



Oy, Come All Ye Faithful

By Dorri Olds

“**H**ow would you feel about Dad and I sleeping over Christmas Eve and we all go out for breakfast Christmas Day?” A trap, a snare. In Mom’s world, my feelings have nothing to do with anything. Especially when she wants something, which is all the time.

See, I’m a dedicated homebody. I live in a one-bedroom apartment that, okay, I admit—I wouldn’t even have if they hadn’t spent a *fortune* putting me through college. But them sleeping over? Give up my firm queen mattress, down pillows, and Calvin Klein silky-soft leopard-print sheets?

If I say no it’ll trigger, “*This*—to your own mother? After all we’ve . . .” The guilt will eat at me until next Christmas.

Two options: sleep in the other room on the floor on an air mattress (rather have weasels rip my flesh), or sleep on the couch, which is right next to the bed (nightmares of being tied to her by an umbilical cord). It’s hard enough to create boundaries without us sleeping like sardines.

“Okay, Mom. Sure.”

We’re devout atheist Jews. Dad taught me passionately, “Religion was created by the rich to control the masses. Poor dumb people, manipulated by their own fears.” Our family celebrates every holiday—Christmas, Hanukkah, Easter, Passover. “Oy, how we’ve suffered, now let’s eat.”

Mom and Dad arrive early and buzz from the lobby three times. I’ve told them once is plenty. Buddy barks and runs in frenzied circles. They ring my doorbell twice, and knock, then call out, “Hi, we’re here.”

Okay, breathe. Grant me the serenity to accept the parents I cannot change.

“Hi Mom! Hi Dad!”

“Hi honey!”

I smile the way I do when Dad’s setting the camera for our annual family pictures and my nieces are crying while Dad is shouting damnitsmile.

Jogging three miles a day for forty years shows in Mom’s taut, muscular legs. The stubborn bulge in her tummy looks out of place on her otherwise lithe body. Mom’s short, curly hair looks whiter than I remember, contrasted by thick black eyebrows—her lethal weapons.

I love Dad’s olive skin, even at eighty-eight, with its thin folds and neat creases. I marvel at his lean, muscular body. He’s never fluctuated more than three pounds. He still plays tennis twice a week. I can tell by the way he’s standing that his shoulder hurts.

“Lookin’ good there, kid. Boy, I wanna tell you, if I was twenty years younger and not your father, you’d be in trouble.” He pats me on the rear even though I’ve told him three thousand times not to.

They drop their coats over chairs and Mom plops her huge purse onto the table with a forceful clunk and squishes the perfectly folded napkins.

My jaw is so tight I'll have to call the chiropractor later.

"Honey," Mom says in her shrill nasal voice, "I brought you some clippings."

One of the things I love about Mom is that she mails articles to me with bright yellow Post-it notes, "Enjoy!" or "FYI" and always "Love, Mom." It's so sweet it makes me want to cry, but right now I'm timing the vegetables and the pasta and the chicken, and I can't give her my attention.

"Let's talk about it after dinner, Ma."

She lets out a sigh and shoots me a look. I return to the kitchen and call out, "Can you please clear your stuff off the table and chairs? Dinner's almost ready."

Mom follows me and says, "How can I help?"

I know she means well, but she's oblivious. When she walks into the narrow kitchen it cramps me into a corner—the antithesis to help. I have shooting pains in my neck and a burning sensation in my arms. My right eye twitches. Dad walks into the kitchen. Now I really can't move.

Dinner is pleasant enough. My shoulders lower a little. *Okay. I'm going to be alright.*

We go to the couch. Mom starts talking about her recent three-day silent retreat. The entire time she attended it was quiet. Nobody spoke as they ate together, meditated, walked trails. Mom yaks for an hour about the virtue of silence.

At last they tire. I dream of being chased by monsters—naked and frozen in place by cemented feet.

Okay, it's morning. Mom's in the bathroom. Rats. I make myself a double shot of espresso—I'm going to need it.

Mom comes out perky. "Merry Christmas!"

I have a crick in my neck. I take two Advil and hope for the best.

Dad is waking up slowly. Noise doesn't disturb him. Without hearing aids in, he's stone deaf. His hairpiece needs a comb. I notice his barrel chest is all gray as he shuffles to the bathroom in his white jockey shorts.

"Merry Christmas." I smile—genuinely this time.

Then she starts, "What long-distance carrier do you use?"

"Um, I don't know, Ma, why?"

"Because you're paying too much."

"Oh."

"He-llo-o?" Her tone rattles windows.

"Yes, Mom, I'm right here." I sound like a weary kindergarten teacher.

"Well? What long-distance carrier do you use?"

"I said, I don't know."

"What do you mean you don't know?!" Her veiny hand, propped on her slender hip, feels like it's around my neck, choking the life out of me.

"Mom, not now."

"You don't know which carrier you use?"

"It's early, I haven't had breakfast, and I don't care about this now."

I'm sure there was irritation in my voice, but not enough to warrant her throwing on her clothes, storming out, and letting the door slam behind her.

"Well now you've done it!" Dad says. He glares at me

"What?" I whimper. "I didn't do anything."

"You upset your mother."

"Da-ad. Please, don't get mad."

"Well, it's too late for that, isn't it?"

I reluctantly pull on clothes, feeling grubby without my morning shower. We go downstairs. The doorman points to Mom sulking. As soon as she sees us she bolts up the block, stomping her feet in her big red boots. It's hard not to laugh. By suppressing my laughter, years of heartbreaking family dramas well up in my throat.

"Where's she going?" I say to Dad, making sure it's loud enough for her to hear.

"Shhhh," he snaps at me. "Come on. We have to catch up to her."

"You go ahead, Dad. I'll meet you at the corner."

He shakes his head dramatically, muttering, "Incomprehensible," and goes after her. I see Dad talking to her and Mom flailing her arms. They wait for me at the light.

"So," I say, trying to sound chipper, "Where would you like to go for Christmas breakfast?"

Nobody answers. I suggest a nice place nearby. I hear a couple of grunts in acknowledgment and we all set out for our celebratory meal.

Halfway there Dad becomes exasperated. It's probably his knee. He pops two Tums. "That's it. I'm going home."

He turns and walks off. I run after him. "Dad, you can't leave. You have the car. How'll Mom get home? You really want her on a train by herself on Christmas?"

The image of my abandoned atheist Jewish mother on Christmas strikes me as funny but I know I mustn't chuckle.

He stands there for a minute and I imagine steam shooting out of his ears. Poor Dad. He shakes his head, "Come on. Where is this place? I thought you said it was close."

We've walked only three blocks.

I smile at him, but he keeps his mad face on.

We get to the empty restaurant and eat in silence. It takes every bit of my self-control not to poke their eyes out with my fork.

Six months later Mom sends an e-mail. "Wasn't that fun on Christmas? Want to do it again this year?"

I burst out laughing at how nuts they are. Then I'm weeping for how much I love them anyway. I press autodial—1: therapist.