

Simplifying Christmas

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Onion Creek Ranch

Every year for years, my family would go through the Terror of Christmas. I think you all know what I mean: Having to go out and buy tons of senseless, expensive gifts for those you love or worse, those you don't, and having to listen to commercials ("Buy! Buy! Buy!") about how it's now only 632 shopping days to Christmas, dating from before Thanksgiving. It's enough to make you wish the Western World never knew Christ was born.

So one year, we all rebelled. We discussed it and decided we were going to simplify and dematerialize Christmas.

We agreed we would not spend a lot of money on things like Christmas trees by cutting our own tree in the woods on Onion Creek, and that we would only hang stockings and not worry about lots of presents. We would go caroling and make pecan pies and pralines. We would do it the old way...

I guess the first thing you have to know about my family is that we come in the Big Size. There are nine of us counting my parents, and my six sisters have 17 kids between them, and then we adopted Simeon from Belize, and then my uncles and aunts always come, and then, being Texans, we each have three dogs. And of course they have to come. So when we all get together, it's never simple, as much as we try to simplify.

When we decided to cut our own tree, the first thing we did was try to find an ax. No one had an ax.

"What am I, Abe Lincoln?" my uncle Mun said, when I asked him for an ax. "Ask your father."

My father quoted a poem about an ax, and my mother said she wouldn't have weapons like that around, and nobody else knew anything about an ax.

I said, "Mama, to cut down a Christmas tree, we're going to need ax!"

We finally found a neighbor who had one. "You know how to use that thing?" he asked.

"No," I replied.

"Okay," he nodded.

One of the things I like about country people is they're willing to let you make your own mistakes, to the point of death.

We all piled in the truck and drove up to Turkey Hill. Two dogs fell out on the way, and we had to stop, retrack, and pick them up.

I looked at my sister Kay, "Don't sit on that ax," I warned her.

"Oh, golly! That IS sharp!" she exclaimed, as she examined a slice in her jeans.

We parked on Turkey Hill and began to walk around looking for a Blue Spruce. Suddenly, Uncle Mun got a fit of sneezing. "What the Hell? Are these all cedars?" he asked irritably. Uncle Mun had been crabby since he got magnetized by lightning.

"I believe so, Uncle Mun," I replied. "Why don't we just get a cedar tree. This one has a nice shape to it." I pointed to Christmassy looking tree.

"Wait a minute," my father said. "Those are tent worms in that tree --but who cares? Let's take it anyway."

I began to hack at its base. Nothing happened. Not even a dent. "What's wrong with this ax?" I asked.

"Let me see that ax," Uncle Mun said, grabbing it from me.

My mother leaned over and whispered, "Lin, I meant to tell you earlier, whatever you do--don't give Munroe the ax."

I said "Why not?" as I heard Uncle Mun howl.

"Munroe hit his ankle," Kay said, leaning over the wound.

"Is it bleeding?"

"Yes."

"Well, we better take Mun to the hospital," my father announced. "Never mind the tree, we can put up a chin-aberry branch and decorate it."

“What?” I looked at him aghast. “That won’t be Christmassy,” I protested.

“Think global, Lin,” he replied. “Think global.”

That was the end of our home-chopped Christmas tree efforts. We began to hang stockings on the mantle above the fireplace. All kinds of stockings. They were gay and colorful. Some homemade, some made for the dogs and decorated with little felt bones on them and names such as “Dulcie,” “Pinto,” “Max” and “Puppykins”. The last one was Kay’s dog. She never could find a name for him. He has a lot of complexes because he’s five now and still called “Puppykins”.

Kay’s daughter Eve was turning 15, so she felt she ought to have five stockings. Kay, in a fit of stocking greed, hung up four for herself. I had one, but each of my dogs had theirs, and then the aunts and uncles and so on. There were 46 stockings tacked up on the mantle, sagging from the weight of the presents. We had filled each stocking with our presents, some really large and heavy that we had to cram in, some heavy, because we had simplified and didn’t have a Christmas tree.

By the evening of the 24th, the weight of the stockings had begun to separate the mantle from the wall, I noticed. I started to say something, but then my father brought out the eggnog and, leaning on the mantle, began an eloquent speech on the meaning of Christmas—which I’ve forgotten because just as we lifted our glasses, the whole mantle ripped off the wall and fell on us.

It was a horrible sound, the rending of wood against stocking and punch glass. My father was the most wounded because he had been making the toast. Uncle Mun ran to Daddy, now buried beneath the stockings, but was distracted by seeing his own stocking on my father’s stomach. My father tried to lift it off. He could hardly budge it. “Munroe, who put this Skilsaw in your stocking?”

“I don’t know,” Uncle Mun replied, cutting his eyes away from Daddy on the floor, a sure sign that Uncle Mun was lying.

“That’s what broke the mantle,” my father said heatedly.

“No it wasn’t,” Munroe protested. “Your weight did it.”

“Munroe, did you give yourself that Skilsaw for Christmas?” My father looked him in the eye.

“I cannot tell a lie...” he began nobly, but at that point my furious father, normally a pacifist, whacked his leg against Uncle Mun’s, tripping him. He went down like a ton of lead.

“You idiot!” he roared. “You never put a chainsaw in a stocking!”

