Secrets and Surprises

by Grey_wonderer

Summary

This was written in honour of the birthdays of Bilbo Baggins and Frodo Baggins. It is just a short story in which Sam, Merry and Pippin remember the occasion.
This is the prologue, in which I take credit for some things and not others.

Disclaimer: These are not my hobbits. I did nothing here except *borrow* a few characters from J. R. R. Tolkien in order to write a story because I’m not very original. I am making no money for this story now and do not plan to make any money for it in the future. If, however, anyone would like to pay me *not* to post it, then I will consider your offer. (Anything over $10 should be more than enough to get me take this post down.) I don’t think that would count as making a profit from the story. It would just be making a profit for removing the story.

Any mistakes in canon, spelling, formatting, grammar, or location ARE MINE! Americanization are also mine, thank you very much! This story was not beta’d or Brit-picked because I waited until the very last minute to write something and it is hardly fair to send something off to be beta’d on the very day you need it. So, I now claim responsibility for all errors in this fiction.

If anyone else would like to dispute my claim on this, and has solid proof that they made any of the mistakes in this fiction, then you are welcome to do so. Just post a comment to this story letting me know which mistakes are yours along with proof as to *why* they are yours and I will personally post an addendum stating which mistake(s) is yours and apologizing for taking credit for your work. I will list your name prominently so that everyone can take note of your mistake(s).

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Thank you for reading this prologue and if you should do so, thank you for reading the story that follows. If you *do* read the story, send me your name, and date of birth and I promise to drink your health next year. As you can tell from reading the story, I enjoy drinking.

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Chapter one

The small house behind the hedge at Crickhollow was ready for the celebration. It had been cleaned. Its pantry had been stocked. Its beds had been made. The firewood had been got in. All was ready for the birthday remembrance to commence.

Sam placed the cake in the centre of the table and then stood back to admire it. It wasn’t as grand as some of the others he’d made in the past, but it was still rather splendid sitting there on its own. He smiled. It wouldn’t be a large party like the ones in times past, but it would still be a party. As his sister Daisy always said, ‘If there’s cake, then it’s a party.’

“It smells delicious in here,” Pippin said walking over and joining Sam by the table. Pippin placed his hands behind his back and rocked slightly on his heels. “Do I smell apples?”

Sam shook his head. “You know the rules. Don’t none of the ingredients get told until we cut the cake.”

“Well, I think I would be safe in guessing that there are more than a few apples in that cake,” Pippin said looking at Sam for confirmation but getting none.

Merry Brandybuck came in quickly, closing the front door behind him. In spite of his efforts, several leaves swirled into the room along with him. Merry frowned down at them and then walked over to the table and placed a tall, corked, bottle next to the cake. “The wind is up out there and the storm isn’t far behind,” Merry said unfastening his travel cloak and draping it over the nearest chair. “I believe I just missed getting caught in the rain.”

As if on cue, they all heard the sound of rain hitting the window panes and Merry smiled.

“Is that some of Buckland’s finest?” Pippin asked, surveying the bottle.

“No, not this year,” Merry said, running a hand through his wind-blown curls. “If this is all it claims to be, then this is something rare, as rare as hen’s teeth I should think.”

“That explains why you have the label covered,” Pippin frowned. “What’s the big secret?” he asked.

“Well, if I were to reveal that, Cousin, then it wouldn’t be much of a secret, would it?” Merry asked.

“Sam will give no information as to what’s in the cake, you’ve brought in a secret bottle for the toasting, honestly, it isn’t *my* birthday so I don’t see why I’m left out of so much of the planning,” Pippin said.

“I don’t know what’s in the cake either,” Merry said. “And Sam doesn’t know what’s in *this* bottle, so there are secrets enough for all. If you want a secret of your own, then you’re going to have to provide it.”

Pippin grinned. “Maybe I will.”

“That sounds suspiciously like a threat,” Merry said, taking his cloak back to hang it on a peg by the door.

“Really, Meriadoc,” Pippin sighed. “Threats would hardly be proper behaviour for the Thain of the Shire unless of course, the threat in question was to be backed up with action.”
“Well, never let it be said that I accused the Thain of failing to act,” Merry said. “The actions of
the Thain aren’t always explainable, but the Thain always does something.”

“Being as you are a close relation of the Thain’s, I will ignore the implied insult in your last
remark,” Pippin said.

