

Christmas Present

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Preface

This is a book about miracles. After all, it is a book for Christmas. And what is Christmas about, if not miracles?

Some might argue that Christmas in America has become the celebration of material excess--- the ultimate capitalistic binge. In America, they say, the spirit of Christmas has been forgotten, along with an ideal that goodness and light can rule a tolerant society. A society where there is room for all, where there is strength in diversity, and where freedom and individuality mutually coexist with empathy, compassion and responsibility for one another.

Well, I, for one, wish to believe.

I wish to believe in goodness.

I wish to believe in light.

I wish to believe in love.

I wish to believe in miracles.

This is a book about miracles. After all, it is a book for Christmas. And what has my life been filled with, if not miracles?

Not bad for a Jewish kid.

Not bad at all.

Merry Christmas, my Christmas miracles.

This little book is for and about you.

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Angels We Have Heard on High

My relationship with Christmas has evolved over the years. It didn't start out as the love affair that exists today.

Far from it.

As a Jewish kid growing up in a predominantly Christian America, my earliest exposures to Christmas were punishing. In fact, my sense of alienation and marginalization sprang from a "separate but unequal" status. As a child at Christmastime, I was perpetually ostracized by the greater culture. Unlike baby Jesus, who was glorified and made holy, I was reviled and abandoned at Christmas.

Everywhere I turned I was bombarded by endless messages, spoken and unspoken, condemning my unforgivable dissimilarity.

"Santa Claus is coming to town"--- but year after year he skipped my house...

"He knows if you've been bad or good"--- I'd been perfect! I'd shown kindness to strangers, given a portion of my hard earned allowance to charity, stood with the elders in synagogue to utter the mourners' prayer, facing Jerusalem...yet he'd skipped my house, again!

"And now an update on Santa's progress from our field correspondent in Coral Gables...There have been sightings of a sleigh led by a reindeer with a bright red nose over the sky in Miami, Florida"--- I was five years old, standing in the front yard dressed in my favorite kangaroo footie pajamas, matching kangaroo-eared hoodie pulled over my head, and tiny

matching stuffed baby kangaroo peeking out of my front pouch.

“JoAnn!” called my mother, “Come inside! You can’t go onto the roof with that flashlight.”

“But Santa---”

“Santa Claus isn’t coming to our house. There is no Santa Claus for Jewish children. We don’t celebrate Christmas. We celebrate *Chanukah*. Can you tell me the story of Chanukah, the *Festival of Lights*?” she asked, in a proud and loving tone. She’d emphasized those last three words with such exaggeration; she may as well have been holding a 10 ft. x 10 ft. cue card in my face. My mother always wanted her children to succeed.

Of course I could tell her the story. But who cared? Santa Claus wasn’t in it. Still, I replied, ever the dutiful daughter:

“When the Asseeranuns took---”

“---Uh-seer-ree-yuns, dear. The conquerors were called Assyrians.”

“When the Uh-seer-ree-nuns took over Jerusalem, they came to the Holy Temple and destagraded it---”

“---Des-uh-cray-ted. They *desecrated* it. They destroyed it on purpose,” my mother interjected, “go on.”

“They ripped up the Torah and burned it, and they broke everything in the Temple. When Judah Maccabee came to the Temple to reconstapate it---”

“That’s re-con-se-crate it. *Re-consecrate*, meaning to bless it, restore it, make it a holy place again---”

I was five. Her vocabulary lessons were going in one ear and out the other...“He found a piece of a broken oil lamp that should’ve worked for just a little while, but it worked for eight days. It was a side from God---”

“--- A sign, Honey-”

“A sign. ‘Cuz the Maccabees won against the great big Us-seer-ree-nuns and that was a miracle.” I answered, still dejected that she wouldn’t let me up on the roof. If only I was able to signal him, I knew Santa wouldn’t skip my house this year. I was sure of it.

“That’s right, my zeisa madeleh,”---a loving Yiddish term meaning sweet little girl---“and so we light the menorah, say our prayers, play dreidel, and eat latkes to remember and to celebrate that miracle.”

Oh, joy.

Some of my friends’ parents went a bit farther, trying to heal the wounds of difference, the pain of being skipped over, the sadness of being left out.

“You know, Michael, Santa goes to the McFarland’s house, but Chanukah Hank comes to ours.”

“That’s weird” my friend Michael retorted, “because Mrs. Epstein says that Hanukkah Harry does.”

“Oh. Right. That’s right...” We could smell the rubber burning as Michael’s mom threw her brain from second gear into overdrive. “... that’s because there are so many wonderful Jewish boys and girls in our neighborhood that it takes two men, not just one---Chanukah Hank and Hanukkah Harry---to bring all the kinderlach presents. Tell me, darling, this year, do you want one small gift every night, or do you want to save them up and get ONE GREAT BIG PRESENT on the eighth night?”

That was Mrs. Mendelsohn. Her husband, Morris, was an investment counselor at Rutland Bank’s South Miami branch office. I wondered why she wasn’t, since she’d managed to convince Michael to invest his eight days wisely.

"You know, we used to be able to bake our Christmas cookies..." drawled Mrs. Wick in a hate-filled tone at the start of her third period Home Ec. class, her sour expression exacerbating a hag-like face "... but *we're* no longer allowed to do *anything* in school for *Christmas*." She turned to me, her pair of flame throwing Godzilla eyes shooting intense flares, "*THEY* didn't like it," she turned the flames off, aiming an angelic gaze instead toward the rest of her students "and so now *WE* can't do it anymore."

