

## Season 8, Episode 14 A Very Merry Sidedoor Final Transcription

Lizzie Peabody: This is Sidedoor, a podcast from the Smithsonian with support from PRX. I'm Lizzie Peabody.

Gemini 6: Gemini 7, this is Gemini 6. We have an object, looks like a satellite going from-

Lizzie Peabody: This is a transmission from the Gemini 6A spacecraft on December 16th, 1965. The two-man crew was orbiting Earth when they spotted something they couldn't identify.

Gemini 6: He's in a very low trajectory traveling from north to south.

Margaret Weitekamp: Something that they've seen near Earth, something that is heading at polar orbit, at quite some speed, at a very low altitude.

Lizzie Peabody: Margaret Weitekamp is chair of the Space History Department at the Smithsonian National Air and Space Museum. She says, at the time of this transmission, Gemini 6A had just completed a historic first, maneuvering within feet of another spacecraft, Gemini 7, while in orbit.

Margaret Weitekamp: Having completed their mission task, they got back on the radio and called down to Houston and told them that they thought they saw something unidentified.

Gemini 6: Standby. Looks like he's trying to signal something.

Margaret Weitekamp: "Standby. It looks like he's trying to signal something."

Lizzie Peabody: On the ground, Mission Control listened in tense silence, waiting for more details. What was this UFO? An alien life form? Secret Soviet spacecraft? What they heard next was this.

Margaret Weitekamp: And then they broke into a little rendition of Jingle Bells with Wally Schirra on the harmonica and Tom Stafford on the jingle bells. Immediately recognizable, but a little jazzy. There's a little syncopation there. He's having some fun with it.

Lizzie Peabody: By the end of the song, Gemini 7 had caught on, radioing that they too saw a sleigh like form flying in polar orbit.

Gemini 7: We got him too, 6.

Mission Control: You're too much, 6.

Margaret Weitekamp: "You're too much, 6," which is the answer from the capsule communicator at Mission Control. "Okay, you got us, Wally. That was fun."

Lizzie Peabody: The astronauts didn't actually see Santa. It was mid-December. He was still packing his toys. But their prank made history. So that was the first live concert from space, the first music created in space.

Margaret Weitekamp: First music created in space, the first musical concert.

Lizzie Peabody: The pocket-sized harmonica and jingle bells that the astronauts smuggled on board are on display at the Smithsonian's National Air Space Museum, mementos of a moment that delighted Americans across the country.

Margaret Weitekamp: It was much appreciated as a moment of levity in Mission Control. And it's one of the ways that people, I think, got to see the very human side of who the astronauts were and them interacting in a workplace the same way anybody else would and celebrating the magic of the season.

Lizzie Peabody: Ah, the magic of the season. The holiday season is here again, and with it, the many traditions we celebrate. Songs, food, rituals so familiar to us, we may not even think about where they come from. So, this time on Sidedoor, we're mixing it up with a special holiday episode focusing on the puzzling origins of some American Christmas traditions.

Nathalie Boyd: Yeah, like what is figgy pudding? I mean, we sing about it every year.

Lizzie Peabody: And here to help me spread the holiday cheer is Associate Producer, Nathalie Boyd.

Nathalie Boyd: And mistletoe. Like what is up with that? I don't want to kiss you.

Lizzie Peabody: Wow. Okay, that's fair.

Nathalie Boyd: And then there's this New Year's tradition called Watch Night.

Lizzie Peabody: Hang on, wait, wait, wait. Don't give it all away.

Nathalie Boyd: Okay.

Lizzie Peabody: All right. Natalie and I will be back with this holiday special.

Nathalie Boyd: After the break.

Lizzie Peabody: That's my line.

[MUSIC]

Nathalie Boyd: All right, Lizzie, it's the holiday season, so that means we're surrounded by music. And you probably know this song.

Carolers: (Singing)

Lizzie Peabody: Yes. I think regardless of your cultural or religious affiliation, I'm pretty sure anyone in America who has gone out shopping in December is familiar with this song.

Nathalie Boyd: Right. So, you know this line.

Carolers: (Singing) Wait a second. What the heck is figgy pudding?

Nathalie Boyd: What is figgy Pudding? It's in the song. You hear it all the time. I ask people. They don't know. Pie, pudding, jello, what is it? I suppose there's figs.

Lizzie Peabody: I honestly could not tell you.

Nathalie Boyd: Well, I think you would enjoy putting together some history.

Lizzie Peabody: Oh, no.

Nathalie Boyd: Think you can make a figgy pudding?

Lizzie Peabody: Not really, but I do know who I could call for help.

Ashley Rose Young Oh, oops.

Lizzie Peabody: It smells like fire. Did we set the bread on fire?

