

12 Days

edited by Shelley Silas

*Stories inspired by
"The Twelve Days
of Christmas"*



Val McDermid • Sophie Kinsella • Jake Arnott
Mike Gayle • Patrick Neate • Stella Duffy
and more . . .

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A Partridge in a Pear Tree

When the King of Spain's daughter came to visit me she wore a gown of ivory brocade cut into with diamond lace. On her feet were calfskin shoes and she carried a fan carved from a single elephant tusk. The King of Spain's daughter travelled from Seville to Cordoba by foot, then by carriage to Madrid. She waited two hours at the airport there, bought a Steven King novel and caught an adjoining flight to Barcelona. Unfortunately she left the book – just three chapters in and already dog-eared – in the seat-back pocket on the plane. After a brief diversionary weekend in Sitges, lunch in Tarragona, supper in Girona, she travelled the coast road up to Perpignan. I did not know she was coming, but on the day she left, a week after the feast of the Assumption, I knew something was on its way. I felt it in the water, washed my hands in a porcelain bowl and the cool liquid was heavy with waiting.

I will come to you in the evening, orange blossom in my hair. I will take your hand and hold it to my breast, you will count the beats of my heart. We will never go astray. Daylight may be marred by fog or rain, the moon waxes and wanes, the earth spins on an elliptical axis so that even the rising sun appears to arrive from an altered direction, adjusting the angle of shine from summer to winter. But the Pole Star and the Southern Cross have marked us out. I'm coming. I'll need a cup of tea when I get there. And a good book.

I don't know how she found me. I know why she found me. The tree drew her, of course. Pear tree, not nut tree, no matter what they called it. I should know, I planted the seed. It drew them all, my little tree. Cousins and kings, councillors, counts, and the others too. Those that would steal it, take the harvest, smelt it down, make their own precious things. There are always people waiting to steal what they can, especially from something as generous as my little tree – those welcoming wide open branches. But these were my precious things, they would not be taken. Having planted the seed in the first place – one part organic compost to two parts peat and sand mix - I too was surprised when the tree began. I remember my fifth form biology, I eat bean sprouts, I know what to watch for.

I know what to watch for. The lie of the land, sleight of hand, wedding band. Your ring finger is empty. I will fill it for you.

I watched the seed unfurl and grow. And keep growing. First the kitchen windowsill, then a gentle tempering to the outdoors, terracotta pot bubble-wrapped tight for chilly evenings, by spring the root and branches were strong enough for the ground. London clay, thick and cloying, seemed worth a try. The blossom arrived first. It was not as I had expected, almost too delicate. We had a warm spring this year, lucky spring, a late and easy Easter, four full moons packed into the first three months. I know about trees, fruit and nut. Have read up on them, our local library sees a lot of allotmenters, books pock-marked by dirty fingers. Usually there must be two trees, male and female, for the promiscuous dancing bees. I had just the one. It wasn't meant to fruit so soon. But it did. How it did. Nutmeg and pear. Pear tree with a little added spice.

I agree with you. After all, if the tree blooms a pear, then surely the branch on which it sits is a pear tree? And pear wood is mine, always has been. Sacred to Athena, Hera, Vishnu-Narayana. (I looked it up online.) I am coming for it. For the gardener too and your rough dirt-working hands. I don't mind a hard journey. I do not believe it is better to travel than to arrive, at least not in second class accommodation. But the approach is valuable, a time of preparation, consideration. I gather myself, the advent of arrival.

Unfortunately one of my neighbours, nosy woman, always chatting over the fence, became interested in the tree's progress. It is the curse of our London terraces – you think I live here because I actually enjoy a recreation of the fifties myth, street-party stories? I certainly do not. Sadly I do not have the wealth to garner anonymity and my interfering neighbour saw the shining leaves. I had tried to shield the heavy flowers from her spying eyes, the prying spies I knew she would tell, a full mouth of secrets dripping from the corner of her curling lips. I built a shed around the tree, open to summer light, closed against winter dark. Glass roofed, glass bricked, creosote-edged beams erected merely for the scent, my shed was a place of translucent light and slow growing ease. I am no DIY expert, B&Q is close to the seventh ring of hell for me, IKEA a Swedish prison. But I tried hard, worked harder and, in the end, I was pretty damn pleased with the result. There are people who enjoy the process of creation. Not me, my moment of satisfaction comes from having it all done and dusted. Ready. Waiting.

