



COME SPRING,  
THINGS WILL BE BETTER

**A Christmas Story**

A SHORT STORY BY

**William F. Powers**



# Come Spring, Things Will Be Better

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Edited by Jerian R. Powers  
Published by Blue Cat Ventures Press

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Enjoy!

\* \* \* Initio \* \* \*

"Everything will turn out all right, Maribeth. Come Spring, things will be better. Maybe this ol' war will be over, and we can get to farming our land. You'll see. Things will be better in the Spring."

"I know, Robert. I just wish you wouldn't go, that's all." She hugged him tighter as she spoke.

Maribeth Waldon read the newspapers—she saw the reports. She knew the arguments on one side and the arguments on the other side. In all her days, it had never occurred to her that the state she loved would be at war with some of the other states—states whose citizens loved their lives as much as she loved hers. She could not imagine such a thing happening, but it had happened all the same.

She also read the death counts. Battles were reported along with the casualty figures.

The whole thing terrified her, not just the deaths and carnage but the way that the war had just leapt onto the scene. It was like a spirited horse bolting from the barn—once it was out, there just seemed no way to get it back into the stall.

Newspapers also reported quotes from public figures that the conflict would not go on much longer. Of course, they had printed the same opinions two and a half years ago when the war started so such quotes these days had become less frequent—and even less convincing.

About this time last year, there was horrible bloodshed at Antietam. Earlier this year, there was more at Chancellorsville. Then in July, there was Gettysburg—how many dear souls had been lost during those three terrible days? "Dear God," she had prayed, "How long will this killing go on?" Now, as the autumn of Eighteen Hundred and Sixty Three set in, the newspapers were reporting a major battle in Chickamauga. Those four conflicts alone accounted for one hundred forty thousand dead, wounded or missing, not to mention the numberless fights before or between.

When Maribeth was just three, her father had been thrown from a horse and killed. He was a good man, but she could not remember him very well except what her mother told her. Then last year, her mother came down with the fever. Now her husband—the only family she had left—was going to war.

The train's shrill whistle sounded for the second time.

"Maribeth, I must board the train."

She held him with quivering arms for just a few more precious moments. As she released him and moved to arms' length, she looked at him with eyes that were beginning to melt. "You come back to me, Robert Waldon. I am giving you permission to do what you have to do, but I am NOT giving you permission to die. Do you hear me?" Her tone was more fearful than angry.

He smiled. "Yes my darling Maribeth. You are the love of my life ... I will come back to you."

She lunged at him again, grabbing him around the neck, and pressing her cheek to his. The deep-seated groans of her heart began to force their way out as quiet sobs.

The whistle sounded again, then steam released from the engine up at the front of the train.

"Dearest Maribeth, I truly must go."

She released him slowly, as if she feared it was the last time she would ever hold him.

"I will post a letter every week," he promised as he picked up his pack and his rifle. In three paces, he was on the first step of the rail car. He turned

to smile at her, and just as he did, the car lurched with the movement of the engine. He dropped his pack to grab the handrail but managed to trap it against the next step with his knee. He gave her a sheepish grin and shrugged his shoulders.

“What *ever* shall I do with you, Robert Waldon?!” she shouted over the noise with a scolding chuckle.

He grinned again, then shrugged again. “I love you,” he mouthed quietly, closing their parting conversation. They were alone in this moment. The platform was crowded but these two souls embraced but one tender focus—the love they shared.

“I love you too,” she said softly, unwilling to let her lover’s expression go unanswered.

He grabbed his pack, walked up into the car, and found a rear-facing seat. Opening the window, he leaned out slightly, and waved to his bride of a little over two years. As the station grew further and further distant, the only thing he was sure he could still see were the tears that glistened in her eyes and slowly traced paths on her soft cheeks.

It sorrowed him that his leaving grieved her so. He loved her dearly.

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“My Dearest Maribeth,

“This is my ninth week away from you, and each seems longer than the last.

