

Seasoned Greetings
from Writing Our Lives



**A Holiday Chapbook
for OLLI at Auburn Friends**

December 2021



Seasoned Greetings...

Terry C. Ley

A class offered in 2004 through AUall, the predecessor to OLLI at Auburn, inspired *Writing Our Lives*. The instructors of that class led our discussions of a series of essays by professional writers telling how living in Alabama had influenced their writing. I noticed that, at every opportunity, classmates told portions of their own stories—of growing up in Montgomery, of attending a one-room school, of knowing someone who performed a heroic deed in their hometown. They told their stories with enthusiasm and, in doing so, inspired stories in others. Having been an English teacher for forty years, I recognized my classmates' need to tell their own stories, and there was no outlet then for doing that in our lifelong learning institute.

My former student Cathy Buckhalt and I organized what we thought would be a one-time memoir-writing class that became the continuing course *Writing Our Lives*. We have been writing about our lives every term for sixteen years now, and a few folks who have been with us more than ten years seem to still have plenty of stories to write!

Because we are on hiatus during December each year, we have not often tapped our reservoir of winter holiday stories. So I invited students in our fall term class to submit holiday-related stories for this special chapbook, which we are publishing as a greeting to our OLLI friends. We hope that you will enjoy the stories, of course, and since they are online, we hope that you will pass them along to friends anywhere likely to be entertained or inspired by them. Might some be inspired to write their own stories and share them with others? That is a possibility worth hoping for.

The *seasoned* in our title *Seasoned Greetings* is related to my own semantic preference. Some of my older friends find the term *senior citizen* offensive, so I invented *seasoned adults* to refer to folks who wear their age as a badge of honor, especially those who have gathered scores of good stories to tell—and share their stories with others, with pleasure. Meet some of them here. Turn the page!

Seasoned greetings!





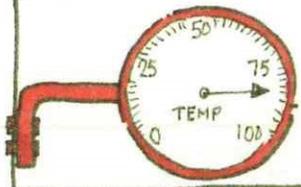
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Cover design by Charlotte LaRoux and her son, Aaron LaRoux

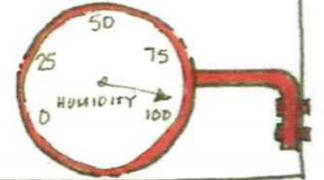
Our lives are a series of little stories that add up to the big story of who we are, where we've been, what we believe, and what we value. Remembering and writing down the little stories is one way to communicate the big story of our lives.

Jerry Apps, *Living a Country Year*



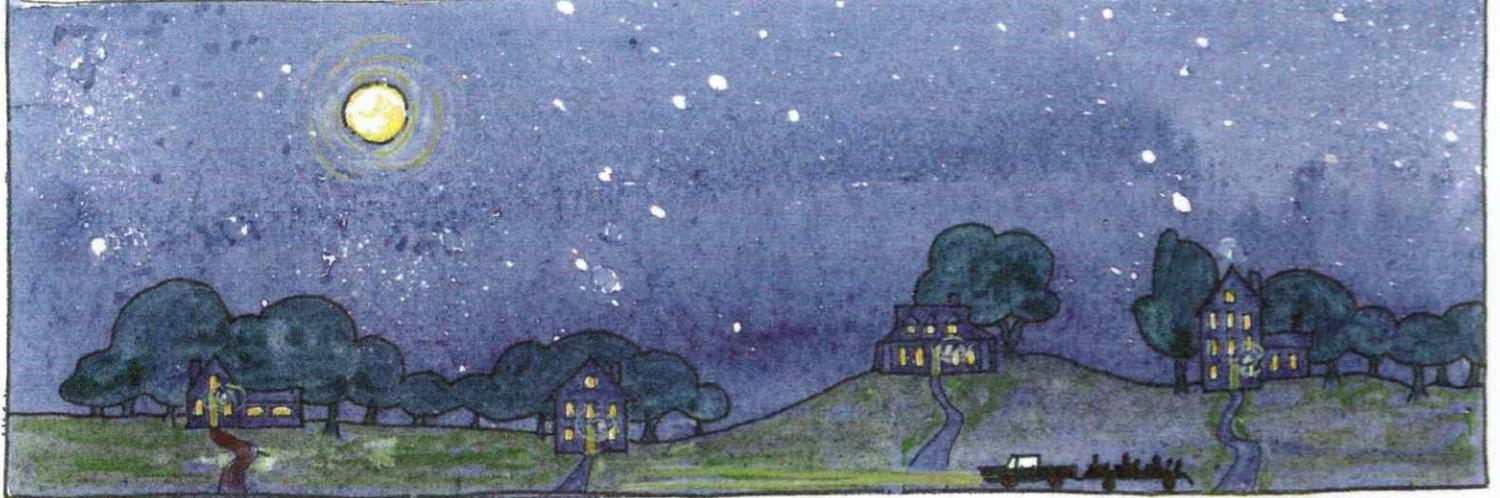
EYES ALL AGLOW

THREE DAYS IN DECEMBER

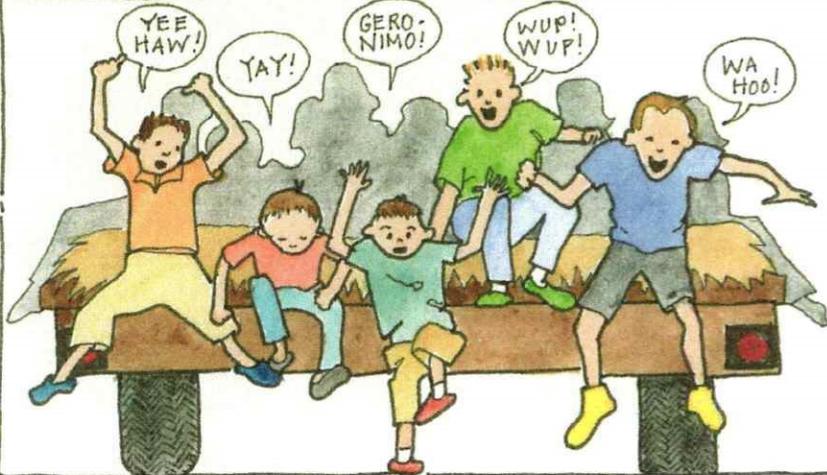


Day 1: Hayride

When I was a little kid, Christmas season started with a family hayride. In south Louisiana we never had a white Christmas, never went on a sleigh ride, never built a snowman, never sledged down a hill (never even saw a hill), but we did have one magical night of caroling.



