

## Cathy's Best-ever Christmas, 1960

Steering her by a firm grip on her shoulder, Mommy worked the roomful of relatives, coaching Cathy to wish everyone a Merry Christmas. Cathy was only 8, but she knew how to comport herself in her freshly cut "pixie" hairdo and fluffy party dress with a big red bow in back.

They had just arrived at the annual party at her grandparents' ranch, and the huge, wood-paneled living room, infused with the aroma of roasting turkey and filled with people in stiff clothes, was already boiling hot. Cathy smiled and shook hands with everyone, even with Cousin Dick in his boarding school sweater.

Once they had made the rounds of all 34 relatives, Mommy vanished into the kitchen, Daddy joined the laughing cluster of men around the fireplace, and Cathy was released. The Christmas tree, twice as tall as Daddy with its treetop angel brushing the ceiling, should have been an object of interest to her, but wasn't. A close look revealed no elaborate handcrafted ornaments, only tinsel and glass balls. Any gift for Cathy, if there even was one, was buried under a mound of presents under the branches, a mound in which she feigned disinterest. The trestle table, brought in for the occasion and running the length of the room, was laid with the party dishes. Glowing candles lit the area around the table, but the far corners of the crowded room were dim.

Cathy scanned the arrangement of placecards. As she did every year, Granny had organized the seating with the idea of giving everyone someone to talk to. All the kids were together, with Cathy, as always, seated down at the end with the preschoolers.

There was no one close to her age to play with other than 12-year-old Cousin Dick. As Daddy drove them up to the ranch that afternoon, Mommy had leaned

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over the back of the front seat and warned, "Don't embarrass your mother like you did last year, when you were caught shuffling placecards around so none of you kids had to sit next to Dick."

"But he's creepy. Anyway, Cousin Laurie told me to do it."

"Laurie's fifteen and should know better. *You* should know better. Dick's an orphan, and your grandparents are the only family he has, so you need to be nice. Promise?" She glared.

"I promise," Cathy muttered. Worse than being an orphan, she thought, worse than boarding school, was to be the ward of her pitiless grandfather. It reminded her of the awfulest fairy tale, and it had really happened to Cousin Dick.

After a minute Cathy said, "Mommy, can you ask Granny to let me sit with the grown-ups this year? Maybe next to Aunt Jo?"

Mommy only grunted, and turned to face the road, leaving Cathy to contemplate her signature French twist, held together by invisible hairpins. Daddy said nothing.

Family parties were always the same. Escape from the steamy living room was impossible because Grandfather's ferocious cattle dog blocked the outdoor exits. Cathy had long before made peace with the dreary mounted moose and elk heads that leered in each other's direction from opposite walls of the living room, glass eyes unfocused on a point in midair, lips slightly parted to reveal plastic tongues, as if about to drool on the people below them.

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In many past visits she had studied the inscrutable pattern of the Middle Eastern carpet, one of many souvenirs of Grandfather's career on the Arabian pipeline. She had fingered the carved dog's-heads on each arm of the big leather wing chairs. She had played with the claws on the bearskin on the floor. The brass of the engraved Arabian platter used as the coffee table was newly polished, and decked with bowls of almonds and olives and the adults' screwdrivers in tall narrow glasses.

The tinkling of a tiny bell summoned the youngsters to an alcove where Grandfather kept his liquor cabinet. They knew the routine and gathered in front of him: Laurie, Dick, and Cathy, and all the other tots and teens.

He measured out one jigger of colorless vodka and poured it into a tall glass, saying as he did so: "To quote the Greek philosopher, 'If one oversteps the bounds of moderation, the greatest pleasures cease to please.' Do you understand what Epictétus meant by this, children?"

They stood there dumbly. What was Grandfather driving at? His two twenty-something sons, standing behind him with beers in their hands, rolled their eyes at each other. Grandfather couldn't see them, but Cathy could.

Her attention wandered to Uncle Bob's suede sportcoat, a velvety tan, and she wondered if it was from a deer he killed on a family hunting trip. She made a plan compliment him on it later, making polite conversation as Mommy had taught her to do, although she really didn't want to know about the hunt. At the last family party Cousin Laurie's mean older brother had tortured Cathy to tears with his gasping portrayal of the death of Bambi's mother. In the process he taught her the expression *gut-shot*.