"Excuse me," I proceeded at enormous personal risk. I'd already failed my A-line skirt project. I raised my hand innocently to ask what I'd hoped would be a clarifying question, as Mrs. Wick was clearly unhappy, and I wanted to understand why.

"What, Raker?" She'd mispronounced my name for the umpteenth time, replacing the "Rack" with a rake, and the "ear" with an "er."

"Um... who is 'THEY'?"

She looked at me with unequivocal scorn, then aimed her reply at my classmates, "Well... *YOU* know..." Her eyes quickly darted from them, back to me, as she spewed the next word "...*THEM*..." declaring as indirectly as she possibly could to her students that it was my fault we couldn't bake Christmas cookies.

I realized in that moment who "THEY" were.

And I was one of "THEM."

"Don't you bake Christmas cookies at home?"--they questioned, as we ate lunch at our assigned table in the cafeteria.

"No" I replied in a flat tone of surrender, "We don't bake Christmas cookies. We don't celebrate Christmas."

“*WHAT? YOU* don’t celebrate *CHRISTMAS????*”

I wasn’t sure if the group had been shocked into silence, or had paused to consider the ramifications of my reply. After a few uncomfortable and equally rare silent moments, they asked a follow-up question:

“Are your parents *COMMUNISTS?*”

They’d paused to consider the ramifications.

“*What’s on TV tonight?*”--- I inquired as I flopped onto the couch.

My choices were: “A Charlie Brown Christmas” on CBS, “The Judy Garland Christmas Special” on ABC, or “Bob Hope: A USO Christmas with Our Troops in Viet Nam, starring Joey Heatherton, Joe Namath, and JoAnn Worley” on NBC.

“Isn’t there anything else on? Just Christmas shows?” I whined, hating the fact that every show on TV was reminding my classmates and Mrs. Wick that America celebrated Christmas and I didn’t, and was therefore a communist.

This continued into my adulthood.

It was during my first year of teaching at Mona Jarus Exceptional Student Center---early in my career--- when the principal, Mr. Bragg, invited me into his office one day in late November.

“Goldrich. How are you?”

“I’m great, Mr. Bragg!” I answered, trying to contain my knocking knees ...petrified as I was that I’d majorly screwed up somehow without knowing it and was about to get canned.

“Goldrich, sit... please...” he pointed to the chair next to his desk--- the chair where he always sat the kids who’d been sent to the office--- and began squirming in his. “Goldrich... That’s Jewish, isn’t it?” ironically cloaking his remark with as much *savoir-faire* as he could muster.

I found his question and tone extremely puzzling.

“Um, it’s German, actually, but yes sir, I’m Jewish...”

“Well, Goldrich, you know, here at Mona Jarus, our students are special, and we like to ---well, we kind of--- well, we tend to go a little overboard at Christmas. You know. We like to decorate the whole school, and uh, have sing-alongs, and special performances for the kids in the cafeteria, hold gift exchanges and classroom parties, and, uh, of course there’s our annual reindeer dance and... well, you know, we make it very special for the kids. It means a lot to them and their parents.”

“Uh huh...” I had no idea why we were having this conversation.

“Well, uh... I just want to make sure you’re not going to have a problem if we do that this year---”

Yes. At Christmastime, other folks’ resolute discomfort at my very existence was incessantly and inescapably in my face.

Until one day, when all of that changed.

I’d fallen in love with a Catholic woman, whose observant mother was very close with the church. The three of us were together for the first time at Christmas, in a small Michigan town. They’d decided to attend Christmas Eve services in a small chapel built of stone--- a guitar-led midnight mass--- and I’d been included.

Mass began as ushers made their way down the center aisle, passing out candles to each row of congregants. Each of us held our lit candle as songs were played and prayers were prayed. It was beautiful, inspiring, romantic, soulful and spiritual and joyful and lovely and I was moved and touched and listening and holding my candle, immersed in the experience, my first ever in a church.

The service came to a close, and we were asked to turn to the person next to us and offer them a Christmas greeting. When I turned, I saw that I was the only person sitting at our pew--- or any other for that matter---still holding a lit candle. Everyone else had at some point snuffed theirs out and passed them on to an usher, who'd collected them.

I was once again the Jewish kid--- out of place, skipped over, left behind.

Except, this time was to be different.

My girlfriend's mother, who had been sitting next to me, was quietly chuckling to herself. Not in a condescending way. Not in a judgmental way. But in her way: kindly, softly, warmly--- not only appreciating the comedic moment, but also enjoying how immersed I'd been in the service she loved. She leaned in close to me, and gently told me as quietly and discretely as she could, "You can blow that candle out now."

As I did, she surreptitiously took it from my hand, sparing me the further indignity of having to figure out what to do with it. Then she pulled me close, gave me the sweetest hug, and said a heartfelt, sincere, genuine "Merry Christmas, Jo, God be with you."

That was Celeste, teaching me my first lesson:
Christmas had not rejected me.

A few years later, when she'd grown ill with cancer, we brought Celeste to Florida to live near us, so that we could care for her. It was her first Christmas with a large congregation, one that lacked the warmth and familiarity of her small church in Michigan. Still, she was faithful, and she wanted to attend Christmas Mass. I offered to give her a ride, and told her I'd pick her up at her apartment around noon. When I arrived, she was waiting by the door, dressed in a beautiful, bright red dress. I was a bit taken aback by the loud color choice. (A cultural difference: Jews *never* wear loud colors to synagogue, but rather are supposed to dress with humility as they prepare to be in the presence of Almighty God...)