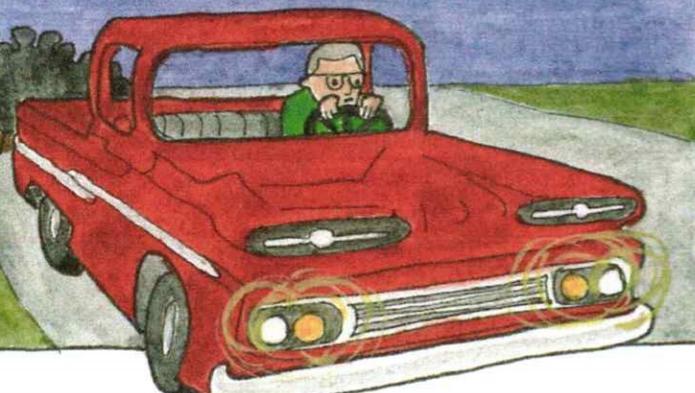
The boys got to ring doorbells. Every stop was a mad race with lots of whooping war cries.



We knew the first verse to lots of songs. For fast tunes, we repeated that 1st verse and the refrain over and over. The slower carols sounded so good that even the dogs joined in!



When our voices grew hoarse and pleas for the bathroom grew desperate - we lumbered back to the house for ...

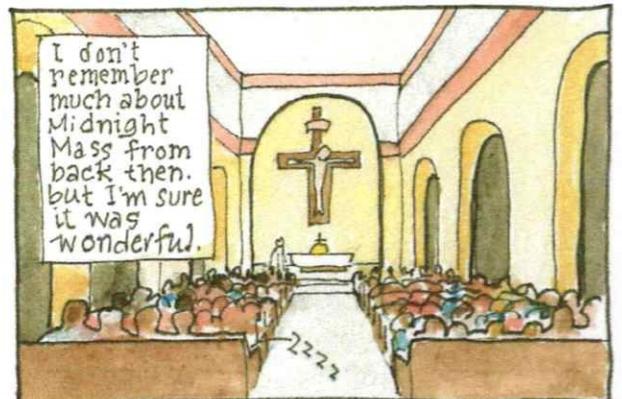
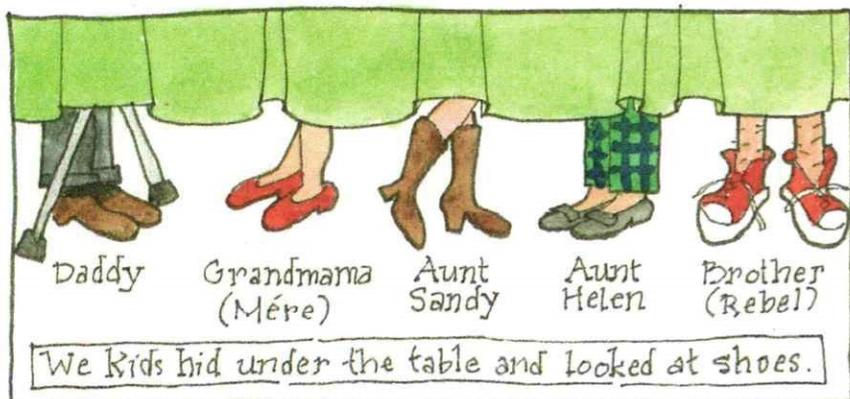


...cookies and hot chocolate!

