

Holiday Times

The Ones We Love Remembering,
Others We Would Rather Forget



A Writing It Real Anthology
Edited by Sheila Bender

Holiday Times: Miseries, Mysteries, and Misbehaviors

Sheila Bender, Editor

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Foreword

Young and old, we are all facing the circumstances of isolation this holiday season and looking forward to resuming gatherings before too long. As we look forward, it is a hop, skip and a jump to memories of celebrations over the years—some of ritual, some of changes, some full of surprises, some funny, and some forever heart-breaking.

I want to thank the contributors to this third Writing It Real anthology for their attention to the kind of detail important in storytelling and for creating intimacy with their readers. As writers with the ability to share our experiences in story, we open others to deeply experience their own. In that way, we are all in this together.

Sheila Bender

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Skinny Santa by Morgan Baker

I waited by the gate at the Eastern terminal for Jamie to deplane after his trip from Camp Lejeune. It was 1984 with no security to keep me from cozying up to the passengers as they disembarked from their flights. I was 26 and studying writing in graduate school. Jamie was 24 and an officer in the Marines. He was coming home for Christmas, and no one knew but me. My mother, who sang Christmas Carols along with records, while wrapping presents and baking didn't think he had leave—this would be our first Christmas with a missing family member—but he had called me in Boston's South End and said he wanted to surprise the family in Cambridge. Would I help?

Yup.

My mother was always cooking up nutty ideas like picking Jamie up at the train from college wearing pajamas or paper bags on our heads. Not sure how those ideas would go over these days.

I rented a Santa suit from a company in the garment district in Boston near where I lived, and from the airport we hightailed it to my third-floor bedroom where he switched outfits.

Jamie did not make a good Santa. He has always been super skinny. As a 24-year-old fit Marine with a 27" waist and a 40" chest, he didn't resemble Santa at all. We stuffed him full of pillows, but his hazel eyes and sallow cheeks gave him away, so he put on mirrored aviators. He looked like a cross between cool and crazy Santa.

We drove to Cambridge, where I dropped him at the top of my mother's street. I went in to "visit" my mom and 8-year-old brother, Will, casually leaving my camera by the front door.

Soon enough, the doorbell rang. My mother opened the door and didn't say much, especially when Santa started "ho ho hoing" and stepped into the house.

Will was in the front hall, with his mouth hanging open, but as soon as Santa came in, he ran into the living room, behind the couch as far away as possible.

My mother took one look at Santa's flat fanny, evident now, smiled and screamed, "Jamie!" Her laughter got the better of her as she ran to hug him. Will slowly crept out from behind the couch as Jamie removed his sunglasses.

"We did it," I thought. "We actually pulled it off." I stood back and watched the happiness unfold.



That Creepy Turkey by Marlene B Samuels

It was Aunt Esther's turn to host our family's Thanksgiving feast. My mother's younger sister absolutely adored all the hullabaloo that surrounded every American holiday, particularly those for which she was to play hostess. Without a doubt, she was the antithesis of my mother who considered most holiday-related activities—other than the food that is—to be ridiculous timewasters. And because our Thanksgiving dinner was to be in my aunt's brand-new house, it meant things she'd learned about from *Better Homes and Gardens* magazine, deciding upon the menu and setting the dinner hour. One thing excited her more than anything else: the opportunity she'd have to demonstrate what she believed was her vastly under-appreciated creativity.

Eventually, my entire family came to agree that the most insane, and without a doubt memorable, events of that Thanksgiving dinner could be attributed to my aunt's fondness for holiday decorations, especially to that creepy, damned plastic turkey.

A naturalized American citizen, Esther devoted a tremendous amount of effort to learning all about symbols and traditions of national holidays, and just like for the rest of our family, it was particularly relevant to food-related ones. Thanksgiving definitely would be her time to shine. To do justice to the holiday and to prepare for her eagerly awaited hostess role, my aunt began to amass every decoration and place-setting she considered even remotely suggestive of fall and the Thanksgiving theme months in advance. From her perspective, more of everything always was better. With Thanksgiving in sight and what were about to be her new hostess responsibilities for such an all-important dinner, my aunt's life acquired great focus.

We all first laid eyes on “the thing” at the Rosh Hashanah dinner we celebrated in my aunt and uncle's tiny apartment just before they moved. Other than Aunt Esther, every one of us deemed the thing utterly repellant. When out of her earshot, my cousins, brother and I whispered about it in the hallway, on the back porch, in their bedrooms and at the dinner table. But my aunt was beyond proud of it. She was downright ecstatic. She passed the thing around the living room as soon as we'd gathered to enjoy pre-dinner appetizers and wine. She couldn't resist gloating about how clever she'd been to buy the thing the instant she'd set eyes upon it.

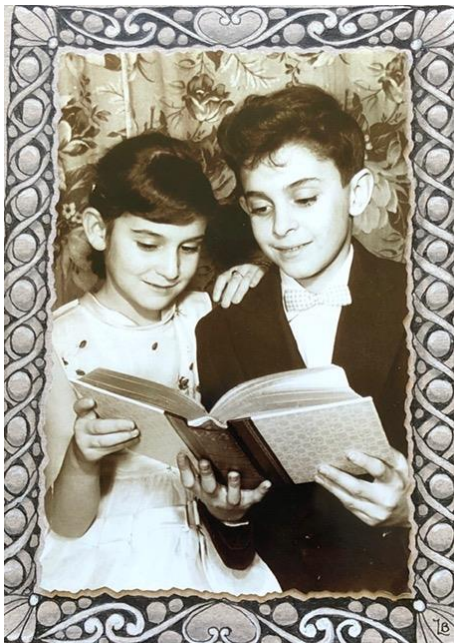
“So, would you believe I found such a thing last July for close to “*gournischt*” (nothing) at some barn sale in the Wisconsin Dells? Incredible, yes?” No one dared express less-than-favorable views for fear of hurting Aunt Esther's feelings. It was well known in the family from far too many experiences with her that she tended to be somewhat hyper-sensitive to criticism.

What was it about that gigantic plastic turkey, anyway? For starters, the way its glass eyes meandered in two different directions—one up and the other down—exceeded creepy. Occasionally, gravity or the slightest movement within several feet of it, caused both its eyes to relocate. And when they did, they'd fall forward into a cross-eyed position, creepier still. While the eyes alone could have been enough to unnerve anyone who happened to look at it, my

brother and I concluded the eyes were minor compared with its worst feature: a startlingly repulsive, overbearing stench reminiscent of barnyards, cow dung and sour milk emanating from its tail feathers.

Months earlier, Esther had decided a turkey decoration would be just the thing to place on the center of her holiday table. “We have to have a center-piece for our all-American feast, right?” She reminded us as she fantasized about replicating the dinner table-scene from her favorite Norman Rockwell painting. And that’s exactly what she did: stick the creepy plastic turkey right in the middle of the table.

“What is it with these people?” I asked my brother in a whisper. “Do you think maybe they lost their sense of smell during the war?” I realized I’d become obsessed trying to imagine where the thing’s feathers had been and what might still be clinging to them. I was having difficulty thinking of anything else. Aunt Esther was so proud of her turkey, she insisted it had a name and as such, in order to be respectful, we ought to refer to it by its name—Tom Turkey—rather than “the turkey” or “that thing.”



From my perspective, the vile thing was ridiculously out of proportion to be the centerpiece. So wide was it, that for anyone seated in front of it or staring into its behind, seeing across the table would have been impossible. Tom was at least three times too tall for the table and his head touched the bottom lightbulbs of the room’s chandelier. In addition to not being able to see around or over him, Tom was painted an odd array of iridescent colors more reminiscent of Halloween than of fall or Thanksgiving. But the paint was still-tacky, not wet exactly but sticky enough to attract lint and dust to its recesses. Stranger than all his other strange features was that his tail was made out of real feathers and they definitely were not turkey feathers. My brother and I were certain that at one time, those feathers had been attached to a peacock’s butt.

We’d all just finished gorging ourselves on appetizers in the living room—“Pigs in a Blanket,” to be precise. “That is the most idiotic name for something that was created using miniature Hebrew National Kosher hot dogs and wrapped in kosher dough made without butter!” My brother announced. “What total moron came up with that one?” My mother’s death-stare halted any further discussion about the topic and just in time, too. At that moment, Aunt Esther rang her miniature replica of the Liberty Bell, also purchased specifically for our holiday dinner.

In single file, the fourteen of us moved into the dining room. We took our appropriate seats designated by leaf-shaped name cards in autumn colors. Our Thanksgiving dinner that year was

especially significant. It was to be the first holiday dinner Aunt Esther and Uncle Ziggy would host in their new house, and a real house it was!

There was a separate dining room, a huge kitchen with two ovens—an unheard-of luxury—two sinks plus unimaginable counter space. Had it not been for Tom Turkey, the table truly could have been a work of art. Color coordinated napkins and plates in autumn tones of terra cotta reds, golden yellows and warm earth-tones marked every setting. Paper maple leaves had been scattered atop the rust-colored paper table-covering and vanilla-scented votive candles were arranged symmetrically, two on either side of Tom Turkey. My brother and I were sure that the candles were my aunt's futile attempt to camouflage the bird's stench. Obviously, she'd also been studying *Good Housekeeping* magazine's special The Thanksgiving Issue. Candles were lit, wine poured, and toasts were made.

“*Mazel Tov!*” My father shouted, holding his wine glass high above his head.

“*Mazel Tov* and a Happy Thanksgiving!” All assembled shouted. Every head at the table turned to admire Uncle Ziggy entering the dining room bearing the weight of a massive, perfectly golden roast turkey surrounded by roasted potatoes, carrots and leeks on an immense ornate platter. As Ziggy struggled, stoically, toward the table trying to hide the huge strain on him, he lost his footing and stumbled forward. Regaining his balance, he plopped the heavy platter onto the table with a tad too much force. The table shimmied under the sudden weight. Instantly, two candles on either side of creepy Tom Turkey toppled over, each in a different direction. And that's when it all happened!

Tom's tail-feathers caught fire. First, they smoldered and as they did, they began to emit an even more unbearable stench than we thought possible. Seconds later, the paper that had served as our “tablecloth” burst into flames. Oddly, those of us still seated at the table were immobilized. We stared at the scene unfolding before our eyes yet seemed incapable of registering that flames were spreading rapidly. Fortunately, it was the increasing stench of burning feathers that helped knock us back to our senses.

Without another moment of hesitation, Uncle Ziggy lunged toward the table and grabbed the turkey-bearing platter to make a hasty retreat toward the living room. As though in a choreographed stage-performance, my mother jumped from her chair, grabbed her seat-cushion and began pummeling Tom Turkey in an effort to smother his burning tail feathers, where upon his plastic exterior broke into shards revealing at least five miniature Tom Turkey replicas who'd actually been “living” inside him. My father also sprang into action. Jumping to his feet, he hoisted the water pitcher, emptying its contents over the burning paper table-covering that had engulfed creepy Tom Turkey.

In the ensuing chaos, my brother, cousins and I took full advantage of the sanctioned opportunity to contribute to the craziness. Systematically, we worked our ways around the table, picking up every full glass, enthusiastically contributing to the deluge.

“Fast work putting out that fire, Meyer!” Aunt Esther said to my dad. “And Ziggy,” she gushed wrapping her arms around my uncle’s neck and planting a loud kiss on his cheek, “you saved the turkey and our entire Thanksgiving holiday!”

“I saved the only turkey of worth saving!” He responded. “For god’s sake, didn’t I tell you that thing was a complete piece of *dreck* (shit)? So, enough already—enough excitement, enough *mit* this disgusting Tom Turkey business. Let’s eat!”

Esther, still standing next to the table, took her plate and poured the accumulated water from it. Next, she collected her wine glass, napkin and silverware and announced, “Come, everyone! We still have our turkey and all the food so to the living room we go. Time to eat but for real now!” She led the procession adding, “We all know exactly how to eat without a dining room, right?”