I kept my thoughts about her color choice to myself, and drove her across the street to the huge Catholic Church which also serves as the area's diocese and encompasses an entire city block. We pulled into the parking lot, just in time. As I dropped her off, she quickly asked while stepping out of the car, "Where should I meet you after the service?"

This was my first time ever dropping anyone off for Christmas Mass, and I answered: "Don't worry about it. I'll find you, no problem." *After all*, I thought smugly to myself, *with that red dress on, you're gonna stick out like a sore thumb!*

When I went back for her, little did I expect to see rivers of red pouring through the church's exits, converging on the parking lot, which was soon becoming a red sea of biblical proportion. It took a bit of time, but we did finally meet up with each other.

That was the second lesson Celeste taught me:

Catholics wear red on Christmas.

Her last Christmas on Earth, Celeste allowed me the privilege of hanging her homemade ornaments--- some lace, some crocheted, others made by her children's hands over the years--- on her tiny apartment-sized Christmas tree. At the time, we didn't know she would leave us just three months later, but we did know how ill she was. She sat in her robe, the familiar turban slightly askew on her nearly bare head, wrapped in an afghan in her reclining chair next to me. She let my hands be hers, guiding me on the placement of each ornament, and with each one, sharing its story, sharing her love of the holiday, of her children, and especially, of her daughter. It was intimate and tender and I felt in those moments the magic of Christmas---there, quietly trimming her tree, together. Later, we took her for a drive around town, through the best decorated neighborhoods, to see Christmas lights.

No one loved Christmas lights more than Celeste.

That was the third lesson she taught me:

Christmas lights and Christmas trees are truly beautiful, and Christmas is filled with love.

Ever since Celeste, every year, I decorate my home with a Christmas tree and lights, and take a car-ride to tour the best-lit neighborhoods, in her honor---all the while, keeping her close in my heart.

Celeste---My first angel, gave me Christmas.

More than a decade later, I fell in love with a Presbyterian woman. I was already in love with Christmas. But now, I had a double "excuse" to continue to celebrate it, in my own weird way.

I still celebrated it for Celeste. But now, I also celebrated it for my girlfriend, who came as a package deal with three others. As her sister warned me on our first meeting: "If you marry my sister, you marry all of us. We're a really close family. No one comes between my sister and our family. And no one comes between my sister and me."

And tight they were (and still are).

Now, Christmas came with a set of family traditions, and I lived in a bigger house, with room for multiple trees---

I graduated from one tree to three of them: one for me and Celeste, filled with celestial ornaments; one that was my girlfriend's, filled with rocking horses; and one for Idgie---my first, precious trip of a dog---filled with ornaments she'd insisted on having: bones and Snoopy and Woodstock, Charlie Brown and his crew, and of course, a tree topper with her name in lights. And I graduated into having more outside lights---ones that illuminated the beautiful forms of our large oaks, a family of lighted deer grazing below.

Christmas had gotten bigger and better.

My girlfriend's mother and I shared a wry sense of humor. She and I would laugh as observers of the subtle follies happening around us that no one else seemed to catch. She made me welcome in her home, and welcomed me in as a part of her family.

We didn't know at the time that we were having our last Christmas with Sara. I can't remember it specifically, to be honest. I just remember all of them--- the ones we celebrated while she was alive. They were always in her home, which was decorated to the hilt, lights outside and a welcoming wreath on the door, lovely Christmas Village set up in the front living room, tasteful decorations everywhere you

turned, and so much warmth and laughter--- always so much warmth, fun, and laughter. Christmas Eve with cold cuts and the out of town family, Christmas morning in pajamas, opening presents, sharing stories of the family's adventures. More laughter. More warmth.

That was Sara, teaching me my fourth lesson:

Christmas is about family, traditions, joy and laughter.

She died suddenly, without warning, one cold winter's day. The date was February 29th --- leap year.

Maybe it had to be that way, because we couldn't bear it if we had to relive that horrific day every year. Or maybe, if she had anything to do with it, it had to be that way, so that we could keep laughing three out of every four years.

Now, her daughter and I open our home every year on Christmas morning, surrounded by our tiny family, trying to laugh and have fun again, and to recount stories of the family's adventures, in Sara's honor.

Sara---My second angel, gave me Christmas with family.

And then there is my third angel, Peggy.

Peggy was Christmas Spirit incarnate. Her outside lights outshined them all. Her tree was fresh, and green, and towering, decorated meticulously and to the nines, just as she always dressed herself.

Peggy planned every gift for the people she loved with deep thought, care and generosity. Her gifts always reflected understanding, awareness, and perception of the true nature of their recipients, acknowledging beyond a shadow of a doubt how much they were loved, and what each person meant to her. She'd wrap each one differently---matching its personality to the receiver's---the old fashioned way in crepe

or cotton or silk, with hand fashioned bows and decorative elements she'd made herself. Her gifts came solely from her heart, and her heart was as immense as the ocean.

Peggy spent a lifetime working in the field of developmental disabilities, liberating people from the worst conditions imaginable. She was the only professional I'd ever known who refused to leave even one person behind--- persons with whom she often developed a lifelong bond.

Peggy greeted Christmas every year with the joy and wonder and innocence of a child, celebrating as if each year's was her very first --- as if each friend were her very last.

In her final days her hospital room was filled with Christmas spirit and with people who loved her. They spilled into the common areas, forming a line that stretched from her doorway, down the hall and past her corridor. Although she ascended from Earth on that cold December evening just shy of Christmas, the timing of her departure somehow made sense to me. She wanted to be among the other angels on Christmas day--- where the real celebration is.

That was my last lesson:

Christmas is humanity's chance to celebrate with angels.

Do You Hear What I Hear?