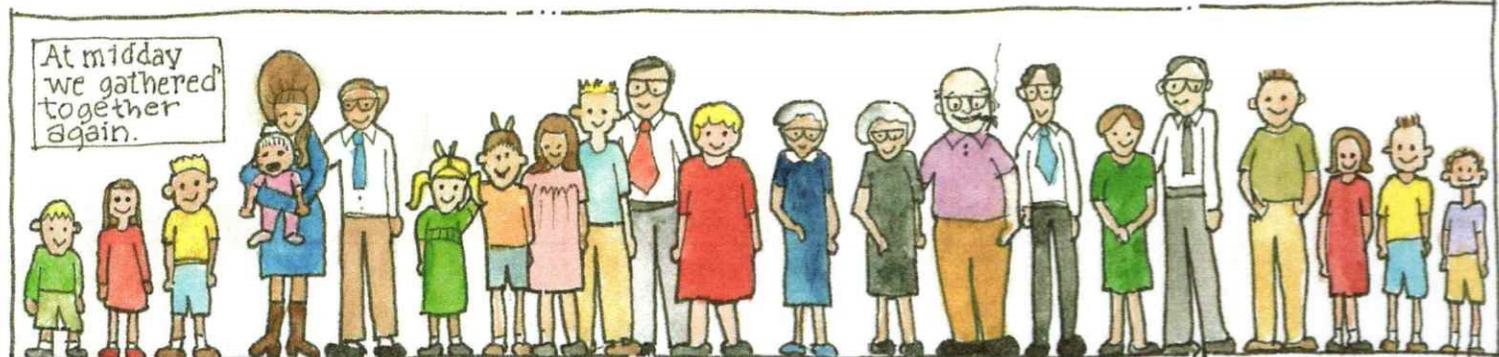
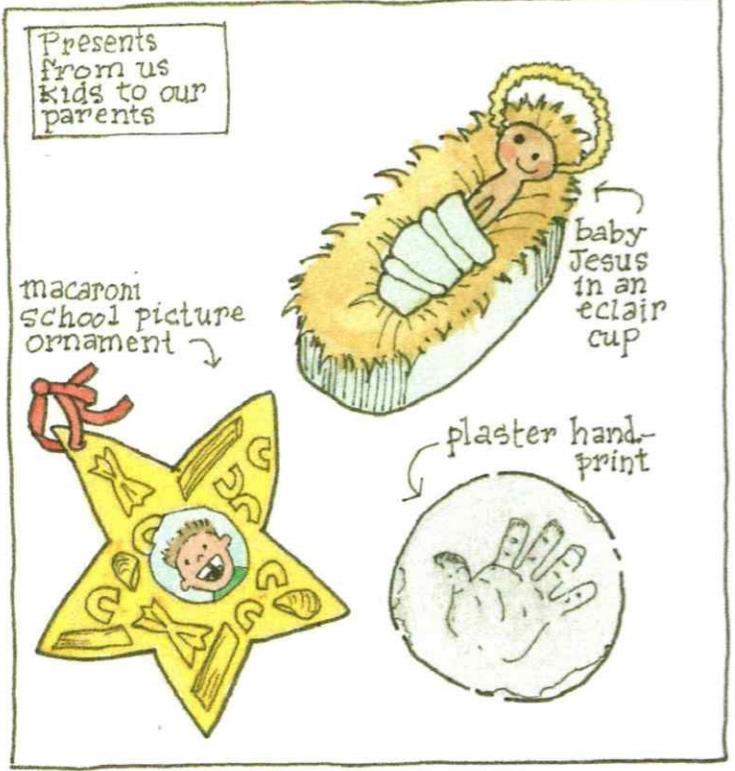
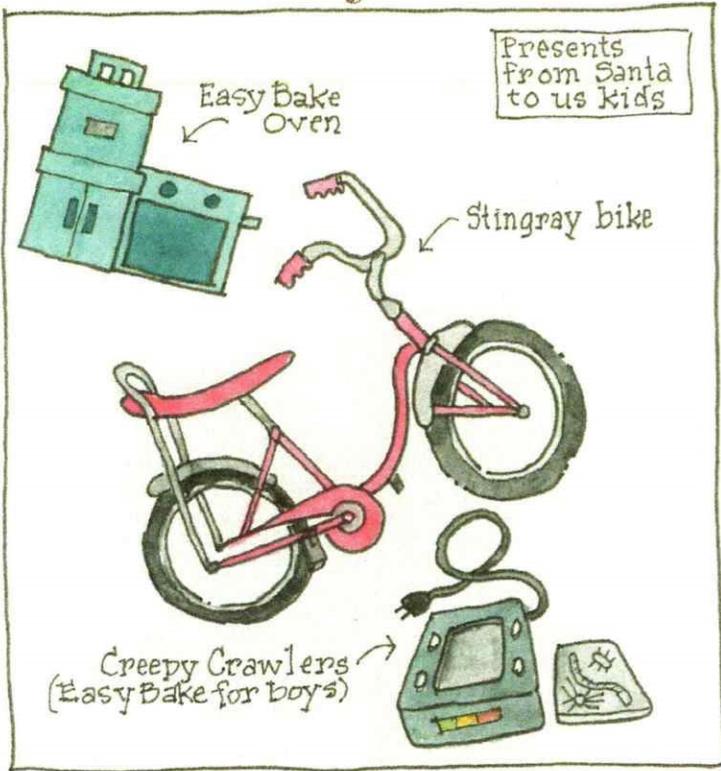
teeny-tiny marshmallows!



YUM!
YUM!
YUM!



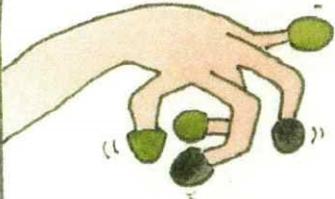
▲▲▲▲▲ Day 3: Christmas Day (morning) ▲▲▲▲▲



Day 3: Christmas Day (afternoon)

The menu was exactly the same every Thanksgiving and Christmas forever and ever, world without end. Amen.

appetizer: olives



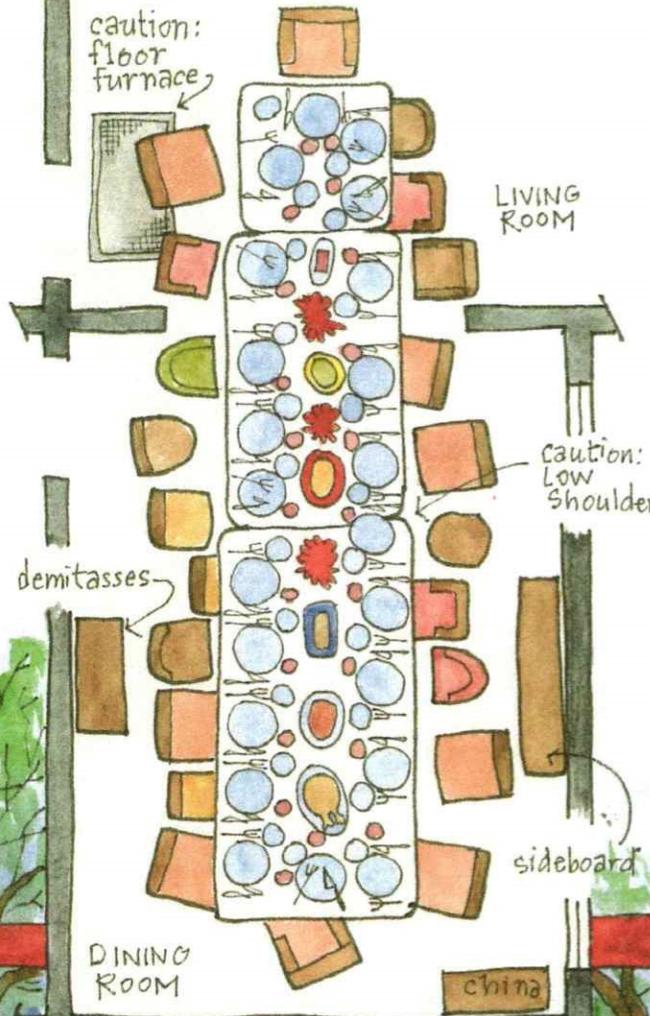
two turkeys (au jus gravy)



Mère's cornbread dressing



Our number varied from 11 to 22, the table expanding and contracting to seat us all. The year there were 13 of us, my best cousin and I volunteered to eat in the kitchen. Treize à table was taboo.



Mère's celebrated Cherry-Port Jello salad on an iceberg lettuce leaf and topped with mayon-naise.*



canned peas, yams, and spiced peaches



canned jellied cranberry sauce



dessert



After dinner the women washed up and talked about family. We kids were shooed outside, too young to hear about marriage and child-bearing and great Uncle Louis' new toupee.



The men watched football and talked about football



We kids played outside until the light faded and our moms called our names.



