

An excerpt from the short story  
“The Giving Christmas Cookie”

from the book

*Christmas Cookies Are for Giving*  
*Recipes, Stories and Tips for Making Heartwarming Gifts*

by Kristin Johnson and Mimi Cummins

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AMANDA SPOTTED A SODA MACHINE and in her haste tripped over the footrest of a solid steel wheelchair in the hall. Amanda stepped back and stammered an apology to the woman in the wheelchair, gaunt but elegant, with skin as clear and flawless as an angel's. I could see strands of curly white-blond hair escaping from a babushka she wore underneath a broad-brimmed red straw hat decorated with a garland of small white flowers. Like Grandma, she shivered in a thick, soft sweater, and her long red skirt covered her legs.

“Look where you're going.” The cocoa brown eyes that looked at Amanda were amused. “Can't wait to get away from the old folks, eh?”

Amanda stood with gawky tall grace. “They're having a sale at the mall.”

“I love shopping,” the woman said.

“Shopping rules,” Amanda agreed. “I'm sorry I knocked into you.”

“Believe me, dear, you're a welcome distraction.” The woman extended a stiff, arthritic hand. “My name is Elise.”

We introduced ourselves and told her about Grandma.

“Oh, yes, I know her. So sweet, but it's a terrible thing to lose one's mind.” Elise clenched her fingers together. I noticed the stiffness in her fingers, more severe than with arthritis, and the way she looked tired even by the effort of speaking to us. “But then, we all have our burdens.”

“You have rheumatoid arthritis?”

I dealt with a variety of illnesses, and could spot a range of symptoms. A pity I couldn't detect Grandma's Alzheimer's. Granddad shielded us from the knowledge until he died.

“Yes, and it's tiring me. I want to talk to you delightful girls some more, if you'll help me to my room.”

Amanda pushed the unwieldy wheelchair to Elise's room, filled with poinsettias and lamps with lacy shades. Paintings of fairy-tale medieval castles on the Rhine and the Loire covered the walls. There was one large photo of a young man with outdoorsy good looks. The photo was signed “To ma chère Elise—Jacques Delacroix.”

“My husband.” Elise smiled. “I met him when I was studying fashion in Paris.”

“Paris!” Amanda's eyes looked more alive. “I'd like to go there and open a café.”

Elise squeezed her hand. “He was in the French cinema—he later learned the American custom of signing stars' photographs and gave me this one as a playful reminder of our exciting lives. I was making hats and he had—”

She stopped and smiled. “You didn't come here to hear about my life.”

“We'd love to,” I said, enchanted with this woman.

Amanda looked, star-struck, at the photograph of Elise's husband, who reminded me a bit of Robert Redford or Harrison Ford.

“He's cute,” she said.

“He was wonderful.” Elise's face softened with the glow of love never absent. “Sit down, please. It's good to have company.”

Amanda sat listening to Elise, and asked questions about fashion, Paris, and falling in love with a romantic movie star. Elise learned about my sister Kate and suggested we make a trip as a family to see her.

“Are you all prepared for Christmas?” she asked.

“Mostly,” I said.

“It's wonderful that you take the time out of your holiday to visit Edith.” Elise looked toward the small, plain bedside table, a contrast to the bed with its lace counterpane, covered with a cozy quilt the color of Elise's hat. “My children blame my illness for my husband's death. They never come to see me.”

Amanda gently touched Elise's hand. "That's awful."

I was proud of my daughter's ability to adapt, and to put people at ease.

"I miss them...but mostly I miss my kitchen, and making the Giving Christmas Cookie. The smells would fill the whole house. My children and grandchildren thought I was a great cook."

"Giving Christmas Cookie?" Amanda looked interested.

"Ah, I'm getting ahead of myself. Not unheard of when you're older. My ancestors in Vienna, Austria had the most delicious vanilla cookie recipe, *Vanillekipferl*. In 1863, the Aichner family opened a *konditorei*, a pastry and candy shop, where the most delicious smells of rugulach and almond crescents and linzer sandwiches—with raspberry jam that stayed on your tongue—made you cry with the joy of being alive, of sitting there among friends and family, artists, musicians..."

She pointed toward the bedside table. "Could one of you please open the drawer by my bedside, please? You'll find an ebony box inside, and it has *Die Konditorei Aichner* inscribed in gold on the lid."

Amanda opened the drawer and brought out a small enameled box that was so black it reflected Amanda's own silhouette when she turned it on its side. The top reminded me of an intricately decorated cake with ribbons of gold, like frosting, running through the gleaming ebony. The gold rivers formed flowers and leaves and vines that framed the words *Die Konditorei Aichner—Familien und Freunde sind willkommen!*

Amanda opened the box and slowly revealed its treasures: several yellowing, thin parchment sheets covered with elegant, round handwriting, most of it English script. The first sheet was illustrated with angels and cookie cutouts. Amanda touched the word *Vanillekipferl*, done in calligraphy.

"That's German for 'Vanilla Crescents,' " Elise said. "My ancestors would keep the ovens going all day and night, because everyone in Vienna loved the vanilla fragrance and the taste they said was like heaven. My mother took that as her signature recipe, and selling them supported our family. But when I moved to Paris, of course it was not wise to speak German after the war, so I spoke French. When I moved to America with Jacques and the children, I was out of the habit of speaking German, so my children never learned it, and they named the cookie The Giving Christmas Cookie, since we gave the cookies every year as gifts. After my husband died and I moved here, I translated the recipe into English to give to my children so they could continue the tradition. But, of course, they weren't interested."

Amanda gazed at the words. "I gained five pounds just reading this."

"It tastes even better," Elise said. "And in my day, we didn't worry so much about food. We ate with our families. Do you eat dinner together?"

"Most nights," I said. "And Amanda's our baker."

"You enjoy making cookies?" Elise smiled at Amanda. "I wish my grandchildren did. I wish I could share my cookie recipe with them, and the other Christmas cookie recipes and family traditions I collected."

I read another paper. "And this looks like a prayer."

"A kitchen prayer," Elise said. "I call it the before Grace prayer. You recite it while baking."

The prayer read:

*"God bless this mixture with the sweetest and tastiest ingredients: joy, faith, family, friendship, love, and health. Let the scent of this holiday offering rise to Heaven and make the angels sing, for the happiness of mankind is their feast. Let us taste our blessings with each bite as we share the company of our loved ones. Amen."*

Amanda grabbed the box and the papers. "Mom, I just had the most awesome idea."

The starlight in her eyes made me grin, at both the happiness and the mischief I knew followed that look.

"What's your idea?"