It was November, a month that had always marked the beginning of my favorite time of year. The holy trinity was upon us: My birthday, Thanksgiving, and Christmas. Great food, great celebrations, great weather. But this year, 2010, was going to be different.

I was heading to the hospital for neurosurgery. They were going to open my skull and operate on my brain.

My brain!

My one and only beautiful attribute! (When “A Beautiful Mind” was released, I wondered how anyone had produced a film about me without my knowledge or approval.)

Allow me to explain:

As a zavtig adolescent (my 5’3” frame weighed 172 lbs.) I did not meet the criterion for beauty. In the age of Twiggy, thin was in, and curly hair was out. I spent my teen years in overalls and a fake leopard skin coat--- which I thought hid my fat and made me less conspicuous in public.

What could I have been thinking?

I lived in South Miami. The coldest it ever got outside was 78 degrees. But that didn’t stop me.

I was desperate. I’d sweat if I had to. I’d iron my hair. If I hid my body, I could hide my ugliness. And if I could hide that, I could become invisible. And if I became invisible, my torturers would leave me alone. (Back when I attended high school, the terms “bully” “bystander” and “victim” didn’t exist. However, the terms “queer” “fatso” and “kike” did.)

I never did make the connection that my strategy was doomed to total failure. Since then, I’ve developed a fashion sense that tells me --- although I was way ahead of the animal rights curve---that wearing overalls and a fake leopard skin coat will get you noticed every time, especially in Greater Miami.

By senior year, I’d figured out that my appearance was hopeless. I was never going to be able to blend in. Instead, I decided to take an alternate route, and actively sought to identify any superior attribute I might possess, the magnitude of which might compensate for my curly hair and swollen physique.

After months of self-analysis, I was able to erect a positive self-concept around the one thing I actually had going in my favor: My brain.

After all, my brain was what had always distinguished me from my sister, the size 1 petite and alluring beauty. Not that she isn't also highly intelligent. She is. (Damn it!) But she's had to carry that burden on her own. It isn't easy being objectified by every eye that passes your way.

Our Aunt Ruth, in from Baltimore for her yearly winter vacation at the Fontainebleau Hotel, would always introduce us to ritzy acquaintances in the hotel's lobby as follows:

"I'd like you to meet my two nieces. This is Susan--- isn't she beautiful?" Now, what to do with me...

"And this is JoAnn: She's the smart one."

It was November 2010, and the smart one was heading to Tampa General Hospital to get a brain tumor resected from her skull.

Although I put on a brave --- rather average but not completely ugly and yet hardly pretty either--- face, I knew there were several possible post-surgical outcomes:

1. Complete recovery with residual hearing preserved
2. Recovery with deafness and tinnitus on my right side
3. Recovery with deafness and tinnitus on my right side with irreversible vertigo or balance disorder
4. Recovery with deafness and tinnitus on my right side with irreversible vertigo or balance disorder and facial nerve paralysis (possibly transient, possibly permanent)

5. All of the above, along with some form and degree of Cognitive Impairment (Temporal lobe damage)
6. Death
7. Everything or anything in between

When I woke from surgery, or so I am told, I was trying to rip out my tubing. I have no recollection of such behavior, but there are sworn affidavits attesting to the fact. (I am to this day, mortified.) When I woke the first time that I remember, I opened my eyes to the sight of my Deborah. That was all I needed. I knew I was still on Earth. Then she spoke (she was on my left side) and I knew I still understood words. Next, I tried to move a bit of everything. The left side of my face worked, but my right side didn't. Still, my right eye was stuck open (it could've been worse), and I was able to put words together, and think, and speak--- although I was a bit slurry. A few more moments passed, and I realized the constant high frequency tones weren't coming from medical equipment in the room, nor were ocean waves crashing outside my window--- all these noises were coming from inside my head. Also, just because I was in Tampa, the hospital did not offer the same spinning feature on its 9th floor neuro ICU as Tampa's Transit Authority had offered on its top floor restaurant located above the main concourse at Tampa International Airport--- I was the one doing the spinning, not the room.

When I woke again, my neuro-otologist was standing at my bedside. He took my hand into his, and said, "You did great, JoAnn. We got it all, just like you wanted, and we had a really strong acoustic signal all the way up 'til that very last scoop, and then we lost it. I'm so sorry, JoAnn. We got the whole tumor, but we couldn't save your hearing."

Soon, I was surrounded by my friends, and my family, who were all there, in their own ways, every time I needed them to be--- there, helping me to get stronger and to heal--- there, helping me return to life, and to work---there, until I again knew joy and thankfulness.

This is a book about miracles.

After my three angels, the next miracle that comes to mind is me.

I am a miracle. And I am grateful every day to the light energy that is the source of all--- the invisible force that worked through the hands of my surgeons and nurses, through a woman named Deborah, through my family and friends, and continues bestowing miracles through each of them.

These are the lessons my brain tumor taught me:

Time is precious here on Earth;

Every day is a gift;

Love abounds;

Angels also dwell on Earth; and

I am blessed with angels, all around.

Silent Night

My father was Jewish. As such, he didn't believe in Christmas. He taught me as best he could to honor my God, my people, our religion and its traditions. Mostly, he taught me by example to be gentle, and kind, affectionate and generous, courageous and strong, to live with honesty and integrity, and to always be helpful to others. When I came

out to him, he didn't skip a beat. He just loved me. Always. Unconditionally. Really--- Unconditionally.

He spoke from his heart with silence.

A twinkly wink, or rolled eyes aimed at me when I'd turn toward him from my mother's intensity.

A quick rub on the shoulders whenever he walked by.

