

**Mary (Year 9, James Allen's Girls' School)**  
**DLF 2017 Winter Short Story Competition entry**

**Bulgarian Bells**

The wind moaned as it swept through the forests high up on Mount Vitosha. A lone wolf howled hauntingly at the full moon, stopped, stood for a second silhouetted against the pure white snow, and then vanished back into the gloomy depths of the trees. The branches hung low, laden with frost and snow. A squirrel scampered away, leaving a trail of tiny footprints. The silvery moonlight shone on the empty space where that wolf and countless other wolves had stood throughout time, singing their heart-wrenching songs to the world and creating a mystical, even slightly eerie, feeling. The snow had sifted down and lay in powdery white sheets on the snowy mountaintop above the tree-line.

Far below, down in the deep wooded valley, huddled down in the snow, lay little houses, sheltered from the storms and winds and all of them mirroring the twinkling stars above. Even in the moonlight, one could see that they were all painted in bright beautiful colours: red, yellow, jade green, contrasting with thick snow on the roof and icicles hanging from the eaves. Each dwelling teemed with life and its own unique story, radiating warmth and comfort. Plumes of woodsmoke rose up and up, merging with the great bulk of the mountain towering up behind. Little scenes of family life gleamed out through the brightly lit windows- grannies in their rocking chairs weaving or twirling their fluffy spindles; families crowded round the dining table or the blazing log fire; strings of dried herbs and spicy sausages hanging by the chimney breast.

Then suddenly from among the trees came the sound of happy, jingling bells and the jolly cries of children. Two little ponies came into view, their breath steaming in the frosty air, pulling a wooden sleigh painted with gaudy flowers, and heading straight towards the village. The passengers chattered loudly and peals of laughter rang out every now and then.

The ponies battled on bravely through the drifts, never wavering, stirring up waves and clouds of snow that billowed out behind them. The travellers approached a house right on the edge of the village and clambered out smiling, wrapped up in furs and knitted pullovers.

The door opened wide and a warm gust scented with hot Rakia spirit and honey wafted out. The visitors were welcomed in with great exclamations of delight which were repeated when the children saw all the decorations inside, especially the little Christmas tree with a glistening golden star at the top. Glittering baubles and wooden toys hung from the branches with peppermint candy canes and gingerbread men near the foot where younger children could reach them. A magnificent feast was spread out on the worn pinewood tables- roast lamb and goose, wild boar stew, pies of every kind, dried fruit and cheeses, stuffing, cake and more. Slowly, the heavy oak door swung shut and the iron latch clicked to. Outside, high in the branches of an ancient snow-dusted spruce, an owl gave a single wavering hoot; then all was silent once more.