

# OTHER PEOPLE'S RITUALS

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**Each year we made the hectic trip to be with my husband's family, hundreds of miles from home. How I longed to have our own Christmas just once, our own traditions - instead of someone else's.**

*Wednesday, December 20.* At our house we've never needed a calendar to chart the days till Christmas. Every December Hal gets merrier and merrier as the days tick off. He wears holly in his lapel, hangs mistletoe over his classroom doors and generally goes around radiating so much peace on earth, goodwill to men that I keep expecting his nice comfortable features to rearrange themselves into "cheeks like roses, nose like a cherry," or however that poem goes.

I, on the other hand, look into my mirror and see frown lines deepening across my forehead. Ebenezer Scrooge still lives, a querulous, cross-tempered female. On Friday, the six of us are due to wedge ourselves into our station wagon and head north for yet another Christmas in New Hampshire. After all these years you'd think I could accept it gracefully.

"Oh, Mom!" says 12-year-old Carrie with an exasperated sigh, "you're supposed to like Christmas."

"Bah! Humbug!" I reply. To myself, though, because I've quit talking to the kids and Hal. Without noticing, they go off to their assorted schools, the twins caroling, "Hark, the harried angels shout/One more day and school is out!" I even get an exuberant kiss on the back of my neck from Hal and a promise to bring home more cartoons. He is whistling "Now We Come A-wassailing" so loudly as he leaves that I'm tempted to fling my coffee mug at him.

"If you hate going so much, why not stay home?" asks my mother when she comes over to pick up all the houseplants that can't make it through a week without water.

"It's not that I hate going," I answer. "Just that I'd like a choice. Remember the year Ted was born? I told Hal New Hampshire was too far to drive with a little baby."

"So he came home with plane tickets. I remember." Her smile is indulgent. She can afford to be complacent. Mother's big thing is the Burke Family Reunion, which takes place every June when about 150 of our kin return to the homeplace near Raleigh, like swallows to Capistrano, to spread a picnic lunch under the huge pecan trees. Mother would enjoy being with us at Christmas, but as long as she can have us for all the other holidays plus the B.F.R., she's willing to wave us off to Hal's sister, Josie, every December.

How can I make Mother understand something I don't fully understand myself? I'm

truly fond of Josie, but she and her husband, Jack, make Christmas seem too organized. I suppose they have to if they're going to feed and house so many extra people; yet even though there are always lots of chores for me to help with, I never feel necessary. Anybody could run the vacuum or unload the dishwasher or amuse toddlers while all the rest are out risking pneumonia and broken limbs skiing.

I'm not saying I feel unloved or think for a minute that Hal and the kids wouldn't miss me if I weren't there, just that nobody would really miss my contribution to the holidays. It's Josie who sets the tone of our Christmases, not me.

"Just once," I say as I take the last batch of gingerbread men from the oven, "I wish Hal's family would come here for Christmas."

Audibly and untactfully, Mother wonders how I could bed down ten extra people in our three-bedroom ranch.

"It's only nine more," I say, recounting the gingerbread men to make sure there's at least one for everyone.

Mother picks up a decorating tip and starts piping red icing onto the cookie figures. Her hand is steady as she outlines jacket, trousers and smiling faces. She has done this every Christmas of my memory—a tradition I wanted to pass on to my own kids. Instead, I sublimate and make them for Josie's tree. We don't even own a string of colored lights.

Feeling slightly sorry for myself, I start piping names in white icing, beginning with Ted, Carrie, Beth and Bobby. There will be 15 of us at Josie's this year. When I first started baking gingerbread men to take to Josie's, Carrie and the twins weren't born, just Ted. Hal and Josie's kid brother, Andrew, was still in junior high. Now he and Sue have produced a second child. I pipe a jaunty diaper onto Baby Hope's gingerbread man and picture her smeared mouth as she eats it. It seems like such a long time since the twins were babies.

The telephone rings. "Aunt Kate?" By those two clipped syllables I know it's Josie's older daughter, Amy, and not one of my Southern nieces. She rushes through the amenities to confide her true reason for calling: She's invited someone to Christmas dinner and wants me to decorate a gingerbread man for him. "—because I don't want him to feel left out. You're sure you don't mind?"

"Of course not!" I say. "That's Phil as in Philip?"

"No, F-i-l-l as in Fillmore!" Amy giggles. "Can you see it? Mrs. Fillmore Hobson.

"Oh, not too soon!" I protest, remembering her shy little face peeping around Josie's skirt the first time I met them after Hal and I were engaged. Is she really old enough now to be

engaged herself?

Amy rings off saying, “Jeff said to tell Ted they’ve predicted fresh snow for the weekend. See you Saturday!”

I rescue the last unbroken gingerbread man from Mother and decorate it with that new name. Fresh snow indeed.

