

Thanksgiving-Christmas

by Star Davies

Christmas in my family was never a small event. Every year my parents would go all out to make sure that we kids got the best Christmas their money could buy. The result of these grand annual events was, of course, my father screaming and pulling out his hair and us kids sticking our fingers with needles as we tried to string popcorn for the tree. Mom never knew that the popcorn was supposed to be stale.

Every year we alternated the ornaments put on the tree from fragiles one year to homemade and wood ornaments the next. Mom would drag dad to the tree lot next to Wal-Mart and pick the tallest, fattest tree they had. One year it was actually too fat to fit through the front door, so they had to bring it through the patio door and carry it through the house to the living room. Another year—before they started using the real thing—my dad got so angry with the lights on the Christmas tree that he tossed the whole fake tree to the curb, lights and all.

Most of these events, I assume, happen in nearly every house during the holidays.

When it came time to decorate, the whole family was together. Mom would put in her usual mix of Christmas Cd's—Very Special Christmas 1 and 2, Randy Travis, Alabama Christmas—and we would all work together filling every single hole we could find. Once the tree was completed a marathon of Christmas movies would begin, accompanied by a glass of egg nog each. I cherish those years to the point that they still bring me to tears.

Don't worry, there's no death in my family. Thank God. But one year will forever stand out in my mind.

Every time I think of the Christmas of 1990 it takes all of my strength not to cry. Just picture me as you read, writing this story through sobs of fear and joy, pounding away on the keys.

The holiday season started like all others. It was early November. The family drew names for special Christmas exchanges, wrote out their wish list, and went about their business. I have always been a bigger fan of Thanksgiving, so I procrastinated. Why taint Thanksgiving with Christmas? I still consider it a sin to put out decorations before Black Friday.

Anyway, Thanksgiving was quickly approaching and I was excited for the coming holiday. Every night my parents sat in front of the television and watched news while I locked myself in my room and read my books, forgetting the world existed. But this night was different.

I don't recall exactly when the call came, or how my parents told my older brother, sister, and I. I was only ten at the time. What I *do* remember was forsaking one holiday to have Christmas together.

Dad was in the Navy Reserves, and Desert Storm was in swing. His reserve unit was called into war. Since he was to leave right after Thanksgiving—a day or two after, I cannot recall exactly when—my family decided that we would have Christmas on Thanksgiving. It was the one and only year I have ever been willing to look at anything Christmas that day.

Since there was no time to buy and decorate a tree, my mom got creative. In our living room she tended a potted tree that only seemed able to grow already dead leaves. The tree, pot and all, only stood about three or four feet tall and always looked dead. We tossed some

tinsel on—which the cat ate and threw back up all over the house—and hung as many ornaments as we dared weigh the tree down with. When we stepped back to marvel at our success, I had to fight off a giggle. Our sad, little, leafless tree reminded me of the Christmas tree in Charlie Brown Christmas. Except ours was a little taller.

Our shopping was rushed during the next couple of days, but we managed to have it all done and wrapped before Thanksgiving.

On Thanksgiving-Christmas morning we woke, ate breakfast together, then turned on the holiday music and began handing out our meager supply of gifts. It was the best Christmas I can recall. It was the smallest Christmas on record for our family, but we made up for it later.

The only other memory I can recall to detail of that strange holiday was the gift I received from my dad. For years my love for tigers grew. They are beautiful, powerful, graceful creatures. Every now and then I would add another stuffed tiger to my collection, but there was one I was missing. One tiger that I wanted more than any other. For months I begged my dad to buy it for me and he denied me. Yet that day, under our Charlie Brown tree, my dad extracted a not so cleverly hidden large black trash bag. Yes, a ten year old girl was excited about a trash bag.

When he handed me the gift I nearly jumped up and down with glee. I had yet to open the bag and knew what was inside. My three foot tiger. More excited than I had ever been, I tore at the bag and hugged the tiger close.

Though at the time I did not understand why exactly, I named the tiger Glass. I get it now. All the months my dad was in Saudi that tiger helped me sleep at night. It made me feel like my dad was right there beside me. It was the most precious item I had. The most fragile. As long as it was unharmed, he would be too.

When I stated earlier that the Zipse family made up for that small Christmas, I did not mean years later. Shortly before Christmas mom received a call from dad saying he was not to be shipped out from North Carolina until after Christmas. The rest of us packed as quickly as possible and left as soon as we could.

Across the Skyway Bridge with a mother terrified of heights, through an Indiana ice storm that froze our car doors shut, and through the Smokey Mountains my mother drove her children to see their father... to see her husband.

Though I have very fond memories of a surprisingly wonderful Christmas in North Carolina, it's the memories of that Thanksgiving-Christmas that stand out to me. I still have Glass seventeen years later. She is watching me as I write this, reminding me of how much the Zipse family has to be grateful for.

Now all of the Zipse kids are married with kids of our own, and the Christmas's are only bigger—my parents new house has a lofted ceiling in the living room, so you can picture the trees they get now—bigger and better.

But no Christmas will ever take the place in my heart that belongs to the Christmas of 1990.