“Right!” We agreed, following her lead as we carried whatever we’d need away from the table and into the living room. Ziggy, in the chaos, had placed our feast atop the console television. As soon as the last family member was seated all around the living room, on sofas, recliners and on the floor, he promptly began his knife-sharpening performance. The first slices of golden turkey were carved, plates were passed around, and once more we lifted our glasses. But this time the toast was enhanced. “L’chaim and a Happy Thanksgiving!” shouted my father.

“L’chaim and a Happy Thanksgiving!” We replied as one. But my father wasn’t done. He proceeded with his critical message. “You know *vat*,” he announced. “Never mind *mit* all this *mishegas* (craziness) Jews are always repeating, that business they like to say, ‘next year in Jerusalem.’ I’m here, finally in America! What’s really important is God bless America. And if you want to ask me, much better to say, ‘next year in the dining room!’”

“Next year, in the dining room!” We concurred.

Thanksgiving Reunion by Gloria Sinibaldi

As I recall Thanksgiving Day of 2019 it still makes me laugh. It wasn't funny at the time though. What should have been a relaxed day with family turned into the bizarre. It began with a storm. We knew one was coming but this one had more muscle than expected. Torrential rain fell, the water came in sheets, winds blew, and streets flooded. Just when I put the turkey in the oven the electricity went out.

"What? No power?" Husband Peter, quick to think on his feet, fired up the outdoor barbecue. "It'll be okay, we'll cook the bird out here," he said. He grabbed the turkey from the oven, stuck it in the barbecue and shut the lid. "That should do it!" We both sighed, hoping for the best.

The rain showed no sign of let up. We were expecting guests. A reunion of sorts. I hadn't seen Bill and Natalie for 25 years. Peter had never met them. Originally the plan was that there would be eight of us at the Thanksgiving table: our daughter Jenny, son-in-law Lou and four teenaged grandchildren, and us. But a couple of days before the holiday, Jenny asked, "Can we invite Bill and Natalie?" I hadn't heard their names for so many years, it took me a moment to place them. Oh, yes, I remembered. They were neighbors of my ex-husband. Since childhood Grant's family had a cabin at Clear Lake where he met the Taylor's who lived two doors down. John, my eldest son, had recently bought a cabin on the same cove so the Taylor's and their extended family and my kids became reacquainted. It was a new generation of families during summer vacations.

"They don't have anybody to celebrate with," Jenny told me. "Their son and daughter live in the Bay Area and can't come out to see them this year. The Taylor's now live in Desert Hot Springs during the winter. It's close by, right?"

"Yes, it's not far. Sure, let's invite them," I said. "Can you be at the house around one thirty and bring the appetizers? That would be great!"

She agreed. Jenny's family was driving from San Diego. In their infinite wisdom they decided to avoid traffic and take the back roads to our home in Palm Desert. "Taking the main route, would be a safer choice," Peter advised. "A storm is coming." But practical advice falls on deaf ears, especially when old folks dole it out. The words of caution did not stick. When the rain began, it was fine, until it began to snow. Snow in San Diego? Who would have guessed? But the back route runs through the high desert and yes, it snows, not often, but it did on that Thanksgiving Day. Without chains or snow tires they were re-routed back to the main highway by a highway patrol blockade. It was unfortunate. But the family arrived safe and hungry at 6 PM.

Meanwhile, back at the ranch, Bill and Natalie came in early afternoon. When I opened the door to greet them, they were drenched. Natalie was wearing a hoodie topped with a hat. Water was running from it. Bill held an umbrella that looked like it was about to collapse. "Is this the right house?" Natalie asked in a frail voice. I barely recognized her since her hoodie was partially

covering her face and she was looking down to avoid the dripping water. Bill, a tall man, was leaning over, trying to hold the umbrella over Natalie's head.

"Yes, come on in," I said, trying to sound as cheery as possible. I took their coats, hung them to dry and seated them near the fireplace. After introducing them to Peter I asked, "Would you like some eggnog, a hot toddy, some tea? But the concern on Natalie's face was visible. Bill, too, was sullen and quiet.

"Kevin is on his way," Natalie announced. "Kevin?"

"Yes, our son. He decided to surprise us and meet us here. But he got lost, somewhere near Victorville." Bill suddenly came to life. "That place is a hell hole. He'll be mugged or murdered before he even gets here."

Natalie continued as if she didn't hear him. "He's driving a Prius and his car is running out of electric charge. He got off the freeway, trying to find a charging station and then the road was closed. He had to take a detour and now he doesn't know where he is. He's been driving since 4 AM and he's not hydrated. When he doesn't drink enough water, he gets confused."

I heard stories about Kevin. He was an orthodontist in the Bay Area with another practice in Lake County. He was also on the City Council in Lakeport. Natalie's description, that of a confused lost person, didn't fit the one I had in my mind. It was as if she was talking about a teenager.

"And Julie, she is coming."

"Julie?"

"Yes, our daughter, but she may not make it. She was going to surprise us too, but we heard she had to turn around because of flooding over the grapevine. There's no cell service in that area, so we haven't got an update."

Her voice lost energy with each word. I went to the kitchen to fix a pot of hot water for tea. I placed the pot on a tray next to them with cups, saucers, tea bags and accoutrements. I didn't know what to say that would make them feel better. The house was quiet, an awkward reunion after so many years. Luckily, the power had come back on just moments before their arrival.

"Why don't I put on some music. Classical sounds or holiday tunes? What would you like?"

"I'd rather have silence," Natalie said. "I have not been this upset in a long time." With that, Bill sprang from his chair and demanded a computer. Like a soldier taking orders from the captain, I ran to get my laptop. He signed on, but not without a few profanities spoken under his breath.

Peter went to check the progress of the meal while I sat with Natalie to keep her company in her misery. Bill typed in Google maps and began tracking Kevin. After a few moments he pulled his cell phone from his pocket and dialed Kevin's number. "Hey man. You're headed in the wrong

direction. You have to turn back!” Bill was on speaker phone. “There are no charging stations in Victorville. Who the hell in Victorville would need a charging station anyway? Only bums and losers live there. Turn the car around!” he demanded.

“I can’t,” Kevin protested. “It’s raining hard. I can barely see the road. There’s a long line of cars behind me, going slow. There’s no exit.”

Bill hung up the phone in disgust and started Googling for motels. “He’s got to get off that road. This is nuts!” he said. Now he was back on the phone talking to Kevin. “I found a Best Western close to where you are,” he said. “I’ll text you the location. Go there. It’s your best bet before you run out of charge.”

“Is there a room available? Kevin asked. “Can you call ahead?”

“Oh shit! Bill said. “Can’t you do anything?” He hung up and began dialing the phone again.

A man with a heavy accent answered. “Hello. It’s a great day at Best Western. How can I help you?”

“No, Goddamn it, it’s not a great day! I need a room!”

“I’m sorry sir, we’re booked this weekend, especially with this storm. I’ll see what I can do. What is your location? I’ll see if I can find another hotel to accommodate you.”

After a moment, he came back to the phone. “We have something in Adelanto sir, about 10 miles from Victorville. Can I transfer the call to that location?” Bill grumbled but agreed. “Do you want to talk to a live agent or do you want to make your...”

Before he could finish his sentence, Bill screamed, “No! I want to talk to a dead one! What the hell kind of a question is that?” An audible laugh came from the kitchen where Peter was stirring the gravy. I slinked off myself to finish up with last minute trimmings. I needed a break from the drama. The conversation continued. Bill was talking to Kevin again. I couldn’t hear everything he said, but I heard Kevin talking in a raised voice, something about being thirsty.

The rain persisted; the snow fell. My phone rang several times from Jenny and family telling tales of their trip from the high desert back to the main road. It turned out to be quite an adventure. When they arrived, they had pictures! The family being born and raised in San Diego had never been in snow. They were excited to be in a winter wonderland especially on Thanksgiving Day. They stopped, threw snowballs and posed in front of snow-covered hills. Postcard perfect! Christmas card perfect! In the midst of Bill and Natalie drama, I eventually turned on the music. But not before Kevin got a room at the Best Western in Adelanto, equipped with a charging station. Yay! And not before we learned Julie had returned to the Bay Area, disappointed but safe and sound and, of course, not before Jenny and family were safe and warm and sharing their pictures and adventure. Now it was time for the start of the show, the turkey!

We gathered around the table and held hands. Peter said grace. It was a Normal Rockwell setting, with no sign of the angst that filled the room in the hours before. There were smiles, laughter and hugs all around. With a fire burning, plenty of food and drink to go around, we had a lot for which to be thankful. Bill and Natalie missed their family, for sure, but knowing they were safe would do. The reunion happened after all.

Thanksgiving at Our House by Suzy Beal

“One, two, three, four, five, six, seven, hey, you guys, Mom made seven pies this time, two cherry, two apple and three pumpkin! She made cinnamon rolls and bread, too.” We had to wait to eat until Uncle Mac, Aunt Mim and the cousins arrived. The whole house was warm and damp with the odors wafting from the kitchen. Mom had a twenty-two pound turkey in the oven along with all the trimmings, which for us included smashed potatoes (as we called them) with gravy, peas, cranberry sauce, stuffing, homemade bread with real butter (not margarine,) and Waldorf salad and pies for dessert. There would be fourteen of us for dinner. Did that mean half a pie for each of us?

The cousins came from the Willamette Valley. Jean the oldest, just four years older than I, then Jack, two years older and Doug, two years younger than I. We thought of them as the city folks from Forest Grove. As we lived in the country, I always felt they were more “knowing” than us. They knew the latest slang, shows on TV and what clothes were the coolest. They must have enjoyed bringing us up to date.

It rained this particular Thanksgiving, and the weather had turned cold, so we ten kids had to find things to do in the house.

Jean and Jack got us organized in the living room. “Let’s play the board game everyone in Forest Grove is playing,” announced Jean. “We planned to bring it, but we forgot it at the last minute, so we’ll make one.”

She set us to work cutting out paper money. We cut ones, fives, tens, fifties, hundreds and five hundreds from butcher paper that Mom used to wrap meat for the freezer. Jean, Jack, and Tom worked on a piece of cardboard, drawing squares of different colors and filling them in with lots of information I didn’t understand. They also made cards to match the board squares and told us to just keep making more money. Every time I asked what they called the game, they ignored me and kept working. “How many of each are we supposed to make?” No answer.

Several hours passed before Jack announced we were ready to play. They had just written the name of the game in the middle of the board: “MONOPOLY.” We had each found something to use as our playing piece. I had a red button. When they discussed the rules of the game I didn’t understand, and I expected to lose. As the second oldest in my family of seven, I didn’t want to appear stupid in front of my littler brothers and sister, so I pretended to get it. Several of the younger ones, bored from cutting out play money, headed upstairs in search of something else to do.

When the game finally got underway only six of us played. Knowing the name of the game didn’t help me understand the rules, as I didn’t understand the meaning of the word “monopoly,” but my cousins did. They bought up all the property while I hoarded my money. We used macaroni for houses and beans for hotels. Soon the board was filling up with these and I realized

my money would not last. Every time I passed GO, I got more money, but it still wasn't enough when I landed on Jean's hotels. I watched all my money pass into her hands, but I stayed to see how the game would end. The only ones left playing were Jean, Jack and my older brother Tom. They were making deals, but I saw Tom would soon lose to our city-smart cousins.

While we didn't have their skills for these kinds of games, we had our country smarts. The rain was letting up, so we suggested a hike into the woods. The forest behind our house was dense with huckleberry, ferns, salmon berry, and lots of wet moss. We led the way going as fast as we could along our well-made paths. Everyone was getting soaked from the wet brush. We were cold. The tall spruce, hemlock, and fir trees made it dark even in daylight. Soon we could hear our cousins asking, "Do you know where you're going? Are we lost? Let's go back!"