Ashley Rose Young No, it's fine. It's fine.

(Singing)

Lizzie Peabody: That's Ashley Rose Young, setting my kitchen on fire. Not really, but almost. She's a food historian at the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History. I asked her to come over to my apartment and show me how to cook my very own figgy pudding from scratch. And for starters, figgy pudding is nothing like what I think of when I hear pudding.

Ashley Rose Young So, when I think of pudding today, I'm thinking 1950s chocolate pudding. You stir it up, put it in the fridge, it sets figgy pudding is not that. It's not remotely anything like your instant jello pudding.

Nathalie Boyd: So, what is it?

Lizzie Peabody: So, a British pudding is more like a dense cake, full of dried fruits and spices and, well, actually, it kind of depends on the time period you're talking. Figgy pudding dates all the way back to the Middle Ages.

Ashley Rose Young In its earliest iterations, it was a way of preserving meats and other products for the long winter.

Lizzie Peabody: And I'm pretty glad we don't eat that kind anymore.

Ashley Rose Young So, imagine taking something like an animal stomach, and stuffing it with different meats and also with dried and candied fruits, and you throw some other vegetables in there, and it was actually like a savory kind of meat-veggie-fruit block.

Lizzie Peabody: Are you saying this was like the proto-energy bar, chock full of protein, sugar, vegetables, all in a packaging, which at the time was an animal stomach?

Ashley Rose Young I like that. I like that. It wouldn't have initially come to my mind that way, but I think yes. One could maybe think of it as an energy ball. An energy ball.

Nathalie Boyd: Ew.

Lizzie Peabody: Exactly.

Nathalie Boyd:I thought figgy pudding was a dessert.

Lizzie Peabody: Well, by the 1800s it had evolved from a meat and veggie dish into more of a dessert, a very special dessert, because Ashley went on to tell me.

Ashley Rose Young It would actually take an entire year sometimes for working class people to save up the money to buy the dried fruits to actually put into their figgy pudding.

Nathalie Boyd: Oh. So, it was a once-a-year kind of special pudding.

Lizzie Peabody: Yeah. And figgy pudding is also called plum pudding or Christmas pudding. Ashley says they're all different names for the same British Christmas dessert.

Ashley Rose Young Okay. So, I'm turning to page 243 of this almost 400-page cookbook.

Lizzie Peabody: And there are a lot of different recipes for it. So, we went with a classic.

Ashley Rose Young So, Christmas pudding.

Lizzie Peabody: Okay.

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Ashley Rose Young The rich version from Mrs. Beeton's Cookery Book originally published 1861.

Lizzie Peabody: Mrs. Beeton was like the Martha Stewart of the Victorian era.

Ashley Rose Young The go-to source for recipes and housekeeping tips and tricks.

Lizzie Peabody: And she would definitely have known how to make a proper pudding.

Ashley Rose Young So, let's get started.

Lizzie Peabody: What are the ingredients?

Ashley Rose Young Yes.

Lizzie Peabody: You name them and I will fetch them.

Ashley Rose Young Absolutely.

Lizzie Peabody: We started off with pretty much what you'd expect.

Ashley Rose Young Two ounces of flour.

Lizzie Peabody: Eggs. Salt.

Ashley Rose Young One gill of milk.

Nathalie Boyd: What is a gill of milk?

Lizzie Peabody: It's an old timey measurement. Basically, like half a cup.

Ashley Rose Young A fourth a pound of mixed peel.

Lizzie Peabody: A lot of candied citrus peel. But we used marmalade. Ooh, smell that.

Ashley Rose Young Now, we're getting into the spices a little bit here. We need half a grated nutmeg, a fourth of ounce of ground cinnamon.

Lizzie Peabody: Then all spice, cloves, ginger, coriander.

Ashley Rose Young One wine glass full of rum or brandy.

Lizzie Peabody: A wine glass full of rum? This recipe was written before many measurements were standardized.

Ashley Rose Young Why don't we go with classic white wine glass, because think a red wine glass might be too voluminous.

Lizzie Peabody: I'm really flattered that you think that I have multiple varieties of wine glass, but I only have one kind of wine glass, and this has-

Ashley Rose Young Okay. Well, that one will work perfectly. Next on our list is a half a pound of breadcrumbs.

Lizzie Peabody: Which was most of a loaf of bread.

Ashley Rose Young And I think it's important to note that we're using sourdough bread, which would have been the standard at the time.

Lizzie Peabody: Then came a literal pound of various dried grapes.

Ashley Rose Young Raisins, sultanas.

Lizzie Peabody: Okay.

Ashley Rose Young Currents.

Lizzie Peabody: Keeping Sun-Maid in business.

Ashley Rose Young I think we're going to need a bigger bowl.