Munroe hit my father in the nose. “Don’t call me an idiot, you bohemian academic!” he yelled and they began to wrestle and roll amongst the presents, eggnog and stockings. It was an awful scene.

“STOP IT!” my mother screamed, lifting something over her head. “Stop it or I’ll hit you with this ham!” They both stopped and looked up at her. She was holding Christmas Eve dinner above her head.

“Lois, please put that ham down,” my father said in his most baronial tone. “Let’s all regain our composure and proceed to the next event.”

He nodded formally to his brother. “Munroe, I apologize for calling you an idiot. It was not in the Spirit of Christmas.”

Uncle Mun cast his head down. “And I’m sorry for punchin’ your lights out, Tommy,” he mumbled. “There’s some blood on your Santa tie, brother.”

We cleaned up my father’s chest, grabbed the sheet music and all went out to the pick up. It was filled with hay in the back and we all piled in, chattering happily. It was a lovely evening, kind of nippy and red with the sunset, as we cruised out the driveway onto the neighborhood streets.

“HERE COMES SANTA CLAUS HERE COMES SANTA CLAUS” we began to sing merrily as the dogs began to wail. There’s a saying in our family: We can all sing but our voices get in the way...

“Jingle Bells...Jingle Bells...” we went through all the verses and then launched into a few more.

“Who’s Harold Angels?” asked the youngest child. “Hark the Harold Angels?”

“He’s that guy at the feed store,” my Uncle Mun fibbed, and winked at us. “He’s got that fat girl sister, Roundyun Virgin.”

“Really?” all the children asked, wide eyed.

“Mun, stop that,” my mother said and looked firmly at him.

Turning towards my sister Beth, he asked, “Aren’t you a Catholic now?”

“Yes,” she replied defensively.

“Mun, no religion—it’s Christmas...” my mother admonished, looking sternly at him, then realized what she had said.

“JOY TO THE WORLD, THE LARD HAS COME!!!” the children shouted.

“Baptists and Republicans are taking over Texas,” Munroe announced, then looked up quickly at my mother. “All right, all right, I’ll be good...”

“Where are all the people?” I asked, noticing we’d been driving around for an hour down empty streets. “Stop at that house, Barbara.”

We stopped in front of a Christmassy house all decorated with many lights, and blasted away with our singing. We sang and we sang. No one came out so Barbara pressed the horn loudly several times. We sang more. Finally I saw a fearful face peeking out the drapes that covered the picture window.

“I think they’re scared of us, Mun,” I commented. “In fact, I’m sure of it.”

“It’s all those drive-by shootings,” he noted. “Makes everyone paranoid.”

“What’s a ‘pair of noids’, Uncle Mun?” the youngest one asked.

“That’s what you cut off the bull, honey,” he said fondly, looking down at her in all seriousness and stroking her blond head.

“Stop that, Munroe!” my mother said sharply. “Children, just don’t ever believe anything your Uncle Munroe tells you,” she said in exasperation.

“Your grammamma is a fine lady, children,” Uncle Mun said with a grin.

My mother rolled her eyes, but we knew she actually liked Uncle Mun.

“I’m feeling sick,” Kay announced, and began to vomit over the side of the pick up.

“I think it’s all the fumes from the exhaust,” Uncle Mun observed. “We been gassed the whole caroling.”

“Oh, God, I have a horrible headache,” I moaned. I felt faint and fell back into the hay. Something squirmed against me. “What are all these horrible things in this hay?” I shrieked.

“Manure bugs,” Uncle Mun stated. “Those are manure bugs, Lin.”

“Did you get this hay from YOUR place, Uncle Mun?” I asked, dreading the answer.

“Course.”

“Oh, God,” we said unanimously.

“Don’t throw up Kay, we’ll be home soon,” I said. My sister was barely hanging on.

“Head for home, Barbara!” I shouted at my sister driving the truck. “Hurry! Another medical emergency!”

Barbara gunned the truck around and sped through the neighborhood streets, confirming to all the residents that we were a truckload of Okie drive-by criminals.

Finally, we got home and gave Kay extra strength aspirin. She lay on the sofa with a wet rag on her head. Just then I heard my mother scream.

“Now what?” I asked myself and ran into the kitchen.

My mother was pale. “THE HAM’S GONE!” she wailed with a look of shock on her face. “I had it right here, that huge ham I spent all day baking—and now it’s gone!”

We all looked around like we might see a big ham on the floor or by the lamp or something. Just then I spied Max, Kay’s beagle. He looked grossly large and saggy in his beagle belly.

“Max...” I shook my finger at him. “Did you eat our Christmas ham?”

He gave a long heavy burp, kind of like the sound of moving furniture, and lay down with a groan.

We all looked at each other.

“Oh my God...”

“Oh, well,” I said, “We did want to simplify, you know...”

“Not that much!” Uncle Mun protested. “I’m gettin’ a weenie from the fridge.”

The rest of us sat down at the dinner table and looked at the vegetables and pecan pralines.

That was Grace the year we decided to simplify Christmas.

“Jesus,” somebody said.

About the Author

Lin Sutherland teaches horsemanship and riding at Onion Creek Ranch in Austin, Texas. She rides and writes where the west wind takes her.

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