We headed for the huge spruce that grew deep in the woods behind our house. When we got there, we told our cousins to make a circle around it holding hands. It took all six of us to envelop the tree trunk. As we looked up into its branches, I glanced over at my cousins and saw their looks of awe and wonder.

Monopoly was OK, but our spruce tree was the coolest.

Singing of Angels and Mangers – *O so many years ago* by Sheila Murphy

In the olden days, before Covid curtailed Christmas shopping, I cringed at the endless assault of carols blaring everywhere. One of my favorite hymns, “Away in a Manger,” is an ode to simplicity that seemed especially out-of-place in a product-obsessed, ever-longer “holiday season.”

In 2020, the cluttered store aisles and jostling crowds of yesteryear have given way to pop-up ads in an online blitz of commercialism. *No crib for His bed*—not to worry. With flash sales, a credit card not quite maxed out, and FedEx shipping, a deluxe, child-safe crib can arrive at your manger door within twenty-four hours.

I’m eighty-four years old, and relieved to forego shopping and holiday excess. Except for angels, that is. As Christmas draws near, the invisible benevolence of angelic choirs hovers close, in story, song, and memory.

When I was a child—*O so many years ago*—in the early 1940s, Christmas preparations were benign, in some ways benighted, and all-consuming. Although the drumbeat of World War II came to us through our Philco radio, our family and holiday routines seemed little affected.

Our father, a disabled World War I veteran, lamented that he was too old to re-enlist. With other fathers, he patrolled our hilltop neighborhood in his Air Raid Warden helmet. Sitting behind blackout curtains, counting ration coupons for meat and gasoline, we felt secure. In daytime, whenever we walked by a house with a gold star in the window, our mother bowed her head to pray. I recall only one school adjustment during WWII: our school day became a single session of four hours, 9 AM to 1 PM. That was no hardship. Long afternoons were freed up for play.

Today the Covid pandemic has caused disruption of economic and social life, and schools at every level. As grandchildren and their parents discuss the challenges of virtual school and hybrid classes, I’m glad to be long retired from teaching.

In the war years, my brother Tommy and I were both in elementary school. In St. Patrick’s School, Christmas *was* the December curriculum. Angels, their voices, their costumes, and their hovering presence replaced textbooks.

Our teachers were Dominican nuns, garbed in flowing white woolen robes, coifed in starched wimples, with veils that covered all but their faces, and wide leather belts draped with long rosary beads that rattled as they walked in black clunky shoes. Right after Thanksgiving, with the comforting sameness of ritual, our teachers would set in motion a pageant for grades 1 through 5. “Copy these instructions from the board—*exactly* as they are written” was the command issued for everyone. Well, almost everyone. That transcription lesson, transformed from Sister’s flowing penmanship to my tortured Palmer method scrawl, marked the beginning of another Christmas season.

Exempt from the general directions were the goody-two-shoes teachers' pets anointed with starring roles as Mary, Joseph, and the Wise Men. (Many parents could be counted on to volunteer a baby brother or sister for the cameo role of baby Jesus.) The rest of us became a chorus of shepherds (boys) and angels (girls). Except for brief glares of envy directed at the gloating feature players, we adapted. School days reverberated with singing as classrooms, and then the auditorium, echoed with songs of angels, mangers, and peace on earth.

Every year Woolworth's made a killing selling clothesline rope for shepherds' sashes, as well as yards of silver and gold tinsel that ostensibly transformed all sizes and shapes of female girlhood into ethereal angels. Mothers were pressed into service to make angel costumes and raid linen closets for striped tablecloths suitable for flowing shepherd cloaks and headgear. The boys, true to the stereotype of their sex rather than to the role they were rehearsing, were not always peaceful during rehearsals and were especially prone to whipping rope sashes as lassoes.

One year, angel costumes were to be made of sheets; another time the nuns' dictum would call for curtain gauze. My mother hated to sew but her annual role as reluctant seamstress never stopped her from singing as her sewing machine hummed: *In a manger, lying low, O so many years ago....* Haloes emerged from shimmering tinsel wound around picture wire. Oh, how precariously that golden circle hovered above my rag-curled hair. Stiffened wings, outlined in tinsel, may have looked earthbound but just might lift us toward heaven if we prayed hard enough. The voices of children, nuns, and mothers, not Muzak, were background for the Advent season. Do I remember the pageant itself? Not a one.

Angels in school festivities echoed the arrival of manger scenes that seemed to appear everywhere in our 1940s "streetcar suburb" of Boston. On the first Sunday of Advent, a life-size crèche was centered on the lawn in front of St. Patrick's Church, and another smaller one inside, just behind the altar railing. Only after Midnight Mass on Christmas Eve was the plaster infant, a small but central figure, carried to each crib.

The Christmas adventure I recall was an annual trek to Boston with our mother: a long walk down Main Street, a streetcar to Harvard Square, and a subway ride to "Park Street Under." A long stairway to daylight led to window displays at Jordan Marsh and Filene's, where holiday scenes sparkled with visions of sugar plum fairies and Santa's elves. After saturating ourselves with secular fantasies, Tommy and I would race each other uphill from Tremont Street to stand in the straw in front of the crèche on Boston Common. With a trumpeting angel hovering at the roof peak of the wooden manger, the crèche nestled on the hillside below the State House. Silhouetted against a darkening sky, the gold on the State House dome looked like a gleaming archway to heaven. (Only Boston Irish Catholic children of that era would blur images of church and state so comfortably.)

At home, our mother placed baby Jesus figures throughout our house. My china baby doll, swaddled decorously in a white diaper, lay on a white batiste handkerchief embroidered with holly. A tiny crib of wooden slats with a bed of straw was ensconced on a table. Taped high on the door frame and fastened by yarn, a woven straw angel, as small as the plaster infant, floated

above the scene. A Hummel crèche, gift from a friend who had taught in Germany, had pride of place on the coffee table, with each figure's face seeming to glow. After our mother began working in the library and was asked to share our crèche with the town, we had to walk down Main Street to see our Hummel crèche displayed in a glass case near the library circulation desk. (Co-mingling of church and state had yet to become a contentious issue.)



Aside from angels and mangers, my Christmas memories are few and blurred. One is of Christmas Eve. Tommy and I were allowed to open one present, chosen from boxes under the tree, brought by relatives who wouldn't be visiting the next day. Tommy made a production of shaking and poking each box with his name on it, but I always chose Aunt Esther's gift. She was an elementary school teacher, and always chose *the* perfect book. So it was that I was introduced to *Mary Poppins*, *The Secret Garden*, and *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*. On Christmas Eve, I would relish the dust jacket, illustrations, and heft of my book, though I was too distracted to begin reading.

Santa Claus is a minor figure in my memory, chiefly as the filler of stockings whose tantalizing bulges were magical portents of small toys. When we hung up our stockings on Christmas eve, we knew our mother would retell the story from her childhood—how her immigrant mother, widowed at thirty-nine, struggled to raise five children in a land she would never think of as home. In that household, we were reminded, a longed-for and precious Christmas treat, first seen by a telltale bulge in the toe of each stocking, would be a ripe and juicy orange.

After our father died, our mother, assuming Tommy and I had outgrown not only Santa but also our taste for multi-colored lights, brassy swirls of tinsel, and gaudy ornaments, surprised us by

decorating our tree in subdued shades of her favorite color—blue. We were underwhelmed. We wanted, and needed, holiday traditions to be unaltered and repeated, not updated or modified.

This year, grandchildren and their parents will come, not to stay and not for long, helping with chores as they have done throughout these self-quarantining months. Young and old will wear masks, keep their distance, and—they know *the* perfect gift—bring fresh-baked cookies. Their sparkling eyes and stories will lift spirits as high as angelic choirs could ever do. Multi-colored tree lights glowing in garish splendor will mute the subtexts of Covid, cancer, and creaky bones. And the figures in the Hummel crèche radiate tranquility—*O hear the angel voices....*

A Christmas That Defies Recalling! by Joan Connor

My adult children recall Christmas 1988 with various moans and shout-outs; my memory with black holes dug deep recalls a year shrouded in anxieties. I ask them to text their recall of this particular yuletide experience. What I receive reveals a Christmas to not remember, well, for most of the family.

Jack and Gail, my husband's brother and sister-in-law, lived in Cleveland, Ohio. We lived in Missouri City, Texas. *Why don't we take a trip this year for our Christmas present to one another? What do you think about spending the holiday with your brother?*

Was I being considerate of my husband's familial relationships?

Was I exposing the children to an educational road trip?

Was I copping out of the traditional Christmas at home with three children and two others away at college?

Did I ever think that the college-aged children might want to come "home" for Christmas?

Or was I avoiding the queasiness of a marriage about to go awry?

Leaving our Houston suburban home, we drove north to pick up our eldest daughter in Sherman, Texas. We had made arrangements for our eldest son at college in Hoboken, New Jersey, to meet us in Cleveland. Unable to recall those details, I ask for clarification and received this text message from Son #1:

Good luck on your paper, Mom. Just make something up. It'll be better than what happened because that was dreadfully boring. We didn't have much to talk about because nobody had anything in common. They were nice and gracious, so that's good family stuff.

I have a clear picture of us all sitting around the living room Christmas Eve watching their family of four opening presents, one after another.

Did you get any presents from us? I inquire via texting.

Youngest 10-year-old child replies:

Wait, you want to exploit my childhood disappointments? I recall receiving Boggle.

Son, #3 who had just turned fourteen texts:

I vaguely remember opening a shirt from them. I don't remember any other gifts.

College daughter responds:

I just remember everybody trying to talk to Grandmother because she was our elder and we were trying to have discussions with her and be respectful and she had no idea who any of us were and she just wanted to go home. She got up in the middle of the night and got dressed and demanded that she be taken home. Maybe she was demented, maybe she was the smartest one, who knows?

And then there was a wild card football game happening in Cleveland, December 24, 1988 between the Houston Oilers and the Browns. I cannot recall who did or didn't go to the game, but the kids recall it vividly!

Youngest daughter, Mo, was elated and messages:

Lifetime memory going to the Dawg Pound to see the Browns play the Oilers! The game was fun. I remember seeing "Fuck Houston" shirts they were selling. We all thought it was so naughty and so funny.

Youngest son texts:

I was not allowed to go to the football game because I refused to root against the Oilers. When I was told I had to root for the Browns or I couldn't go, I didn't take it seriously. As I slowly realized that no one was teasing me, I threw a fit and said I didn't want to go if that was the case, so Mo got my ticket. My memory is of that long nap I took on their sofa. I didn't really want to root for the Oilers, I just didn't want to root for the team they were. I was such a little jerk!

Oldest son texts:

Maybe I left before football because I have no interest in it and couldn't figure out why everyone liked talking about a game they didn't play. We were all together! We were celebrating a joyous holiday! We were with family! This togetherness has seldom happened in the recent 20 years—maybe twice!

The marriage to their father ended two years later and my now five adult children, ages 42 - 52, celebrate Christmas in a myriad of ways. The joy is that they all answered my texts, read one another's response and shared Christmas memories via our current techie way!

'Tis a simple joy reminiscing a most unusual holiday.

Three Poems by Cassandra Hamilton

This Is Not ‘Just a Tree’

This sapling I saved
twenty-eight years ago.

Now the evergreen stands
three lush stories high.

This wet snowy dawn
we drink to Christmas.

I swig from my toddy
warmed in a flask.

She sips from purple sky’s
cool, cleansing rain.

This is my church.
There is no other refrain.

The Sapling

Scrawny trunk no wider than my spine.
Fledgling branches opening for a hug.
Bark as soft as a babe’s skin.

“Let’s save this one,” I said.

The Price of Holidays

I was born on a farm; taken from my mother.
My cousins were wild; but I lived in a cage.
Where, oh where, is my mother?

My cousins hunted in ponds, fields and woods;
I grew fat and lazy on rich processed foods.
My cousins dreamed under stars pressed in pairs;
I cried alone, unheard in a cacophony of neighbor's affairs.
Where, oh where, is my mother?