“I am in receipt of your letter dated the twenty-first of last month. That makes six letters I have now; each is a treasure to me. I reread them often when we are at rest. I trust that mine are arriving regularly. As promised, I have posted a letter each week, and I hope they find you safe and warm, especially as this winter sets in.

“We have engaged the enemy upon several occasions with some success. My lieutenant was wounded in a skirmish just after I posted my last letter, as was Mr. Campbell’s son Ralph. You will recall that I mentioned Ralph being positioned with our company in my letter of two weeks past. The lieutenant only received a minor wound and came back among our ranks yesterday. Ralph’s wounds were more serious, so they have released him from duty; he will return home after some medical care.”

Robert had scribbled through the next sentence, and Maribeth could not make out what it said. That was his intention, but it unnerved her.

“I am doing well. Actually, our unit has only suffered a few casualties and not one death since I arrived. I thank God for his mercies during this peril.”

Robert mentioned several other things and then closed his letter. “I’m longing to be with you again. Your loving and devoted husband, Robert.”

Several of her tears dampened the pages. It was with great relief that she read of his welfare and his love. When she had read it twice again, she folded it back the same as it had arrived and tucked it into the pocket in her sweater. Now to pick up a few supplies and then journey back to the house. There she would place the letter in the wardrobe drawer with the eight other reminders of her beloved husband who was also her best friend.

In with the letter, he had folded several bills which she could use to support herself as well as keep up the payments on their small farmland. Robert had made arrangements with Mr. Dwyer to buy three acres in the summer before he and Maribeth were married. It was their dream to farm the land and acquire more as they prospered, but he needed to make the payments and buy some seed and equipment to get started, so Robert had continued to apprentice at the blacksmith’s shop. He even reasoned that with what he was learning there he could make some of the equipment they needed, saving them money and accelerating their dream. However, when the enemy won a nearby skirmish and commandeered all the blacksmith’s equipment, Robert suddenly was without a way to support himself and his precious wife. To keep their dream alive, he enlisted in the army.

Maribeth would also stop by Mr. Dwyer’s and make a payment on her way home from town.

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“My Dearest Maribeth,

“Twenty-four weeks have now separated us. I never thought this would take so long. I guess the two and one half years that the war persisted before I entered it should have been a harbinger of the calendar that lay before me. I am laughing at my imprudence as I write this.

“As mentioned in several previous letters, I was not prepared in my mind for the harshness of winter in the out-of-doors. However, now that the daylight is increasing, the temperatures are becoming much more tolerable.

“I am in receipt of your letter of the seventeenth of February. I am very glad for your decision to tend a garden again this year; your garden earnings have advanced our goals. I am so proud of your industriousness in helping to keep our dream alive. You are a treasure to me as I trust I am to you.”

Robert mentioned some of his army friends, their exploits and adventures, being careful with his details. Several things that he included in earlier letters had frightened his dear wife, so he learned to be more cautious with anything which might prove to be upsetting.

He closed his thoughts affectionately, folded in all his pay but a few dollars, and posted his letter.

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It was not unusual for Robert's letters to arrive late. Although he was regular to post a letter toward the end of every week, there might be ten or twelve days between arrivals at the postal station in Mr. Rivers' general store. When that happened, the next letter usually followed within another several days, and then the normal routine resumed. One letter even arrived a day ahead of the one posted the previous week. Such was the way of letters at war time.

Thankfully, none of Robert's letters had been lost before. That is what made this delay most puzzling. It had been three weeks now since the last letter. The fifty-ninth letter—she had kept count and memorized much of them—had been dated the twenty-eighth of October, Eighteen Hundred and Sixty Four, almost fourteen months since they said goodbye at the railway station.

Maribeth went to town twice the second week and then every other day this last week, but still there was no letter. She was worried but determined as she connected the horse to the wagon. The trek to town took a little less than an hour. It had become a familiar ride during Robert's absence with the regular runs for mail. Back in the Spring, the trip was enchanting as the flowers began to show and the trees started to bud. Summer was always a joy, and even in the heat there was enough breeze to make the ride pleasant when she took in the summer produce that she was able to grow in a garden and sell through the general store. Then Autumn came with the colors, the smell of fresh hay, and other harvest fragrances which made for a delightful journey.