A gently held hand as we watched TV together.

A blown kiss from his Hospice bed.

My father's silence could speak volumes. And it could say so little, when it was right and there was little needing to be said. It could be mighty, and it could be tender. It could even sing.

My father had a favorite game as we'd drive down country roads during lazy summers in North Carolina. I'd be sitting next to him in the front seat--- back when there were such things as bench seats--- and he'd start to tap a discombobulated rhythm on my thigh:

Tap tap tap --- tap--- tap,

Tap tap tap ---tap --- tap,

Tap tap tap ---tap ---tap,

Tap tap tap tap-----

“What song am I playing, Jodi?”

I wouldn't have a clue, so he'd repeat it-

“C'mon...You know this song...”

Occasionally I could actually fill in the missing melody. But most of the time, after two minutes of tapping he would give me a clue by humming the first three notes, which rarely helped because my father had to lift hard to carry a tune, and even then, he usually dropped it by the second note. The song still unidentifiable, he'd commence tapping the pattern over and over, giving me every possible opportunity to succeed.

“I don’t know, Pop. I give up. What’s the song?”

At that point he would sparkle, and start to sing, matching each tap with its lyric and note.

“You are my sunshine

My only sunshine-

You make me happy

When skies are gray---”

I miss my father every day of my life. I miss his sweetness. I miss his unconditional love. I miss his silence on silent nights.

Joy to the World

What would Christmas have been, without our precious, crazy, impetuous, independent, assertive, play-crazed Idgie Tawanda of York?

Idgie brought true joy to the world.

When she was a tiny eight-week old puppy (she was a black and tan Yorkie), she would put us all in stitches as she chased down her favorite rubber squeaky toy--- a hot dog nearly her size---and shake it mercilessly while spinning in circles. Several times we were certain she'd built up enough speed to lift off the rug, a "heli-dog" canine transformer.

Idgie loved Christmas.

Particularly when the time came for unwrapping presents. She would help start the unwrapping by tearing the first portion of paper away from its box, then wait, excitedly, eyes fixed on the human completing the task until the entire sheet had been completely removed, then crumpled into a ball, and thrown across the room. She'd chase after it, and once she'd caught it, tiptoe off ---the paper wad hanging like limp prey from her mouth --- literally stealing away to her den under the bed, where she kept her most precious stash.

For nearly two decades, Idgie was there for me--- through good times and bad.

She always lifted me out of myself, and into her world.

She taught me that joy can always alleviate pain and that there is always time to play. That joyful play is a solution to every problem, because it opens the heart, and reminds the spirit of its truest purpose: to live life to the fullest, to laugh heartily and out loud, to connect in joy with others, to just be.

White Christmas

For the longest time after Idgie died, I felt lost. Her presence--- her energy in our home--- had been gigantic, and her death left a gaping hole in my universe. I swore I'd never have another dog ever again. It was much too much to bear; to love and then lose one.

Months went by, and slowly, my heart began to heal. We started to visit animal rescue websites, looking at the photos of dogs available for adoption. After several hits and misses, we filled out an adoption form for a dog named Wrigley--- an adorable Jack Russell/Wirehaired Terrier mix with an exaggerated under bite. We'd indicated our desire and willingness to adopt two dogs simultaneously, having learned so many lessons from Idgie, not the least of which was that a dog should not be left alone while its people are at work. Otherwise, lacking any stimulation, they tend to raid the wrapped presents under your Christmas tree.

Soon, we received a call from the rescue organization.

“Hi. I’m calling for JoAnn.”

“This is she.”

“Congratulations! We’ve reviewed all applications to adopt Wrigley, and you’re the lucky people who’ve been approved. If you’re still interested, we’ll be at the PetsMart® this weekend, and you can come by to meet her.”

After many talks with Idgie, I finally felt she understood my wanting a dog again--- not to take her place, ever, but to help me heal from the pain of her absence—a dog that needed a home, and that I would love in its own way. I was excited and anxious to go get Wrigley, and the next three days crawled by.

Finally, Friday night arrived. Just one more night to get through, and the next morning, Wrigley would be ours. At 7:30 pm, the phone rang. It was Barbra, the owner of the rescue organization.

“Hello, JoAnn? You’re not going to believe it. We’ve got another dog here, she and Wrigley get along great, and she’s perfect for you guys. She’s a round, fluffy little snowball, and she’s so sweet. You’re going to love her. We’re bringing her with us tomorrow so you can meet them both. Her name is Lilly.”

Our excitement doubled.

Saturday morning, we went to PetsMart®, arriving early. The rescue staff had just started setting up pens and unloading crates. We anxiously peeked through the windows of their truck, and spied Wrigley way in the back, a white furry ball beside her. *Is that Lilly?...* We decided to give the staff time to set up their adoption area inside, and went next door to waste a few minutes. When we returned to PetsMart® the adoption center was fully staged, and there, in the farthest corner of a large pen were our two dogs.

Wrigley was barking and moving playfully, actively enticing all potential takers mulling around to come over. Lilly---a round barely recognizable Maltese, fur overgrown and messy--- was in the same pen, hugging the farthest corner, cowering and trembling with fear. Barbra shared everything she knew about her: Lilly had been kept in a crate her entire life as a breeder in a puppy mill, and then dumped.

“Oh, Jo---” Debbie started to cry “we have to take her home with us.”

That was it.

We were the proud parents of a doggy duo.

After two days, Debbie’s face swelled and her breathing

became labored. She was allergic to Wrigley. Heartbroken, we had to return her. Barbra reassured us that she would be adopted quickly, and within 48 hours, she'd been placed with a family who had a fenced yard and two young children. It was a perfect match, we were promised.