I was yanked from my home; leaving, caught a last glimpse of my brother.
My cousins courted and assembled a harem: I, constantly overwhelmed, pressed my face in a corner.
Oh where, oh where is my mother?

My cousins greeted their newborn; I laid out my neck.
My cousins yelped for joy; a blade silenced my clatter.
My cousins strutted in pride; I lay useless on my side.
My innards set on a platter, so people could be thankful their family mattered.
This, oh this, is what happened to my mother.

The New Year's Eve Dinner That Came and Went and Came by Marlene B. Samuels

"Who's coming for New Year's Eve dinner tomorrow?" My two sons asked, almost in unison.

"Same as always." I said, "But this year there'll be sixteen of us instead of our usual ten. All our friends seem to have company visiting for the holidays and hoping to ski because we've had record snowfalls so of course, we told our friends they're welcome to bring their guests."

"Okay, so who's coming?" David, our older son, persisted.

"George and Anne from Palo Alto, their daughter Lisa, her fiancé, their New York University classmate, and George's sister from Boston. Then the Bates—our new friends who live here full time— plus Mrs. Bates's brother and his wife visiting from Chicago and your Dad's "sandbox" friend John and wife Linda. They plan to fly into Boise from D.C., spend the night there, then drive up in the morning for New Year's Eve. And the four of us, of course."

Since having bought our tiny mountain resort house in Sun Valley, Idaho, we'd established a holiday tradition of spending our son's winter and spring breaks there. The winter of the "Vacillating New Year's Dinner," as we came to call it, was one of numerous records; record snowfalls, our sons' ski school promotions, and my completing a fifteen-km cross-country ski trek. Town was packed and the New Year holiday promised to be especially festive. As we'd done for ten years, we'd host a New Year's Eve dinner party.

We had perfected a schedule to suit skiers and non-skiers alike; guests arrived at 8:30, buffet dinner commenced at 9:30. At 11:50, well-fed and tipsy, we all wrapped ourselves in heavy fleece blankets and moved onto our driveway where, at midnight, we began to "ooh" and "ahh" at fireworks-displays above Baldy Mountain.

My menu had become legendary among our friends who, like us, felt fortunate for the opportunity to spend winter holidays in the mountains. But at this particular New Year's Eve celebration, we would add six additional guests so of course, I planned to cook at least twice as much food as necessary.

Two weeks before our three-week Christmas holiday, the four of us landed at Boise Airport. I was determined to complete my most crucial task before we drove the one-hundred and fifty miles up to Sun Valley. We stopped at the massive Wholesale Grocers where I always bought the two ducks I'd make into duck confit the next day. An essential French cassoulet ingredient, confit needed at least two weeks to "cure" in an earthenware crock topped with clarified duck fat. As soon as the crock was stored in our garage fridge, I busied myself preparing duck stock—another cassoulet ingredient, from the remaining duck parts.

My family divided up the remaining tasks that needed to be done over the three days before our party. I prepared lamb stew, shopped for sausages, soaked and cooked white beans and toasted

French bread my husband ground into the breadcrumbs that would become the cassoulet's top crust. We sped towards our New Year's Eve dinner, "all systems go."

While I cured salmon for Swedish gravlax, the boys whisked honey mustard and cut mini-cocktail rye into triangle halves. One day before our dinner and still so much to do! Our house looked amazing. Flower-filled vases brightened up every room and our sons had suspended numerous "Happy New Year" banners from the ceiling beams.

The morning of our celebratory day, I retrieved the confit from the fridge, drained cooked beans and assembled the cassoulet ending with my favorite step, sprinkling breadcrumbs on top then drizzling the duck fat. For good reason, we made sure never to invite the Surgeon General.

George, Anne and their crew of four arrived first. The living room fireplace crackled and cassoulet aromas wafted across the house teasing us with what awaited. Ten of us squashed onto two sofas. Our son, David, poured Champaign while his brother, Michael, passed gravlax hors-d'oeuvres to seated guests. Next, they distributed noisemakers, hats, party favors and—very much against my protests—confetti packets.

We'd set the kitchen counter up as the buffet, randomly arranging candles that, once lit, would mesmerize us with shadows that surely would dance on the walls. The four Bates were due momentarily as were our Washington, D.C., friends who seemed to be running late on their drive up from Boise. Those of us assembled wasted no time enjoying the appetizers and Champaign. We tucked into olives, coconut shrimp and crudités served with a lovely variety of dips.

I had just bitten into a gravlax toast when the phone rang. I ran to answer it. The muffled voice asked, "Marl, that you? It's John. We're super sorry but I doubt we'll be up in time for dinner. In fact, we haven't even left D.C. yet! We're in the midst of a massive snowstorm, more than a thousand flights cancelled so far. But you could do us a favor."

"Of course, anything!" I said.

"Freeze some of that amazing cassoulet for us and we'll try to get to your place by the second."

"Oh, what a shame," George and Anne said simultaneously upon hearing my news. "I guess we'll just have to eat more!" They chuckled, hoping to diminish my disappointment. Our sons filled water pitchers and placed Dijon mustard containers on the counter. I squashed myself back onto the sofa between our friends. The moment I was settled, the phone rang again. "Don't move!" Larry said. "I'm up. I'll get it."

Other than my husband's voice and the crackling fire, the room grew still. "Well, that doesn't sound very good. Anything we can do to help?" He said into the receiver. "We're here if you want to talk. Please keep us posted."

He returned to the living room unable to repress a grimace. "And?" I asked. "What was that about?"

“Looks like no one in the Bates family will be joining us.”

“Their problem is what? They don’t like our menu?” My lame effort at levity failing.

“Seems that Steve, who had surgery last week to remove his adenoids, developed an infection. Apparently, the dose of antibiotics prescribed to him wasn’t powerful enough, so his infection has become more severe. He has a raging fever, so they’re headed to St. Luke’s Hospital.” I gave Larry my doubtful look. “Oh honestly, Marlene, no one makes this stuff up!” He sneered before I had a chance to comment. Then “And no, they did not get a better offer.”

Our initial party of sixteen, in the span of ten minutes, had dwindled dramatically. “I guess there’ll be plenty of leftovers for another feast.” I said as went to remove the cassoulets from the oven and set them to rest on top of the stove. By 9:00 p.m., we definitely were ready for dinner. George had just placed a loaded forkful into his mouth when his mobile phone rang. We all froze at the counter as if in a game of Statue.

“When?” He asked. A medical doctor at Stanford, George continued asking medical questions. “And her vitals? Have you started a coumadin drip? I’ll get back to you in a few.” He hung up.

We’d assumed George’s colleague who helped managed his patient-load had just called. Turning towards us, George said, “Looks as though the Samuels will be having an incredibly quiet New Year’s Eve.” Noticing our confusion, he explained further. “That call was from the doctor at my mom’s assisted-living facility in Menlo Park. She just had a massive stroke, and he suggests we get there ASAP. No telling how long she’ll last. Much as we hate missing this dinner with you, if we hit the road within the hour, we should be in Menlo Park by morning.”

Dumbfounded, we could think of nothing to say. In what felt like less time than it took to blink, our house was empty.

“I’m not even hungry, anymore!” I said.

“Me neither.” my husband agreed.

“Wow, was that ever amazingly weird or what?” my older son announced.

“Was it ever!” said Michael.

“Okay, anyone interested in renting a movie? Buttered popcorn? Skipping supper?” Larry asked. In a large stockpot, my husband prepared a massive quantity of popcorn the old-fashioned way then divided it among four bowls and drizzled tons of butter over each. The four of us plus our two-hundred and fifty pounds of two dogs, piled onto our bed for movie night.

At 11:00 a.m., New Year’s Day, our sons began working the phones inviting all our neighbors for a spontaneous, amazing potluck lunch. “My mom says 1:00 clock. Will that work?” I heard David ask.

We used Chinet plastic-coated disposable plates and Vanity Fair paper napkins. Who really cared anyway? But there was one detail on which I refused to compromise. “Be sure you count out at least twenty sets of silverware and arrange them next to the plates.” I called out to Michael, busily organizing the serving area.

“Really, Mom? Are you sure?” he asked. “You know we have plenty of plastic stuff.”

“Absolutely positive! As long as we’re in our house, no way am I using plastic utensils. We all have our limits, right?” I said. “Besides, plastic utensils are just way, way too sad!”

“Got it. Good point!” he smiled approvingly.

At one o’clock sharp, couples began arriving accompanied by an assortment of older relatives—fathers, mothers, grandparents, no telling who. Everyone carried some sort of gift, bean salads, cheeses and crackers, dips, plus bottles of Prosecco or Champaign. There was no shortage of anything, especially given my habit of preparing double the amount of any food required. Why? “Just in case.” I was taught by my mother.

Our cassoulet and the rest of our amazing feast tasted every bit as delicious, if not more so, than it might have if we’d served it on New Year’s Eve, on China instead of Chinet and alongside linen napkins instead of Vanity Fair paper ones. Our event was a roaring success. It proved to be a rare and spontaneous opportunity to get to know our neighbors, all of whom began to meander home by 4:00 p.m., every one of us quite satiated. And to our even greater delight, I had made so much more than I realized, there would be plenty for yet another wonderful dinner.

It was the following day, January 2nd. The four of us were sitting in front of the fire after lunch when the phone rang. “Hey Marl, it’s John. Linda and I just arrived in Boise and are about to get into our rental car. Wow, would you believe we actually made it? Can’t wait to see you guys.”

“Excellent! The roads are looking pretty good,” I said, “but please watch out for elk!”

“Forget the elk, forget the roads!” said John “All I want to know about is that cassoulet. I sure hope you froze some for us?”

“Great news. I made so, so much on top of which you two are only forty-three hours late so I didn’t have to freeze a thing! The six of us will have a great feast together so who cares what the date is?”

One Step at a Time by Judith Barker Kvinsland

On the night before Thanksgiving, nearly six months after my mother died, the Pacific Ocean unleashed a storm on the northern California coast, unlike any other I had ever seen. I was still a newcomer in California, but I had been forewarned.

“Winter storms around here are brutal,” new friends and colleagues cautioned me. “Heavy, rain-filled cloud banks roll in between November and March. They’re harsh. Don’t be surprised if you have to pull your car off the road and wait them out. Highway 1 will flood, parking lots, too.”

I shrugged away their warnings with a smile and a flippant reply, “Oh, I’m from Western Washington, Puget Sound country. I’m used to rain and storms. Don’t worry about me.”

Little did I know, until the first winter storm of the year arrived that Thanksgiving Eve. Puget Sound rainstorms, while often dreary and endless, are hardly devastating. As I pulled into the parking lot of the local market after work, I encountered blinding rain and churning floodwaters, dimly lit by light poles swaying in the wind. I chose a spot, as close to the entrance as I could find, and shoved the car door open. I peered down into the debris-laden, filthy water and swore to myself, “I’ve got to get these groceries! It’s Thanksgiving, damn it! I can do this.” I slid away from the comfort of my warm, dry seat and plunged into the flood that was now six inches deep and rising. No longer able to see my shoes, I slogged toward the market’s entrance.

Not only was I treading on physically shaky ground that year, but to my real detriment, I was still struggling on emotionally shaky ground as well, protecting myself from reality. My mother was gone. My mother who knew how to stuff a turkey just perfectly, so a delectable crust formed on top of moist breadcrumbs, was gone. My mother who set an elegant Thanksgiving table with lace tablecloths and ironed napkins was gone. My mother who called all of her children before Thanksgiving to remind us to bring containers to take home leftovers was gone. My mother, who gave me her holiday-themed, Thanksgiving china, shortly before she died, was gone. As her oldest child, I was the heir apparent. On this first holiday without her, I mourned my mother deeply.