Now it had just become a cold, tedious November ride that had yielded no postal results for a fortnight and a half. It was harsh—brutally harsh—especially today as the snow flurries teamed with the wind to intensify late autumn's angry mood. The knot in Maribeth's stomach tightened as she saw the church steeple just beyond the rise. In another minute, the whole town came into view. She tapped the reins on Lucy's back, and the mare began a faster pace.

Maribeth stopped in front of the general store, set the brake, and climbed down from the wagon. Hurriedly, she crossed the boardwalk and opened the door. The look on her face announced her mission, and the smile Isaiah Rivers returned told her that *this* trip had not been in vain!

With a shriek coming through a huge grin, she ran wide-eyed to the postal counter, arriving even before Mr. Rivers could get behind it to retrieve the letter. She stood there clapping her hands, bouncing on her toes, waiting for him to hand her the delight she had craved these dreadful weeks. In a single motion, she tore open the letter and bounded to the front of the store to be near the light coming in through the window.

Her countenance suddenly crashed as she saw, in unfamiliar handwriting:

“Dear Mrs. Waldon,

“It is with great sadness that I write you upon the passing of your husband Robert. He and I became good friends when I joined this company in July. I felt sure that you would want to know the particulars of his death.” The letter went on to recount the explosion, the collapse of the bridge, the fact that Robert and several other men had been near the detonation so he had died quickly without suffering. He also gave the general location where the bodies had been buried.

The rest of the letter didn’t matter. By the time her eyes got through the first sentence, they were filled with tears that prevented her reading further. Isaiah saw the letter drop from her trembling hand; it touched the floor just moments before she did as she collapsed into a sobbing heap. Isaiah’s wife quickly rushed to her side not sure of the reason for the breakdown. As she knelt down and held Maribeth in her arms, her eyes fell on the letter, and she knew. Rebekah Rivers held that dear, weeping soul and soon began to cry herself.

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Five weeks had passed since the final letter. The young widow had resigned herself to stay at home for awhile. She only went into town this time because her supplies were getting low, and she feared running out in the event of a blizzard.

Marla Hanson, the minister’s wife, came by the store to do her Friday shopping while Maribeth was there. Maribeth had not attended church since the letter, so Marla encouraged her to come to tomorrow night’s candlelight service.

“Maribeth, please come. It would be so good to see you out,” Marla pleaded gently. “I am sure it would also be good for you.”

“I can’t, Mrs. Hanson. I just haven’t the strength.”

“I know your grief is hard, but you need your church friends to help you through this. We are your brothers and sisters in the Lord. The candlelight service will be encouraging to you.”

“But it will be so late, and the trip is so long ... I ... I just can’t.”

Christmas this year would be in two days ... on Sunday.

“I’ll tell you what,” Marla persisted. “Why don’t you come for dinner tomorrow? Afterwards, we can go to the candlelight service. Then, you come spend the night with us, and we can go to meeting in the morning. How does that sound to you?”

Pressing Maribeth felt so unnatural to Marla. Unlike her gregarious husband, Marla was very mild mannered, but she saw the grief in her young friend’s eyes and longed to staunch the bleeding of her tender heart.

Maribeth was so broken ... so tired ... so lonely. She finally relented and promised to be at Marla’s house by four o’clock the next day.

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Just as it was during the weeks since she received the letter, it took all the strength Maribeth could muster just to get out of bed on this cold, bleak Saturday morning. For a Christmas Eve Day the temperatures were quite mild, but mild in December was still cold.

She stoked the stove and prepared the coffee kettle. She had enough wood inside for the day, but the pile outside was not sufficient for the winter. As chilly as the day was, this was better weather than she was likely to get for the remainder of the winter so this morning would be planned around the chopping stump. After lunch, she would straighten up around the house; then she would get ready for the ride into town. She really did not want to go to the candlelight service, but she had promised Marla at the store yesterday.