A Mix of Christmas Traditions

Ken Autrey

For better or worse, for richer or poorer, marriage brings on a clash of cultures, none more pronounced than the collision of family holiday traditions. When I was young, our Christmas tree was invariably a lopsided cedar that Dad and I cut from family acreage well before the 25th. Dad always had to drill holes in the trunk and poke in prosthetic limbs to fill gaps in foliage. By the time Santa arrived, the tree was shedding dry needles because of age and our failure to add water to the stand regularly. But by that time we had enjoyed our tree for a good two weeks, never mind that we had to make space for it by bunching our living room chairs together like outcasts in a garage sale.

In contrast, in my wife Janne's family, their Douglas fir didn't go up until Christmas Eve—after the four kids were all asleep. The next morning, an array of presents, but also the glowing tree itself, greeted the wide-eyed celebrants. It was as though Santa had somehow squeezed down the chimney burdened not only with his bulky sack but also with a fully outfitted tree in tow. Only much later did Janne realize that this "tradition" allowed her parents to take advantage of last-minute tree sales and purchase a ragged leftover from the corner lot.

Once we had kids, we sneered at those who put up their indoor trees the moment the Thanksgiving turkey was gone, but I insisted that our tree go up at least early enough for us to savor its scent and decorations well in advance, and Janne was all for that.

Both of our families cherished ornaments that captured moments from the past, such as cardboard or popsicle stick angels crudely glued and painted as kindergarten art projects. And both sets of parents held onto glass balls faded and worn enough to qualify as antiques, refusing to trash them in exchange for modern plastic baubles with seasonal phrases printed on them, like "Deck the Halls!" or "Joyeux Noelle!"

While we had that legacy in common, I took issue with my in-laws' strange practice of draping strips of raw bacon on the tree, a tradition seemingly calculated to draw ants and vermin rather than admiration. And Janne, I will admit, was bemused by the dozens of colorful yarn animal ornaments my parents had once purchased in Mexico—enough to overwhelm any tree. I kind of liked them but had to admit that there's a limit to the number of cute handmade donkeys any family needs.

The preparation of Christmas stockings brought out more differences in our backgrounds. Janne was dismayed to find that in my family, we always wrapped stocking gifts. She couldn't get over the absurdity of encasing a Snickers bar or pack of gum in bright paper, whereas I protested that this prolongs the pleasure of the process, as opposed to the abrupt dumping of stocking contents on the floor. She wondered what kid would believe that Santa or his helpers actually took the time to wrap each miniscule treat, but when I was young and still a believer, I don't remember ever puzzling over that.

Despite those trivial differences, I have to admit that our Christmas traditions mostly meshed pretty well. Starting several days ahead, my mom used to make 25 or 30 circular baked confections she always called "coffee breads," doling them out to family members and friends with the idea that they'd be devoured on Christmas morning. After Mom was unable to continue her annual flurry of gift baking, I took on the task, with Janne's support, although I've never made more than eight or ten.

Thanks to Janne's family, we continue the tradition of Christmas Eve caroling that she was brought up with. The extended Debes clan, always with a few friends thrown in, sang into the night, working doggedly through carols both common and obscure. Janne played the piano for these raucous song fests, and the rule seemed to be that on songs you don't know well, you just sing more loudly. Some of the renditions may have bordered on sacrilege, but in a non-church-going family that never posed a problem. When our nuclear foursome traveled to spend Christmas with that side of the family, I always looked forward to those ear-splitting evenings.

Once upon a time, my family habitually went to the Presbyterian Christmas Eve service and then proceeded to the annual eggnog party hosted by Bob and Lee Cannon, a drop-in bash that went on until the Cannons and other well-lubricated Catholics adjourned to attend Midnight Mass. Janne's family had no such tradition, and these days we're not much for big Christmas parties. But we do continue to enjoy a lively session of caroling, whether at church or at home, with a song book in one hand and a glass of egg nog in the other. Janne practices carols on her keyboard throughout the year so that when and if the occasion for singing them comes up, she'll be ready.

The tradition Janne remains most wedded to is the reading of Charles Dickens's *A Christmas Carol*. My family had nothing comparable. Soon after we married, I first heard Janne's dad read from that classic in his highly expressive baritone voice. The usual practice in her family was to read one of the five staves each night, culminating on Christmas Eve. The book circulated, allowing everyone, even the youngsters, a chance to read. Even before our two daughters were old enough to take in the intricacies of Dickens's story, we followed that Debes tradition each year, and many of the most memorable passages have seeped into the family psyche, one example being this priceless description of fish in a grocery store:

The very gold and silver fish, set forth among these choice fruits in a bowl, though members of a dull and stagnant-blooded race, appeared to know that there was

something going on; and, to a fish, went gasping round and round their little world in slow and passionless excitement.

I'm sure our family is more intimately familiar with this tale than with any other work of literature. We no longer have the time or inclination to work through the entire text each year, but wherever we spend the holidays, the reading of at least the final stave is as mandatory as apple pie at Christmas dinner.

With the blending of families comes the blending of traditions. Now that our daughters are married and each has three children, they pick and choose not only from

devised Christmas traditions of their own. Nell, our older daughter, collaborates each year on a Christmas Eve soup dinner at a friend's spacious house; they invite ten or fifteen families, and afterwards many of them move on to a church service. Once they're back home, her three kids find packages "from Santa's elves" waiting for them on the doorstep. Nell always arranges to have a friend or neighbor drop them off surreptitiously. Each year, the boxes contain matching pajamas or bathrobes, which the kids (even now, as teenagers) immediately put on.

Like most marriages, our fifty-year union is a merger of families and the baggage that comes with each, including holiday traditions. While some of these practices clashed, or at least seemed irritatingly peculiar, we've benefitted from choosing the best from both clans, the seasonal habits and quirks that we can agree on and celebrate. Thankfully, we neither drape raw bacon on the tree nor allow hordes of yarn animals from Mexico to dominate the other ornaments.

Our extended family has preserved the best from the past but has evolved along the way. For years, we exchanged presents with Janne's three siblings and their kids, but as families grew and gift-giving got out of hand, we parents decided to hold an annual drawing and limit ourselves to a single gift for one other adult. Then a few years ago, instead of gift-giving, we agreed to make a donation to the charity favored by the one whose name we drew. So we're willing to change sensibly, while holding to Christmas traditions that help keep our extended family together. Thus, each year, we are all able to echo the words of Tiny Tim at the end of *A Christmas Carol*, "God bless us every one!"





