The Little Atheist:

It was so terribly wet. Rain was falling, and it was almost freezing. Night came on, the holiest night of the year. In the dark and gloom a poor little girl, tired and thin, was walking through the streets. When she had left her house she’d had books. Books on how to live, how to find power in oneself rather than an external force. But she had lost them on her travels. The people she had talked to had disliked them very much and had stolen them away, saying they would do nicely to stoke their fireplaces that night. And so the little girl walked on, clutching several torn pages from the remains of her books. The girl had tried to spread her faith in a different form, but she had gotten no listeners all night.

Soaked with rain and dismay, she shuffled on, a picture of suffering. The rain melted her long black hair down her body, curtaining her beautiful face. In all the windows light was shining and people could be seen dancing and laughing with their companions over the dinner table. For it was Christmas! Yes, yes, now she remembered!

She made her way through an alley behind the houses where at least the wind couldn’t get to her. She was getting wetter and wetter but she couldn’t go home. Her family had rejected her because she did not believe. Even now, her mother and father, sisters and brothers, would be celebrating in the festivities and mirth of the special night while she huddled there shivering and wet. At least they will be happy, she thought, for I have unburdened them.

Her skin was much too tender and her bosom much too damp from laying in a puddle. Her mind, most of all, was at the point of defeat. Oh, how much one reading might warm her heart! From her shirt she withdrew one of her pages. It spoke of inner strength and the importance of the individual to their opinions. It brought forth years of courage and reminded her of her childhood dreams. She was flying high above, not bound by any rules. How wonderfully the pages spoke! How comfortable she was! The little one darted her eyes across the page seeking what else she hadn’t read; then the paper dissolved, she fell from the sky, the dark alley returned. The rain had eaten up the paper.

Quickly, she took out another page from her shirt. Words spilled out warmly and effusively; a boldened song that matched the harmony of the carols behind the walls. She stretched on her toes to peer inside the house. The rooms were filled with friends enjoying the young night. Promise and hope swirled about them as they danced and ate. The far corner boasted a tree of magnificent height and harmonious light. It grew brighter and brighter with the most dazzling colors shining in every beautiful way. Then the page dissolved, and she could see only the drip of the rain against the brick. She took out another page. Then she was sitting in the parlor, surrounded by her friends and family. They were laughing and welcoming her, and she too began laughing! Faces she hadn’t seen for years, come together to receive her, and talk and dance and laugh and sing! What joy! The little girl reached both her hands to her mother. Then the page dissolved. But she was still there. She could see herself, now, reaching out to her. Inviting her back to the celebrations.

“There is nothing to cry about,” her younger self told her, her only supporter in this life, the only being with whom to question and discuss, forever and always a phantom of sorrow, “not even for the ability to shed a tear.”

She took out another page, read the ideas, and in the pour of the rain stood her younger self, clear and dry, soft and smiling.

“Oh! But where have you been? I have so much to talk about and no one will listen!” And the little girl stepped forward, quickly pulling out the last remaining pages. To that soft smile she released all the words she ever loved. To herself she spoke of the beauty of this life and the little forgetful moments that pass us by. She took her hands, singing of the peace of the world and her love of curiosity. All the words she longed to tell her mother and father, to her sisters and brothers, to any stranger at all who cared enough to listen. And at last, she had found someone! Someone who cared and shared in the joy of this eternally happy moment.

But in the corner, leaning against the wall, sat the little girl with blue cheeks and smiling mouth, abandoned to death on the holiest evening of the year. The morning’s light rose upon a dejected figure. The child sat there, cold and wet, covered in the dissolved pages of her wonders.

“What a shame,” the people said. No one imagined what a lovely time she’d had, and how happily she had gone with herself into their holy night.