Lizzie Peabody: Finally, some dried coconut. The juice of one lemon.

Ashley Rose Young And this would've been such a precious ingredient in the Victorian era.

Lizzie Peabody: And last, but well, okay, probably least.

Ashley Rose Young A half pound of beef suet.

Nathalie Boyd: Wait a minute. I thought you said this wasn't a meat thing anymore.

Lizzie Peabody: Well, suet is the one meat product in this pudding.

Nathalie Boyd: I almost don't want to know. But what is suet?

Lizzie Peabody: Well, I had to go to a local butcher to find it. It's hardened fat, scraped from the kidneys of a cow, and it looks like-

Ashley Rose Young Macaronis?

Lizzie Peabody: Yeah.

Ashley Rose Young Chopped into irregular shapes?

Lizzie Peabody: Yeah, it does. It looks like macaroni.

Ashley Rose Young Like white macaroni?

Lizzie Peabody: Except it's fat.

Ashley Rose Young Yes.

Lizzie Peabody: And it's got little glistening patches of animal juice, like the juice that runs out of a really rare steak when you cut it open.

Ashley Rose Young Exactly.

Lizzie Peabody: It's like a bunch of macaroni with the steak juice around it.

Ashley Rose Young This looks disgusting.

Lizzie Peabody: I know. And those are the ingredients.

Nathalie Boyd: Wait a second. You didn't say figs.

Lizzie Peabody: Yeah, there are no figs.

Nathalie Boyd: Well, then why is it called figgy pudding?

Lizzie Peabody: Where does figgy come from?

Ashley Rose Young I consulted with a lot of fellow food historians. We don't really know where the figgy of figgy pudding comes from.

Lizzie Peabody: It's a mystery. But we do know that all these ingredients together amounted to a kind of edible symbol of British colonialism at the time.

Ashley Rose Young Coconuts from tropical regions. You have your citrus fruits from warmer climates, and all these spices as well that would not necessarily have been grown in Europe at

the time. So, you're bringing together, it's like a manifestation, a coming together of all the different corners of the British empire into one dessert.

Nathalie Boyd: So, this is all starting to make sense. It's a decadent dessert because you're putting all these hard to get ingredients into one dish.

Lizzie Peabody: Right.

Nathalie Boyd: So, what did you do with all these ingredients that were assembled from far corners of the world?

Lizzie Peabody: Well, the instructions are surprisingly simple. Basically, put everything in one big bowl and mix it a lot. Mrs. Beating the eggs.

Ashley Rose Young Oh my gosh.

Lizzie Peabody: We ended up with a bowl full of what looked like really chunky oatmeal cookie dough.

Nathalie Boyd: Mmm. Nothing's says delicious like beefy cookie dough.

Lizzie Peabody: I know. It actually smelled pretty good, like coconut and lemon.

Ashley Rose Young Ooh, wow. The alcohol. It's really wafting up.

Lizzie Peabody: Slaps you in the face. And it was really heavy. It is 4.8 pounds. It's like a little hard to hold up with one hand. So, we glommed this five pounds of batter into an antique pudding mold that Ashley brought with her. Picture like a classic bundt cake tin, except it had a lid that fits over the top.

Ashley Rose Young So, we're going to put this lid on.

Lizzie Peabody: And it needs a lid because we're going to submerge it in boiling water.

Ashley Rose Young Water's almost boiling.

Nathalie Boyd: Wait, why boil and not bake it?

Lizzie Peabody: So, it turns out baking things back then was really tricky because it's hard to maintain a consistent temperature with a wood burning stove.

Nathalie Boyd: Oh, that makes perfect sense.

Lizzie Peabody: You know what does not make sense to me?



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Ashley Rose Young This is only going to boil for four hours. But the traditional-

Lizzie Peabody: Did you say four hours?

Ashley Rose Young Yes.

Lizzie Peabody: Wait a minute. I have plans tonight.

Nathalie Boyd: Four hours?

Lizzie Peabody: Yeah. Turns out making figgy pudding is a commitment because after boiling it-

Ashley Rose Young You have to age the pudding for four to five weeks before eating it.

Lizzie Peabody: What?

Ashley Rose Young Yes.

Lizzie Peabody: That is not in the recipe.

Ashley Rose Young That is not in the recipe. But it was assumed knowledge.

Lizzie Peabody: It was assumed that you would wait five weeks after making your pudding to eat it?

Ashley Rose Young Yes. And it's because traditionally this dish would've been made about five weeks prior to Christmas. On the last Sunday before Advent began there was actually a day called the stirring day and everyone would come together in the family and for good luck stir all the ingredients in the Christmas pudding together, clockwise, and then you'd boil it, you'd cool it, and you would store it in a dry, cool place to let the juices from the fruits and the alcohol sort of mix and mingle and merge.