I dressed well for the journey, packed better for my arrival. We had some troubles on the way, problems both with transport and accommodation. You have to pre-book Travel Inns far in advance these days and I prefer not to give out my credit card details on the telephone if at all possible, I do not easily believe in strangers. Well, but not easily. Still, we managed. I wore the silk brocade, dark green. It creases least of all my gowns. The diamond cuts can be perilous though, the edges are carbon-dated and sharp. As long as I take care to move with precision my skin generally stays whole. And the calf-skin slippers are very soft, easy to walk in. I have read the new suggestion that even short journeys can cause deep-vein thrombosis, it is best to take precautions. I dance in my slippers whenever possible. Airline stewards usually appreciate the gesture.

Summer took its time and the blossom turned to fruit, growing full and fatter by the day, weighing down the fine branches. There was so much interest I gave in eventually, took the neighbour's interference as an opportunity instead. I offered tickets at my front door, a glimpse of the silver and gold for a tanner. For many of them that was enough. I could still feel her in my waters, it was growing heavier by the day. I worried for the meter, thick sticky ticking through the massy wet. The bill from our beloved Thames Water would no doubt be excessive, and I'd stopped going to work to guard the tree. The universe was perilously close to giving up providing. My quarterly council tax was due as well, gate sales were good, but possibly not quite enough for Lambeth's exorbitance. But still I sat, in the cut-glass shed. I knew something was coming, someone. I trusted her to make it all better. And I trusted my tree. It would not give its treasures up to just anyone, nor offer the fruit to any hand.

I wear a ring on my left hand. Daughter of Athena, the owl that watches from my ring finger itches in a straight line to my heart. Summer grows hotter and the central plains are arid. We travel on, further north. I trust you are worth my journey. (All journeys travel on trust.)

Late summer turned to autumn slipped into the harvest festival, full moon and she on her way.

I can smell you. Your spice scent dragged me up through France, the TGV faster still for my nose's demands. Silver nutmeg in a hot toddy, silver nutmeg mixed into smooth mashed potato, silver nutmeg grated on rice pudding. You will remove the ugly milk skin before I see it, I know you will. The comfort dishes of my desire have dragged me drugged with aroma through the Channel Tunnel. Just twenty minutes and a cheering group of school children to cross under water into the sceptred isle, I dance the aisle and smile on England. Aquitaine's Eleanor would have loved this. Though perhaps she was more of a cinnamon girl.

There is a pear too you know. Juicy pear, ripe pear. An always-ripe pear. Never too hard, never too soft, just right little Goldilocks, this pear is always just right. It will not rot nor drop from the tree. Well, you wouldn't expect any less from a golden one, would you? Not gilded you understand, but actually, truly, properly gold. So why all the fuss about

the silver nutmeg? There is also a glistening gleaming golden pear. That's a big deal too isn't it? I tell you Marco Polo, the spice route has a lot to answer for.

*Slowing down now for the Kent countryside, hops picked, apples stored in cool barns.
And then houses become clustered, back gardens open their faces to morning-tired
commuters, the train steadies me forward to Waterloo winter and tube tickets and
escalator and lift and change to overground train and then street and 45 bus and you.
Your house. Your garden shed of glass. So this is it. I am come. I ring the bell.*

The doorbell is ringing. I can hear it. My little tree can hear it too, the sap rises. Nutmeg and pear sing softly to themselves, ringing through their metal. She has arrived, our very own personal pronoun of what happens next. I was eager before, nervous but eager, now I am just scared. What if I don't like her? What if she doesn't like me? What if I don't matter and all the fuss is, yet again, only for the tree? The doorbell is ringing. I rise from my ripped yellow stool – its plastic coating once matched a fine fifties formica table – and open the shed door. It has been raining. I've been in here since last light last night and now there are spider webs in my way. Picked out in individual wet droplets, crossing my path. The strung webs are pretty, in a modernist Christmas decoration, silver-and-plain-crystal-nothing-too-gaudy, kind of way. They are also a sticky nuisance as I walk back into the house, through the kitchen, down the hall to the front door, leaving a dozen homeless spiders behind me as I go. I'll say this for the King of Spain's daughter, she certainly knows how to ring a bell.

The door opens away from me and you are just as I expected. Tall and lean and the tanned skin of your face is fine-etched from the many hours of gardening and building work during the long summer. You are beautiful, but then I would not have expected less. The seed would not have pushed through the dirt unless it wanted to take a good look at you. I stand on your doorstep, looking over your shoulder into the hall. Your house is a little more suburban than I would have thought. That dado rail will have to go. And I'm not sure about the coir matting covering the stripped and sanded floorboards. I know they are appropriate for the area, your age and your social group, but isn't it rough on bare feet first thing in the morning? We shall see.

