

CHRISTMAS EVE
by
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HE BOYS, MARCO AND LEONE, are the blood and the beat of my four-chambered heart, but there is nothing greater than packing them off to their dad's house on Christmas Eve day, leaving me alone in my apartment for a solid 24. Goodbye little gentlemen, goodbye "Eeewww, mamma! There's something green in my pasta!"; goodbye shrieking, tearful squabble over tubby toy; goodbye bogus games of chess in which your rook takes all of my pawns in one move. See you in the morning, pumpkins!

I lock the door, load the dishwasher, blast the stereo, and sing along at the top of my lungs. My apologies to the upstairs neighbor, but I know every damned word of this thing and have since high school choir and she's going to have to live through my singing every single one of them at top pitch, for—after all—*unto us a son is given*. The crooked must be made straight and the rough places made plain. And to that end, the smell of lemon Cascade wafts out of the dishwasher as the glasses turn crystal clear. *I know that my Redeemer liveth.*

This is not to say that I spend the day relaxing, in the traditional sense. There are some people who just throw the shit in the closet, neaten the bedcovers, and light a cranberry-scented candle, but I am not one of them. With only a few hours until sundown, when my Christmas Eve guests will arrive, it becomes somehow imperative to me—and immensely soothing—to finally artfully hang my collection of antique knife steels, to sort out the Salvation Army clothes from the ones that still have life, to Mop & Glo every inch of the linoleum floor, to crawl out onto the fire escape and clean the outsides of the windows too, to sand down the stains on my butcher block kitchen counter with #57 grade sandpaper,

and to arrange the books on the shelves. Not alphabetically. *Please*. That would be so anal-retentive and rigid. But still, you can't let John Berger just lie there next to T. C. Boyle as if they were equals.

I know some of you understand.

A full day alone is magnificent for me. Normally, I spend all 24 in the constant company of others. Having a family and running a busy restaurant pose special challenges to the solitude-loving Scorpio! There are always always people. Even in the quiet early morning prep hours at the restaurant, when I am staring sleepy and vacant at the espresso machine as it drizzles the brown gold into my cup, getting ready for my monster day, even then when the delivery brutes with their weight-lifter belts and pneumatic hand-trucks have not yet come clanking heavily down the hatch stairs and the jug of pine cleaner has not yet been tipped into the porter's mop bucket, there is still Manolo rhythmically sweeping upstairs. And then arrives the daytime sous-chef. And then the phone gal and, soon after, the GM and then we are welcoming lunch guests and wine reps and fire inspectors and then the evening crew shows up, followed by a hundred dinner guests. Even the walk home from work—which is less than half a block and is the daily solitude I can count on—even that is shared with East Village fashionistas teetering down the sidewalk in impossible shoes and too often puking between parked cars.

Home in bed with the boys (because that's our life at the moment until I can afford the space we really need and want) I merely doze throughout the night as some small but remarkably leaden foot or hand smashes me inadvertently in the eye or jaw. To spend the entire day alone—my restaurant shuttered for the holiday (nothing can possibly go wrong at work because there is no work!), kids safely stowed at their dad's while I howl all four parts of Handel's *Messiah* around my apartment—is, for me, the tip of the top of the freshest mountain.

By dark, I am sprinting to be ready for the guests. The apartment is now perfection—the paperwhites have popped and are reeking their narcissus deliciousness in the living room, there are freshly ironed sheets clean and taut on the bed with a duvet and six pillows puffed up like a thick layer of sweet white meringue where guests will throw their coats. On the now spotless old stove, my 10-quart scuffed Le Creuset simmers with a brothy soup thick with nicely cut vegetables. And I have been alone long enough; I'm ready for friends, conversation, laughing my brains out.

I throw myself through a two-minute shower, shave my legs and pits and—why not?—it's not bikini season but... *there*, too. As long as we're getting down to such details as where Berger should rest on the bookshelf we might as well take the same care with our own body. *Rejoice! Rejoice! Re-jo-o-o-o-o-oice greatly!* With three minutes to go, I dig the accumulated crap out from under my fingernails with a wooden skewer and give them one quick-drying coat of Ballet Slipper. It's Christmas Eve, for Christ's sake.

By the time the intercom buzzes, I am assembling the greatest grilled cheese sandwiches of all time and the fridge is filled with seriously good Champagne, so packed that the bottles that can't stand up on the top shelf lie on their sides like stockpiled ammo down below. This is not the day I want to be drinking any of that chardonnay-sweet or over-yeasted bread-dough shit. I want tight effervescence, chalk on my tongue and the roof of my mouth, sugar turned to cold glass. *WONDERFUL! COUNSELOR! ALMIGHTY GOD!*

I grate the sharp cheddar and slice the blue cheese, sliver fresh mango, and thinly slice a few jalapeños. On the counter is a jar of Hellman's mayonnaise. There may still be a few people who don't know about Hellman's as the perfect and only cooking fat for a grilled cheese sandwich, so here it is: Don't use butter. Don't use oil. Instead, smear a thin film of Hellman's mayonnaise on the outsides of the sandwich and set it in a nonstick pan over low-ish heat. If some of the cheddar melts into the pan, let it set there until it makes that nutty, crunchy lace, which is one of the treats of life.

I like the blue cheese grilled on pumpernickel with a few strips of bacon. But the absolute best is just plain grated cheddar with a little mustard and mayo stirred in to season it. For a second course, I like the cheddar with mango and a few spikes of jalapeño.

The buzzer buzzes and my friends start piling hungrily into my apartment. I fill the crystal flutes to the top, one for everybody, and we clink and cheers. For me, the flute itself hits an especially sweet spot. Almost everything I drink at work I drink out of a plastic quart take-out container which may or may not have had harissa vinaigrette, Bloody Mary mix, or blanched and peeled calf's brains in it the day before. No matter how sanitizing the run through the dish machine is, most of the time my ginger ale tastes weird.