Lilly was now our one and only.

She slowly came out of her fear, and immediately stole our hearts.

It took time for her to learn about freedom, and the outside. When we first brought her into the backyard, she stood in place, staring up at us as if asking, "What am I supposed to do now?" To this day, she doesn't wander far from our sides...nor does she explore.

As soon as we could, we brought her to our Vet.

Lilly'd never been spayed. Our Vet confirmed her history, estimating Lilly'd had at least four or five litters. She was one month shy of five years old. She had multiple mammary tumors needing removal, with a chance one or more could be malignant.

She'd been with us less than 72 hours. We knew she'd been sent to us for a reason. Maybe it was so that she would be loved and cared for, for the remainder of her life, however long that might be.

We scheduled her surgeries, hoping for the best, and she came through like a trooper with a clean bill of health.

Not too much later, I scheduled my own surgery.

When I came home from the hospital, Lilly stayed by my side, day and night; guarding and protecting me; giving me soft gentle kisses; checking on me every few minutes, her maternal instincts taking over. Our roles had been reversed: it was she who was loving and caring for me. Since then, she's never been farther away from me than a few inches.

Her quiet, sweet energy helped heal me. I believe that.
And I believe Idgie sent her to us, to take care of us.

And she has.

Every morning I wake with her, and every night as she
and I nestle in for sleep, Lilly is my very own White
Christmas--- she brings light and love, comfort and joy.

Because of her, my days are merry and bright.

And with Lilly by our sides--- all our Christmases are
white.

All I Want for Christmas is You

You are a miracle to me.

They say that matches are made in Heaven, and I believe them. We happened in a way that took us both by surprise, at a time when we least expected it.

From the time we became colleagues, through the time we became friends you just always seemed to “get me.” You understood me in ways no one ever had before.

Maybe not even myself.

Then, much later, as friendship deepened, our love was revealed as if by magic--- a gift from the universe. In Yiddish, the word is “Basheret”—meant to be, sanctioned by God.

You are all things wise and wonderful, kind and loving, calm and constant, wild and beautiful.

You are frankincense and myrrh and silver and gold.

You bring balance and harmony, freedom and belonging.

You light my days and brighten my nights.

You are the most celestial of constellations. You are the earth and the moon and the sun.

You are the eastern star in every starry night. A compass guiding me.

You are a miraculous wonder ---

All I'll ever want, all I'll ever need, is you.

We Need a Little Christmas (not a lot of it)

Not everyone shares my take on Christmas. Maybe because they've celebrated it their entire lives. Maybe because their experiences have been different from mine. Nonetheless, I honor their choices, and understand their perspectives. Here's to those who've found a way to survive the rigors of the season, and make their own light.

It's almost Christmas.

Time to pack our bags and get the hell out of Dodge!

We've got our plane tickets and a reservation at the Lodge.

Who needs the insanity?

And all that family drama?

The tar and the pine needles...

And all of the bother?

You might think that we're humbugs—

a pair of real Scrooges.

But staying at home is an idea for stooges.

We've been there before---

We won't go there again.

'Tis our way of loving our family and friends.

By getting away and staying out farther

We're reducing the chances of killing each other.

Christmas is supposed to be a time of joy and peace.

So we'll be in the mountains wrapped up in our fleece.

Away from all you numbskulls

and the traffic and the drunks.
This year we're having Christmas
with some mule deer and some skunks.

So please don't buy us presents,
and please don't fill our socks,
'Cause we've found out when we're alone
our Christmas really rocks.

It's not that we don't love you.
You must surely know we do.
And it's because we love you
That we're Christmas-ing for two.

It's simpler and it's peaceful ---
A kinder, gentler way.
We're taking off to keep the peace.
We'll catch up New Year's Day.

The First Noel

It was December 24, 1974.

Bundled in a heavy woolen coat, Chana sat cupping her mittened hands over her mouth. Her warm breath made an entertaining mist, but did little to ease the icy chill. She rocked back and forth on the bus bench, hoping the motion might thaw her thighs. Winter was never this cold in Florida. She glanced at her watch, checking the time to assure herself its workings hadn't themselves frozen.

6:23 p.m.

The bus should be rounding the corner five to seven minutes from now.

At nineteen, Chana still believed in absolutes.

The 6:00 bus would arrive, as it always had, thirty minutes late. That would put her at the crest of Mount Scopus by 7:03. She'd tried sunset from the Mount of Olives and Mount Moriah. Only Scopus afforded a vantage point from which the Old City seemed close enough to touch, yet far enough away to still seem surreal.

"Ma ha sha'ah, Gingy?" Avi, another regular on the route, asked for the time.

"Sheysh v'chaytzee." She answered in the language of her forefathers. Hebrew was delicate, exquisite music to her. It resonated with the ancient soul of her people--- the vibrant heartbeat of her homeland. And so she spoke it as if playing an instrument, constantly perfecting her embouchure, imparting life and emotion into her phrasing. Hebrew was a living language. It had survived the ages, as had her people.

"Zehk'sat kar lach, nachon, Motek?"

What an understatement, Avi! Chana thought. *It's more than just "a bit cold for me"... it's freezing! My chattering teeth should be a dead giveaway.* She grinned back at him, though, touched by his affectionate air. He'd called her "motek", derived from the root "matok" meaning "sweet." In English it translated roughly to "sweetie."

"Nachon, Avi. Heenay ha autobus!"

The bus had finally arrived. The driver punched her pass, and she took her usual seat by a window on the left, where she would have an unobstructed view of Jerusalem. Music played on the radio, until being interrupted by three familiar beeps, signaling the beginning of the hourly news.

