

The Most Wonderful Time of the Year: A Dysfunctional Family Christmas

When we were teenagers, my cousin Melinda and I had vowed to remove ourselves from the region where we grew up: she made it all the way to Northern Virginia from Southwestern Virginia; I made it 90 minutes away from home, just across the Tennessee state line. We knew that we weren't like the rest of the family. In fact, even in our early teens, we optimistically said that, by the time we had grandchildren, they should be completely normal because each generation from our great-grandparents forward (as far back as we had personally known) was a little less weird than the one before it.

Seeing as how I was only 90 minutes away, I *had* to go home for Christmas every year. Which was typically on Christmas Eve because Jared, my husband (whom I had imported from Chicago), was an RN and usually ended up working on Christmas Day. This was actually fine, though, as it kept with our tradition of opening gifts on Christmas Eve.

This particular year, the weather was clear, but bitterly cold. I had hoped for some snow, but none had fallen at home. Typically colder where they lived than where we lived, I still held out hope for at least a little by the time we reached my grandparents' house. Alas, we arrived to the cold, with the wind blowing, but not a single snowflake in sight. We pulled up into the driveway and got out of the SUV, with our food in hand, and started into Grandma and Grandpa's house. There was a full-size plastic nativity scene outside in the yard, just beside the porch, but something was different. "Jared, is it me, or do all of the nativity figures have nooses around their necks?"

Jared, remaining absolutely deadpan serious, said, "Yep, right down to the Baby Jesus."

I went inside, while Jared took a smoke break outside before entering. I was met with loud greetings, hugs, people happily taking our food to the kitchen, holiday greetings, asking where Jared was (when everyone knew the answer), asking how we had been...

But I mostly ignored all of that and walked up to my grandmother, a look of concern on my face. “Grandma, why are there nooses around your nativity scene figures?”

“Oh, they’re not nooses, Daphne! We had some awful winds this week and they just about blew away!”

“Did you think about trying to maybe anchor them to the ground? Something other than baler twine around their necks tied to the stable?”

“Oh, your Uncle Bob said this would just be easier. [Uncle Bob being the one who had to do all the handy work around the house and farm, of course.] It doesn’t show from the road.” Which was true enough, I guess, but it sure as shooting showed if you pulled into the driveway.

Grandpa piped up from his chair in the corner, “Daphne, I told her that it looked downright blasphemous!”

I excused myself and joined Jared back out on the front porch where he was still smoking his cigarette. “They almost blew away in the wind,” I informed him, regarding the nativity figures. “It still seems awfully cruel to have them tied up like that.”

“Cruel? They get to stay out here, and we have to be in there for the next few hours,” he looked sideways at the front door.

“Jared! That’s not nice!” I scolded.

We went inside, together this time, and all the commotion ensued again, this time for Jared's benefit, as though he hadn't been able to hear it on the front porch the first time around. A man of few words, Jared said his hellos, then took a seat opposite Grandpa's chair in the living room, shouting back and forth with him for a couple of minutes before both men tired of pretending to be interested in the art of conversation among all the other noise around them.

Grandma had to show off all of her Christmas cards to me. She always hung every Christmas card that she received in the doorways of her house. She had done this for as long as I could remember. It was an act of pride, a contest of sorts, to see how many she would receive each year, from how far they would come... And by the time she got to be in her 70's, lots of people sent her Christmas cards. I opened a few to see who had sent them. I recognized most as church friends and family. A few were unfamiliar, so I asked. "Who's Agnes?"

She walked over to look at it. "Andy!" She called to my grandpa. "Is Agnes your half-sister's daughter-in-law's cousin?"

Grandpa shrugged his shoulders, "I don't know, Deborah, maybe."

My mom chimed in, "I thought it was Dad's sister's husband's niece?"

We went through four or five more like that. Jared tried hard not to laugh, as he caught my attention and shook his finger indicating that I should leave her alone and just let her be proud of all of the cards without drilling her about who had sent them to her..

So I turned to the Christmas tree, which actually looked spectacular, and told Grandma that it looked really nice. There was new tinsel, new LED lights, several new ornaments, but also many of my old favorite, cherished ornaments from childhood. It really looked just about perfect! "Your Aunt Sandy and your mom

decorated that for me on Thanksgiving. You wouldn't know that, though, because you were in Chicago with Jared's family!" *Ah, there we go, the guilt trip.* Christmas couldn't be Christmas without at least one of those, right?