“Fresh snow? Hey, cool!” exclaims Ted when he comes home from school. He and Carrie head for the attic to bring down their skis. At nine, Beth and Bobby still use the castoffs that clutter Josie’s garage. All four of them are natural skiers. Hal’s genes. I tried it once, twisted my ankle and now have the sense to stay inside where I can’t hear their “But if you’d only *try*!”

What have I to do with skiing and sledding and white Christmases? In North Carolina, farmers go out at midnight on Christmas Eve and shoot their rifles into star-crisp skies. Frost may rime their fields, but that’s all. I can remember snow on Christmas only once in my childhood, and it melted away before noon.

“Fresh snow!” Hal ruffles the twins’ hair happily, and they all trail out to check the snow tires.

***Thursday, December 21.*** With only half a day of school, we devote the afternoon to final packing. Everyone is allotted one suitcase, a gross unfairness, according to Carrie.

“My hair dryer! My steam curlers!” she moans, refusing to admit that Amy and Amy’s younger sister, Jill, own all these things and are very generous sharers. Recklessly, she barter future chores for present space in Ted’s and the twins’ suitcases, and I foresee a strife-torn January. There will be cries of “You promised to do my week of clearing the table, garbage, folding laundry, etc.”

I take out the tablecloth my grandmother made for my trousseau – yards of snowy linen elaborately embroidered with holly, cedar and mistletoe, interspersed with nuts and fruits and red satin ribbons.

“I know it looks huge,” Gran told me when I first unwrapped it, “but you’ll be glad of its length when all your children and grandchildren come home for the holidays.”

Each year I’ve made room for Gran’s cloth in my suitcase, but it’s not the same as the dreams I’d wrapped around it. *Well, no more*, I decide, suddenly determined that I’m going to quit feeling morbid about Christmas. It’s Josie’s house. If she and Jack can be generous enough to have us all pile in on them every year to keep the family ties strong, then the least I can do is stop feeling envious because my children’s strongest holiday memories will be of

everyone else's rituals, not mine.

I put the tablecloth back in its box on the closet shelf and tell Carrie I've enough leftover space in my suitcase to pack three of the six pullovers she thinks she needs for a week.

Hal interrupts to ask if the cartons can be sealed. All our gifts have to be chosen with an eye to how they will travel to New Hampshire. Books, records, magazine subscriptions and clothing are big on our lists. For impossible things – the kids' bicycles, bulky games, Hal's new stereo or my dishwasher – envelopes are placed under Josie's tree containing pictures of the gift that's waiting back home. Poor kids! Always cheated out of enjoying all their new treasures on Christmas Day.

The pecan pies and gingerbread men go in last, then Hal and Ted place the cartons in heavy plastic bags and carefully tape the edges. They repeat the process with all the suitcases except the communal one with our toothbrushes and nightclothes for the motel that will ride inside. The others are securely lashed atop the station wagon.

The children are as excited as Hal, and I can't really blame them. After all, these gypsylike Christmases are all they've ever known. But Hal! He came South to teach before we'd even met, so I know I shouldn't take it personally when he leads the children through two rousing choruses of "There's No Place Like Home for the Holidays."

*Friday, December 22.* We are on the road before dawn. By late afternoon tempers are beginning to rasp. The novelty of travel has worn thin and tomorrow's arrival seems a dreary eternity away. We've played Twenty Questions, License Plate Bingo and been through the alphabet so many times that "A, my name is Alice" has degenerated into "P, my name is Pimpleface and I live in Pimpleville and my "girl friend's name is Pimplepink."

"Oh, yuck!" says Beth. "Why don't you just shut up if you're going to be so gross?"

"Why don't you just make me?" Bobby sneers.

"I'll shut you both up if you don't keep off my side of the car," promises Ted, who has recently decided that his extra four inches entitle him to half the backseat.

"Mom! Ted's picking on us," the twins whine. "*Mo-om!*"

This while I'm trying to negotiate the Delaware Memorial Bridge. It's my turn to drive, and Hal is curled up in the very back, sound asleep.

"If you don't want to be a holiday statistic, cut out the bullying," I warn Ted.

Hal looms up darkly in the rearview mirror as I collect our toll ticket at the beginning

of the New Jersey Turnpike. "Where are we? What time is it?" he asks groggily, peering into the winter dusk.

The twins clamber over the backseat to join him, and now begins the annual debate over motels. Someone brings up Bobby's goof of year before last when he forgot it was winter and demanded that we stop at one with a swimming pool. But the teasing is good-natured for a change. Bobby laughs, and they start recalling past stopovers, beginning with the year one of our suitcases fell off the car roof.

Ted, who is 14, can remember trips before the twins. Carrie remembers their birth but not what it was like to travel without them. She tells of feeling important when people in restaurants smiled at our two babies in high chairs. Ted makes a funny story out of the times he sneaked through lobbies carrying their stuffed animals, embarrassed that people would think he still played with Teddy bears.

I blink hard and concentrate on driving. It's really dumb to get mistyeyed just because your kids act as if they care for one another once in a while.