Lizzie Peabody: Ashley says this also made figgy pudding a great gift to send to family members around Christmastime because it could survive, even thrive, in the mail for weeks.

Ashley Rose Young So, by the time it arrived, it had aged beautifully, and then they would just reboil it and serve it on Christmas Day.

Nathalie Boyd: This sounds a lot like fruitcake?

Lizzie Peabody: Yeah. Ashley actually said figgy pudding is basically the mother of fruitcake.

Ashley Rose Young And now you can see when carolers would come by demanding figgy pudding, what a gift it would be for them to receive it. Because it really, there's a lot of effort that goes into this.

Lizzie Peabody: Pretty labor intensive.

Carolers: (Singing)

Lizzie Peabody: I love how you waited until we were halfway through assembling this pudding to tell me all these things.

Ashley Rose Young I didn't want you to be deterred.

Lizzie Peabody: All I can say is, Natalie, this better taste amazing.

Nathalie Boyd: Well, listen, all I have to go off of is this song and they're pretty insistent on getting some figgy pudding. So, I imagine it tastes like Christmas magic.

Carolers: (Singing).

Lizzie Peabody: Yeah, they are really clamoring for this figgy pudding, aren't they?

Nathalie Boyd: Yeah. But while we wait five weeks for the pudding to age, we have a couple of more holiday customs to investigate.

Carolers: (Singing).

Nathalie Boyd: Starting with the New Year's tradition of Watch Night.

Lizzie Peabody: What's Watch Night?

Nathalie Boyd: You'll find out after the break.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: We're back with our Sidedoor holidays special. And this next segment comes from associate producer Nathalie Boyd. Nathalie, tell me about Watch Night.

Nathalie Boyd: Well, I haven't been since I was a kid, but every New Year's Eve, we would get dressed, don our Sunday best. That meant I had to wear stockings. And we would go to church. I was raised Southern Baptist and so on Watch Night, there was praise and worship. So there would be singing, dancing, clapping along with a choir, and then a sermon. And at 11:58, everyone would get really quiet.

Lizzie Peabody: Was there a countdown to midnight?

Nathalie Boyd: No, there was no countdown, but there was this feeling of hushed anticipation. The pastor would lead everyone into silent prayer. People will begin to speak in tongues, whisper in prayer, and then the new year will roll in.

Lizzie Peabody: So, is this something that you looked forward to as a kid?

Nathalie Boyd: I honestly dreaded it. I always wondered why I couldn't just stay home and watch the ball drop. I knew it was something that Black churches did, but I never wondered why. And then I came across this video of Reverend Reeves. He's the Curator of Religion at the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture.

Reverend Reeves: (Singing)

Nathalie Boyd: And in this video he's singing a hymn and explaining the origins of Watch Night.

Reverend Reeves: (Singing)

Nathalie Boyd: Your voice is gorgeous, by the way.

Reverend Reeves: Oh, thank you.

Nathalie Boyd: So, I asked him to come talk to me about it. What was your experience with Watch Night?

Reverend Reeves: Whew. Watch Night was always fun growing up for me. And so, it's a universal experience in some ways and in some ways everybody tweaks it for their own community in their own context. So, we started around 9:00, 10:00. There was music, there was fellowship. We had breakfast afterwards. So around midnight there was breakfast in the Fellowship Hall. So, we would eat, and then we got home, I think, about 1:00 AM.

Nathalie Boyd: Okay. I mean, that's nice. I wish my church is her breakfast. That would've been great. I mean, as a kid I would've looked forward to it a little more.

Reverend Reeves: Absolutely.

Nathalie Boyd: I was always like hungry at the end of church.

Reverend Reeves: Come through.

Nathalie Boyd: Yes.

Reverend Reeves: It's 12:00, you know?

Nathalie Boyd: Oh, yeah, yeah.

Reverend Reeves: Absolutely.

Nathalie Boyd: So, Reeves told me that Watch Night actually goes way back.

Reverend Reeves: Watch Night Service was not started by African Americans. And I think that that's important to note, that this was a tradition out of the Czech Republic Church.

Lizzie Peabody: Wait, what?

Nathalie Boyd: Threw a thistle in your holly, didn't it? But yes, the tradition comes from Europe.

Reverend Reeves: So, the Watch Night service was a service of the Moravian Church. It was the Love Feast. But in the original manner in the Czech Republic, the Love Feast service was a time of remembrance. It was a time of love and fellowship and breaking of bread.

Lizzie Peabody: Wait, so how did this European tradition make it over to the United States?

Nathalie Boyd: Well, like other Europeans, the Moravians immigrated to America and settled in the South. There they purchased enslaved people, imposed Moravian Christianity onto them, and encouraged them to build their own Black Moravian Church.