The market was brightly lit in contrast to the darkness outside. I grabbed a cart and pulled my wrinkled grocery list out of a pocket. Somehow, I found the strength to work my way down the list; pre-ordered turkey, check. Cranberries, Yellow Finn potatoes, fresh green beans, canned pumpkin, oodles of whipped cream, check. I selected northern California wines from nearby Anderson Valley: Pinot Noir, Chardonnay, and Sauvignon Blanc. I pushed my cart around the edge of the market, ticking off the items on my list, intent upon fulfilling my task, even though I was wet and bedraggled.

I rounded the corner toward the checkout lines and barely dodged an industrious, young clerk positioning a tiered cart, loaded with floral holiday arrangements. The memory of other

Thanksgivings swirled about me, like the last of the autumn leaves blowing outside. With the memory of my mother's gracious Thanksgiving table imprinted upon me and the recollection of centerpieces I brought her every year, I wandered over to the display. I pondered, "Which one would Mom like for the table?" I gazed at glossy pumpkins filled with autumn foliage and chrysanthemums. I picked up colorful vases and asked myself, "Is this one too tall? Will we be able to see over it and talk to each other?" I worked my way around the colorful display until I found the perfect choice: a straw basket planted with a lush, green vine, laden with clusters of bright orange berries, trained to grow in the shape of a wreath. Pleased with my selection, I nestled the basket atop my cart.

I sensed something was amiss. I felt confused and overwhelmed by my actions. I felt lost, even before the young clerk gestured toward my chosen arrangement and politely asked, "Who's the lucky person who gets that one?" My throat tightened. I couldn't speak. I noticed everyone around me chatting, smiling, and wishing each other "Happy Thanksgiving." At that moment, I felt the loss of my mother, more deeply than ever before. Clearly, I was delusional: "If I buy this Thanksgiving centerpiece, everything will be fine. If I buy it, will it bring my mother back?" I burst into tears. I abandoned my cart and fled outside, back into the storm. Murky water sloshed about me as my own tears dripped into the flood.

I don't remember how long I sat alone in my car that night, sobbing and mourning my mother on the first holiday without her. When I finally got out of my car, I realized that the storm had moved inland, away from the coast. I remember stars peeping out, shimmering overhead as the sky began to clear. I remember reentering the market and finding my abandoned cart, in the same aisle where I left it, the centerpiece perched on top. I remember surveying the cart, making sure everything I needed was still inside. I remember the efficient checker who gently set my treasured plant aside as she began to ring up my purchases. I remember her confirmation, "That basket is lovely. It's the nicest arrangement that came in this year." I remember pulling myself together, finally able to whisper, "I'm buying it in memory of my mother. She died this year. I really do miss her." The checker stopped her work, surveyed my sodden clothing and swollen, tear-streaked face, and gently inquired, "Are you going to be all right, dear?" I remember assuring her, and ultimately, myself, "Yes, I think so."



The next afternoon, I gazed around our Thanksgiving table at my family, all chattering, laughing, eager to sample and savor the familiar holiday entrees we had created earlier. Sunlight streamed through the overhead skylights and cast a warm glow on the centerpiece I had chosen the night before. “It’s beautiful,” everyone agreed. As we passed the traditional delicacies around, I heard my daughter wonder, “Don’t we have Grandma’s Thanksgiving china somewhere? We should be using it.” I took a deep breath, gathered up all of my strength, and concurred, “Yes, I think so. We need do that. Maybe, next year?”

Not Always Bah Humbug by Pat LaPointe

“Grandma, it’s time to light the tree.”

“Hang on there, Charlie. We’re missing two things.”

“Oh, we forgot the angel! But I don’t think there’s anything else.”

“Hmm, I think there’s something we need that’s pretty important to you.”

Scanning the box of decorations, he finds his special ornament.

“My ornament! I almost forgot!”

His smile lights up his freckled face as he stares at the tiny cherub sitting on a rainbow. He begins to giggle as he reads the inscription: “Charlie Miller: April 16, 2003.”

“Grandma, my ornament is ten years old and has red hair just like me!”

“Well now we really are finished. It’s time to light the tree. And just in time; our hot chocolate is ready.”

“I can hardly wait to see all the gifts under the tree. Did you have a lot of gifts when you were a kid? Did you make a list of things you wanted from Santa?”

“I don’t remember being asked what I wanted for Christmas or being taken to see Santa Claus. So, what would usually happen was that I played with my brother’s gifts of trains, cars and trucks and he played with my dolls. I didn’t mind him playing with my dolls except for the year he pushed a nickel into one dolls’ mouth. It’s still in her belly today. If you shake her, you can hear the nickel bouncing up and down.”

“Why did you play with his toys?”

“I think it was because I could move them around and make up stories about them. The dolls were kind of just there.”

“Yeah, I’d rather play with toys than a doll, too.”

“When I was older, I opened boxes full of girdles. Do you know what they are?”

“They’re the things they use to build big buildings. Why would you get those? How did they fit into the boxes?”

“Oh, Charlie, not girders, girdles G-I-R-D-LE-S. They were like having on tight underpants. We wore them to make our tummy look better. Your Great Grandma thought my tummy jiggled too much and the girdles would keep it from jiggling.”

“Grandma, that sounds pretty boring.”

“It was. But one year I got a Hi-Fi. You know what that is don’t you?”

“I think I’ve heard the word, but I don’t remember what it means.”

“You know those big black round things that look like they’re plastic and have a hole in the middle. You’ve seen a stack of them in my family room. They’re called records. There are songs on them, kind of like your tablet. There’s a post in the middle of the Hi-Fi. If you wanted to hear music, you’d put the post through the hole in the record. Then you’d put a needle down on the record and music would start playing.”

“A needle?”

“Not like a sewing needle or the doctor’s needle. Maybe I’m not explaining it right. I’ll try to find a picture of a Hi-Fi and to show you.”

“Sound like a lot of work just to hear songs. But did you like it better than the girders, I mean girdles?”

“Yes, I did except that there wasn’t enough money to buy many records.”

“Did you feel sad? I feel sad when I get a toy that needs batteries and we don’t have them.”

“I was kind of sad, but when I got older, I used the money I got from working after school to buy records.”

“Did you open your gifts on Christmas day like we do or on Christmas Eve?”

“Well, every family has traditions. You know the way they do the same things every year. We’ve kept my family’s tradition of opening our gifts on Christmas Day.

“Were there any other traditions?”

“Traditions. Yes, there were others, like it was always your great grandpa’s job to hand out the gifts and we all had to take turns opening our presents. But there was one thing that became a tradition that wasn’t too much fun. Every year we spent Christmas Eve with my Aunt Jo and Aunt Yola and her family. We would get to Aunt Yola’s house by about three o’clock. But by six o’clock there was a problem. Your great grandma, Aunt Jo and Aunt Yola each had different ways to make the holiday food. Each one wanted to do it her own way. They would argue, sometimes loudly, over whose way was best. The one argument we could always count on was how much garlic and breadcrumbs should be mixed into the meatballs. I don’t know if you remember this or not, but Great Grandma’s meatballs were always the best. There was one year when wanting those meatballs got me into a lot of trouble.”

“Grandma, how can meatballs cause trouble?”

“Well one year, when the meatballs were done, I asked if I could have one. Because we were Catholics, we weren’t supposed to eat meat until we got home from church after midnight. So, as soon as I asked, I was chased out of the kitchen and told to go sit down.

“I decided to sit in my Uncle Henry’s lounge chair. It was one of those where you could pull a lever and put your feet up. I thought it was the best seat in the house because it was so close to the Christmas tree that you could just reach out and touch the branches. But I think it must have been too close to the tree because as I pulled the lever and my feet went up, the foot part bumped into the branches and the tree fell on me. In those days trees would be decorated with big red, blue, white and green bulbs and lots of glitter and tinsel. These lights got very hot, and before anyone saw what had happened, they burned a hole in my new tights. Uncle Henry lifted the tree off me, but I was still taking glitter and tinsel out of my hair during midnight mass.”

“Did you get burned?”

“No, but it made that Christmas a little less fun. My brothers and sister still tease me at Christmas saying, ‘Now don’t get too close to the tree.’”

Charlie, staring at the tree seemed mesmerized by the glow.

“Grandma, where did you get all of those ornaments?”

“Well, almost all of them are either things that your mom or your aunts made or things that they got as gifts.”

“I like it that they are all so different. My friend Jack’s tree isn’t real like yours and it has only blue ornaments on it.”

“Sometimes that looks really pretty. Blue is a very nice color. And real trees can be a problem, especially if you’re not careful when you decorate it. Do you know what flocking is? It’s shiny powdery stuff you can spray on the branches. It’s pretty but very messy. One year your great grandma put a bit too much of it on the tree. Every time someone walked past the tree, some of the flocking fell on the floor. It ended up sticking to our feet and we had flocking footprints all over the house.”

“That must have been very funny.”

“Everyone but your great grandpa thought so. Every day even after we’d thrown the tree out, he would repeat the same words as he walked through the house, words you’re too young to hear. It was the last year your great grandma flocked the tree.

“And like I said, having one color ornaments can be pretty, but sometimes it depends on the color. One year, Great Grandma decided our fake white tree should have black ornaments. We lived on a busy main street and Great Grandma always thought that we should have something pretty for the passersby to look at. We don’t know why she wanted black ornaments. We thought maybe she was sad that year. Anyway, my brothers and sister and I became known as the kids with the black balls on their tree.”

“So, Christmas wasn’t always fun. Does that make you sad, Grandma?”

“No sweetie. All those days are gone and now I have the best Christmases anyone could ask for. For one thing, you come to trim the tree and drink hot chocolate with me.”

“Have my cousins ever come to trim the tree?”

“No, this is my special time with my favorite red head.

“And you know what else makes these the best Christmases? Each year I ask you, your sister and your cousins to give me a list of four or five presents you would like. I try to get at least four of the five items on everyone’s list.”

“That’s why there’s always so many gifts under the tree!”

“Well, there are nine grandchildren. That times four...”

“I know. It’s thirty-six presents.”

“Right. But don’t forget I get two presents for each of my four daughters and one present each for their husbands. So, what does that make?”

“Um, two times four is eight, plus four is twelve. Plus, the thirty-six equals forty-eight presents!”

“That’s right.”

“So, buying the presents is what makes our Christmases the best?”

“I love buying the presents, but what makes these the best Christmases is when I hear ‘Grandma, you got me just what I wanted.’”

“You always do. I love you, Grandma.”

“I love you too, Charlie. I enjoyed sharing these stories with you. Now let’s go refill our hot chocolate and enjoy our beautiful tree.”

In Search of Traditions by Pat Detmer

Our family consisted of an oft-promoted father whose career required moves throughout the Midwest and eventually to a Seattle suburb, a mother who learned how to make an empty house a home by the time we got back from our first day in a new school, and three sisters. I was the eldest. We spent much of the fifties and sixties unmoored and in search of holiday traditions.

I learned much later in life that my mother spent months weeping after making her first move to a new city that was hours away from her hometown, leaving her family and emotional base behind. She was pregnant with my younger sister at the time, and if you believe in epigenetics and how it can affect a child in utero, it would explain a great deal about my sister's anxiety, present from birth. Everything that held meaning for my mother was left at the city limits as our little family headed north to a new life.

My father was, as many fathers were in the fifties and sixties, a good provider, but emotionally distant. He smoked, but everybody did. He drank to excess, but a lot of people did. He didn't seem to be interested in fixing things in our houses or cars, leaving that to Mom, and he was proud of the fact that he never once changed a diaper. He was darkly handsome, so much so that when he was in the Illinois State Patrol and they designed new uniforms, he was chosen to be the model for their media and promotional packets. My mother, on the other hand, was attractive but unaware that she was, and had been raised to enable and provide, groomed in the art of trying to guess what the man of the house needed before he even knew what he wanted. Did he say he'd always wanted an airplane? He got an airplane. A boat? He got a boat. Meanwhile, Mother drove a car so old—we called it The Clunker—that when we sat in the back seat and looked down, we could see the road speeding by through the rusted chassis.

