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Counting my Blessings

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This year we forgot to eat the chocolates in our advent calendars. My mother found a buy one-get-one free deal for them at Costco, but they lay left behind on desks and under beds as Santa's face beamed for a lost audience. The calendars were still firmly packaged in their cellophane wrappings—the corners tightly folded and waiting for eager fingers to tear at them and look inside.

My half-brother Joey asked me if I thought Christmas would help anything this year and I didn't think so, but I just smiled at him, shrugged my shoulders and looked outside. The icicles dripped into the already melting snow and the white lights on the plastic reindeer burned into the mild December evening.

Isn't it funny how Christmas makes you remember things? he said. I put my hand over his, made quiet shushing noises, and told him I was sorry. He looked over at the Christmas tree and the presents newly opened. Next Christmas will be easier.

Bing Crosby sang to Rosemary Clooney on our television set. My parents sat on opposite ends of the flower-printed couch that match the curtains over the bay window. Too much sunlight coming through the windows over the years has dulled the curtain's flowers. Bright greens have turned to moss and the Mediterranean blues have become muddy. My mother held on to her glass of Chardonnay with both hands. She never turned her head but you could tell she wasn't listening to Bing Crosby—her eyes were twitching from the window to my father to her wine to my father to the rug to my father to the candles to my father.

When I'm worried and I can't sleep, I count my blessings instead of sheep. And I fall asleep counting my blessings.

Only Joey went to her funeral. I never met Judith because I wasn't allowed to, but she died this year on November 30.

Joey and I were watching Psycho downstairs when we heard our father call to us sternly—angrily. The blonde's shower was about to end, but I pressed pause. Joey clenched his jaw and looked up at the ceiling. He sighed. This better be good, he said.

We stopped when we got to the top of the stairs—you can see into the kitchen from there and we could see and didn't want to know more. My mother was crying. My father's hands were folded as he stared at them with resolution. When we entered the kitchen, my father looked up at Joey. Your mother died last night, he said.

Joey really did turn white and then he stumbled and then he said what?, and finally my mother rushed over to him and hugged him and they cried for awhile. When my father stood up he walked over to Joey and put his hand on his shoulder and I don't remember what he said to him, but after that, my father left the kitchen.

Two weeks before my father married Judith he told me Nana said to him if you have doubts don't. He said he shouldn't have.

Nana said Judith was volatile. While one minute she would play the peaceful hippie in her airy skirts, and talk about inclusion and how much she loved my father—the next minute she would be up in arms. She would yell at my father and tell him he was bigoted and greedy. According to my grandmother she used to hit him.

My final paper for my 10th grade English class this year was to write a biography on someone in my family. I chose my father. I just wanted to hear him talk about Judith. When I try to speak to my father—pick at the lock of his old life—it will never budge. It has become rusty and stuck. I knew many of the answers already from family rumor and from Joey, but I asked anyway. When I asked how long he and Judith had been married, he said he didn't remember. When I asked him how they had met, he said college. But how? I don't remember. Is she younger than you? I don't know. What does she look like? I don't have any pictures of her. Why did you get

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LAURIE GUILMARTIN

That's enough.

The one story he did tell me was that on his and Judith's wedding night they stayed at our family's old farmhouse. It had been storming and when they were about to go to sleep he said they heard a loud crack, then thunder that shook their wedding bed and finally a fall. Judith jumped and my father ran outside to see that the large oak in the front yard had split in two. The story sounded too familiar and I told my father that sounded a lot like a scene from Jane Eyre. He looked at me and then started chewing on his fingernail. I guess life imitates art, he said.

On the 22nd we decorated our tree. Each of us had one ornament we had put up every year since we were little. Mine was a golden ballerina that would twirl round and round if you spun her feet. Joey and my father each put up their ornament and left—my father to his office, my brother to his room. My mother put on the Peter, Paul & Mary Christmas CD as we finished decorating the tree. When we finished, my mother said, there, now that's a beautiful tree, and went to sit on the bay window. She looked at the curtains and moved her fingernails over their fabric as she looked outside. She took off her glasses and rubbed them on the bottom of her shirt and I sat on the couch and watched her as I sipped my Diet Coke. She sighed and looked over at me. She asked me if I would like a glass of orange juice. That stuff's not good for you honey. I said I was fine and walked downstairs to my bedroom.

Joey said Judith was beautiful. Early in the morning on the 23rd I heard knocking at my door. I opened it and Joey was standing there smiling and waving a plastic baggy in front of my face. Present from college, he said, let's go smoke. I put on my boots and coat and we walked across the street and then over into the woods.