"This is the Israeli Broadcast System. The time is seven o'clock, and here is the news:

The Israeli Defense Forces will be on special alert during the next four days. Security around Jerusalem and Bethlehem has been increased to assure the safety of Christmas pilgrims..."

Chana had noticed many more security checks in the stores and bus stations that day, usually indicative of forewarned terrorist activity. She'd completely forgotten about Christmas! It was December 24th and yet she'd not heard a single Christmas carol, nor seen a single Christmas decoration. There had been no pre-Christmas sales, no Christmas books or movies. No references to Christmas in the daily comics.

In short, life in Jerusalem had stayed pretty much the same. As an American living in Israel, these sudden realizations filled her with a unique sense of melancholy. She thought of her friends back home. Though somewhat relieved to have escaped the intense commercialism, and equally intense sense of isolation, she was also filled with

fond memories of the season.

There had been that special Italian Christmas Eve dinner she'd eaten at Danielle's house, replete with the traditional seafood meal and marvelous dessert pastries. She hoped Tony was on leave from the Marines, and that they were all together again, tonight. And the Bakers next door had by now erected a towering fresh Frasier fir—one that no doubt reached their living room ceiling—and had trimmed it with thirty years' worth of family-made ornaments. She said a special prayer that the Bakers, too, were together and in good health for the holiday.

But here in Jerusalem, life--- with the exception of increased security--- had basically gone on as usual.

She turned around to Avi, in the seat behind her.

"Avi, do you know where I can buy Christmas cards?"

"Christmas cards... I've never bought one. You might check the super department store near Zion Square. It will be open tomorrow--- only until one o'clock."

"That's right. It closes early before Shabbat. I'll check there. Thanks."

He pulled the cord and stood up. "Good luck, Chana. Hope you'll find one there. This is my stop."

"Have a good evening, Avi. I'll see you tomorrow."

The sun was beginning to set on the Judean Hills. Two more stops, and they would be at the crest of Mount Scopus. How different she felt, here in Jerusalem, this December 24th.

Here in Jerusalem, surrounded by her people. Here in Jerusalem, where Avi and the rest of the nation would be scurrying along with her tomorrow, making final preparations before the Sabbath.

Here in Jerusalem, where in one week, newspapers

would print special stories of Chanukah; where row upon row of apartment buildings filled with native born Israelis and immigrants from Russia, Ethiopia, Morocco, France, Australia, Belgium, South Africa, Argentina, America--- every nation--- would have placed in their windows a Chanukah menorah and its candles, their flickering lights lining the route to Mount Scopus.

Here in Jerusalem, where young school children would soon re-enact the triumphant Maccabean revolt against the Assyrian oppressors, as it had transpired in this ancient land more than one thousand years earlier, when Judah Maccabee beheld the miracle of a shattered oil lamp burning for eight days upon his re-sanctification of a plundered Temple, marking the first celebration, the first Festival of Lights.

Yes. Chana felt a unique sense of melancholy.

It was December 24th and she was far from America. Far from her friends who remained there, and her memories of their Christmases past.

But it was December 24th and she was here, in the land of her forefathers; in the land that gave birth to her people; in the land that had renewed itself and given life back to them, once again.

She took her place at the exit door, waiting for the driver to pull to her stop. Stepping down, she felt the rocky soil of the holy land under her feet. The land so many civilizations had sought to conquer. The land for which generations of her people had died. The same land where Moses, and Jesus, and Mohammad had walked.

She stood there, beholding the ancient City of Jerusalem, home to so many world religions--- where each had a place and their followers lived together in peace.

She watched the last remnants of sunlight sweeping

across the weathered stones of Jerusalem's ancient walls, as if they were being touched by the very hands of God. She stood, awestruck by the miracle, as it blossomed magically and instantaneously into the City of Gold.

Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas

They were struggling, as so many do, trying to make the yuletide gay even though their hearts were breaking. It was yet another year --- and they were both still lonely--- the man without a wife, his son without a mother.

How could it be that the world managed to go on all around them, impervious to their pain? How would they once again rise above the sorrow, and find comfort in the twinkling lights, the smell of Balsam, the decorations she'd left behind?

Hard as they tried, they couldn't replicate the way she'd made Christmas special. Delicious aromas wafting through the house from the kitchen. Decorative elements scattered throughout, artfully placed in just the right way. Perfectly wrapped presents under the tree. The sound of her laughter, the warmth of her smile. The comfort of her touch.

The simple peace her mere presence could bring.

Though years had passed since she had, at Christmas, it was hard for life to go on. Hard to just muddle through, without her, when the world around them was wrapped up in joyful celebration.

Where was their Christmas miracle?

They thought back, recalling every detail they could: How she was great with dogs, and loved all living things. How patient she was--- loyally standing by them, no matter what. They remembered how much she loved those tiny white blossoms that grow from weeds. Weeds that bothered others, but never bothered her. She found beauty in every living thing. Even a weed.

They missed her more than ever at Christmas. Still, they had each other, and that would have to be enough. They'd

managed to go through the motions--- setting up the tree, decorating the house--- trying to lift each other into the Christmas spirit. Maybe just having had her in their lives at all---no matter how briefly--- had been their miracle. They could celebrate that.

But if only she were here, tangibly with them just once more.

They closed their eyes Christmas Eve, the coldest night of the year so far, an overnight freeze forecast, and woke Christmas morning, somewhere between sorrow and joy.

Remembering last night's weather report, they went outside together to check for frost.