My sisters and I never felt slighted by this. Life was an adventure, and we enjoyed the plane and boat as much as our parents did and spent lots of time making each other laugh. Even though there was an eight-year span between us, we were abnormally close, a product of clinging to each other for the first few months after a move when we were, by default and design, each other's best and only friends. Every two or three years we faced a strange town, school, neighborhood, or regional reality. Life skills unneeded by natives were required for us to scale rugged, unfamiliar mountain ranges of potential friends, teachers, hangouts, stores, and routes, and we roped together for safety. It was difficult to maneuver in a world of unknowns and constant novelty, but at least we had each other.

While living in the Midwest, we would trek to Mom and Dad's hometown for Thanksgiving and Christmas. It wasn't easy. Depending on where we lived at the time, it could be a five-hour drive, one-way, on 2-lane state or county highways, and everybody wanted a piece of us once we got there. I was the eldest grandchild on both sides and remember having Thanksgiving brunch as well as Thanksgiving dinner to placate each family, the beginning, I'm convinced, of my

lifelong battle with weight. When we later moved to the Pacific Northwest, the last transfer Dad would make, visiting the family for the holidays was no longer feasible.

We had no seasonal traditions at the time, though Mother tried to create some. I remember sitting safely inside a car with my dad and sisters at a Mt. Rainier-area campground as she tried to craft an Easter brunch on a Coleman camping stove that she'd set up on a picnic table. She thought this might be an interesting tradition to start, one that would sound kooky and fresh, something she could write home about. Unfortunately, the campground hornets went berserk when they got a whiff of the honey baked ham, and from the car, it looked like Mother was on speed and attempting to direct an invisible orchestra. Today I cringe when I think of us watching and laughing, tears rolling down our cheeks, although I'll admit I'm laughing through a cringe as I write this.

Undaunted by the experience, she planned a holiday trip to Seattle's waterfront. It was dark and empty on Christmas Eve, but the order-takers at the fish bar still managed to be brusque, barking at us to provide our orders in the correct sequence—fried foods separate from chowders!—and to stand in very specific spots as we waited. The draconian rules may have been useful in July or August, but we were the only people there, and Mother, who was easily made nervous by any negativity, attempted to ratchet up her chipper and cheerful attitude. Once our orders were ready, we grabbed the bags and got on the ferry to Bainbridge Island, riding over and back as we ate clams and chips, watching the skies darken and the lights of downtown Seattle wink on. We kept that up for several years, but like other attempts at fresh traditions, that one eventually winked out as well.

And then one year, traditions ceased to matter.

Dad was known to disappear for a night or two, but he'd never done it during the holidays. Until he did. It was Christmas Eve, and the smell of a savory dinner wafted out the front door as each of us entered our parent's home. Gifts were artfully arrayed under the tree, and we drank, chatted, and laughed, catching up. Hours later, we sat in the darkened living room, tight-shouldered and thin-lipped, straining to hear a car door that might announce his arrival. My youngest sister broke the ice.

"Mom," she said gently, "have you checked his side of the closet?" It was funny, but it wasn't.

We all laughed, then checked. His clothes were there, but he never showed that night and never called. His daughters eventually went home, and Mother faced my father alone when he appeared days later, sorry, smelling of booze, with no explanation for his disappearance. Mother didn't ask. She told us that our father was obviously having some issues, and that we were to leave him be, a statement in perfect alignment with her enabling passivity.

He was sorry until he wasn't sorry anymore, and then he did what he'd likely wanted to do for years: Left Mom for his secretary, married her, and moved to Oregon, having scant contact with his daughters until much later when we made the effort to build a bridge between us. With

Mother no longer interested in proactive family management, we were free to create our own traditions, and they became substantial, sacrosanct, taking time and effort and all the creativity our nomadic lives had provided. We have videos that showcase our compulsive thirty-year attempt to hammer ourselves firmly into place as we married and our families expanded with children and stepchildren. We produced Thanksgiving skits with awards for the best one, scavenger hunts, attendee packets that we sent to family members ahead of gatherings, a white elephant gift exchange we called Vicious Present, a sister/mother Christmas brunch at a lodge that we've repeated for more than 30 years. It was a groaning raft of traditions that we tied to the shore, one that could buck the tides and withstand the storms.

But time has an impact on everything, including best intentions. Grandchildren are no longer as malleable as they once were, children and grandchildren couples have in-laws who want them for the holidays as well, plus there are the usual markers of time: divorce, illness, dementia, death. And this year, a pandemic.

It begs the question: Does it matter, a year without holiday traditions? Speaking from the experience of decades without them, I know that our family will survive the loss. The traditions may not look the same next year as they have in years past, but they don't need to be the same. They just need to be.



Awaken! Listen! Prepare!

It's 5781 the Jewish New Year by Carol J. Wechsler Blatter

We hear these beckoning bellows and blasts from the Shofar which awaken us, arouse us, and command our attention—

-- *Tekiah-Shevarim-Teruah-Tekiah-Tekiah Gedolah.*

We greet each other in our synagogue on Rosh ha'Shana, the head of the year, saying *L' Shana Tovah U'metukah*, may you have a good and sweet year. Ten days later on Yom Kippur, the day of Atonement, we greet each other at synagogue saying *G'mar Chatima Tovah*, may you be sealed in the *Book of Life* for good. During these high holidays we reassess our lives, we look inside ourselves and scrutinize our past behaviors. It is our last opportunity to change our ways before the gates close at sundown ending the year 5780.

This year we tried to re-create past high holiday services when we sat on a burgundy faux velvet-covered pew in the front of the synagogue's sanctuary, faced the bema, saw the aron ha'kodesh, the holy place where the Torah scrolls are stored, the Torah table on which the Torah scrolls are laid out and the holy words are chanted, the eternal colorful hanging light, the Ner Tamid, and the stained glass multicolored windows to our left where sunlight peered in and bathed us in warmth and cleansed us in compassion. Our rabbi and cantor emerged dressed in white robes, the choir accompanied the prayers. Few souls, if any, remained untouched.

But this new year 5781 celebration, we placed our high holiday prayer books on our dining room table, which was covered with a white tablecloth edged in gold next to our computer. How odd to pray in front of a computer screen! So that answers the question, *why was this new year different from all past new year holiday celebrations?* It's the Corona Covid-19, the frightening and fatal virus which has turned our lives upside down. Watching high holiday services for the Jewish new year online on Zoom meant blocking out home activities and diversions in order to stay focused and pray with *Kavanah*, intention.

We prayed for survival. We were under a cloud cover of anxiety and fear due to the virus. The bottom under us was sinking and we didn't know how to float and where to go. What could we do? We prayed to find the strength within us to carry on, to stay positive, and to remain healthy. Surely there were previous high holidays where we carried huge burdens, sometimes enormous, overwhelming burdens. But we weren't prepared to see death all around us. Each day new increasing number of deaths were shown on our television screens. Thousands of people died due to the virus, many needlessly due to the do-nothing policy of our president. We mourned for these unknown deceased persons. We mourned for life as we had always known it. Never before did we question our own survival.

We recited the thirteenth century Aramaic Kaddish (holy) prayer of remembrance, *Yizkor*, for those who have died, our mothers, fathers, aunts, uncles, friends. After reciting this solemn

prayer, we paused for a moment, we held each other tightly with teared eyes, we cried, we smiled, we looked at each other differently, more intensely, just the two of us. Never did we feel so close to death. Silently we gave each other strength and comfort.

On Yom Kippur while fasting for twenty-four hours we admitted our transgressions, we repeated one by one, each and every *chet* we had committed. *Chet* is not a sin, *chet* means missing the mark. We owned our bad habits, poor choices, and destructive decision making. We committed ourselves to changing, returning, and repenting. Changing is hard but it is always within our reach. It's never beyond our capability. We can't do it is no excuse.

Near the end of this service as on Rosh ha'Shana we recited the Yizkor (remembrance) prayer in memory of our deceased parents, siblings, aunts, uncles, all those who had been in our lives and are now in their final resting places. Our rabbi recited this prayer:

*Our day
Unlike the grass of the field, like flowers in the meadow
vanish in a momentary gust of wind,
Gone, never to be seen again.
But God's love is infinite and with us forever.
God's goodness reaches far into the future —
This is the gift of the covenant.*
Psalm 103:15-18

We brought sweetness to the holiday, too, symbolized by dipping slices of apple in honey. We rejoiced eating sweet slices of round challah (holiday egg bread with raisins), applesauce kugel, a sweet noodle pudding, and carrot tzimmes, a baked stew of pear, carrots, and sweet potatoes softened, and covered with honey, along with baked brisket which we cooked for hours in a sauce of orange juice, honey, and sweet Manischewitz White Cream Concord wine. My annual homemade chocolate honey cake and coffee completed the dinner.

These holidays have taught us life lessons for living good, caring, and meaningful lives, doing good deeds, being of service to others, and working for justice. We learned the importance of family relationships, to appreciate those closest to us, and to keep our ties tightly bound and whole. We don't aspire to be beyond ourselves, but we do aspire to be our best selves.

The blasts, the bellows of the Shofar via Zoom ended these services, brought to a close 5780.

Holiday Season Blessings by David Horowitz

I

Mom's independent mind meant tussle
With Dad's dishonesty and muscle,
His smacks and slaps and screaming, sneering
Disparagement and domineering.
So, finally: divorce. I celebrate
A separation's beneficial break.
No tears on my account, kind reader,
Or for my mom. He couldn't beat her
If gone, or slap my brother down the stairs
Or smack me raw. And so, I bless the stars.

II

Dad's kitchen-table screaming blasts, his jeers
And sudden slaps, my brother's rage, my tears,
Mom's pleading (how she hated feeling bossed!),
Dad's tantrum any time the Knicks or Giants lost,
His filching fifty diner mustard packets,
Hotel-brand towels, and balls and bats and rackets,
Fresh morning paper by a neighbor's door
(He'd steal to learn last evening's Giants' score).
And if I dared complain about his loot,
He'd chase and smack and yell and kick and boot.
So, yes: I bless my folks' divorce: hooray!
My favorite memory and holiday!

Bubble Lights and Tinsel by Barbara Simmons

When the box that held the bubble lights appeared, having been stored in a corner of our cellar for the past 11 months, along with ornaments and tinsel and the Christmas tree stand, I knew that the holiday season had begun. Living in a small city outside Boston, it was usually a certainty that we'd have a white Christmas; in fact, snow flurries would have swirled about us as early as Columbus Day some years. That part of Christmas, its being a "white Christmas," owed everything to weather. But what I remember most are the accessories of Christmas—the small parts that made our very simple celebration special.

The diminutive tree, no more than two feet tall, could easily stand on an end table, and its branches each held a socket waiting for the bubble light candle that my brother and I would delicately handle, screw in, and then, with the tree plugged in, wait and wait and....As if through some Christmas elf's assistance, the bubble light would begin to show waves of movement in each small candle. Of course, my brother and I couldn't let an opportunity to "beat" each other be overlooked, so we would "bet" on which candle would begin to "bubble" up first. I cannot remember what we won, except bragging rights, but it was one of the small parts of this holiday's rituals that, over time, had its sweet moments along with ones that teetered towards poignancy.

We usually bought our big tree, the living one that fragranced our home with the scent of balsam fir, at the Main Street Christmas tree lot, a few miles from our home; my mother would wait until just a few days before Christmas itself to purchase the tree, and we usually had a pick of what had been left behind, the stragglers, but we knew that, without mom every saying so, we were struggling—never hungry, never without new shoes for the school year, but struggling since my father's presence had become less of a physical one, and his absence definitely a felt presence. So, for a few dollars back then, we could pick out a tree, haul it home, set it up, and then, carefully decorate it with tinsel strands, singularly fixed to each branch.