“It pays to know important folks,” Sam said grinning at Merry.

“Indeed it does,” Merry nodded. “Pippin, why don’t you surprise us with a fire in the hearth while
I comb the wind from my hair and make myself presentable for the festivities. I hear the Thain will
be here and I don’t want to look unruly in front of him.”

“The Thain will appreciate your efforts,” Pippin said, starting over toward the hearth. “But I don’t
believe the Thain is coming. I think it will just be Pippin tonight.”

Sam smiled. “I’ll get our supper finished. Whoever’s comin’, I suspect they will be hungry.” It
amused him when Pippin spoke of the Thain as if he were another hobbit altogether, when Pippin,
Peregrin Took that is, was the Thain and had been for the past year or so.

It was right puzzling in some ways how Pippin was not always eager to claim the title of Thain
and yet Merry, Meriadoc Brandybuck, was, no matter what, always The Master of Buckland. Sam
suspected that he would never completely understand either of dear Mr. Frodo’s cousins, even if
he spent the next hundred years or so workin’ on that problem.

The meal was one of Frodo’s personal favourites; roasted chicken with carrots, onions, and
potatoes, mushrooms in butter sauce, freshly made bread with blackberry jam, summer squash,
pickled eggs, and the last of the fresh garden tomatoes. The cake still held its place of honour in
the centre of the table, but now it was surrounded by a very impressive feast.

There were only three of them in attendance this year. Rose’s first cousin on her Father’s side was
having a difficult pregnancy and so Sam’s lovely wife was attending to her as well as watching
their children. Fredegar Bolger, who nearly always came, was suffering through a bought of fever.
Since his time in the lock holes, Mr. Fredegar took ill rather easily and had to be careful with his
health. Merry’s wife, Estella was nursing Fredegar through his fever. She was a very devoted
sister and as Fredegar had not yet married, Estella would always tend to him when he was feeling
poorly. Pippin’s wife, Diamond, didn’t attend the birthdays. She claimed that these occasions
belonged to the others, since she had not been close to Bilbo or Frodo. She said that she would
feel like a stranger among old friends if she were to come along and so, she never did. Merry’s
mum normally came, but this year she was busy with some tradition of her own according to
Merry. He didn’t explain and no one questioned it. Several others had also been invited but for
various reasons had not been able to make the journey to Crickhollow this time.

They always tried to gather at Crickhollow for the birthdays because that was where they had
celebrated Frodo’s birthday the last time before the Quest. Even though Mr. Bilbo had never
celebrated a birthday in the little house, this was the place that felt right to them. The birthday was
a remembrance more than a party, in spite of the cake, and Crickhollow seemed just the place for
remembering.

Bag End, with its big, airy, rooms and its new party tree seemed too bright and too full of life
somehow. Since Sam and Rose were busy filling the comfortable smial with little Gamgees, all of
whom had splendidly lively birthdays, Crickhollow seemed more appropriate these days.

It was currently empty what with Merry and Estella living at Brandy Hall since Merry had become
the Master of Buckland and Pippin and Diamond having moved into the Great Smials when
Pippin became Thain. It was still comfortably furnished and kept in fine order so it was never too
great a chore to open it up and set out the birthday feast.

This year, it had been Merry who had come a few days prior to the celebration and stocked the little house and seen to airing it out. After all, he was living the closest to it, and he had been the last one to live in the little house.

Sam had arrived late last night and had got up early to prepare the feast while Merry had gone about running some errands in town. Pippin had arrived just before elevensies with a basket of fruit and cheeses and breads from the Great Smials which he proclaimed to be their luncheon but which they had eaten for elevensies as well as luncheon.

As the everyone filled their corners by nibbling on this and that, talked turned to the birthday lads.

“I wonder if they are still celebrating together?” Merry asked thoughtfully.

“If Bilbo is still up to celebrating, then I suspect that they are,” Pippin smiled. “I can’t imagine one without the other on this day.”

“I recall some of Frodo’s earlier birthdays at Brandy Hall,” Merry said. “Still, when I think of this day, I usually think back to Bag End underneath the party tree or that night here just before we set out on the Quest.”

“I usually think on Mr. Bilbo sitting in the kitchen of Number three on the Row long after the party guest were gone,” Sam said. “This was before Mr. Frodo came to live with him. He’d come over after his party and sit with my ole Gaffer by the kitchen stove. The two ‘o them would drink some of the Gaffer’s home brew and talk of old times. I used to hide in our pantry and listen till I fell asleep. Someone would always find me there in the morning and take me off to bed. It was like bein’ a secret guest after a time. They knew I was there I suspect, but they never ran me off nor invited me to the kitchen.”