As she chopped and split the wood, her fingers and toes became increasingly cold. “How did Robert ever do this?” she asked herself. She hadn’t chopped wood last winter as Robert cut and split enough for the whole season before he left for the war. She even had enough remaining for part of this winter and here in late December was just starting to deplete the woodpile. Now, after an hour with not much to show for it, her hands and feet hurt, and her back hurt; most of all, her heart hurt. Finally, she sat down on the stump and cried like she had never cried.



After a few minutes, she got up from the stump, picked up the axe, and returned to the house. The cry, the cold, and the chopping had exhausted her. She placed the axe in the corner, lay down on the bed, and slowly drifted into an uneasy sleep.

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In a few hours, she awoke. Judging by the sun, it was a little after noon, but she was not hungry. She had skipped lunch most days over the last several weeks—and sometimes breakfast too. She just did not want to bother.

She thought again about not going into town for dinner or the Christmas Eve service, but now *two* things pressed on her: one, she had promised; two, she decided she needed to see if one of the ladies at church would come out with her husband in the next week or two so the women could visit and he could chop some wood for her. Maribeth reasoned that she could repay them with some of the yield from next year's garden.

Maribeth got up and got ready for her journey.

Outside, the temperature had dropped, and the wind had picked up. She went out to the shed, got the tack, harnessed Lucy, and hitched the horse to the wagon.

She would arrive a little earlier than four o'clock but not too much earlier. She thought Marla would be relieved to see her make it out anyway. Besides, if she didn't go now she might just change her mind ... promises and firewood notwithstanding.

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Dinner had been pleasant. The Hansons were a dear couple and even had her laughing several times ... something she had not done a lot lately. It was definitely a lift to her spirits. She discussed her need for firewood; Marla assured her she could think of several ladies who would be glad to ask their husbands to help.

When the time for the candlelight service came, the three went next door to the church. People were already gathering. Someone had hung a Christmas wreath on the door and had put some pine sprigs in the windows. There was a lit candle on a table up front that would be used later. Along with the stars and a sliver of moon shining through the window, it provided all of the light in the room as the sun had taken its leave several hours before.

Derrick Hanson shook hands with everyone, and then people began to gather to the pews. The minister offered a short prayer of thanksgiving, for the season of remembering the birth of the Savior, and for God's hand of blessing throughout this year. He ended with an "Amen", and the congregation responded in kind. Marla held her breath, hoping to hear something from the young widow who sat next to her; she had indeed heard a soft "Amen." "Amen," Marla whispered softly.

Snow was falling and was shaken off of coats and shawls as folks continued to arrive. As Derrick called out the name of a carol for the congregation to sing, the train arrived at the far end of town, its distant bell and whistle adding to the sounds of the season. The fresh pine branches were releasing their fragrance. It would be a hard Christmas, but it was Christmas, nevertheless, and through tears and a sorrowed smile, Maribeth was once again singing the songs of a grateful heart.

Several more carols were sung, mixed with seasonal thoughts that the minister had prepared. Then the time came for the lighting of the candles. The entire congregation slowly filed around the sides of the room and each lit their candle from the one on the table at the front. As they proceeded, they sang the old Charles Wesley hymn "Come Thou Long Expected Jesus," penned more than a century earlier. As they did each year, they sang it through twice. The singing ended just as the last of the people returned to their pews.

Minister Hanson stood and announced the next carol, and he began leading out the hymn. "Silent night, holy night. All is calm, all is bright ..."

As they began to sing the second verse, the door at the rear opened. "Silent night, holy night ...." Another latecomer stepped in from the cold and closed the door behind him. "Shepherds quake at the sight ..." The latecomer began making his way forward into the candlelit room.

Derrick Hanson had a strong voice as a preacher, but his singing voice was good too. Although he tried to restrain himself during the singing, his voice could always be heard above the congregation. "Heavenly hosts ....." When the minister's voice fell silent, the absence was noticeable. One by one the carolers stopped singing and looked toward the front. In silence, they saw the startled look on the face of their beloved pastor; they turned to see the object of his gaze.

It was Robert Waldon.