Jared came over to admire it with me and put his arm around me, as though to protect me from the rest of the barbs that would surely fly about us visiting his family once a year. Being the tall man that he was, though, he reached over to lean the angel back, as it looked like she was leaning forward. And that's when it happened.

Her hair came off! He didn't realize that it was just kinda taped on there with Scotch tape and it came right off when he accidentally touched it. Grandma screamed that he'd torn up her "antique" angel, and everyone came rushing into the living room to try to fix things back, so Grandma would calm down and not have a holiday heart attack, which she was prone to do sometimes.

Poor Jared just stood there open-mouthed. I pulled him back over to the piano bench. "It's okay, honey. She has had that angel since the first Christmas I can remember, maybe longer," I laughed. "You didn't know that she was wearing the equivalent of a Dolly Parton wig! We'll just make sure that she gets a new angel next year."

Most years, we drew names, but everyone bought everyone gifts. anyway. I always sent gifts to Melinda's kinds, but the adults back home felt like it wasn't appropriate for all of us grown-ups to buy gifts for each other. After all, there were the two grandparents, my mom and stepfather, my sister, two aunts, two uncles, Melinda's brother Kevin, and his wife... So, this was the first year we drew going strictly by the rules of buying *only* for the person whose name was pulled out of the bowl as it passed by. Come Christmas Eve, my grandmother looked at me after I gave my grandfather his gift and asked, "Where's mine?"

“I didn’t draw your name.”

“Well, you can’t buy something for Andy and not me!”

“But those are the rules.”

“I guess I’ll just tear up your Christmas check, Jared’s, too!” she whimpered, more than a little wounded that she had been left out. “Since we’re *going by the rules*, all of a sudden.”

Jared jumped in. “Grandma, you weren’t supposed to give us anything unless you drew one of our names.”

“Well, I *did* draw Daphne’s, but if she’s just getting her Grandpa a gift and not me, then I’m not giving it to her!”

I looked at Jared and mouthed, *Oh, for Pete’s sake! I told you this would happen!*

Grandpa shook his head and threw his gift across the room at her. “Lord’s sake, Deborah, take my gift and shut up!”

She picked up the pillow that had “World’s Best Grandpa” stitched across it and threw it back at him, knocking a lamp off of a table.

So my mom jumped in. “Here, Mommy, I got your gift.”

For just a few minutes, Grandma seemed to be soothed and forget all about her disappointment in me. Mom had bought her some perfume. Grandma sprayed some on her wrists and started on about how nice it smelled. Meanwhile, Grandpa sat across the room choking, as it was so strong that it has aggravated his asthma, and he had to reach for his oxygen hose.

Then my Aunt Pam handed Grandma a package, “Here Mommy, this is from Cory and me. He got your name.”

My mom glared at Pam from across the room as Grandma opened a quilt with all the family’s names on it. “I suppose Cory made that all by himself, huh?”

Well, that just got things all riled up again about the drawing of names and who you were supposed to give gifts to. It devolved from there until Grandpa yelled out above the deafening din, “Is it time to eat yet, or not?”

Jared quickly jumped to his feet. “Grandpa, I think that’s a good idea. I’ll go get the turkey out of the oven. Do you want to carve it?”

Grandpa waved his hand and said quietly under the roar still coming from the other side of the room, “It’ll just fall off the bone, anyway, so you go on, Jared. I’m getting too old to hold that electric knife too steady, anyway,” he winked at me.

My Aunt Sandy, the baby of the family, and only twelve years older than I was, had escaped to the kitchen to remove her trademark homemade rolls from the oven, as I was working on pulling desserts out of the fridge and coolers.

Cory turned thanks and Jared started carving the bird with the same expression of horror his eyes always held when it came to Grandma’s turkey. As a teenager, we bought pizza for me the day before because I hated turkey. It turned out that I didn’t hate turkey, per se, just *Grandma’s* turkey. It was the driest, nastiest stuff I’d ever tasted. It was like chewing paper! As an adult, she started buying a ham, especially for me, as if the pizza were an abomination at the holiday table. No one else complained. I guess they had never had anything different, so they didn’t know any better. As for me, I’d had Jared’s Thanksgiving turkey cooked on a Weber grill and it was most succulent bird in the universe! So I watched Jared finish off the remaining damage to the turkey carcass, my Aunt Pam grabbing a drumstick, and waited reached for a couple of pieces of ham to go with my myriad of sides.