*Saturday, December 23.* The snow by the roadside is dirty and patchy through New York; but Connecticut and Massachusetts are prettier, and by the time we cross over into New Hampshire after lunch, the landscape looks like a Currier and Ives print. Hal and the children are tense with excitement, pointing out familiar landmarks.

"Remember now," Carrie warns the twins, "watch what you say 'cause Stevie and Hope still believe in Santa Claus."

Normally, Bobby and Beth resent her edicts, but today they just nod, solemnly aware of the trust they keep for their little cousins, Andrew's children. I recall when Andrew was cautioned not to spoil it for Amy.

"Remember the first year you let me help fill the stockings?" Carrie asks me. "Maybe Aunt Sue will let you fill Hope's stocking," she tells Beth.

"I do like our Christmases." Beth sighs happily.

"Nighttime's best." This from Bobby on the front seat between Hal and me. "I like the way Aunt Josie and Uncle Jack's house feels at night when you're lying on the back-parlor floor in your sleeping bag and the fire's burning and you can see the tree lights from the front parlor and hear all the grown-ups talking."

"When I was a boy," says Hal, "we didn't have sleeping bags, just quilts on the floor."

"And the girls had the big bedroom on the top and you boys used to sneak upstairs at

night and make scary noises till Granddad chased you back to the parlor,” says Carrie. They love to hear him talk about his childhood here.

“Breakfast after midnight service. Real maple syrup on our waffles.”

“The snow --”

”The tree --”

”The presents!”

“Yeah! ‘Specially if you get an envelope. Then you know something cool’s waiting back home.”

I can’t let that pass. Incredulous, I twist around to face Ted. “You mean you really don’t mind not having your big present right away?”

“Maybe when I was a little kid,” he admits, “but not any more. It stretches Christmas out and gives me something to look forward to.”

The other three chime agreement, and Hal gives me a curious glance as I turn back to stare through the windshield.

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They finish with Christmas morning and move on through the day, remembering the mingled smells of evergreens and turkey until everyone’s too hungry to wait another moment.

“Finally, Aunt Josie will play the piano and make all us cousins sing for our supper

”And then dinner with everybody at that big long table and so much food that you can hardly see our tablecloth.”

“Not this year,” I tell them bluntly. “I didn’t bring it.”

There is stunned silence, then such an outburst of protest that I am overwhelmed.

“You *forgot* it?”

“But we always have our tablecloth!”

“How could you forget it?”

“Are you *sure* you didn’t put it in?” asks Hal.

"I always sit at the fourth pineapple," mourns Beth. "That's *always* been my place. Remember the little stain where I spilled plum tapioca on it when I was just a baby and you said we needed a plum there anyhow?"

I had forgotten.

Carrie is guilt-stricken. "My sweaters! Was it so you'd have room for my sweaters?"

"Of course not," I assure her.

"You didn't forget the gingerbread men, did you?" Bobby asks anxiously. "Or the storybooks?"

I shake my head, not trusting my voice for a moment. Hal must have caught the glint of tears, for he says quietly, "What happened, hon?"

"Nothing." I try to sound casual. "I just didn't realize anybody noticed or cared about the things I do at Christmas."

"Boy, Christmas dinner's going to feel weird," Ted says gloomily from the backseat.

"Not notice?" Hal seems genuinely puzzled. "Why would you think that? It takes *all* the parts to make a whole. Try to imagine your Burke Family Reunion without Aunt Mary's chicken pastry or Uncle Thel's crazy Jell-O salads, if you don't believe me. And look at Amy. Didn't she feel that having Fill's name on one of your gingerbread men would make him a real part of the family? I'd call that noticing."

A deep, wondrous emotion begins to build inside me. My rituals or Josie's, suddenly it doesn't matter because for the first time in all these years I'm finally sure of my part—not just for my children, but for Jack and Josie's and Andrew and Sue's, too. Remembering Amy's voice on the phone, I know Hal is right: A dumb thing like a name piped in white icing is important to her. So what about all the rest? I might not be part of the skiing party, but I have baby-sat and literally kept the home fires burning so the others could go. And ever since that first visit, when Amy was a kindergartner, there's been a child to cuddle beside me on the hearthrug. I'm the aunt who reads *Little Bear* books with an unfamiliar accent, who bounces babies on her knee to the rhythms of "This Is the Way the Lady Rides."

My pecan pies, their mincemeat – surely I am bound up in their memories, just as they are bound in mine.

We finally turn off the main highway. Only a few more miles to go. The kids are all tangled up in "The Twelve Days of Christmas." Nobody can remember how many maids a-milking there are. Snowflakes begin to fall, and I'm looking forward to Josie's Irish coffee,

which will be waiting for us just as it always is.

Behind the steering wheel, Hal gives me a happy smile. “Almost home now,” he says.

I smile back, but already I’m calculating long-distance phone calls. I mean, why waste a perfectly good tradition? “Hal,” I say, “how much do you suppose it would cost to air-express a package from Raleigh?”