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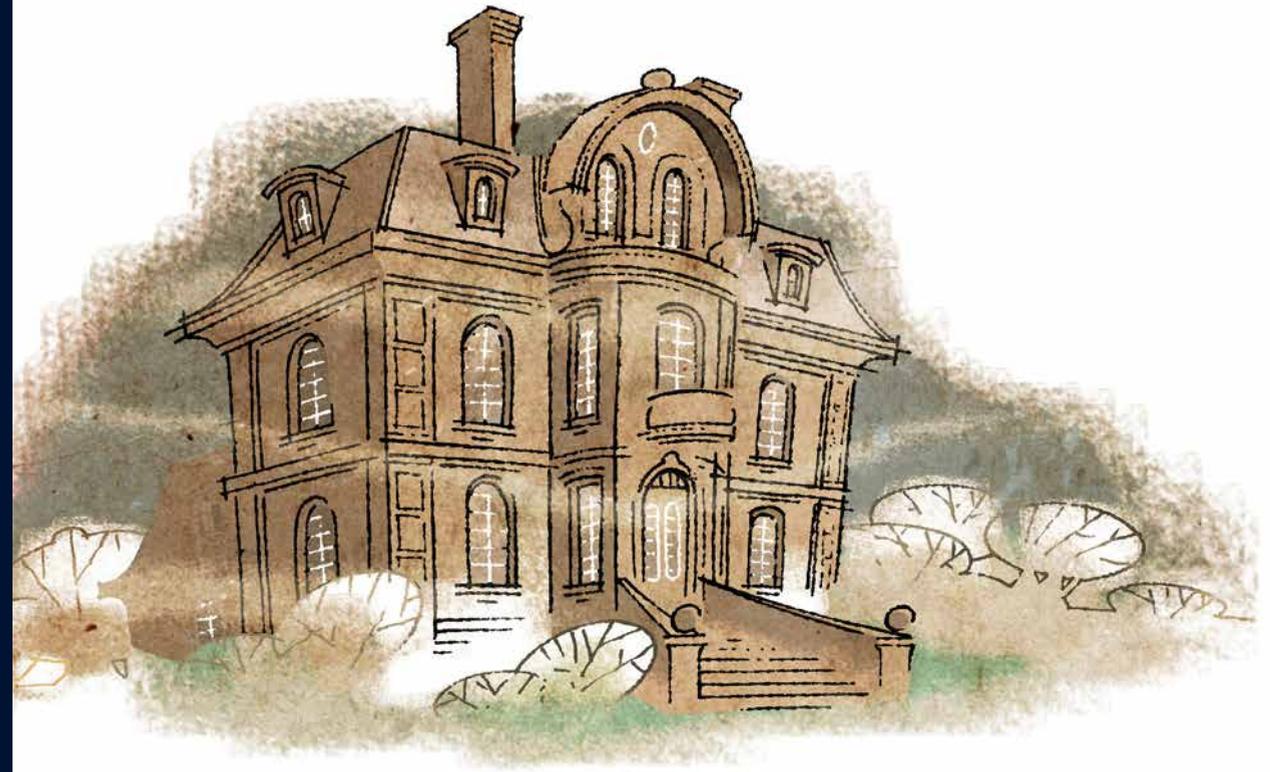


Cecilie Eken

AUNT STELLA'S HOUSE

A CHRISTMAS TALE

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A CHRISTMAS TALE

Illustrations by Peter Heydenreich



Meet the characters



EMMA

Emma is nine years old. She has grown up in an apartment in the city with her parents and younger brother, Carl. She is imaginative and curious, and loves to dress up. When she is playing, she often makes up stories based on whatever is round about her. Sometimes, she doesn't stop to think first about what she says or does. She isn't always very brave when it comes to trying new things, and prefers to have her father and mother close by. Emma is very fond of her brother, but now and then she finds him a little bit annoying and childish, and thinks he should listen more to her.

CARL

Carl is seven years old. He likes cars and building things with his hands; he is good at climbing and balancing and sometimes he's braver than his sister. He often lets Emma take the lead when they play together because that's what she does best, and they usually have a lot of fun together. Carl likes meeting new people, as long as his sister is there too, and he's glad she's there to keep an eye on him. Sometimes, though, he thinks Emma wants to be too much in charge, and that can get a bit boring. If you offer Carl a biscuit, you can be sure he'll take it.

AUNT STELLA

Aunt Stella lived a life full of experiences together with her husband, Ricky, who died about ten years ago. Their house is full of objects they have inherited or brought home from their many travels around the world. Aunt Stella is not too good on her feet any more and so she doesn't travel like she used to, but stays at home with Stripy the cat. She gets help around the house and garden, but she still does her own cooking, and is not afraid to eat dessert first, if that's what she fancies. Generally speaking, Aunt Stella isn't too bothered about obeying the rules and keeping on top of things, and sometimes she mislays things. Talking about her travel experiences is one of her greatest pleasures.

— CHAPTER —



Sometimes mothers can be irritating, Emma thought. She looked out of the car window, the raindrops slanting with the car's motion. Next to her, Carl had fallen asleep. He always did that on a long drive.

How come their mother couldn't even manage to walk downstairs? Now she was at home, relaxing on the sofa in their apartment, her foot in plaster, and she wasn't allowed to do anything. And their father was due to leave for a five-day business trip the next morning. That was why she and her brother Carl were in the car, and Father was driving them the long road from town to Aunt Stella's place, where they would remain until Christmas. Aunt Stella lived right out in a forest. Emma and Carl had never visited her before, and certainly not without Mother and Father.

"Can't gran and grandpa just look after us?" Emma had asked.

"Have you forgotten they're off to the US to celebrate Christmas with Aunt Sofie and your cousins this year?" her father had replied.

Actually, Emma had forgotten. And nanny and granddad were too old, and everyone else was too busy, so that just left Aunt Stella. All because Mum couldn't pick up her feet properly.

Emma sighed and looked at the car they were about to overtake on the motorway. There was a grey-haired lady behind the steering wheel. The car's windscreen wipers were working frantically, and her nose was almost touching the windscreen.

It was actually more than two years since she'd seen Aunt Stella and all she could remember was that she had a cat, and that she talked a lot. But each Christmas, she sent a package of gifts to Emma and Carl, and her presents were always lovely. A magnifying glass. An egg made from a shiny, green stone. A music box. A penknife. Emma was pretty sure she'd like Aunt Stella; it was just that she didn't really know her.

"I'm sure you'll have a great time, Emma," her father said, turning round as he drove. "When I was a child, I loved visiting Aunt Stella and Uncle Ricky. Their house is full of things they've brought back from all sorts of trips."

"Mmm" was all Emma could muster.

Carl snored gently.

They exited the motorway and continued driving along roads that got narrower and narrower. Gradually, the rain stopped, but the clouds still hung low. They passed through villages with no one to be seen, and eventually there weren't even any houses – only fields and trees. Finally, her turned father into a side road that led into the woods.

"I reckon this is probably it, but the sat-nav hasn't got a clue where we are."

Around them, the fog was becoming more and more dense.

"Let's hope we don't get lost," Father murmured.

Emma sighed again.

