I had always planned to come home for Christmas. It wasn’t until at a party for my community choir, by the chattiest woman in the group and a few glasses of wine that I was persuaded otherwise. “Oh dear, you musn’t come back! Use your time.” She urged with an imploring hand on my elbow. Being a straightforward sort of woman who takes great pride in sorting out the lives of others for the better and of a very generous nature with her connections, she asked for my notebook and inside scribbled the address of her English husband’s sister who she said lived in a small village in the south of England. “Oh, they would love to have you for Christmas, and there’s nothing like an English Christmas,” she insisted, “you will love it, oh you just have to go.” Her eyes sparkled with such excitement at the idea that I couldn't refuse at least an inquiry to my parents. I glanced down at my notebook at the address she had written in a suitably frazzled hand: Merton Cottage, The Street, Kilmington, Wiltshire, England.

Merton Cottage. The very cottage in front of which I now found myself stood, two days before Christmas in snowy Kilmington on The Street, (so named for being the only one in the village). The “cottage” was hardly what I would have imagined a cottage to be. As a country house, it was much bigger than the tiny residences I was used to seeing packed into British towns and cities. As I gave a timid knock on the door, I shifted my feet in nervousness on the uneven steps. This last week had been my first exposure to that disease they warned me about before I left; homesickness. I had enjoyed every part of my first term at Lancaster University- made wonderful friends, knew the town and campus so well I could give the locals directions and never longed to be anywhere but within those surroundings I had come to cherish so much. But classes had ended now, campus was deserted and on the radio they were playing Bing Crosby’s “White Christmas” and Frank
Lauren Katalinich – Finding My Place on the Street

Sinatra’s “I’ll Be Home for Christmas” which conjured in my head with every familiar note, images of my mother wrapping presents, my father reading aloud the Nutcracker story by the tree and my little brother setting up camp with his cat to wait for Santa in the living room. They were doing much the same this year-- cooking the same delicious meals and singing the same carols, but without me. I was some 4,000 miles away on the porch of a snowy cottage about to spend Christmas in the company of a family I had never met.

I was excited to get to know a new place. After all, though it was the allures of charm: charming thatched roofs, charming bridges over charming streams, the words of Dickens and Austen and Keats and the melodies of the Beatles that may have attracted me to England, it was not the England I fell in love with. I found the country itself, outside of the tourist ideal, held even more fascination for me. I had found a place for myself at Lancaster and I was resolved to do so wherever I travelled. I had made English friends, played English sports, and could somewhat successfully translate Britishisms into their American equivalents. I had even begun to grasp the elusive concept of “banter” which seems to permeate so completely English social interaction. The term is versatile- it’s a kind of playful teasing with an edge, a witty and imaginative back-and-forth, the mastery of which is an indicator of social competency. “Where’s your banter?” they will ask. American’s are rumored not to have it, so I like to take every chance to practice.

My nervousness, to my relief, was very short-lived-- for the next minute an enormous man, nearly 6-foot 8, flung open the door and greeted me with such a smile and hug that I was instantly convinced that there had never been time when we were strangers. He welcomed me in a booming voice that matched his stature perfectly, and introduced himself as Ian. Inside I met Elizabeth, his wife, his 90-year old father, Charles who was
staying with them for the holidays and the menagerie of 6 dogs, 6 cats (and their six kittens), goats, chickens and sheep and a newly acquired set of bees (for their honey business) with whom they shared Merton Cottage.

The cottage is an interesting place; even the people who lived there seem to find it an enigma. Ian told me that he suspected it had been built around the mid-1500s but the origins of its name remain a mystery. I was baffled at this for I had thought certainly that the custom named houses I had observed since I arrived was simply the choice of the family that lived there. In fact, the name usually comes on the deed of building and part of the official address. The result is a house with an identity and a character all its own. And, I found, a scapegoat; “I haven’t been warm in five years- it’s bloody Merton Cottage!” I heard Elizabeth exclaim one evening. I’ve grown very fond of the tradition-- a name seems to give recognition that those who live there are merely passers-through, that the house has seen far more than them and over the years added to its own character.