There was none--- instead, thousands of tiny white blossoms covered their lawn, like a freshly fallen blanket of snow.

They turned to each other, looked up toward Heaven, and smiled.

Baby, It's Cold Outside

The world, in general, can be a cold place. And that never changes. Even at Christmas. Unless, that is, you know of a magical place where time stands still, imagination takes flight, make-believe is real, and all things are possible.

Jackie and James sat in the tiny living room of their small home--- the most conspicuous one in the row of neatly kept modest block houses: each the same size, each having the same sterile plot of neatly cut grass for a lawn; each lacking a single landscaped alteration that might indicate the personality of its inhabitants.

Each, that is, except the one in the middle of the block, where a gargantuan, untamed tree resembling the fabled beanstalk rises to the sky, and carefree bushes dance wildly in the breeze, dotting the landscape, and birds merrily frolic about. The one surrounded with an energy that is tangible--- a rainbow bubble that is palpable as you step out of your car.

The one belonging to Jackie and James. Mother and son. The Yin to each other's Yang. Two distinctly anomalous creatures who are wonderful and wondrous, creative and insightful, real and unfiltered, naturally unfettered.

The magical forces behind that rainbow.

“What shall we do today, James?” Jackie asked, her voice sparkling like sunshine.

“Maybe we should sit for a while and consider our possibilities, Jackie...” he replied, eyes full of twinkles “... I...I need to wait and hear what Charlie thinks.”

“You do? Well, where is our little kitten...Charlie?” She lifted from her chair like a feather caught in a swirl of invisible wind, dancing from room to room, making her way through each. “Charlie? Where are you? James needs to hear what you think...”

James called out to her: “Jackie, he’s in here.”

As if on cue, the kitten had appeared on James’ lap the moment Jackie’d left the living room--- a fellow conspirator. The two, now seated together on the sofa, shared the same mischievous grin.

“Wh...what’s that, Charlie?” James asked, bringing his ear down until Charlie’s whiskers tickled. “Really?” James’ speech was barely audible through his giggles, “Okay. I will have to ask her.”

Jackie’d made her way back to the living room.

“There you are, Charlie! Have you and James decided what we’re going to do yet?”

James spoke for the two of them. “We have, Jackie. Charlie and I want to go through the looking glass, and find Ru...Rudolph the Ru..Reindeer”

“I see...”

“And then we need to bring him the carrots and the lettuce you bought yesterday.”

“We do...”

“Ye..yes, we do.”

James’ aversion to anything resembling a vegetable had resurfaced. He had been less than transparent yesterday as Jackie’d unpacked the grocery bag filled with salad fixings, then proceeded to serve him one for dinner.

His reaction brought new meaning to the term “tossed salad.”

“Well. Maybe we should just go through the looking

glass first, and see what Rudolph might feel like.” Jackie’s idea sounded reasonable.

“Okay. But Charlie already talked to him.”

It had sounded reasonable, but she was still wrong.

“Well...maybe by the time we get there, Rudolph will feel like having something else--- like some hot cocoa, or a bowl of noodles...”

“Maybe.” James thought that might be possible. But he was still bringing the carrots.

“We better get dressed, then, and put on our looking glass travel suits. Thing is... I lost my helmet the last time we went through the looking glass, so I need to make a new one before I can go. Will you help me?”

“Of course, I will, Jackie” he said in earnest.

“Okay. What do you think we need?”

After a brief pause, he answered: “We need helmet paper, paint and a flashlight.”

“Helmet paper, paint and a flashlight...alright...what kind of paper is helmet paper?”

“That special looking glass proof paper, Jackie. You know, the paper that’s in the Christmas box,” he said, astonished that she hadn’t already known this.

“Paper in the Christmas box...”

“Yes. The paper with the purple protection.”

They made their way to the hall closet, and Jackie pulled down a box twice her size. It nearly took them both out as it toppled down. They rifled through it until finding the purple sheets.

“Ah! Now I remember! Of course, James! We *did* use the purple protection paper last time, *didn’t* we?”

“Yes, Jackie, we did---” he was becoming a bit annoyed now.

“Let’s see---- we have the purple protective paper---”

“Purple *protection* paper, Jackie.”

Accepting the correction, she continued. “Purple *protection* paper...and... here’s a flashlight...now we need some paint.”

“Forget paint this time. Charlie said we didn’t need it after all.”

“Are you sure, James? I wouldn’t want there to be any mishaps when we pass through the looking glass.”

“Let me double check with Charlie. Excuse me one moment.”

With that, James left the hallway in search of Charlie, returning a few seconds later. “He said we don’t really need the paint. If we don’t hurry, we might miss Rudolph. He has an appointment scheduled with his Vet today.”

“He does?”

“Yep.”

“Well, then we’d best hurry, don’t you think?”

When they’d placed James into Jackie’s arms more than forty years earlier, he was the most beautiful baby she’d ever seen. He sparkled and beamed at her, and lit up the entire world. She’d waited so long for his life to begin, and now it finally had. Wherever it would lead him, she would never be too far behind, to guide him when needed, to love him unconditionally. As they’d placed him into her arms, they’d told her he was the kind of baby that would never be more than a toddler, mentally; that he would never be able to live in our world, independently; that he would never learn like other children, if he learned at all; that babies like him often failed to thrive and if they did, never lived past twenty; that he was mentally deficient, and would never find the capacity

for mental abstraction; that the world would be cold to him, and cruel; that he would be a life-long burden and so they recommended she bring him to the place where babies like him all go, where they are cared for properly--- the state institution for the feeble minded. They told her to bring him there, and walk away.

The two busily cut and stapled until fashioning

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