“When I think ‘o the parties after Mr. Frodo came,” Sam said, eyes getting slightly misty, “I think ‘o all them small parties he had where he would celebrate with a few friends and then drink Mr. Bilbo’s health even long after everyone else had give the old hobbit up for dead. Mr. Frodo never did give up hope, and in the end, he was right.”

“I nearly questioned him about Bilbo once,” Merry said. “I got as far as saying, ‘Frodo, after all this time, do you really think that Bilbo is,’ and he cut in and stopped me there. He looked at me firmly, in that way he had that let you know he meant business, and he said ‘He’s alive, Merry or I’d know different.’, and that was that. I never questioned it again. Never out loud nor even to myself. If Frodo was convinced that Bilbo was still alive, then that was good enough for me.”

“And you didn’t want to risk his anger,” Pippin grinned.

“And that,” Merry laughed.

“I carved all of our names into a beam in the pantry the night before the Quest,” Pippin said quietly.

“You never mentioned that,” Merry said. “And come to think of it, I’ve never noticed anything like that in the pantry.”

“I carved them into one of the supporting beams near the back corner. There’s usually something stacked in front of that beam. That was why I chose it,” Pippin said. “I was going into the pantry to get something, jam I suspect, but it was so empty in there. You’d laid in a few provisions when we were all *pretending* that Frodo meant to stay here, but then we’d packed up a good deal of it to take along after we revealed the conspiracy, so the place was rather bare. It made me sad.”
Sam nodded. “Ain’t nothing sadder than an empty pantry.”

“When did you have time to carve names into a beam?” Merry asked.

“Everyone was asleep,” Pippin said. “I just couldn’t get settled. I had too much on my mind. It was about then that I realized what we were doing and thanks to those Black Riders we’d seen, I realized that, as Gandalf was always saying, this wasn’t a hobbit walking party. I was going to eat something in the hopes of settling my nerves and instead I wound up making use of the knife that Frodo gave me for his birthday that year.”

“You carved *all* of our names?” Sam asked.

“Yours, Frodo’s, Fredegar’s, Merry’s, and mine,” Pippin nodded. “I carved the date below it all and even put our ages next to our names. I just had this need to fix it so, no matter what happened, someone might know we were here later on if, well, just in case.”

“So, all of that carving has been hiding in the dark of the pantry all these years?” Merry asked.

“It’s been back there hiding in about the same way Sam used to hide in the pantry and listen to Bilbo and Hamfast,” Pippin said.

“I’d like to see that,” Sam said.

“I checked on it earlier,” Pippin said. “It’s still there. Take a candle when you go and I think you’ll find a surprise there as well.”

“A surprise?” Merry asked. “What sort of surprise? What have you done now?”

“It isn’t my surprise,” Pippin said. “It’s been my secret all these years, but I didn’t do it. Each of you should wait and go alone later tonight and see it for yourself.”

“If this weren’t such an important occasion, I’d think you were just trying to get Sam and me to go on a wild goose chase,” Merry said.

“No wild geese,” Pippin smiled. “Trust me. It’s worth seeing, but it’s best if you go alone, and be sure to have a fresh handkerchief along. You’ll need to go to the very back of the pantry and kneel down in the left hand corner. I’ve already moved things around so you can see it. I finished carving my list of names at just after two in the morning. I know because I carved the time in also. So sometime after I left, someone else was in the pantry. I found evidence of that, when you and I were moving into Crickhollow, Merry. I started to say something to you way back then, but for some reason, I kept it to myself. No one knows about it save me and the one who carved it. At least no one has mentioned knowing it.”

Merry and Sam looked thoughtfully at Pippin and then Sam broke the silence. “I think it’s time for the toast. We don’t want to leave it too late or it won’t be the birthday any longer.”

“Good point,” Merry nodded. “We’ve been talking and eating far too long.” He picked up the bottle with the covered label while Sam lined up the glasses. The firelight glinted off the sides of the lovely, old, crystal that had once belonged to Bilbo’s mother, Belladonna. Sam had brought the glasses with him and had worried all the way there, afraid that the ride in the back of the waggon would jar them and they would break. Luckily, they had made the trip just fine thanks to some very good packing on the part of Rose.