She was short. I knew she was short because I had to lower my eye level when I opened the door. For some reason I had expected a taller woman. Dark, with long hair and longer limbs. The flamenco dancer classic I guess. Not that she wasn't beautiful. And the orange blossom was a good touch. She did have the long dark hair, dark skin, big round brown eyes – a young Susan Dey, after the braces and the faked piano playing, and many years before LA Law turned her blonde. I was a bit rubbish there, at the door, just staring. It's not every day I greet royalty on my doorstep. The Queen doesn't come south of the river all that often, can't get the cabs I expect. I wasn't sure how to address her. Your highness. Your holiness. Darling.

You stand aside and I enter. I am used to a little more ceremony in welcome, but you will learn in time. I will teach you. I am a good teacher, have schooled both willing and unwilling pupils. Between us there is a shy glance, sly glance, and I note your dilating

pupils. Mine too I expect. We have both felt the strong desire stretching from here to my home, reaching halfway across this continent. As I journeyed closer our joint passion compacted, a black hole into which all wanting poured. My suitcases are piled beside your wheelie bin, you pay the porters from my Lulu Guinness purse, take the bags in your hands and then begin a stumble of uncertainty. Upstairs or downstairs, where is my lady's chamber? You are reticent and do not know which room to show me first. I lead the way, unerring sense of direction, up the stairs, first right and into the bathroom. No bidet, how English. I wash my travel-dirtied hands. Your water is heavy, isn't it? Is that what they mean by the limescale problem here? We will install filters. Next week. For now I take your builder's hands, gardener's hands, hold them in mine which are clean and a little wet still. There is a hardened blister just north of your lifeline. I will smooth that, soothe that, my tongue reaches for the scrape of rough skin. You are coy, slow, I hear an intake of breath and smile. There is time. How about a cup of tea?

She unpacked, I put the kettle on. I was just starting to worry that perhaps she'd want some girly herbal tea and all I had were builders' bags, when she walked into the kitchen carrying a small wooden chest. She had changed, jeans and a t-shirt. But she still wore the calf-skin slippers. Fair enough, that diamond lace looked dangerous. Lovely, but dangerous. She sat the chest on the kitchen table and showed it to me. It was well made, old. There were nine drawers, each one lined in silver with a different faintly scented selection of fine leaves. She took the pot from me – our fingers crossed again – and began to mix her brew. Half a teaspoon of this, a quarter of that, one full of another. Each one dropped into the pot, falling with a gentle shush. Then the boiling water and then the

wait. Five minutes she said. Long enough to take a good long look. I thought she meant the tree, opened the back door, pointed the way past the ripped and hanging webs. She did not follow. It was not yet time. She meant me, I was to be looked at. Inspected is not too fine a definition for the looking that began again with my hands, lingered on my forearms, dwelt on my shoulders and back and neck and then came to my face.

I want to see you. See what they do not see when they sweep past you and out to the little tree. I want to see the one who planted the seed.

She touched my eyelids and the delicate veined skin yearned to open for her. She ran the back of a smooth-buffed thumbnail across my eyelashes and each one blinked for her, severally and individually. She traced the print of her index finger along my eyebrows and down to the tired shadows of my long waiting - I knew for the first time the perfect circularity of my eye sockets. She lingered with the quiet wrinkles at the time-folded corners, laughter lines, worry lines, crying lines. I could have told her the content of each one. She did not ask. And then, finally, she licked the ball of her left little finger and brought her own liquid to my dry tear duct. It was a surprise and a relief. The tea was ready. We had a cup each. And chocolate bourbons. They were new to her. She ate five and a half.

When I kiss you the taste on your tongue is of these English biscuits. They are nice, plain. Later I will feed you on my food. When I lick your hand the flavour is of your garden, London clay and spider's webs, clean and dirty at the same time. When you hold me I am

nearly naked. For a woman used to boned corsets, wide dresses, heavy gowns, this t-shirt is flimsy and easily removed. (Remove it easily.) When we lie together on your kitchen floor I wonder in passing about the cleanliness, how recently this room was swept do you have a cleaner will you clean for me wash for me touch for me love for me. I wonder in passing and then you are passing over my body around my skin under my heart and I into you and you back to me and this is why I have come, why I am here, where I will come back to. You are easy, quiet, slow, ready. The wait was worth it, I hear the song of bending boughs from the shed at the bottom of your garden.

I'd never had sex with royalty before either. Fortunately the protocols weren't all that different. She was smooth and soft except just at the waistband where the diamond lace had cut into her, leaving a lattice of small scratches, light scabs for gently easing free. When we were done with the kissing and the turning and the laying and the wanting we went upstairs together to wash. I ran her a bath and she lay back into the water. It was heavy and held her close. I would have climbed in with her, but she said that would not be right. Not on a first date. I showered when she was finished, cleaned the tub and wiped it down. I pulled her long black hairs from the plug hole, dried, combed and plaited them. Put away the thin rope of hair in a heart-shaped music box left behind by my last lover.