A Special Part of Christmas

Bill Brown

For a good portion of my growing up years, we lived only a couple of hundred yards from my grandparents' house. That was good fortune any time, but especially at Christmas. Their farmhouse was the center of our Christmas universe. Family and kin, close and distant, gathered, and we learned a good portion of our family history from listening to them reminisce.

Of course, for us kids, the season really started with the arrival of the Sears & Roebuck Christmas catalog. (Montgomery Ward had a catalog, too, but it was like Pop Kola up against Coca-Cola.) We'd pore over the pages until they were tattered, wishing for all manner of things that we knew we wouldn't get. Funny, but when I think about it, I can recall only a few of the Christmas presents that I did get and even fewer of the things I lusted after but didn't get.

In retrospect, the Christmas menu didn't stand out as being much different than what was served during the rest of the year—except for fruitcake and ambrosia, and those don't rate high on the nostalgia meter.

The Christmas tree—always a cedar or pine cut on the place—was set up in the seldom-used living room. The smell of fresh cut cedar or pine still stirs an image of the living room and the tree and the presents.

But what dominates my memory of those Christmases is a medley of aromas and tastes and even sights, not what was served at the table, but a cornucopia of edibles—I guess you would call them snacks—set out around the house. Most of them we saw only at Christmas, and all were in quantities not matched at any other time.

There were navel oranges from South Louisiana, plump with juice and easy to peel, tangerines that were sweet and tart at the same time, and boxes of dates, exotic and sticky. Muscat raisins were in wooden boxes, the dried grapes still attached to the vines. They were nothing like those red boxes of Sun-Maid raisins.

We learned to punch a hole in one of the eyes of a real coconut to get the milk and then split it open to harvest the meat. Brazil nuts were so tough to crack that they were hardly worth the effort; walnuts were so easy that you had to be careful not to crush the meat.

There were big sticks of peppermint candy—we called them quarter sticks, because they did cost a quarter—that you broke pieces from.

There were pecans, too, but they weren't special, since we had pecan trees, and red Delicious apples, which were noteworthy only because there were so many of them.

What made it all such a treat, and such a vivid memory, was that you didn't have to ask or wait for someone to hand things out. You could just take what you wanted.

If only Sears had done that...





A Christmas Surprise

Charlotte LaRoux

Walking into my foyer after a tiring day at work, I was cheered by the chirping laughter of my young son in the kitchen. He and his dad were engaged in playful banter. Simultaneously, I was overwhelmed by the glorious aroma of holiday spices. “They must be baking Christmas cookies,” I thought. Then, “No. That’s impossible. Len doesn’t cook.”

I went to the kitchen and found my darling son and husband chomping away at a variety of Christmas confections: cookies and candies. The table was crowded with goodies, but also with two large brown cartons addressed to me. Aaron and Len had opened my boxes and were gorging themselves. The gift boxes were from my mother.

Mom was a dental assistant, and growing up we were never allowed to eat sweets. “Sugar rots your teeth,” she lectured. So, when I saw two cartons from her packed with holiday sweets, I panicked since it was so unlike her. Maybe she was getting senile. “Stop eating this stuff. It’s from my mother. I don’t know why she sent it, but I guarantee, you’re not supposed to eat it.”

Spraying crumbs as he spoke, Len laughed, “Yeah, it seems strange. This is like something Aunt Catherine would send us.”

“Us?” I asked. “She sent these to me. Stop eating.”

My two Cookie Monsters ignored me as I unpacked the boxes. Cookies of odd shapes, candy canes, M&Ms, Red Hots emerged. At the very bottom of the second box was a set of printed instructions: “How to Assemble Your Gingerbread House.”

Len had eaten the chimney. Aaron had eaten the Gingerbread Man. One side of the house had been demolished and shared. Most of the chocolate Snowcaps, the roof tiles, were gone.

Ten minutes later we stopped laughing. “I thought the cookies were weird shapes,” Len confessed. At last, they had ceased to pig out.

I set about baking replacement cookies for the house. I gingerly cemented the cookie slabs with white icing, but my cookies had warped in the oven and large gaps appeared at the corners. I glopped more icing there, but gaps at the edges remained. Two sides bulged. The house leaned. My gingerbread house was a mess. Gum drops, candy canes, and Necco wafers notwithstanding, the gingerbread house was a structural and artistic catastrophe.

Since it was a gift from my mother, I set it out on display in the foyer alongside photos of Christmases past. As I took down the Christmas decorations in January, I carefully wrapped the

house in two black Hefty trash bags set inside a cardboard box for safe keeping. I stored it in my Christmas closet along with the colorful tree decorations and holiday gift wraps.

Besides Len and Aaron, others were dining on the gingerbread house. The next year, as I unwrapped it, I found it had been infested with hundreds of tiny black beetles. They had feasted on my house. They especially enjoyed the icing, which was punctured with hundreds of tiny holes. They had enjoyed a sugar high right before they realized there was nothing to drink in the Christmas closet. The desiccated little bugs had all died of thirst. Ha! It served them right. Len and Aaron, on the other hand, never did pay for their crimes.





December '86—A Fine Time to Leave My Sweet Lynn

Bill Lee

I picked a fine time to leave my sweet Lynn—
two active children
and dissertation to defend.

Left her in December '86 in hell—
a leaky roof
and a “Gables,” Florida, house to sell!

We’ve had some bad times,
lived through some sad times,
but this time I feared it might end.

I picked a fine time to leave her alone,
right after Christmas,
for a business to own.

Arrived excited in Roswell,
but BK Lounge trauma
tempted my farewell.

I picked a fine time to leave my sweet Lynn!
Why she didn’t leave me, don’t know.
Been fifty years—maybe my cute grin...
I picked a fine time to leave my sweet Lynn

This poem was inspired by “Lucille,” a song written by Roger Bowling and Hal Bynum, recorded by Kenny Rogers in 1977. And this poem is a villanelle, red-neck style.





