

Oh, Holy Night

By: Adrienne LaValley

It always seemed like my dad was competing with my sister for the slowest present opening award on Christmas morning. The tornado in the piano/ tree room lulled to a dull roar. The wrapping paper, tissue paper and ribbon settling on the floor around everyone's flannel pajama legs. One by one we'd make sneak exits to the kitchen for fruit cake and chocolates, but there they'd stay. Both of them. Sitting with a giant pile of presents at their feet and an extremely satisfied look on their faces. Smug, really. "Oh I still have a couple left actually," they'd say. "Are we done? Oh I didn't realize we were done! Could you maybe come back in so I can open mine?", they'd say. Pure evil. But we did it. Every time. We went back in the room, threw a huge stink about how obnoxious they were and reluctantly plopped our butts down in front of the loot pile, waiting for the people we loved to torture us. Like sloths.

My dad would carefully pick up each present and lower his ear to the box, as if he could hear the book or the pair of sox right through the wrapping paper and cardboard. Then he'd shake it, feel around on the seams and throw out a few guesses as to what he was 'sure' it was. "I know! It's a crowbar. It's a crowbar!!! Wait. No. It's a back scratcher thing! Oh my god, I've GOT it. It's a hanger. You got me a hanger." He was usually wrong, of course. Then he'd take more time to unwrap that present than anyone could possibly stand. Jack knife out, well honed, he'd slide the tape off the paper with precision angling as to not actually cut it, then shimmy the knife under the flap and carefully lift the paper up, unwrapping the present to the fullest extent of the definition. He literally unwrapped it. The same way it was wrapped up. If he could have replaced the tape back on the Scotch spool, he would've. He saved the Christmas paper or handed it to us and we'd save it in a box for next Christmas. By this point though we were prepping dinner and I'd moved onto Halloween costume ideas for next year. He was still guessing what present number two was. He was wrong. On the rare occasion he was right though, he'd throw his head back with a roar and a flash of his white teeth and a bellowing laugh that could rival Santa himself, thoroughly pleased with his psychic genius.

The Christmas present I got in fourth grade rivaled anything else I'd get for the rest of my life. It was 1990 so I'd asked Santa for a "Go-Go My Walkin' Pup". Naturally. We didn't do 'real' dogs in this house. Lizards? Check. Parakeets? Multiple checks. Rabbits? Check, check, check. Cats? Endless checks. Guinea pigs, fish galore, crayfish, hamsters, mice, a rescued/ stolen turtle named Michelangelo, a diapered chicken named 'Babe' who lived in a refrigerator box we fashioned into a pretty exceptional coop, if I say so myself. All ending in some unfortunate accident or disappearance, with little exception. Petite number 1 and 2, you're still out there somewhere. I know it. You name it, we had it. Except a dog. And I'd been asking. Pretty much since I was born. So I asked for a fluffy white Pomeranian looking lady dog on wheels with a pink leash and a button to make it move. What else could an eight year old want, really? I could not have been

more excited. I'd also received a fuchsia blazer with black trimmings and my initials monogrammed in calligraphy on the breast pocket. And a black fedora. I was killing it. KILLING it. The fedora sat perfectly on my bowl haircut my dad may or may not have done himself with a Flobee. I believe emphatically everything was downhill from that moment in time. There's a picture of me adorned head to toe in my Christmas loot and the pride on my face is palpable. What I didn't realize then was that I was foreshadowing my existence as the crazy lady in a fedora and pink blazer, walking her tiny white Pomeranian down Park Avenue shouting "You're such a good girl Celeste, such a good girl, mommy loves you".

Christmas was this weird, sacred thing in our house. It always seemed like no matter how much trauma went down prior to December 24th, we'd set it aside for exactly two days. Dad told one of the children that they were a large factor in his unhappiness? Didn't matter. Dad got us kicked out of some sports program because he had a brawl with the team coach who went on and on about how crazy he was? Didn't matter. Dad screamed at the top of his lungs down the middle school hallway for one of us because we were late for pick up and teachers and students came out of their classrooms to witness the commotion? In the smallest town on earth? Didn't matter! It was Christmas! And we were happy on Christmas. We were normal. We played the bells in the bell choir at our mother's behest, donning white gloves and our Christmas dresses and khaki pants up in the balcony, hoping no one we knew recognized us. Sometimes she'd even manage to wrangle some other unsuspecting young folks to sing 'Carol of the Bells' in church on Christmas eve. She was very persuasive when it came to Christmas church duties. "Everyone loves hearing you guys sing! Oh they'll be expecting it! Just have Ann and Joel and David come over on the 23rd. We'll rehearse it really quick!" It was a welcome torture that I made a stink about at the time, but that I actually look back on quite fondly.

