

A Few Words

from Jan Carroll

Winter 2021/2022: Happy Holidays



Thanksgiving

He listened to the back track, the flippant cracks, the last fracture still intact. But he knocked over the gravy boat at dinner, upsetting it on the ironed cloth, when the aunt, passing pickled beets, phrased her question like a seismic kick for a blunt instant. Somewhere in the alley of his heart his inner child tripped over long-discarded broken-off bits. His heart ached as a sibling drained over-boiled potatoes into the kitchen sink. Not everything's made better by butter and salt, as if that made up for being bullied, for being pulverized. *Yes he was in love!* simmered in his craw like a thickening roux. *Yes with that person!* kept coming to the surface, every bubble burst defiant not defeatist. He insisted on keeping his composure. He would outlast her sugarless demeanor, would live the meaning of sweetness as he reached out in his mind, took the hand of that one the aunt villainized, the one who wasn't asked, while he was coerced, threatened with familial blacklisting, that one he held, welcomed, *Yes, loved,* here at this and any, every, meal, a little honey in a rust-colored bowl always set out on their own table.

Thank You

"If the only prayer you ever say in your whole life is Thank You, it will be enough."—*Meister Eckhart*

Thanks for dropping off
the lunch I forgot.

For taking on this part in the community play,
both actor and understudy under the weather.

Thanks for helping me take the log out of my own eye,
renting the heavy machinery needed.

For wiping off the mud before walking across
the floor I just spent an hour scrubbing.

Thanks for sitting up all night
with me when I was feverish.

For calling me back from the ledge,
teaching me how to hedge a bet.

Thanks for making me laugh,
always giving me the bigger half.

For giving me a ride to work
in a raging blizzard.

Thanks for cleaning out the drain
in the kitchen sink after you made dinner.

For bringing me a flower picked
from the artwork of your garden.

Thanks for donating a kidney to that lucky woman,
or donating your rare blood.

For buying me that book
and wrapping it up—with ribbon!

Thanks for being here.

Thanks a million.

Thanks so much.



So, the holidays are upon us, carrying with them a weird mix of memories of magic and dashed hopes, of wonderful connective times and upsetting, disruptive times. We can find ourselves walking that tightrope fine line between a long-held tradition being bonding and meaningful or burdensome and overdone. Between trying to create amazing new memories and simply wearing ourselves out. Between wanting everyone else to be happy and finding our own measure of joy. Between trying to make everything perfect and, frustrated, giving up. I hope you will be good to yourself this year, as you are being good to others. That you will find something sacred, renewing, comforting, a gift, in the moments you take for yourself as well as in those you share with others.

May you be well.

Well Wishing

You may not be able—to this day—to stomach sherry because of the way your mom mixed it with shrimp Christmas Eve dinner the year you were twelve.

Sometimes the glossy, full-color magazine photo is better than the sketchy recipe's result. Though Santa never brought that autoharp you asked for forever, you still adore the concept of stealth giving. Mismatched stockings oddly hung are not a sign the fragile infrastructure is collapsing, though the assumed need for hidden facial-recognition devices may be, little one-eyed ogres spying on crowds of shoppers. You may cringe when it's pointed out all your songs exude being rescued, so you write one identifying with the she Road-Runner, Wile E. Coyote be damned, and it's a hit at the holiday party. You may not be able to dig up that ancient bottle of Elmer's glue to re-affix baby Jesus's ceramic head (broken off when you blundered by too close and he crashed to the floor)—too much junk strewn in stuck drawers, the twist-open dispenser probably gunky and dried shut anyway. You may plug in a strand of colored lights to find only the middle third illuminates then the elderly dog trips on the extension cord, making the artificial tree shake in its not-yet-decorated state next to the archway, but not, thank God, tumble. At least you're past the 19th of December, the date your dad considered cursed, one year wounded in the battle that took his buddy, ghosts haunting him ever since. Another year losing control on the ice on the way to see his girl—your future mother--totaling his car. Your sister, due on that date years later, born thriving, without incident, on the 22nd to great relief. But you may have a sickness not unto death, always questioning the thickness, the adequacy of the ice to hold up the ones who auger through, hoping to hook fish from dark depths. You may be fried by this time, all this prep, yet there you sit toying with contentment. This year you didn't invite that troubled soul wracked with anger issues. Your wrapping work looks like little kids did it, your dyed frosting oozes off the edges of flat-baked snowmen, candy canes, and bells, but guess what turned up under the box of cookie cutters—a get-out-of-jail-free card! And cock-eyed to the left behind the rarely used Jello mold, a Chutes & Ladders spinner, irreparably bent, awkward, inept. Now you'll never know who's turn it is, who goes next, or how far. That's alright. You may move in any direction. You may fix yourself a bit of sustenance, pour out some cheer. You may spontaneously conceive a new gift. You may lose your grip. You may wish yourself well.

Otherworlder at Christmas

I'm an alien here, a stranger stumbling
through this world of woe, a broken
Jack-in-the-box on the island
of misfit toys (I pop up off-beat), a fourth
magi too late to the manger, Jesus long ago fled
to safe asylum. I must've misread
the star charts, missed my stop
on some interplanetary train. I don't know how
to crop myself down to acceptable size to fit in
to the holiday cards, how to photoshop this December
into snowy Hallmark scene like the dog
jingle-bells the night in her dreams
with muffled barking, mumbled pleas. So I set up this tree
like an arrow in my living room to point
more or less home toward that galaxy
with which I am a meant-for match,
where my digital dial could quit searching and lock
on that station that plays what I want to hear, where I
and my kind puzzle-piece together
in four-part harmonic code before we even open
mouths to speak. This evergreen radio tower is crowned
with a star to boost the signal.
Tinsel draped on limbs mimics how they used to wrap
aluminum foil around TV antennae to magic
a clearer picture from static. Ornaments, popcorn strands,
memories are ballast, show, camouflage. Gifts
now and then mysteriously
materialize beneath.



Solstice

Dark it was in the womb
yet you had everything
you needed to get ready
for your birth.

Dark too it was in the cave
though you felt your way
along dank walls, didn't you?
Inch by inch.

Dark it was in the room
that night the storm knocked
the power out but you struck
a match, made candlelight.

Dark too it is in the craze
of the world we live in.
But you'll be alright, won't you?
You have your own north star.

"For last year's words belong to last year's language, and next year's words await another voice. And to make an end is to make a beginning." — *T. S. Eliot*



"We will open the book. Its pages are blank. We are going to put words on them ourselves. The book is called Opportunity and its first chapter is New Years Day." —*Edith Lovejoy Pierce*

New Year's Kiss

I have a clock in my kitchen stopped
a few minutes short of midnight. Even though

it's broken beyond hope, I keep it there by the sink
to remind me—not of the ever-impending end

of the world but instead of New Year's Eve, over
and over. As if anticipating in those moments leading to

twelve chimes: the days of Christmas, a dozen fresh
Grade AA eggs, visiting the Apostle Islands, and the months

waiting for me in the calendar I just picked up
at Office Max. Strokes of beginning and potential—not

constriction. In fact, the tradition of kissing at midnight
on New Year's Eve dates from the Roman Saturnalia,

a celebration of anything but restriction, and which, it is said, began
with kissing. And later, Europeans at big parties wore masks

bearing all the bad of the past year. A kiss after removing
those masks, revealing those faces, was meant to reenact

purification. Or, it's like the woman I went to see
at the nursing home whose dementia has robbed her

of speech, but who, when I blew her a kiss upon leaving, raised
a hand to her mouth, and with a sweep of her arm, sent one back.

*Originally published in *Volume One*, Local Lit

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