One particular Christmas season, with the small tree decorated, our stockings hung on the mantel by the fireplace, and the large tree finally secured, my brother and I wondered if our father would be home. He'd been away, again, for several days, which was becoming a pattern. Sometimes he'd come home for dinner, but just as often, he was not around, and I had become accustomed to our sitting down with three place settings for dinner, not even pretending that he might show up late. Christmas Eve, we put cookies on a small plate for Santa Claus with a small cup of milk and set it before the fireplace so Santa would "stumble" upon it as he came down our chimney. My brother and I had most likely stopped believing in Santa a few years back, but the appearance of a jolly soul in our somewhat somber home had become another Christmas fixture.

That Christmas morning, up early, my brother and I crept down the staircase from our bedrooms on the second floor to the living room on the first floor—and there, sleeping on the sofa, was my father. Later, like the line from *Tale of Two Cities*, I called the scene "the best of times, the worst of times." My mother, up in her bedroom, came downstairs, and my father, getting up upon

hearing the chattering of eager gift-recipients—as well as gift-givers with something for both mother and father under the tree—got up, fully clothed in what he had apparently been wearing the previous day.

I remember that Santa's cookies were gone, and the glass empty. I remember that my father sat quietly as we opened gifts, displaying little affect for, nor knowledge of, anything we had received. I asked him to sign my autograph hound with its dachshund's sides lined and ready for signatures—a popular gift in the 50's. My father wrote his name, not Dad, and I resolved not to have anyone else sign it, embarrassed that my father's name, not his role, was now tattooed on my little stuffed animal.

And, as the day grew darker, my father's mood did also, and he, obviously restless, said he wasn't able to stay. Today, it seems right that he would have left; I found out many years later that he had been living elsewhere with someone else and probably had needed to share that day with two families. But, for that day, even when he left, the bubble lights still wriggled with movement. And the tinsel still shone on our tree.

Today I know that the bubble lights contained methylene chloride, a solvent that is toxic and carcinogenic and could have caused poisoning if the glass were broken and the fluid spilled. I've also found out that the tinsel strips, which we would collect before we threw away our tree, saving them for another year's use, could have been a fire hazard and that early tinsel strips had had a lead base, another toxin. But for that day, nothing, not even my father's disappearing act, could dissolve the joy of Christmas for me. That particular Christmas helped me understand that joy and pain are intertwined, like the bubble lights' splendor with its toxic liquid interior and the glistening tinsel, with its lead base. I choose to remember beauty and truth.



Vignettes for Holiday Anthology by Sally Krusing

We, my younger brother, older sister and I awoke on Easter morning when I was in first grade in Belleville, Pennsylvania. The Easter Bunny didn't come.

There were no Easter Baskets or eggs to find. Mother said we were bad so the Easter Bunny didn't come. We went to church and I held back tears all morning. When we returned home there were Easter baskets in the living room. I never spoke of this until way past adulthood when I saw a therapist. After all those years I still cried.

My father was in the Army and we moved frequently; Belleville, Pennsylvania; Fort Knox, Kentucky; Panama and Puerto Rico. In Ft. Knox, the February I was in second grade, I started school on Valentine's day. Every child in class received cards from all the other children. I received none. The pit of my stomach churned but I didn't cry.



Green Turkey by Virginia Amis

My sister Elizabeth and I were living together in a small townhouse, her first place far away from family. I had moved away from home, too young, not ready for the responsibilities of a brief marriage that took me away from Pennsylvania. After the breakup, I had little means and no real plan for the future. Liz was dying to leave our parent's nest and joined me in Oklahoma.

We furnished our place with a hodgepodge of sofas, tables and lamps of the most inferior quality. We'd never had any wealth growing up and our first place together showed no change in that trend. I, at least, had a bedframe, mattress and box foundation. Liz's bed consisted of two old mattresses, piled one on top of the other, sitting directly on the floor. She never complained. Our dishes were a few leftover wedding gifts supplemented with cast offs from our mother. Garage sales gave us affordable pots and pans. One pan we agreed we had to have was a roasting pan, large enough to hold the world's smallest turkey.

We worked in retail, her in a trendy clothing shop and me in a furniture/floral/seasonal goods store. Neither of us earned enough to stretch further than rent, groceries and utilities. We afforded one car between us and if I worked later than Liz she had to come back into town after she'd already finished her day and retrieve me.

The air in Oklahoma had gone from September heat to cool nights and jacket days. Bradford pear trees started their annual fashion show, dressing in the brightest reds. We could be so distracted by their beauty while driving the car down an avenue that we risked rear-ending the vehicle in front.

As Thanksgiving approached, I listened to customers at my shop talk about their plans.

"We're going to my mother's. She makes the best stuffing."

"It's my job to make the pies. My grandma taught me how to make her crust."

Liz and I felt the sadness of being alone, albeit together, but far away from the rest of our family. Good holiday memories warmed us, football games in the yard, leaf piles for jumping and where the little ones hid, ready to surprise whoever happened by. The dinner bell yielded a golden-brown turkey, roasted and readied for carving, cranberries, amazing stuffing with chestnuts, mother's pumpkin pie. Leftovers for days, available for turkey sandwiches and late-night snacks. No one argued during the dinner, mouths too full for any words to escape. No one complained about washing the dishes.

A tall order faced us. With no money to fly home, we had to make our own Thanksgiving holiday work for us. A week before, we shopped for a turkey that would fit into the small roasting pan. Neither one of us had ever cooked a turkey before, but we were brave, having helped in the kitchen since we were eight or nine years old. I tackled the stuffing, consulting a small tin recipe box for the handwritten card containing the list of ingredients. Liz baked the

pumpkin pie. We agreed we didn't need a mincemeat pie, my mother's favorite, but if we had been honest with each other, we would have admitted to missing having one.

Thanksgiving Day gave us blue skies. We both rose early, ready to bang around in the kitchen as we prepared our meal, the Macy's Day Parade playing as background on the television. If we'd been in Pittsburgh, we would have gone to watch that city's parade, a tradition that marked the beginning of the Christmas season. Neither one of us admitted to the heaviness in our hearts as we fussed and fretted over our dinner makings. We were holiday soldiers, stationed far away from family, remembering past Thanksgiving dinners and imagining what everyone was doing at the precise moment we stirred the green beans or whipped the topping for the pies. I could see my other siblings in my mother's kitchen, bumping into each other, sneaking a bite of sweet potatoes, urging each other to try an olive or pickled onion. Only my father ate those.

We set the table, a swap meet find that was really an oak desk, covered in a new vinyl tablecloth that hung down too far, and prepared to eat our feast, resignation to our plight evident on our faces. We wanted to be home with the rest of our family. Still, the turkey tasted good and I'd managed a palatable stuffing, reminiscent of Mom's. Liz's pie was delicious, too, and I planned a second piece for a late-night snack.

"We did it," we said, toasting each other with ginger ale.

My mother sometimes left the turkey in the warm oven while we cleaned up after the meal. Liz and I did the same with our remnants, then took a walk around a nearby lake before settling down to watch a Christmas movie.

The next day, Black Friday, we were on point at our respective jobs, handling the madding crowds. Each night we'd compare horror stories of demanding, rude customers who tried our patience before dropping into our respective beds to rest up for the next day's battle. We were too exhausted to think about dinner after our evening shifts. I sometimes nibbled on pie and Liz found a small can of ravioli to heat on the stove, if we bothered at all.

My birthday falls two weeks after Thanksgiving. Liz liked to make a fuss over birthdays, but that year we were too tired to even think about a celebration. On the way home from work that evening, we decided to buy a frozen pizza and call it good.

I turned on the oven to preheat and paused to listen to my sister tell the story about the woman who insisted she was a size 6 when every pair of slacks she tried on in that size would not close at the waist.

"She kept telling me I was bringing her the wrong size," Liz said, her hands in the air showing her frustration. "Finally, I mixed a size 8 into the selection I took to her as she waited in the dressing room. Guess what fit?" Liz leaned on the counter; her nose lifted. "Do you smell that?"

I was at the refrigerator and turned to look at the oven. "Is that smoke?"

Liz opened the oven door, averting her face so the dark cloud would not suffocate her. “Oh my God! Look!”

Inside the oven sat the Thanksgiving turkey, green mold covering the bones picked clean, black crust on the flesh still hanging to the skeleton. We looked at each other and burst out laughing. Neither one of us had remembered to take it out after our dinner.

To this day, decades later, we still laugh at the Thanksgiving memory we created.

Christmas Eve by Penne Wilson Gailer

We had moved to Albuquerque, New Mexico, in the summer of 1982 leaving behind family and a way of life we had known for more than 30 years and embraced a culture infused with the history of Spanish settlers and new ways of celebrating most every holiday. We noticed luminarias when the girls were in elementary school and saw them in our neighborhood our first Christmas. There was also Rodolfo Anaya's children's story called the "Farolitos of Christmas" that introduced children to the concept of these little brown paper lunch sacks with sand in the bottom supporting a votive candle. The farolitos, also called luminarias, were put along pathways on Christmas Eve and lit just at sundown to light the way to Earth for the Christ child. Grocery stores had special sales before Christmas of sacks and candles for Do-It-Yourself families, but boy scouts, schools, and churches sold them as fund raisers. Bought this way they came with the sand. It was special to drive or walk through the neighborhood on Christmas Eve and see sidewalks and driveways lit up with candles. It was a special one-night event and those who purchased electric candles and plastic sacks were the objects of disdain and could usually be identified as newcomers who somehow didn't understand the concept and the meaning of the tradition.

As a family we had enjoyed the bus tours of Old Town on Christmas Eve with the church San Felipe de Neri lit up with luminarias on the walls of the compound and on the sidewalks and all of the carefully placed sacks along the sidewalks of the plaza and the gazebo. Every business participated and there were lots of ohs and ahs from the riders on the bus as we drove slowly through the streets packed with cars and foot traffic. It was a special night for everyone.

When the girls were a little older, we joined the Methodist church that was across the street from the University of New Mexico, a bit of a drive from our house, but it was an established congregation and the girls had made friends and joined the youth group. As I child I had never gone to church on Christmas Eve because my great-grandfather was a Jehovah's Witness and did not believe in celebrating the birth of Christ, just the Last Supper. He did, however, believe in family, and so we always had a meal and presents on Christmas Eve and shared our love for one another.

As a family, the four of us decided to go to midnight church Christmas Eve 1991. We had diner, opened one present, which was always a new board game and pajamas. We got dressed for church and left home about 11:30 p.m. to be sure we were on time.

The neighborhood was beautiful as always and as we turned onto I40 we could notice the lights in Old Town. As we approached the Big I, which was the interchange between the two major freeways, getting ready to turn onto I25, everyone in the car took a collective gasp. There on the right-hand side, the hillside was ablaze with luminarias, hundreds of them, maybe even a thousand. They seemed eerie and strange because there were no visible buildings or sidewalks, just light, soft enveloping candlelight, collectively lighting the night. We were unsure of what we

had seen, so when we got to church, we asked what it was. The answer...it was the graveyard. On Christmas Eve families took luminarias to the cemetery and lined the graves with them. We were amazed. So amazed that after we sang “Silent Night” and church was over, we got directions to the cemetery. The gates were open on Christmas Eve and a line of cars drove in single file. The night was hushed and solemn, graves were aglow. Some were also crowned with balloons, or flowers, and children’s graves often held stuffed animals or other toys. Families shared their love for their dearly departed on Christmas Eve and wanted to make sure that the Christ child found his way to those they held in their hearts.



Tucked away far back on the shelf, I find the green metal box. My rusted treasure chest of memories and flavors. Of family and friends who come out once or twice a year—or not at all. Of traditions. Inside, stained three-by-five cards cleave to each other. Some green, some orange, most yellowing white. Tattered edges. Neatly typed. Poorly written. Spots conceal vital measurements. Recipes tried and true from decades of holidays.



First the mashed potatoes. I boil, skin, and whip them up. Add butter, cream cheese, and sour cream. Safe to refrigerate for a few days, noted the friend I'll never see again.