The Night I Called the Cops on Santa

Beverly Sandberg

A long, busy, and fun-filled Christmas Eve was ending, and we were snuggling in at a beachfront condo, away from the activity and bustle of the family home. Snoring softly beside me, my husband already had visions of sugarplums dancing in his head, while I was about to tie on my kerchief and settle in for my own long winter's nap. I reached to turn off the light when—BANG-BANG-BANG! Something was hitting the front of the house. I bolted upright in bed and stared at the door. BAM-BAM-BAM! This time it was definite. Someone was purposely hitting the door. Now I was afraid, petrified with fear. Hubby, bleary-eyed but awake now, saw my fear and said, "I'll go to the door."

"No! Don't! They may have a gun! They may shoot!" Then—one more hard bang, followed by total silence. In my hysteria, I started to scream. "Who are you? What are you doing here? We don't want you here! Go away!"

At that point, even I knew I was over the top, so I did the next reasonable thing. I called 911.

"This is 911. What is your emergency?" I told her in my least calm voice ever. "What is your address?" Huh? I had no address except the name of the place where we were staying. After reviewing her maps for several minutes, she announced that there was no such address on their roster. "What county are you in?" Huh? No idea. Well, ma'am, we are in two separate counties. I will transfer you, and they will help, but I will stay on the line with you to help explain your whereabouts." (God BLESS this Christmas angel!)

Now the cops were on the way. My new best-friend dispatcher told us to stay inside until we saw police officers with flashlights walking into our area. When they were right by us we could open the door and talk with them. Finally the light beams came into view. How relieved we were—until they went past us and right up to the condo next to us. I'm sure those occupants were not thrilled with a midnight visit from the county's finest. However, we were grateful to see them, and after getting the dispatcher's permission, we opened the door and directed them through the sea grass and dunes to our beach retreat.

Upon opening the door to them, we noticed that the rocking chairs on the porch had been moved, with one chair turned around and directly facing our front door. As two of the officers spoke with us, the third was staring straight down at one of the rocking chairs for what seemed like forever. He then looked up at us and asked, "Who's Baba?"

It was then that my hero husband and I looked down at the rocking chairs, mouths agape. I was suddenly gripped with laughter, the kind you get in church and can't stop. Through my laughing tears I saw one of the rockers loaded with presents falling out of overstuffed stockings that Santa had filled. Through our laughter we tried to explain that Baba is the name our grandchildren use for their grandfather.

Apparently, the bangs and knocks were made by our dear son-in-law as he was helping our daughter give us a Christmas surprise. The officers were great about having to respond to a call reporting Santa and said they were happy that it turned out well. God bless them!

Christmas that year was the best ever, and I will always remember the night I called the cops on Santa!





The Star Shines over Walmart

Diane Miller

The stores were already beginning to close as it was getting late in the afternoon on Christmas Eve, and I was feeling pretty sorry for myself. Debbie wouldn't make it home from California for Christmas, but others would be at our house for the holiday dinner, so I still had to cook. And everyone who wakes up at our house on Christmas morning gets a filled stocking, regardless of their age. Here I was, needing to finish up last-minute shopping for four stockings, and I still had to pick up Mother to spend the night, as was her habit on Christmas Eve since Daddy died.

Well, OK, I thought, I'll just swing by Walmart on my way to pick up Mother. Walmart's a great place to buy stocking stuffers, but late on Christmas Eve it's a madhouse. I cruised the lot several times before I found a place to park, then I had to follow a young woman to her car so that I could get a shopping cart. Hey, at least I had a cart. Finding one that didn't have a wobbly wheel was too much to ask.

Making my way through the aisles jammed with frantic shoppers, I did manage to get chocolate Santas and clever trinkets, and I brightened up a bit. The stockings would be fun. But then I remembered. That particular Walmart was the only one in town that didn't carry groceries. What about the oranges? I had three oranges at home; I needed four. The oranges are especially important in our family. Every year that I could remember, there was an orange in the toe of each stocking. Many people say they bring luck. But Daddy used to say that the orange stood for the Star of Bethlehem. Its position in the toe of the stocking made it the last gift, long anticipated. *That* was important: to be reminded of the significance of Christmas in the midst of festivity.

When I saw the checkout line, I almost wailed aloud. It was so long that I would be in Walmart another fifteen minutes, minimum. To get oranges, I'd have to go to a grocery store, and I just couldn't face fighting crowds at yet another store, even if I weren't already late to pick up Mother and get dressed for the seven o'clock Christmas Eve church service.

Then I got defiant. I'd go without an orange for myself, just wouldn't put one in my own stocking and nobody would notice the difference. That stuff about the Star of Bethlehem was Daddy's notion anyway, and he'd been gone for several years. He was the only one who would have cared, probably.

Feeling self-righteous and mildly aggrieved, I finally got through the checkout and pushed the ornery cart as far as the door. I abandoned it there and hoisted up the two blue plastic bags of goodies, the silly yellow happy faces printed on the sides mockingly reminding me of—what else?—oversized oranges. At the sight of them, I was suddenly contrite about my ill humor. As I stepped outside and glanced up at the sky I murmured a sheepish apology to Daddy and, sort of, to God. I was comforted by the thought that they'd both understand and not fault me for my orange-rationing plan. I reminded myself that Christmas happens anyway; it's not *my* doing.

The wind was picking up as I threaded my way through cars in the still-crowded lot, hoping that I'd found the right aisle where mine was parked. Ah. There was my car. And imagine that! Right next to it on the driver's side, there was actually an empty parking spot, the only one in the whole lot, as far as I could tell. But when I came around to get into the driver's seat, I stopped in my tracks in surprise.

Right in the center of that empty parking space, luminous in the fading gray light, there sat a beautiful orange. No owner in sight, but sure to be crushed by the next vehicle if I didn't rescue it. Guess Daddy wasn't taking any chances. He was determined that I wouldn't be allowed to forget.





Beauty is in the Eye...

Cathy Buckhalt

“Beauty is in the eye of the beholder,” wrote Margaret Hungerforde Wolfe. This quote perfectly fit my favorite Christmas ornament. It took a family outsider to deflate my bubble of beauty.

Every Wednesday in my childhood years I spent with Scout activities. My mom was my Brownie leader. As troop leader, she gathered supplies for our crafts lessons. My uniform waited for me in my closet, stiffly starched, sporting my shiny Brownie pin. My friends and I hurried home from school each Wednesday to change and get to the scout hut to lay out supplies.