Reverend Reeves: So, when you think about really some of the earlier practices, it was Black Moravians. They become one of the first African-American communities, religious communities, that are practicing Watch Night because their enslavers were Moravian.

Nathalie Boyd: But on December 31st, 1862, Watch Night took on a whole new meaning for African-Americans. President Abraham Lincoln had issued the Emancipation Proclamation, which declared that all enslaved people in the Confederate States would be free.

Reverend Reeves: Emancipation was on the horizon, literally the next day, but the order would go in at midnight, January 1st, 1863.

Nathalie Boyd: Reeves says that on that particular New Year's Eve, also known as Freedom's Eve, freed and enslaved African Americans gathered wherever they could to wait for coming freedom.

Reverend Reeves: Not always in buildings, but in religious institutions that enslaved individuals constructed for themselves on plantations. They referred to as hush harbors. Hush harbors were oftentimes in the woods.

Nathalie Boyd: Remember, in many places it was illegal for enslaved people to gather in groups of more than seven. So, they had to gather in secret.

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Reverend Reeves: And the enslaved individuals would get together. It was a space of conjuring. It was a space of praying. It was an interfaith space. It was our sacred space. It was not controlled by anyone but us.

Nathalie Boyd: So that's how Watch Night became established throughout the African American community. But Reeves says that although it's a tradition born out of slavery and emancipation, over time it's taken on new meanings.

Reverend Reeves: What we see today in some Black religious institutions, it's singing, it's dancing, it's fellowship. It's also remembrance.

Nathalie Boyd: Regardless, he says that it's important to sit with a history behind the tradition.

Reverend Reeves: It's a great opportunity for us to say, "What is this? What does freedom look like in 2022? What does freedom look like in 2023? What did freedom look like in 1862?" That there's always this waiting that people of African descent are doing. It may not be, so that no longer chains can be on our hands, but there's still the level of freedom that we're all seeking every December 31st, that the next year will offer something better for us, and not just individually, but collectively.

Lizzie Peabody: So, Natalie, does knowing the history of Watch Night change your opinion of it, your memories of it?

Nathalie Boyd: It makes me feel a little guilty, standing there as this reluctant child being forced into this moment. As an adult that now knows the origins, it makes me sad. There was this opportunity to educate me about my ancestors, and let me sit in that moment, as Reeves says. and I just feel like I missed this huge opportunity. So, what I can say is that, and now moving forward, even though I will not be at Watch Night service on New Year's Eve, in my heart, I will carry this joy of knowing what that stroke of midnight meant to my ancestors on this day in 1862. So, this next segment is something we've both been curious about.

Lizzie Peabody: Mistletoe.

Nathalie Boyd: Mistletoe.

Lizzie Peabody: So, it is well known that in American pop culture, if you stand beneath mistletoe, you're supposed to kiss the person you're next to.

Nathalie Boyd: Why do we do this? Who is responsible for this holiday hazard?

Jim Deutsch: No one is entirely sure how mistletoe, a poisonous parasitic plant, became associated with kissing.

Nathalie Boyd: Hold on. Did he say poisonous?

Lizzie Peabody: Yes. To find out about mistletoe, I reached out to Jim Deutsch, Curator with the Smithsonian Center for Folk Life and Cultural Heritage. And turns out mistletoe is kind of freaky. For starters, it can be deadly for some animals, including people.

Jim Deutsch: Yes, it can be poisonous for humans, but of course, not for birds.

Lizzie Peabody: Oh.

Jim Deutsch: And this is how mistletoe spreads, through birds.

Lizzie Peabody: Oh, they eat the berries, and then they're-

Jim Deutsch: They eat the berries and then they excrete the seeds. In fact, the word mistletoe comes from, in old English, and even in German, mist means excrement.

Lizzie Peabody: Really?

Jim Deutsch: Yes. If you listen to people swearing in German, they will often use the word mist, which would be the s-word for us. And I don't mean Smithsonian as the s-word.

Lizzie Peabody: So mistle is like little dung, and the toe comes from ton or twig.

Nathalie Boyd: Okay, wait a minute. So, you're telling me that mistletoe means little poop stick?

Lizzie Peabody: Yep. So, it's basically named after how it spreads. When birds poop on twigs or tree branches, the sticky mistletoe seeds attach to the wood and grow there. So, it spreads from tree to tree without seeming to touch the ground.

Jim Deutsch: It is not of the earth. It does not grow in soil. Rather, it grows as a parasite on other trees, largely deciduous trees which shed their leaves in the winter.