You are storing me, shoring me up, just in case. There is no need. I'm staying now.

She said she was hungry again, that travelling always gave her an appetite and the airline food appeared to have become even worse since the imposition of further security checks.

I don't mind the security, really I don't, I appreciate both the necessity and the effort involved, but I am very disturbed by that whole plastic cutlery thing.

She said she needed flesh, meat, wanted to suck small bones. I offered a frozen chicken from the freezer, fish fingers maybe, but she had come prepared. Pulled enamel pots and aluminium pans from the Luis Vuitton, condiments and utensils from her handbag, and an A-Z from her pocket. The shops were all open for her, workmen left their waiting on this ordinary extraordinary day. Her presence keeps us all willing working. It's a good trick. No doubt explains her hometown's impressively balanced budget. We went to Stockwell Road where she haggled with an elderly Portuguese man, two small boys watching in admiration. Walked Streatham High Street from Brixton Hill to the ice rink. Finally took a half-empty train to Borough Market and came home with our afternoon arms full of essential provisions. The birds are small and firm and clean. A small white feather floats down as I open the gate.

(Came home? I like that.) I will make you Toledo partridge with dark chocolate sauce.

I eat the chocolate, she grates it into my hand, hard and bitter, it wakens the edges of my tongue. She needs one glass of dry white wine for the dish. We keep back a glass each for ourselves and pour the rest at the base of the tree. Moisture enough for a London winter.

According to the old man in the high street shop, this bird laid fifteen eggs in one day. She was one of his finest, will do well for Catalan-style partridge, ten garlic gloves fat and pink, two dozen onions, not one of them larger than the O of your open mouthed love.

She peels each onion carefully, stripping back the finest layer of dry brown skin and exposing white flesh membrane beneath. She starts with a pearl-handled knife handed down from mother to daughter, then discards it in favour of the new one I bought last week at the Co-op, two small paring knives for the price of just one. By the fifth tiny onion her dark eyes are streaming. I stand at her left and catch tears for the stock.

Jewish partridge, we call this one, though probably the Arabs gave us the nuts, certainly the Romans brought the garum, and the clay pot belonged to my mother and her grandmother before. The meat is sweet and strong, I think perhaps you are too. They say partridges mate for life. You are a gardener and I am a cook, this should work well.

Dish follows dish, tiny bones picked and licked and sucked and cleaned. We eat small and delicate morsels across a whole day. The postman comes and goes, local bin men collect carefully piled recycling bottles and paper, black liner bags stuffed with onion skins and greasy paper napkins. I am so full. Full of her and of the day and all these months of waiting for her to come.

You do the dishes. I want to watch your Queen's Speech. My mother asked me to check it out.

Tidied house, street lights on, it's time now. We go outside. I walk barefoot on to a frosted ground, it must be truly cold for the suburb-heated grass to turn winter-crisp. I show her the shed, switch on the external lights. She is suitably impressed and turns to smile at my neighbour peering from behind tired nets. My neighbour has the gall to wave. The King of Spain's daughter pokes out her tongue. Maybe we won't be sharing next door's Boxing Day sherry after all.

Your tree is beautiful. As it should be. You are beautiful. As you should be. I am beautiful. But you knew that.

We consider dessert. A fresh golden pear, rice pudding with lightly grated nutmeg. But we are full, she and I, not greedy. Sitting in the crystal palace of my shed, me and the King of Spain's daughter at my side, we talk of her journey and the heavy water of my knowing and if she thinks she will like brussels sprouts. I use my father's sister's recipe, cook them with chunks of salty bacon and stir in double cream at the very last minute. It's really not bad. Above us, reaching up to the glass ceiling and the pale orange sky of this old city, hang a silver nutmeg, a golden pear, and the wishbone of a partridge in a pear tree. The little tree is good to lean against, solid. You tell me your studies : Athena was worshipped as the mother of all pear trees. Perdix, one of Athena's sacred kings, became the partridge when he died – but in Badrinath, in the Himalayas, he himself was the Lord of the Pear Trees.

This tree is male-female, it carries us all.

Everyone always talks about the partridge, don't they? As if that were the point being made, the lone partridge, waiting hungrily for his life-long mate. No-one really thinks about the tree, how the precious fruit would grow, where the bird would land if the tree wasn't there. But I do, I planted it.

You planted it. It called me to you.

And now it holds us up.

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