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The implications of *gut-shot* occupied Cathy's imagination while Grandfather waited for an answer. Receiving none, he sighed, and continued: "Moderation, a value prized by the ancient Stoics who fathered our great Western culture, means to be mild and measured in actions and thoughts, avoiding extremes or excesses."

The audience was getting fidgety, but they knew that eventually they would receive a moderate sip of the tabooed beverage, so they waited as he preached on. Only Cousin Dick gave Grandfather his rapt attention. Just like Grandfather, he had a teacherly way of standing with his chest puffed out.

By now Uncle Bob and Uncle Bill could barely suppress their snickers, but Grandfather seemed not to notice. "Civilized people practice moderation by avoiding too much of anything, not just bad things, like war or crime, but even good things: too much food, drink, exercise, sleep, and so forth. Too much pleasure 'ceases to please.' Thus, the wise and dignified man drinks moderately, avoiding suffering to his family as a result of his immoderate behavior." His eyes scanned the room, and landed on Cathy. Unable to contain themselves, her uncles ducked out the door, mumbling that they were going for a smoke.

These were complicated ideas that Cathy barely understood, and a lot of the words were unfamiliar, but she could tell that Grandfather was talking about getting drunk, which was undignified, and somehow caused suffering. She glanced around for a grownup who would interpret. Never before had she heard anyone talk so openly about drinking, but no grown-ups were near enough to have heard what Grandfather said.

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Cathy knew someone who drank a lot, and even fell down the stairs, although no one ever mentioned it: Daddy. Was Grandfather warning her not to be like Daddy? She knew better than to ask.

After filling the glass with orange juice and stirring the drink, Grandfather passed it among the children for each to take one small sip. "Here's looking at you," he said, stooping over and piercing Cathy with his gaze. She recognized a test. So she replied, "I catches your eye," as he had taught her to do, with a fake Southern accent and a girly wiggle. "Yum," she said, although she could taste only the orange juice. And then she ran off, feeling his eyes following, judging her performance.

Passing the brass tray, she pulled ten pitted olives out of their bowl, popped them on the ends of her fingers, and crouched behind one of the wing chairs to suck on them and think. But a knuckley, liver-spotted hand snaked around the side of the chair and pulled Cathy over to face the person sitting in it. To her relief, there was Aunt Jo's merry smile. "Hey, little pixie, why don't you join Aunt Jo here and tell her what you've been up to lately."

"You're not my really-aunt, are you?" Cathy asked as she squeezed in beside her in the big chair. "No," said Aunt Jo, "but I'm *almost* family, wouldn't you say?"

"You're always at the parties."

"That's right, so I could be your sort-of great-grand-aunt, couldn't I?"

"I guess so," Cathy said shyly. "What would that make me? Your great — what?"

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"My great grand-niece, and if I had a really-one, I would want her to be just like you," said Aunt Jo.

Suddenly the kitchen door crashed open, and Cathy's two uncles crowded through it, fists flying. She could see Uncle Bob's raised arm in its deerskin sleeve, backlit in the harsh kitchen light. The uncles were cursing each other, and the room filled with shouting, with Granny wailing "Charles, stop them!" loudest of all.

Squealing with delight, Cathy slid unnoticed out of Aunt Jo's chair to run toward the fracas. Then Grandfather came through the door and started wrestling his sons apart. Daddy also darted forward, pulling Uncle Bob off Uncle Bill, and the four men stood still, panting. A few feet away, Cathy stopped hopping up and down joyfully and also stood still, her thumb finding its way into her mouth. Her fun was over as fast as it had begun.

"Bob, go to your room for the rest of the night," commanded Grandfather. "Bill, you too," he said, pointing in another direction. "You boys should be ashamed of yourselves."

As the two skulked out of the room Cathy felt Mommy's hand on her shoulder. "They don't know how to hold their liquor," she told Cathy, although it didn't explain anything. "Now get your thumb out of your mouth like a big girl and go tell your grandmother how much you love her and how you hope this won't spoil her Christmas."

Spoil Christmas? This was Cathy's best Christmas ever! Trying to stifle her glee, she did as she was told, and as soon as Granny dried her tears they all sat down to dinner, leaving two empty seats, one on either side of Cousin Dick.