Once everyone had started eating, the phone rang. We knew who it was -- Melinda, whose family ate earlier and more quickly than our crowd. Whomever answered the phone would talk for just a minute (these were the days when you

actually paid for long-distance phone calls, after all), and pass the phone to the next person. While that should have been a pretty fool-proof plan for getting her through the whole family, it never failed that either Grandma or Grandpa would hang up before she had spoken with everyone, so her phone bill wouldn't be so high. So if you wanted to talk with her, you had to make a mad dash for the phone as soon as it rang.

After lunch, Grandpa had kicked back in his recliner and was snoring away, sleeping with his tongue hanging out of his mouth, a la Michael Jordan. Uncle Bob had gone home as soon as he ate, not being overly social. My stepfather, and sister, too, had gone home, and would pick up my mother later. Uncle Cory had either gone up on the hilltop to hunt or commune with nature and God, depending on the temperatures. Jared was flipping through channels, not really looking for anything in particular. So that left all of us women to find something to do. And it was always the same thing. Rummy.

Rummy was something of a family tradition among the women. There was only one problem. Grandma cheated. And everyone let her by with it. Except me. I was just a little too competitive to have her win by laying down all of her cards after her turn had passed and someone had "gone out," because, she "forgot to lay them down" on her last turn. Especially when this happened nearly every hand. I politely called her out on it a few times, and she refused to pay me any mind. When it finally came down to me beating her, my mother, or losing, I finally told her no. "No, Grandma! You cannot lay down those cards! It's not your turn, anymore. If Mom beats me this game, she will beat me honestly, but I'm not sitting here and having you *cheat* me out of a potential win!"

Well, I had said the magic word. "*Cheat?!?* You think I'm *cheating???* I'm just a poor, helpless old woman and I can't help that I forget..."

And thus began a litany of wrongs I had committed against her during rummy games for years, being mean and cruel, when none of her other grandchildren would have dared to do or say such awful things to her. Her other grandchildren loved her, she declared. “Yes, I noticed that none of them sent Christmas cards or called, except for Melinda,” I said aloud, thinking initially that I’d only said it inside my head.

Her gasp was more than audible. It was damned near palpable, as she clutched her heart, and exclaimed, “Well, I *never!*”

Jared, overhearing the raucous from the living room, called out, asking if it was about time to head home so he could get some rest before he had to get up and be at work at 5:00 a.m. the next morning.

“No,” Grandma insisted, “you keep playing. Since *I’m* the cheater, I’ll just go put things away.”

Well, that was the end of rummy. Everyone went to put things away, even though everything had been put away before rummy ever started. I got my casserole dish and went to wake up Grandpa to give him a hug.

“I guess *cheaters* don’t get hugs,” Grandma exclaimed with a huff.

“Yes, *you* get a hug,” I answered, exasperated. “I was getting Grandpa first, so I can come over to the door and put my shoes on after I hug you, and not have to walk all the way back across the living room. I know that I’m not allowed to track up your floors, walking through with my shoes on.”

I’d lost track of the number of guilt trips this was, but I sure wished that I was racking up some sort of frequent flyer miles for them all!

Grandma went to the kitchen and got her purse. “Here, now, Daphne, you and Jared take your Christmas checks.”

“Grandma, it really isn’t necessary,” I started.

“I sent one to all the grandkids,” she informed me, making me feel oh-so-very special. “Remember, now, they’re postdated, so don’t try to cash them until after the third of the month. You have a Merry Christmas!”

I took a deep breath and hugged her neck, and kissed her cheek. Defeated, I muttered, “You have a Merry Christmas, too, Grandma.”

Then everyone started calling out Merry Christmas, like it had been a perfect day. And, maybe in our own little bizarre world, it had come pretty close, I thought, realizing that I was probably about as weird and had almost as many idiosyncrasies and neuroses as the rest of them, just in different ways.

As we walked down the sidewalk towards the car, I looked over at the nativity scene, now lit up in the dark of the evening. “Poor Baby Jesus,” I lamented, shaking my head.

“Lucky Wise Men,” Jared insisted, with a chuckle.