Lizzie Peabody: But mistletoe blooms in winter. So, imagine it's thousands of years ago. The leaves have fallen from the trees, leaving these bare skeleton limbs against a gray sky, and then you look up and there, a little patch of bright green leaves. It's almost magical. How did that survive?

Jim Deutsch: And so, because it is growing and thriving in winter, it acquired this notion that it is immortal.

Nathalie Boyd: So, everything else dies, but mistletoe is alive.

Lizzie Peabody: Yes. It turns out encouraging people to lock lips isn't mistletoe's only superpower. Mistletoe is found all over the world, on every continent except in Antarctica. And everywhere it grows, it seems to captivate the human imagination.

Jim Deutsch: In Cambodia, the decoration of mistletoe is believed to bestow invulnerability. In Japan, they'll chop up the mistletoe and use that in the crops that they plant in order to give their plants some extra power.

Lizzie Peabody: Oh.

Jim Deutsch: Throughout the world, it's also used as a folk medicine. But the idea of mistletoe as a powerful plant is worldwide.

Nathalie Boyd: Okay. This plant has been associated with immortality, invulnerability, fertility, and healing. But the kissing thing seems like a stretch.

Lizzie Peabody: Yeah. Jim says there are a bunch of theories about how that might have gotten started. There's a story from Norse mythology about a king who was killed by an arrow made of mistletoe wood. But then somehow he comes back to life and his mother, who's also the goddess of marriage and motherhood, agrees to kiss anyone who stands beneath mistletoe.

Jim Deutsch: In order to show that it was a symbol of love and not hate.

Lizzie Peabody: Essentially redeeming the reputation of mistletoe?

Jim Deutsch: Lizzie, I have to say, not all folklore makes perfect logical sense.

Lizzie Peabody: Another idea is that the kissing began with the Romans during Saturnalia.

Nathalie Boyd: What's Saturnalia?

Lizzie Peabody: It's an ancient Roman festival that happened right around the winter solstice to honor the god Saturn. And it's thought to be the source of a lot of traditions we now associate with Christmas, like gifts, wreaths, bringing trees inside, eating a lot.

Nathalie Boyd: Sounds like Christmas to me. And did they kiss under the mistletoe?

Lizzie Peabody: It's sort of impossible to say for sure, but we do know that it was a European ritual before it made it to America.

Jim Deutsch: From Europe, what I've read is that Washington Irving, the American author, chronicler of Knickerbocker Tales, was the first to put this in print.

Lizzie Peabody: In an essay he wrote from 1819, Washington Irving describes Christmas Eve in England. "The Yule Log and Christmas candle were regularly burnt, and the mistletoe, with its white berries, hung up to the imminent peril of all the pretty housemaids."

Nathalie Boyd: Okay. I like how it's their imminent peril. That's great.

Lizzie Peabody: Then there's a footnote explaining, "Mistletoe is still hung up in farm houses and kitchens at Christmas, and the young men have the privilege of kissing the girls under it, plucking each time a berry from the bush. When the berries are all plucked, the privilege ceases."

Nathalie Boyd: So, let me get this straight. The Europeans got this idea of kissing under the mistletoe from Norse mythology. Or it might've been the Romans?

Lizzie Peabody: Or it might've been the Druids. See, they would-

Nathalie Boyd: Okay, whoa. A lot of information and possible origins. But it was Washington Irving who popularized it in the US through his essay about Christmas in England?

Lizzie Peabody: Yeah.

Nathalie Boyd: So, it's his fault. Washington Irving, ruining American Christmas parties since 1819.

Lizzie Peabody: Indeed. And for the record, he also writes about Christmas pudding.

Nathalie Boyd: Oh my gosh, I forgot about that. When are we going to taste the pudding?

Lizzie Peabody: Right now. Come on in.

Speaker 12: Oh, that looks so good.

Lizzie Peabody: We invited the whole Sidedoor editorial team, a trusting bunch of colleagues, I would say, to the studio to find out what a Victorian figgy pudding tastes like.

Nathalie Boyd: You know what they say? The proof is in the pudding.

Lizzie Peabody: Oh, no. Oh, brother.

Nathalie Boyd: So, catch us up. Last time we saw this pudding, it was boiling on your stove top.

Lizzie Peabody: Yes. So can I just say, I have been co-habiting with this pudding for so long, I feel like we have a bond. Like I don't have a child, I just have this five pound cake. I have been nurturing for five weeks. After it was done boiling, I took it out of the mold to cool. Time to get



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this baby out. Wrapped it up and tucked it away in the back of my refrigerator for a few weeks. All right. And then this morning I unwrapped it. This baby has been chilling in the fridge. Reboiled it for an hour, took it back out of the mold, rewrapped it, and brought it here to the office, where you got to see it.

Nathalie Boyd: It's so cute!

Lizzie Peabody: It's beautiful.