One of our favorite craft activities was making Christmas ornaments. On this day we would be making Christmas ornaments. Each of us would choose a color globe and spray it with white flocking to resemble snow. As the leader’s daughter, I waited patiently for my turn, hoping the blue globe would still be available. Finally, it was mine! I carefully sprayed my flocking. When I finished, I felt my ornament might hang in a snowy forest. Each Brownie carefully set her ornament around the hut to dry. Later, we wrapped our creations in soft cloth to take home. I was excited to place my snowy globe front and center on the tree next to a blue light.

Years later, I brought my soon-to-be-fiancé home for Christmas Eve dinner and music. Our living room was a painting, featuring homemade potpourri of orange and lemon peel layered with cinnamon sticks. The Advent candles glowed in the windowsill alongside fresh juniper branches tied with red velvet bows. Logs flickered and popped in the fireplace. Then there was the tree, shining with every color bulb and silver tinsel. My gaze fell on my special ornament.

With my beau sitting beside me, I innocently asked, “Just look at our beautiful tree. Which is your favorite ornament?”

“I really like your mom’s cross-stitch designs,” he replied.

“I do too, but does any other ornament catch your eye?”

“Well,” he hesitated, “I don’t know about the prettiest, but I surely know the ugliest ornament.”

With that, he walked across the room and took off my blue, snow-flocked ball. “This one spoils the tree.”

I took my ornament from him and placed it on the tree. He did become my husband, but he never received the story of my most beautiful ornament. You see, "Beauty is in the eye of the beholder."





I Hate Tinsel

Bill Wilson

My earliest Christmas memories include the aroma of fir trees and hands sticky with pine tar. I see both my older sisters marshaling the family around a firry acquisition, boxes of ornaments piled on the living room floor, tangles of lights crammed into other boxes, and always—always—what we used to call tinsel. More than anything else, I hated tinsel.

The “icicles” of my childhood were made from lead, the same lead used in gum wrappers and cigarette packs. The same lead that has been declared toxic for children in the wall paint they eat. During their sojourn in our attic, the ersatz icicles always became a tangled mass of soft metal, more snarled even than the Christmas lights. Freeing the lump of tinsel for artistic draping on the tree took some doing.

My sisters loved tinsel, carefully hanging one icicle at a time on the carefully chosen branch, far enough from the tip to stay put but close enough to the end to be visible. I was impatient as a child, even more impatient than I am now. I detested the chore of untangling a fist full of lead ribbons without breaking the fragile things, uncrimping the ornery kinks each string would develop, and the subsequent quest for the right place on the proper branch.

Orneriness and sloth are great motivators. Young as I was, I quickly developed a strategy for liberating myself from the burden of decking out the yule tree: My solution was simple and very effective. I would help the girls choose the tree, fix it in the stand, wrap the base in a colorful floor cloth, and lug boxes and bags of decorations from storage. Those activities involved motion, activity, and large things to do.

When tinsel time arrived, I morphed from doer of light lifting to the lead ball monster. Waiting until my sisters were in the zone of artistic tinselling, I would grab a fistful of the silver stuff and hurl it at the tree—Bob Feller on steroids. I did this quietly, on the sly. I allowed the girls time to progress in their artistry while I was advancing in my deviltry.

Then my throw for freedom from decorating would strike home. One or the other of my two siblings would catch me in the act of assaulting the fir.

“Mom! Bill is throwing tinsel at the tree! He’s making a mess of the decorations!”

Ever the peacekeeper, the mollifier, Mom rapidly solved the crisis. “Bill, go out and play in the yard.”

I headed for the back door, only too happy to comply with the order to go into exile.





The Cursed Christmas Tree

Terry C. Ley

I successfully avoided being the one to put the lights on a Christmas tree until the first Christmas that Mari and I were married. My mother had painstakingly done that job all the years that I lived at home, often taking a whole evening to do so. During the years that I shared an apartment with my friend Roger, he volunteered to arrange the lights if I would get the tree in its stand, ready for decorating.

Mari didn't make the task so easy for me. She did not volunteer to do that job. In fact, she said, her brown eyes doing a job on me, "Daddy always put the lights on the tree at home!" I was trapped, doomed to wage battle with all those twisted cords and sensitive bulbs that would not light.

The weather did not make the task any easier that first year—or my mood any cheerier. The Friday night we set out to select our tree was bitterly cold, the wind whistling, announcing what Midwesterners call "bad weather." As we climbed out of our warm car, we put on our insulated gloves and wrapped our mufflers around our necks a second time. Crystals of frost had begun to form on the pine, cedar, and spruce trees that stood erectly in long lines before us. After a few minutes of inspecting the merchandise, our fingers began to tingle with onset frostbite, and we chose a likely blue spruce, paid a king's ransom for it, and bore Christmas home in the trunk.

The next morning, as I prepared to secure it in the new stand that we had bought, I was shocked to learn that we had adopted a tree that was decidedly disadvantaged, having a severe case of spinal curvature. Alone in our garage, I cut off as much of the trunk as I dared, hoping that it would stand tall and straight. But no matter how much I cut, no matter how I arranged it in the stand, the tree leaned as if had been standing in a strong wind for a long time. We had hoped for a perfect Christmas tree, but we would have to mask the tree's deficiency with lights, colorful ornaments, and tinsel.

That afternoon, I learned a lot about arranging lights on a Christmas tree, lessons purchased with much frustration. I arranged lights, rearranged them, took off whole sets of lights and started again. I tested strings of lights, replaced bulbs. Once, I braved the weather to make a trip to the hardware store for more strings of lights. My patience wore thin, but I persisted. After a couple of hours, frustrated and wondering what kinds of marks my mother would give me for my efforts if she could see the results, I stood back to

examine the aesthetic effects of my efforts. Not too bad. I turned out all the lights except the lights on the tree. Not too bad. We turned to boxes filled with ornaments and tinsel, anxious to make this misshapen lady the belle of the Christmas ball.

That night, we went to a gala holiday party. Since Mari was new in town, she was a little nervous about spending so much time with so many people whom she did not know well, people who had been my friends for several years. On our way to the party, she told me that she would just have a glass of scotch, something she could nurse for a long time. Apparently, she ran out of scotch more often than she was counting on, because by the time we drove home, she was showing emotional signs of someone who had imbibed more than usual. Once inside our apartment, she lay on the davenport, one foot on the solid ground to steady her universe. I turned on the Christmas tree lights. Returning from putting our coats away, I found Mari weeping as she lay looking at the Christmas tree.