We'd drink sparkling cider in our fancy clothes and sit by the Christmas tree until our thick, winter stockings got itchy on our legs and the pajamas had to come out. Then almost without fail our dad would read the 'Polar Express'. In a multitude of voices. I can still hear him saying "This... is the first gift of Chriiiiistmaaaaaas!" The smell of his cologne and the rough feeling of the wool sweaters he wore, even though they scratched our faces is forever imprinted into my senses. Christmas was happy. Even if the rest of the year wasn't. He'd pull it together. Or be forced to. In all fairness, I don't know how much joy he chose to express and how much my mom just made it appear that way.

The holidays could be quite dark for him and she tried her best to make it as normal and festive as possible. I'm discovering through his writing that honestly, there wasn't a lot of room left in his head for much else. Christmas probably sent him into mental overload. I've heard that on occasion he'd sit up in his room and refuse to come out when we got back from church. I seem to only remember the years he came down with a smile though. I guess that's good. And he didn't usually join us at church anyway. That was my mom's thing.

Most of my childhood he was against God altogether. And who could blame him, really? No God was there for him his entire childhood. He flip flopped back and forth between devout christian and stubborn atheist at least every couple of years. If he had a cross around his neck he was ON god. If there were no bibles in sight and frequent rants about the insanity of organized religion, he was OFF god. Pretty simple. He'd get obsessed and maniacally post-it note certain sections of the bible he thought were important to remember, then throw it away the next time he renounced his faith. He eventually settled on something he could live with, though not until much later in his life.

Once he moved out, Christmas became an entirely different experience. For a long time it was darker and never without a whisper of hopelessness. I don't remember a lot honestly. Except being worried all the time, mostly about disappointing someone. And stuffing that worry with shortbread and fruitcake. We made it work though. We'd wake up at mom's house, open stockings in her bed with her, go to dad's for morning present opening and breakfast, then back to mom's for afternoon present opening, then back to dad's for dinner. The houses were never more than a tenth of a mile from each other, so from a kid's stand point it was kind of a win-win. Didn't get what you wanted at one? You have a second shot in about two hours. Keep wishing.

The Christmas eve candle lit church service was a non-negotiable. Sure you technically had a choice, but surviving the look on our mom's face if you chose to sit it out was not something for anyone even dabbling in empathy. You're going to break your mother's heart on Christmas eve? Oh ok! She's playing the flute and the piano this year, you know. So we'll see you there? Great! Let's make sure we're all sitting together though, so wait for me in the vestibule while I help her set up the bells for bell choir upstairs. You're playing by the way. I'm sorry, but the Miller's are out of town and we need someone who can lift the heavy bells. So. See you there! Love you!!

There was always one woman who sang "Oh Holy Night" grossly out of key and at the pace of a dying tortoise. It was pure torture every year. We'd look around the congregation and watch everyone's eyes widen when she went for the high note. And every year it was even more gloriously off key than the last. It's truly a blessing that it's inappropriate to clap after people sing church hymns. I feel like that tradition was started as a direct result of performances like this. Naturally we'd sit in the back so our snickering laughter wouldn't carry to the front. Our mom was horrified she'd raised such ingrates, but really I think we were just expelling the tension we'd built up as a family over the previous 364 days. It wasn't our fault and I'm standing by that. One year we started laughing before we even got to our pew, whispering "Oh my god, I'm so excited for 'Oh Holy Night. Please tell me she's doing it again this year, she's doing it right?". Our mom whisper yelled back at us: "You're all monsters... she died this past year. She was ninety five". I think she actually considered giving us away that day.

Our mom made Christmas happen. And after our dad moved out and into a home with his new wife, she made it happen too. Especially if you consider Christmas a feeling, rather than an event. If my dad was stuck on his own island upstairs, mulling over all

the reasons he hated himself, or all of us... we didn't know it on Christmas. If he was stowed away in the dark contemplating string theory and writing about it with a fury more commonly reserved for addicts, we didn't know it on Christmas. At least the ones I remember anyway.

It wasn't always pretty, it wasn't always full of light but there was always fruit cake and shortbread, both of which I've discovered are either loved or loathed by just about everyone. "I could take it or leave it, really. I mean, it's pretty good" said no one ever. There was champagne at one house, Irish cream at the other, English party hats at one, jazz music at the other, chicken at one, pickled beets at the other. And laughter at both. There was never a shortage of laughter at both. The Christmas heroes made sure of it, no matter what the previous year brought. They wrapped, they bowed, they baked, they gathered, they hugged, they smiled, they hid their sorrows the best they could and they made it smell like Christmas.

They brought the fruitcake, they brought the short bread, they brought the cheer.