Nathalie Boyd: It's so cute. I didn't mean to interrupt you, but it's like freaking cute! It looked kind of like a small bundt cake. The color was dark caramel with darker specks, which I assume were raisins, and it kind of had a waxy look on the outside.

Speaker 12: Smells like gingerbread, holiday, cinnamon.

Speaker 13: Kind of like red winey, kind of.

James: Yes, red wine and gingerbread.

Speaker 14: Yeah. It's got a like a spice cake smell, almost like carrot cake, that kind of smell.

Nathalie Boyd: And it looked really festive with holly poking out of the top.

Lizzie Peabody: Yeah. Ashley says that that is the traditional presentation.

Nathalie Boyd: And as is tradition, we doused it with brandy, and set it on fire.

Lizzie Peabody: It's on fire.

Speaker 12: It's definitely on fire.

Lizzie Peabody: While exercising utmost safety with professional supervision in a well-ventilated area outdoors.

Nathalie Boyd: Yes.

Lizzie Peabody: Let the record show. All right, I'm going to douse it. Here we go.

Nathalie Boyd: And remind me why we set it on fire?

Lizzie Peabody: Well, according to Ashley, it has to do with Christian symbolism. The prickly holly leaves at the top represent the crown of thorns, and the flaming alcohol represents the Passion of Christ.

Speaker 12: All right, we did it.

Nathalie Boyd: All right team.

Lizzie Peabody: So, after we did that. Come, come, come close.

Speaker 14: Gather round.

Lizzie Peabody: It was time for the moment of truth.

Nathalie Boyd: Are we all eating it at the same time?

Speaker 12: Yeah, let's do it.

Speaker 14: I guess so. Thank you.

Speaker 12: I'm so curious.

Lizzie Peabody: All right. One, two, Natalie's face.

Nathalie Boyd: It's fine. I'm going to take-

Lizzie Peabody: Okay, three, go.

Speaker 12: Okay.

Speaker 14: It's warm.

Lizzie Peabody: I think it's fair to say the results were mixed. I'm surprised at how delighted I am by it. It's not too sweet. It's a little tart.

James: It's like the consistency of a Lara Bar, you know?

Speaker 12: Yes.

James: Like one of those, just densely packed with dates and nuts and it's kind of chewy.

Nathalie Boyd: James kind of proved your point about the original energy bar.

Lizzie Peabody: That's right.

James: And it seems like every bite is kind of a different flavor, where you're like, it's kind of crunchy and now it's kind of fruity and yeah, ow it's apple pie. Now it's like-

Lizzie Peabody: Like Willy Wonka.

Speaker 12: It does remind me-

James: Now it's bacon.

Speaker 12: I'm with James. It tastes different with every bite.

Speaker 16: It does.

Speaker 14: I keep eating it.

Ann: So, I'm a little bit afraid.

Speaker 20: I'm in the same boat.

Lizzie Peabody: Ann, our Executive Producer, had sort of a Russian roulette experience.

Ann: One bite was delicious, a taste like fruitcake and the next, bite not so.

Lizzie Peabody: But she still gave it an 8 out of 10, the highest rating in the group.

Ann: But most of it is great.

Lizzie Peabody: I would not serve it to my friends, so I have to give it a four out of 10, I think, a four out of 10.

Nathalie Boyd: Most ratings were kind of in the middle. I'll

Speaker 16: Give it a six.

Speaker 12: Seven.

Lizzie Peabody: Wow.

Speaker 14: It's like a six. It's okay. Yeah.

Lizzie Peabody: As for the lowest.

Nathalie Boyd: It has nostalgia in my heart because of this episode, so I'll give it a two out of 10.

Lizzie Peabody: Wow.

Nathalie Boyd: It was horrible. The worst thing I've ever had.

Lizzie Peabody: Worst thing you've ever had?

Nathalie Boyd: No offense. It's just not good.

Lizzie Peabody: I am offended on behalf of myself and my pudding baby. Nathalie, you asked me to make this thing.

Nathalie Boyd: I did, and I'm so excited I got to try it, but I will never try it again.

Lizzie Peabody: Wow, we're really running the gambit here. I like it. I feel bad. I feel disloyal to the pudding baby. I'm going to amend it to a five. I'm going to go five.

Nathalie Boyd: No.

Lizzie Peabody: Dang it.

Nathalie Boyd: You can't take it back.

Lizzie Peabody: Okay, fine, fine, fine, fine.

Nathalie Boyd: I mean, people have babies every day. They turn out how they turn out.

Lizzie Peabody: That's true. You're so wise.

Nathalie Boyd: I know.

Lizzie Peabody: But let's bring it back to the song that got this whole party started. Well, what do we think? If you were caroling door to door and you were cold and you were done singing? Nathalie's just shaking her head.

