't helping a bit. Can't you see I'm trying really hard to be miserable? I don't even have a gift for you. I mean I do, but it's not anything you can unwrap."

"What is it then?" he asked.

"I was hoping we could go away together. You've worked so hard for so long, I thought that now with things settled down a bit with your brother, maybe I could entice you into taking some time off. Since Dirk has Janice helping him out at the

ranch, I was hoping maybe you and I could take that trip to Mexico we'd once talked about."

"I think that's a mighty fine idea indeed. In fact, why don't we plan to make it a honeymoon trip?"

"Really?" She instantly brightened. "I'm so glad you like the idea." Then her smile faded again. "But that still doesn't make up for this lousy Christmas. I wanted so badly to show you how we do it Southern style."

He laughed, a deep throaty rumble. "If that's all that's eating you, sweetheart, you can make it up to me real easy."

"How?" she asked.

He tipped her face up to his, his eyes gleaming with humor and something else that made her insides quiver. "Why don't you just grab that can of Reddi-Wip, put on that little pink Santa hat, and *do me* cowgirl style?"

~THE END~

Wade and Nikki's full story is told in [SLOW HAND](#)

In rural Montana... Wade Knowlton is a hardworking lawyer who's torn between his small-town Montana law practice and a struggling family ranch. He's on the brink of exhaustion from trying to save everybody and everything, when gorgeous Nicole Powell walks into his office. She's a damsel in distress and the breath of fresh air he needs.

Even the lawyers wear boots... Nicole Powell is a sassy Southern girl who has officially sworn off cowboys after a spate of bad seeds-until her father's death sends her to Montana and into the arms of a man who seems too good to be true.

Her instincts tell her to high tail it out of Montana, but she can't resist a cowboy with a slow hand...

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Janice Combes has two loves, bucking bulls and Dirk Knowlton. But Dirk only has eyes for a dazzling rodeo queen. How can Janice ever compete while mired ankle-deep in manure? Exchanging playful banter with Dirk is all Janice can expect-until the stormy night he knocks on her door dripping wet and needing a place to crash.

Different Dreams...

Dirk Knowlton is living the cowboy dream. Life should be good-roping, branding, backing broncs, riding bulls, but there's a void he can't seem to fill. After getting hung up by a bull, he wonders if this is really the life he wants. Restless and rebellious, he bolts...but there's a certain cowgirl he can't forget.

When a battle-scarred Dirk returns to his Montana ranch he's determined to hang on at any cost. Janice has come back home to lick her own wounds. When old dreams turn to dust, can two wary hearts take another chance on love?

Excerpts available at:

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