With busy making preparations for Christmas Eve the next day, I spent the evening in the company of Ian’s father. With mulled wine in hand I curled up on a chair by the blazing fire. Charles prefers whisky to wine and sipped slowly on his second glass. 17 years in the navy gave him his tolerance he says. We talked for hours; he spoke of his flat in Lyme Regis that overlooks the sea- he loves beauty and took up painting about 20 years before. Having spent the previous week admiring the rugged cliffs of Cornwall and Plymouth, I could only imagine the beauty he must capture with his brush of tempestuous waves forever careening against the rocks at the famous pier.( I found when we returned him to his apartment the following week though that the beauty of the sea, however attractive to
other artists, was clearly eclipsed in Charles’ eyes by the magnificent figure of his tabby, Felix, whose portrait, although admittedly very well executed, adorned nearly every wall.

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I rose early on Christmas morning to find the world outside bathed in beauty. I once again felt a sense of gratitude for the anti-privacy policies in this country-- It is legal to cross over private land here- a result of the British obsession with walking and their stubborn insistence that they be able to do it wherever they like. There was no church service offered this morning but I felt as I walked through the sparkling frost covered fields, no lack of spirituality. The sky was a beautiful combination of delicate pinks and purples as the sun rose, the birds sang and the sheep seemed to let out their bleats with more gusto than usual. I returned to the house from the back, though the garden, over the fence and past the chicken coop to greeting yaps of dogs who can sense the anticipation of Christmas and the certainty of a forthcoming roast dinner in the air.

It is a tradition; I was informed on first arriving in Kilmington that the Red Lion Inn (Kilmington’s local pub and the only business in the village) opens for two hours every Christmas day and that by custom the entire village packs in for pints on the generosity of the pub owner. So accordingly, the moment we had finished our Christmas dinner, along with a rather disastrous dessert of Christmas pudding which, in its failure to catch fire, resembled more of a saucer of brandy with bits of soggy cake in it, Ian jumped to his feet and declared that it was time to be, “Off to pub!”

The Red Lion is a little old pub just as you might imagine a pub in an English village might be with a wooden door and a cast iron latches. The walls and ceiling are mustard yellow with a deep red trim. The wooden beams above, almost so low as to hit your head,
are covered in Christmas cards from patrons to the well-loved owners and the stone fireplaces at either end housed two merry fires. When they told me everyone would be there, they certainly meant it. I never saw such a mélange of ages-old men congregating with their pints by the fire and young girls in their satin reds and greens dancing through the legs of grownups. There were old wooden stools pulled up to the bar and the Christmas tree stood like a queen in the corner, dressed in all her Christmas finery—bedecked in balls of gold and silver and tinsel all strewn about.

I went up to the bar with Charles and ordered a half pint of the local brew only to be reprimanded by the owner, “Half a pint on Christmas Day? Don’t be daft, ‘ere love,” thrusting an overflowing one into my hands. I watched as they sang the carols whose words I knew so well but the melodies of which seemed to be have been lost and changed in their trip over the Atlantic. I watched as little children rang the little brass bell that hung above the bar and every few moments another laughing group burst through the oak door, stamping feet and clapping hands.

We stayed the whole two hours, leaving only after the owner ushered us out and as we walked, laughing, back from the pub together down the hedge-lined Street to that old cottage I was reminded once again of that wonderful phenomenon I have enjoyed since I came to this country which is that the only difference between a stranger and a friend is one very good chat (and how many I had had!) And I whispered a small thank you to the Christmas wind blowing down from the top of the hills, to the little stone church, the bleating sheep, for this lovely family, for the dear pushy woman in my choir and the wonderful prospect of six more months in which to enjoy them.