“What’s wrong, Mari?” I asked. Had things not gone well at the party? Had someone hurt her feelings? Had she decided that she didn’t like my friends after all? Was she homesick? sad? regretful? “What’s wrong?” I repeated.

“Well,” she said, sniffing, dabbing at her tearful eyes, her left foot still planted solidly on the floor. “Daddy didn’t swear at the Christmas tree when he put the lights on it! He always sang!”

So I was the culprit, the Grinch who contaminated the joy of my bride’s Christmas! I apologized profusely, I think, and promised never to curse the Christmas tree again. Since then, I have drawn Christmas-tree-lights duty for thirty-six years, and generally I have tried to abstain from any mean or ugly language around the Christmas tree when my wife—or the spirit of my wife’s daddy—is within earshot.





Critter Christmas

Debbie Cunningham

Knock! Knock! Knock!

Heating pots bang; stirring spoons clang. Running children giggle; hanging ornaments jingle. Screaming infants cry; standing chairs creak.

Knock! Knock! Knock!

Busy Christmas clatter fills my grandparents' home for this extended family. It could be any year. Names and ages change with new additions of in-laws, recipes, and buns in the ovens. My grandmother totally embraces these human "critters" but is forever afraid of undomesticated anything. Aproned cook queens continue to stock the adult dinner table.

Knock! Knock! Knock!

Finally, my dad struggles yet eases through the packed room. His smile brims on the edge of excitement; his steady hand opens the front door. The biggest wrapped Christmas package in the world stands still on the porch. Only a dark strong hand settles the moonlit surprise.

As my dad and Mr. Bill finagle the box to center stage, scratches and squeals tweak through the amazement. A fatherly look signals that this gift is for me! Christmas paper rips and floats to reveal a caged spider monkey, Smokey, stunned to a big-eyed confusion!

Crash! Bam! Splat!

My grandmother haphazardly drops full bowls of mashed potatoes and green beans, yet steadies her focus. She throws Lambert's-style rolls toward the crate. "Get that critter OUT!" she screams. With a controlled comforting and settling hug, my grandfather seems to calm the matriarch to notice Smokey's cloth diaper and the cage's secure lock.

Eventually, children breathe, teenagers ooh and ah, adults snicker, and my grandmother rolls her eyes and pats her heart. My dad stands proud. And I fall in love.

Knock! Knock!
Who's there?
Merry.
Merry who?
Merry Christmas!





Saying “Merry Christmas” with Cherries Jubilee

Margaret Craig-Schmidt

The first time I enjoyed the flaming dessert Cherries Jubilee was at Antoine’s Restaurant in New Orleans. My hometown in Southern Mississippi was a short drive to New Orleans, and our family would go there periodically for shopping or to celebrate a special event. On one of those occasions—perhaps my birthday—we ordered the Cherries Jubilee at Antoine’s. The dessert was served in an impressive manner. The lights were dimmed, and cherries were set afire with brandy at our table. The waiter then threw some of the flaming brandy on the tablecloth, where it burned harmlessly. The dish was completed by ladling the brandied cherries over scoops of ice cream.

Our family liked the taste and spectacular presentation of the dessert, and later Cherries Jubilee replaced the usual fruitcake as the dessert of choice for our family’s Christmas dinner. This tradition continued into my married life and was expanded into pre-Christmas dessert parties when we would invite a small group of friends for Cherries Jubilee as a way for saying “Merry Christmas” and to celebrate our friendship. Because the dessert can be served to only a small number of people, we usually extended the invitation to a different group of friends each year.

In recent years, I have prefaced the “lighting” of the cherries with a brief history of the dessert. The famous French chef, Auguste Escoffier created Jubilee Cherries in 1887 in honor of Queen Victoria’s Golden Jubilee, celebrating the fiftieth year of her reign. The original recipe of Escoffier’s Jubilee Cherries has been translated into English.

Recipe for JUBILEE CHERRIES (1887)

Original Recipe in the *Guide to the Art of Modern Cookery* by Auguste Escoffier (1846-1935)

Stone some fine cherries; poach them in syrup, and set them in small silver timbales. Reduce the syrup and thicken it with a little arrowroot, diluted with cold water; allowing one table-spoonful of arrowroot per half-pint of syrup. Cover the cherries with thickened syrup; pour a coffee-spoonful of heated Kirsch into each timbale, and set a light to each when serving.

The original recipe did not include ice cream, but as technology developed for keeping food frozen, ice cream was added as an ingredient of the dish and the name changed from Jubilee Cherries to Cherries Jubilee. The recipe that I use for our Christmas celebrations comes from The Better Homes and Gardens cookbook titled *Fondue and Tabletop Cooking*. This recipe for Cherries Jubilee, which includes ice cream, is given below.

CHERRIES JUBILEE (1970)

- 1 16-ounce can pitted dark sweet cherries
- $\frac{1}{4}$ cup sugar
- 2 tablespoons cornstarch
- $\frac{1}{4}$ cup brandy, kirsch, or cherry brandy
- Vanilla ice cream

Drain cherries, reserving syrup. In saucepan, blend sugar and cornstarch; gradually stir in reserved syrup, mixing well. Cook and stir over medium heat til mixture is thickened and bubbly. Remove from heat; stir in cherries. Turn mixture into blazer pan of chafing dish. Set pan over hot water (bain-marie).

Heat brandy in small saucepan. (If desired, pour heated brandy into large ladle.) Ignite and pour over cherry mixture. Stir to blend brandy into sauce. Serve immediately over vanilla ice cream. Makes 6 to 8 servings.

Accompanying this recipe is a photo of the cherries in a silver chafing dish and a ladle containing the flaming brandy ready to be stirred into the cherries. Dishes of ice cream are awaiting the cherry sauce. The caption for the photo reads, "Indoors or outdoors, create showmanship and style by flaming classic Cherries Jubilee. The luscious dark sweet cherries, combined in a brandy-flavored sauce are added over mounds of vanilla ice cream."

Cherries Jubilee is a spectacular dessert for a family Christmas dinner or for a small gathering of friends. The flaming brandy symbolizes the excitement of Christmas and the vibrant love of family and friends.

Merry Christmas, everyone!





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