I had never smoked a spliff before and watched his precise movements as he took a cigarette and broke it in half. The tobacco fell onto the paper as he stretched it out and then broke up the weed and sprinkled it on top. We passed it back and forth in silence. When it was done, we lay down and looked up at the clouds. The woods were silent and we just stared and stared.

Did you know he was the one who left her?

I didn't know, but I didn't want to be high anymore. I wanted to go back to sleep because it was cold now and my parents would worry and I was in the woods at 8 in the morning and it was cold and the woods were empty and silent and crowded.

She really was beautiful, he said. I don't know how any man could have left her. Even as she got older, her hair didn't lose its curl or its blackness. She was always so colorful—every outfit just—bright. I don't know, he said. She was my mother, but I would see the way men looked at her, you know?

I didn't know but I moved my head up and down and then refocused on the clouds.

I don't know why she never got remarried, he said. I asked her once why she didn't date like Dan's mom and she said something like once was enough for her. She said she didn't want to fight anymore—even though I'm sure she started the fights. She loved fighting—but what she did she called discussing.

I told Joey that I was tired—that I wanted to go home. He told me my eyes were too red. They'll know if you go back now.

He said he wished they had never gotten married. I think she hated him even more than he hated her, he said. At least eventually. I mean she was crazy, sure, but God was he an asshole, sleeping with another woman. I was there after he left, and I was little, but how can a person forget the banging on the walls and the screaming and crying and sleeping on the floor. Come on, you were born before the divorce was even finalized between them. A new baby born to her husband that wasn't even hers. Maybe she would have been happy if she never found out—I mean she loved him I know she did, she always told me how much she loved our father, but she hated him too—

They should have never gotten married to begin with. Nothing good came out of that marriage.

But if they never got married, I said, you wouldn't be here. That's something good. Well, I wouldn't have the splitting headache I have now.

We sat for a while and looked at the trees. It was warm for December. The early morning light flickered in-between, and in and out of pine needles— the light seemed to dance— no — waltz for my brother and I. That morning we were audience to the woods' Christmas pageant. We sat on the slush-covered ground and followed the sun as it moved up higher into the sky, except there was no where to go—no destination. Around 10 I was worried about how nervous my mother would be—wondering where we were—and I started to cry. Joey rubbed my back. He said, shh, shh, don't worry, we're going home.

When we got home we spent the day lying on the couch watching Christmas movies. My mother never noticed we were gone.

On Christmas Eve my father was drunk. The whole night his glass of merlot was consistently half full—the sound of popping corks adding extra notes to the traditional Christmas carols. My father is the kind of man who gets angry if someone says Happy Holidays to him rather than Merry Christmas. He has never been one to say much, but he will interrogate people if they say Happy Holidays to him.

What did you say? What other holidays are you referring to? I believe it's the day before Christmas so I think you can say Merry Christmas—it's not Chanukah and it's not Kwanzaa.

When he was a child, he used to be a part of his church's live nativity. He and other kids from his youth group would dress up as shepherds, wise men or angels and parade around the center of his town. People from the town protested the nativity scene years later and the youth group can't do it anymore. Goddamned left wing liberals, he said. He blames it on Kwanzaa. He hates Kwanzaa with a passion.

Joey, my mother, my father and I all sat in the living room Christmas Eve as my father made his yearly speech against the Happy Holidayers.

When my father said, Judith loved to say Happy Holidays; Joey looked at him and started chewing his nails. That's the problem with the bipartisan household, my father said. We'd fight about mostly everything. She always had to make sure not to exclude anybody. I was never understanding of others' situations enough. We don't want to offend anybody, she'd say. But she offended people all the time. As my father laughed Joey turned more and more red—he clenched his jaw and sat on his hands. My father said, she probably even sat and fought with St. Peter—now we don't want to leave anybody out of heaven—it's just not fair. I can see her screaming at St. Peter. I can see it so clearly.

Joey looked at my father with tears dripping down his face as he stood up to leave. You are such a cowardly man, he said. I can't be here—I can't be near you. I'm leaving tomorrow and I don't know where the hell I'll even go, but I'll figure it out. I don't ever want to be anything like you.

When Joey walked into his room my father stared at the door that had just closed—not seeming to blink, his eyes became more and more wet. My father does not cry so my mother and I looked at each other and then at the floor. I think we felt guilty. My mother reached out and put her hand on my father's knee, but he just swatted it away. Don't, he said, and went into the kitchen. After a couple of minutes I heard him go into his own bedroom. Soon my mother followed and I stayed in the living room for a moment and looked outside. I could see and hear the melting icicles drip into the snow. Drip, drop, drip. And the Christmas carolers' voices that came through my mother's clock radio sounded more like ghosts from a far distant place that was no longer real. After a few minutes I realized it was late enough and walked downstairs to get some sleep for Christmas morning.

