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Blue Christmas

After nine months at home and who knew how many more to come, Duncan and I went to buy our Christmas tree at the stand where we always go. Nobody was coming for Christmas. Duncan’s daughter Alicia was working in New Zealand, and we were cloistered in our old adobe house outside Santa Fe, but we still wanted a tree. A small tree, not like the bountiful ones we had when a dozen people came for Christmas dinner and the bedrooms were packed with guests. Back then my mother drove up from Albuquerque, and Duncan’s parents came from their retirement community nearby. His sister and her family drove from Denver. Alicia brought international students home from college so that they could experience an American Christmas. A neighbor and her children walked up the lane with a tin of homemade biscochitos.

I was an ambitious cook back then. One year I made turkey mole with an organic turkey from Embudo, Mexican chocolate, and three kinds of New Mexican chiles. I stayed up all night Christmas Eve making that mole from scratch. Roasted tomatillos, raisins fried until plump, chopped tablets of chocolate, ground cinnamon, anise, and cloves. Nineteen ingredients in that sauce. I was proud of it, but I heard later that Duncan’s parents did not like it, so I reverted to roast turkey and played around with the stuffing. Piñons, cornbread, chorizo.

Now our parents were dead. Duncan’s sister was dead. His nephew’s first wife was dead, killed by a drunk driver just about this time of year. All our friends were hunkered down. “Our job is keeping each other alive through this winter,” I said to Duncan. “I’ll keep you fed, you be my doctor, and we will live to see summer.”

Hunkering down has been easier for me than for Duncan. At the end of the scary, suddenly online spring semester, I was furloughed from the community college where I taught and started Social Security. I threw myself into online election volunteering, and Alicia texted “THANK YOU!!!” when Arizona was finally called.

Duncan is a doctor specializing in diagnosis and treatment of cholesterol disorders. He is seventy-one with an artificial heart valve. I am sixty-five with asthma. High risk. He switched to seeing his patients on Facetime and Zoom, but he misses being in the room with them. I am a broken record: “It would be fatal for both of us and Alicia is too busy to take the dogs if we die.”

One of Duncan’s patients sells Christmas trees in a motel parking lot. “Hey Doc,” he said through his mask sprigged with Santas. “What a year, huh? But we made it to Christmas. Merry Christmas.”

“Merry Christmas to you, Buddy. Handsome mask. And you got some good-looking trees.”

“What you looking for this year?”

“We’re going small. A quiet Christmas. Just us and the dogs.”

“I hear ya.”

Buddy glanced at the bumper sticker on the back of our truck. “So I guess you’re happy about the election, huh Doc.”

“’Happy’ does not begin to describe it.”

Buddy, clearly, was not happy about the election. “I wouldda thought a doctor would care more about his taxes. You work hard enough for it.”

“Taxes pay for schools and roads and museums and the NIH and the FDA which will regulate the vaccine,” I said, and Duncan gave me a look that said *sometimes, could you just take a pass.*

“I’m not getting any Bill Gates microchip vaccine,” said Buddy as he wound twine around our tree. “How about you, Doc?”

“I’m specifically requesting the one with the microchip,” said Duncan. “I want Bill to be able to find me if he ever has any questions about his cholesterol.”

While Duncan unloaded the tree and fixed it in its stand and carried in boxes of ornaments from the shed, I put on Elvis’s Christmas album and microwaved yesterday’s lasagna, made a salad and set the table with Christmas napkins leftover from last year.

“When we finish the tree, we can send a picture to Alicia. With the dogs. I’ll make a ‘Merry Christmas Alicia’ sign for Clovis to wear.”

My husband looked like he could cry.

“I know how it hurts you, sweetheart. I miss her too. Remember that Chinese pre-med student she brought home one year? Mei.”

“She was really smart,” he said. “We talked about gene therapy.”

“I guess she is a doctor in China by now. She could have been in Wuhan, for all we know. Did we ask where her home was? I don’t know if I would have remembered Wuhan because back then I’d never heard of Wuhan.” I pushed the salad toward him. “Now I guess we will go to our graves never having visited China.”

Duncan did not care if he ever saw China. He didn’t want to travel anywhere he could not bring his dogs. Unless his daughter was working there--she’s designed sets for movies in Argentina, Atlanta, Russia, Thailand, Texas. She’s supposed to work in Santa Fe next summer, if things go okay. The unions have tight protocols, she tells us. We work in pods. We are tested all the time. Everyone is careful.

I went on. “So many people have it worse than we do. Parents of little kids. Unemployed June graduates. People in high rises. People lonely and alone or stuck with someone they can’t stand. Workers who can’t telecommute. People losing their jobs who are too young for Social Security. Let’s count our blessings.”

Duncan pointed at the dogs and counted. “One blessing, two blessings.” He kissed the top of my head. “Three blessings.”

I kissed him back. “Four.”

“Time to go out, girls,” he said. I watched out the kitchen window as a magpie flew off into the dusk and the dogs squatted in the dry grass while my husband stood there, vigilant. Four of us for Christmas, counting the dogs. And we would finish the tree in the morning. There was plenty of time.