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One day away—pies! Mix the flour, roll the crusts—will they succeed this year? Prepare the fillings. Texas pecan, my best friend’s sweet delight as southern as her accent. We won’t hear her drawl and stories this year, she lives too far away. Pumpkin, my ex-best friend’s recipe with its complex medley of spices. None better. Her misdeed now accepted as a blessing. Berry—a bubbling mix of strawberries, raspberries, and blueberries. Add a dash of ginger, my husband’s secret.

Up early on the day itself I concoct Mother’s plain bread stuffing. Cube the loaf, chop onion and celery, sauté together. A dash of poultry seasoning. A pinch of parsley. The sprinkling of sage exudes her wisdom. Crumble in cornbread for interest. She’ll never know.

Now wrestle the bird, stuff it full, and pop Tom Turkey into the oven. It won’t be long until aromas seep from the kitchen to greet all who step through the front door.

There’s time enough to prepare a casserole—apples, yam, and raisins—my creation. A long-ago attempt to entice now-grown children to eat sweet potatoes at the feast. Few indulge, but how do you not have this dish at a holiday meal? And who will ask “is a yam a sweet potato or is a sweet potato a yam?” as Great Granddad did every year? Someone will remember.

The smell of turkey fills the house as children with their children burst in. Hugs all around. More dishes fill the table. Vegan casseroles, exotic salads, home-baked bread. A new daughter-in-law arrives with a bit of her family—a carrot ring with a white pea sauce. We will try it, won’t we? Drinks fill the side table: home-brewed beer, carefully aged wine, and sparkling apple cider.

The grandchildren busy themselves tracing little hands on construction paper. The thumb for the head; tiny fingers for tail feathers. Turkey place cards as bright as fall leaves: red, green, blue, and yellow. Carefully they write each name, consult about who goes where, and place the cards around the table. From the kitchen I hear them vie for who gets to sit next to Grandma. I remember when it wasn’t me.

Turkey’s out. Granddad is carving as I stand over the pan of drippings, shaking a jar of flour and water. Slowly I pour it in, stirring all the while until it bubbles. Gravy, smooth, no lumps, just like my grandmother taught me.

“Dinner’s ready!” I call.

Everyone finds their spot and settles in for the feast. I survey my table. Family and friends in their places. Some sitting in their seats; others present in the dishes.

We’re all here.

Contributors' Notes



Journal and 101words.org.

Virginia Amis is a lawyer and a writer who spends her days in a courtroom and her nights and weekends in her writing room. A transplant from Pittsburgh to the Pacific Northwest, she writes in that setting, bringing nature and characters to life through her stories. She has written two novels and has a third in progress. Her short stories have been published in: *Reminisce*, *Reminisce Extra*, *Perspectives Magazine*, *Scribes Valley 2019*, *Beyond the Norm*, *Scribes Valley 2020*, *Where Tales Grip*, *Linden Avenue Literary*



her husband and dog, Mayzie, live in Cambridge near her younger daughter. She looks forward to 2021.

This will be **Morgan Baker's** 62nd Christmas, and her first without her 28-year-old daughter and her husband (in California) due to Covid. Morgan spends as much time with her family as she can, and if she can't be with them, she writes about them. Her work can be found in *The Boston Globe Magazine*, *Cognoscenti*, *The Brevity Blog*, *Writing It Real*, *Talking Writing*, *Motherwell*, and *The Bucket*, among other publications. Morgan teaches at Emerson College and privately and is the managing editor of *The Bucket*. She,



Writer and budding poet **Suzy Beal** spent twenty-five years helping seniors put their stories to paper and this year just finished her own memoir. She writes personal essays and is currently studying poetry. Her work, including a portion of her memoir, has appeared on TrueStoriesWellTold.com. Other pieces have been published by Story Circle Network, 101words.org, and Central Oregon Writer's Guild. Recently an essay has appeared in *Placed: An Encyclopedia of Central Oregon*. She lives and writes in Bend, Oregon.



Carol J. Wechsler Blatter has contributed writings to the following publications: A personal essay appeared in *Chaleur Press*, a story in *Story Circle Network Journal*, and a poem in the anthology *Real Women Write, Growing/ Older*. She has received honorable mention for non-fiction writings by New Millennium Writings. One of her essays appears in the Writing It Real anthology *Mishearing: Miseries, Mysteries, and Misbehaviors*. She is a wife and mother and very much enjoys time reading and writing with her precious, clever granddaughter. She is a recently retired psychotherapist.



As a current student of Lindenwood University, **Joan Connor** is pursuing an MFA in creative writing. She is a retired educator and travels frequently with dog Ava and a very tolerant husband in their RV. Her writing endeavors include nonfiction essays, poetry and a recent interest in tanka. Joan divides

her time between Coeur d Alene, ID and Kerrville, TX considering both spots a “little touch of heaven.” She also divides her time between writing, piano practicing, pursuing the fiddle and attending vintage trailer shows.



Pat Detmer has had humor pieces in newspapers including *The Seattle Times* and *Eastside Journal*, as well as columns in the *Whidbey Island Marketplace* and *Newcastle News*. Her work appeared in *Newsweek's* “My Turn” and she was a staff blogger for BoomerGirl.com for the length of its existence. She writes copy for businesses and has a monthly blog about business management and sales on her company website www.thequincygrou.net. On the fiction side, she’s won contests featuring brevity and speed, and has appeared in three short story anthologies and a chapbook.



Cassandra Hamilton is a disabled artist/writer who creates from dreams. She teaches Active Dreaming (a synthesis of modern dreamwork and shamanism) and has a particular fondness for writing on Styrofoam takeout containers. Her writing has appeared in *Brevity Blog*, *101 Words*, *The Door Opener Magazine*, *Rivereast News Bulletin*, *The Glastonbury Citizen* and two Writing It Real anthologies.



David D. Horowitz founded and manages Rose Alley Press, which publishes books featuring Northwest formal poetry. *Slow Clouds over Rush Hour*, his latest poetry collection, is due from Rose Alley in February 2021. His poems have appeared in dozens of journals and anthologies, including *The Raven Chronicles*, *Terrain.org*, *The Lyric*, *The Literary Nest*, *Candelabrum*, *The Asses of Parnassus*, *Coffee Poems*, and *Here, There, and Everywhere*. His essays regularly appear online in *Exterminating Angel*. David frequently organizes and hosts literary readings, His website is www.rosealleypress.com.



After growing up in Florida, **Sally Krusing** lived in Alaska, Minnesota, Georgia, Greece and Germany. She retired from IBM and lives in Tucson, Arizona, spending her time cycling, reading, writing, traveling and supporting a local theatre. Despite several traumas as a child, she has a zest for living. She calls herself a budding author and is pleased and grateful to be included in this anthology. She published a poem, “*I Am From and Have Become*,” in *Oasis Journal 2017: Stories, Poems, Essays by Writers over Fifty*.



A Puget Sounder by birth, **Judith Barker Kvinsland**, a retired teacher and college administrator in both Washington and California, happily exchanged professional writing for personal essays and occasional prose poems. She now lives and writes in Eastern Washington amidst wide open skies, channeled scablands, and burgeoning wineries. She and her husband are “itinerant grandparents,” frequent travelers to California, Montana and the Olympic

Peninsula, to connect with extended family and friends. Her collection of essays, *Disturbing the Calm: A Memoir of Time and Place*, was released on March 13, 2020, the moment that home stays began and bookstores were shuttered. Like many others, she is looking forward to the day when bookstores re-open and writers and readers can meet up again.



After careers in Business Management and years as a psychotherapist, **Pat LaPointe** found her true passion to be writing. She has had personal essays, flash and short fiction published as well as edited a nonfiction anthology of women's stories of surviving toxic relationships. She is a writing workshop addict who enjoys enriching her writing skills and sharing work with other writers.



Sheila Murphy taught English and Latin in Massachusetts, Hawaii, and Connecticut, in Catholic and public schools. She and her husband of sixty-one years divide their time between Connecticut and Massachusetts. Mother of four and grandmother of ten, she has led memoir workshops at her local library and at Wesleyan University's Institute for Lifelong Learning. Her chapbook, *View from a Kayak in Autumn*, honors the memory of two grandchildren who died of Spinal Muscular Atrophy. Her poems have appeared recently in *Forgotten Women: A Tribute in Poetry*, *Westview*, *YourDailyPoem*, *PoetryPorch 2019 and 2020*, and *Passager Poetry 2019*.



Elizabeth Leah Reed is a nonfiction writer whose work has appeared in *Leaping Clear*, *Journal of the Modoc County Historical Society*, *Oasis Journal*, *Taijiquan Journal*, *Inside Annapolis*, and others. Her biography, *Mrs. Musterman, the Milliner of Main Street* (Wheatmark, in press), celebrates the life of a single woman—a milliner—who against all odds supported and raised a family alone in a small town, during the first half of the 20th century. An earlier book, *We Come from Island People* (Petersrow, 2000), chronicles the history and genealogies of five families of the Eastern Shore of Virginia from 1645 to 1900. She graduated from the University of Maryland, was an award-winning corporate writer, taught at George Washington University, and now lives in the desert of Arizona. There she writes, birds, and practices tai chi.



Marlene B. Samuels earned her Ph.D. and M.A. from University of Chicago where she serves on the Advisory Council to the Graduate School, Division of Social Sciences. A research sociologist and instructor, Marlene currently is conducting research for her project, with co-author Pat LaPointe, about female-to-female relational aggression. She edited and coauthored *The Seamstress: A Memoir of Survival*, is the author of *When Digital Isn't Real: Fact Finding Off-Line for Serious Writers* and is completing her forthcoming book, *Ask Mr. Hitler: A Memoir*

Told In Short Story. Marlene's essays and short stories have been published widely including in *Lilith Magazine*, *Long Story Short*, *Our Echo*, *Story Circle Network Anthology*, *Iowa Summer Writers' Anthology* and others. Marlene divides her time between Chicago, Illinois and Sun Valley, Idaho with her amazing and emotionally supportive Rhodesian Ridgebacks, Ted and George.



Barbara Simmons, who grew up in Boston, now resides in San Jose, California—the two coasts inform her poetry. A graduate of Wellesley, she received an MA in The Writing Seminars from Johns Hopkins. As a secondary school English teacher, she worked with students who inspired her to think about the many ways we communicate. Retired, she savors smaller parts of life and language, exploring words as ways to remember, envision, celebrate, mourn, always trying to understand more about humanity.

Publications have included work in *The Quince*, *Santa Clara Review*, *Hartskill Review*, *Boston Accent*, *NewVerse News*, *Soul-Lit*, *300 Days of Sun*, Writing it Real anthologies, *Capsule Stories: Isolation Edition*, Autumn 2020 and Winter 2020 editions, and *OASIS*, among others.



Gloria Sinibaldi is a mother of three, grandmother of eight, and a lover of animals and nature. She loves to hike, especially when at her home in Lake Tahoe. She is a career coach, and throughout her career has assisted job seekers through periods of job loss and career transition. Gloria writes short stories and poems, as a form of expression and “therapy.” “A Means to Survive” was published in *Tahoe Blues*, a collection of short stories, in 2012. Her poem, “Lone Wolf” was published in *Perspectives* magazine in 2018.

She has written numerous articles for *the Tahoe Daily Tribune* and the *Sierra Sun* focusing on job search strategies. She spends her days enjoying time with husband Ralph and Sissy, her Goldendoodle puppy.



A dream to live on an island brought **Penne Wilson** to Anderson Island, WA, two years ago. She spent her first 34 years in Colorado, where she was raised, earned a bachelor's, and married. She spent the next 34 years in Albuquerque, NM, raised her children, got a divorce, and earned a Master's and a Ph.D. from the University of New Mexico. She currently teaches high school English for Great Lakes Learning Academy, a totally online school. Writing has been a major outlet for her since high school and she has used it to

express joys and accomplishments, failures and losses. She has two amazing daughters and two adopted sons. She delights in her four amazing grandsons and one incredible granddaughter, who also appreciates island life. She continues to try new things, and finds joy in writing, painting, gardening, and walking the trails with her two dogs.