“This is my surprise for this year, and, if it’s real then it’s a very good surprise,” Merry smiled. He uncovered the label and held it out for Pippin to inspect.
“It can’t be!” Pippin said.

“That’s what I thought too,” Merry said. “Then I took it up, out of our cellar at the hall, and showed it to my mum. She and a few of my other older relations confirmed it. This, my dear friends, is a bottle of The Old Wynyard’s!”

“I didn’t think there were any left,” Sam said whistling softly as he read the label. “I thought we finished the last of it that night *here* in this house.”

“I think everyone believed that,” Merry said. “When I showed this to my mum, she nearly passed out from surprise. She said that she had no idea there was any of this in the cellar. I came upon it by accident. I was looking for some of Buckland’s finest that I knew my Father had put in the very back of the cellar. I found that, but I also found this sitting there among the other bottles.”

“Was there more?” Pippin asked.

“No, this was the only one,” Merry said. “One lone Baggins soldier among an army of Brandybucks. The minute I saw it, I knew that we needed to use it for the toast tonight.”

Sam smiled. “It’s a wonder. I never thought to see one like it again.”

“Sam, would you like to do the honours?” Merry asked holding out the bottle.

“No, you or Pippin can uncork that,” Sam smiled. “I’ll be very happy to drink it, but I think one of you should open it.”

“Pip?”

“You do it, Merry,” Pippin smiled. “My hands are shaking just looking at it. Besides, you were the one to find it.”

“Very well,” Merry said and he very carefully removed the cork. There was a lovely, soft pop and then Merry poured some for each of them. The liquid shimmered in Bilbo’s mother’s crystal and Merry handed each of them a glass. “The toast is yours this year, Sam.”

Sam cleared his throat and raised his glass. “I’d like to propose a toast. Here’s to friendships, past and present, to those lost to us and to those close at hand, to all we hold dear in our hearts. To the very good health and continued long life of Mr. Bilbo Baggins and Mr. Frodo Baggins of the Shire! May they celebrate many more special birthdays together and may we all be around to drink their health until we can all be together again!”

“To Bilbo and Frodo!” Pippin and Merry declared and the three of them gently clinked their glasses together and drank. Later, after a proper amount of time to reflect on things, Sam cut and served the cake which did indeed contain more than a few apples as Pippin had suspected.

At just after two in the morning, with everything quiet and Merry and Pippin, presumed to be asleep, Sam took a lantern into the pantry and knelt down next to the beam. He ran his fingers over the date and tried to imagine Pippin sitting in the floor of the pantry carving the date into the wood very carefully with the new knife that Frodo had given him hours before.

Below the date were their names. Sam read each aloud very softly.

"Frodo Baggins, 50years, Samwise ‘Sam’ Gamgee, 38years, Meriadoc ‘Merry’ Brandybuck,
36 years
Peregrin ‘Pippin or just Pip’ Took, 28 years and Fredegar ‘Fatty’ Bolger, 38 years. Carved here on this day at 2am by P. Took

Sam smiled. It would have surprised him at the time to have his name listed among the gentry that way and not only listed, but listed second, just below Frodo’s own name. He shook his head and ran a finger over the letters, brown with age but still clearly visible.

Pippin Took never was one to stand on ceremony and at that age, the lad often let proper rules go out the window in favour of what seemed best to him. Seeing their names listed and knowing that this had been done just before they left, gave Sam a shiver.

Pippin was ever the optimist and none of them had known, at that point, what evil they would face. In light of his sunny disposition, Sam had never suspected that Pippin feared they wouldn’t be back. Sam had worried after they’d seen those Black Riders, but he’d still believed they would be coming back. He’d been scared near to death about going through the Old Forest, but even that hadn’t made him lose hope. Still, it was a big risk they were all taking, and Pippin was right to wonder if they would ever return.

His eyes were already slightly misty, but when he noticed another bit of carving on the beam next to this one, tears came into his eyes. He moved the lantern closer so he could see it properly and dried his eyes with the handkerchief that Pippin had recommended bringing. It said:

*Don’t carve up all of the pantries in the Shire or I will take back the knife, Peregrin. Use it wisely. I’m watching. FB*

As Sam got up to go back to his bed, he hoped that Frodo was, somehow, watching them still.

Grey_wonderer
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