Nathalie Boyd: No. I would not want this. This would be the last thing I would want.

Lizzie Peabody: Would you demand some figgy pudding?

James: I would say, yeah, if I were out in snowy cold conditions for a couple hours and I got a glass of rum or brandy at each house and then towards the end of the night, yeah, this would, I think go down pretty well.

Lizzie Peabody: So, if you were really drunk, you would want some?

## Season 8, Episode 14 A Very Merry Sidedoor Final Transcription

James: Drunk and cold.

Ann: It's like getting a Power Bar after all of your work.

Lizzie Peabody: Exactly.

James: Exactly.

Lizzie Peabody: Regardless of what you're eating, or whatever holiday traditions you do or don't observe, we wish you happiness and good health as this calendar year draws to a close. And if you have traditions whose origins you never considered, maybe do a little investigating. Just like a weird bite in a Victorian dessert, you might be surprised by what you find. For what are the holidays, if not a big figgy pudding, a mishmash of customs and rituals, some wonderful, some you'd probably rather skip, but together they are greater than the sum of-

Nathalie Boyd: All right, all right. I think they get it. To wrap this up, Happy Holidays everyone.

Carolers: (Singing)

Lizzie Peabody: Wait a second. What the heck is auld lang syne?

Nathalie Boyd: No, that's a question for next year.

Lizzie Peabody: No, we're done.

Nathalie Boyd: Yeah.

Lizzie Peabody: This is done.

Nathalie Boyd: Over.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: You've been listening to Sidedoor, a podcast from the Smithsonian with support from PRX.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: If you cannot wait to make your own version of Mrs. Beeton's figgy pudding, you're in luck. We'll include that recipe in our newsletter. We'll also post videos of us trying to light the dang thing on fire and eventually succeeding. You can subscribe at [si.edu/side door](http://si.edu/side door).

[MUSIC]

Nathalie Boyd: The Smithsonian's National Museum of African American History and Culture will be holding a virtual Watch Night celebration this New Year's Eve from 7:30 to 9:00 PM. We'll include an invitation to that event in our newsletter as well.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: In this episode, we focused on traditions with roots in Christianity, but there are many traditions to explore. Let us know if there's something you'd like us to look into for next year.

[MUSIC]

Nathalie Boyd: Special thanks to Ashley Rose Young and Valeska Hilbig at the National Museum of American History. Thanks also to Connie Carter at the Library of Congress.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: Thank you also to the Sidedoor carolers.

[MUSIC]

Nathalie Boyd: That's Stephen Worth, Emily Howell, and the multi-talented Ashley Rose Young.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: Oh, and thanks to our friend Nick at the Organic Butcher who helped us out with that suet situation.

[MUSIC]

Nathalie Boyd: Thanks also to Margaret Weitekamp and Alison Mitchell at the Smithsonian's National Air and Space Museum.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: Reverend Reeves and Sierra Jefferson at the National Museum of African American History and Culture.

[MUSIC]

Nathalie Boyd: And Jim Deutsch at the Smithsonian Center for Folk Life and Cultural Heritage.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: Huge thanks to Nathalie Boyd for co-producing this episode. And to our brave teammates at Sidedoor who tasted the fruits and meats of our labor. Sorry, did you just gag a little bit?

[MUSIC]

Nathalie Boyd: No, I was laughing.

Lizzie Peabody: Okay.

[MUSIC]

Nathalie Boyd: James Morrison, Ann Conanen, Caitlin Shaffer, Tami O'Neill, Jess Sadeq, Lara Koch and Sharon Bryant. You guys slayed it.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: Oh, I get it. Episode artwork is by Dave Leonard.

Nathalie Boyd: Extra support comes from PRX.

Lizzie Peabody: Our show is mixed by Tarek Fouda. Our theme song and episode music are by Breakmaster Cylinder.

Nathalie Boyd: Fact checking by Adam Bisno.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: If you want to sponsor a show, please visit [sponsorship@prx.org](mailto:sponsorship@prx.org).

Nathalie Boyd: And I'm your host, Nathalie Boyd.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: I'm also your host, Lizzie Peabody. Thanks for listening.

Nathalie Boyd: Thanks for listening.

[MUSIC]

Ashley Rose Young I think if you're making this at home, and if you feel safe doing so, you could set your eggs out like a half an hour or so before boiling so that they kind of come to room temperature.

Lizzie Peabody: I don't want to speak for everyone, but nobody's going to make this at home.

Ashley Rose Young I imagine we might inspire someone out there, but yeah, there's a reason-

Lizzie Peabody: There's really no reason to do this.

Ashley Rose Young -this is not a part of our traditions. It just takes so much work.