When Maribeth saw her husband standing there—alive—she covered her mouth with her hands and began to weep. In another moment, she was crying *and* laughing and running down the same aisle that she and Robert had happily walked down more than three years prior. In a few steps and a

grand leap, she was wrapped in the in the arms of the one whom she had mourned, the one for whom her very soul had ached.

Never in the town's fifty-one-year history had there been a more joyous Christmas Eve, nor more laughter and uproar at a candlelight service. As the raucous rejoicing begin to subside, Minister Hanson's voice boomed over the remaining din. "I want us to sing a different carol now." He led them in singing "Joy to The World". It was almost as if the rafters were shaking as they reached the final stanza:

“He rules the world with truth and grace,  
And makes the nations prove  
The glories of His righteousness,  
And wonders of His love,  
And wonders of His love,  
And wonders, wonders, of His love.”

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After the service Robert explained what had happened. His unit was supposed to demolish a bridge to slow the advancing troops. His friend, Justin—who had written the letter—saw Robert at the end of the bridge right next to the explosives. Just as Justin looked away for a moment, Robert slipped and fell to the ground under the bridge just at the water's edge, hitting his head, and becoming unconscious. At almost the same moment, the explosives accidentally detonated, trapping Robert under one of the falling bridge beams, covering him with debris, and killing those nearby who had seen him fall. Justin had looked up in time to see wood splinters and several of his fellow soldiers flying through the air. Two of the recovered bodies were unidentifiable, but Justin assured the lieutenant that one of them was Waldon. Robert and one of the unidentified men had similar builds. With only two bodies—and one assumed to be Walton—they presumed that the third missing man had landed in the river beneath the bridge and been washed away.

The lieutenant and his remaining men finished demolishing the bridge, buried their dead, and headed back to where they were to meet up with their company. As well as they were able to determine, Robert remained unconscious the remainder of that day and into the night. Then he struggled well into the next morning before he finally freed himself. Following that, it was another two weeks of eating berries and roots before he caught up with his unit. By then the letter had long since been sent.

Captain Ballard had sympathy for Robert's unusual situation. His wife was mourning a loss that had not occurred, and the quickest way to alleviate her sorrows was to let him return to her. However, the captain—being a married man himself—was sure that having endured what she had, if Mrs. Waldon ever got her arms around her husband again, the army would *not* be getting him back. However, the most compelling of the dilemmas was that Robert had been reported as killed and was no longer being paid. He actually wasn't a part of the army anymore.

After weighing all the factors, the captain wrote a letter dismissing the young private from his command. "Before I relieve you of your duties, I have two final orders for you, young man."

"Yes, sir?"

"First, I want you to get home to your wife as quickly as you can."

"Yes, sir," Robert promised with a grin.

"Secondly, please extend my deepest regrets to Mrs. Waldon for this terrible mistake."

"I will, sir."

The captain stood, they saluted and shook hands then Robert started out on the fastest journey he could manage.

Two weeks after their grand reunion, the very happy Mrs. Waldon received a letter from the captain expressing his "most sincere apology" for the grief she had endured.

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Spring that year was unusually fresh and crisp. It just teemed with life, with vibrancy, with joy.

Robert had been right ... well, almost right. It had come a year later than he promised, but the war had ended, Spring had come, and things *were* better.

Between the money that Maribeth earned from her garden crops and the money Robert had sent home, she had put away enough money that they could buy the seeds and the essential equipment to begin farming their land. The work was hard, but hard had never felt so good. Through the years they continued to prosper, purchasing more land from Mr. Dwyer and expanding into livestock.

Most importantly, however, by the time they departed this world at a good, old age—the one in early spring and the other just three weeks later—they had left a legacy of faith, hope, and love to five dear children, fourteen grandchildren, and a growing number of great-grandchildren who had all

learned the story of Robert and Maribeth Waldon—a story of Spring and of better things to come.

\* \* \* Fini \* \* \*

I hope you enjoyed “*Come Spring, Things Will Be Better, A Christmas Story*”. Some of my other titles include:

### **CHILDRENS STORIES**

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