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Simply Christmas

BY LAURA HUNT ANGEL

There were not many holidays that my family made much of a to-do over when I was a child. Christmas, Thanksgiving and Easter were the big three. Other holidays, including birthdays, were marked with tokens of a more practical nature, if at all. A bunch of fresh-picked flowers for Mama's birthday; a favorite dish for Daddy's; a homemade cake for each of us. It was in these small, everyday gestures that my parents' love was best displayed. Christmas was no exception.

CHRISTMAS MORNING, SOMETIME IN THE SIXTIES

Gina was gently shaking me. Through half-opened eyes, I could see that she was excited. Neanie stood beside her and was using her best stage whisper to tell me something that I wasn't quite awake enough to understand. Then it dawned on me: it was Christmas morning! Daddy couldn't wait any longer and had sent them to wake me up. Together we all scrambled out of the bedroom and made our way across the hall to the kitchen, where Mama, Daddy, Lizzie and Papaw were waiting.

"It's Christmas!" I croaked. Daddy, sitting at the table in his usual place, looked at us with a false frown and said, "I heard some noises last night. I went out and saw a little man on the roof. I ran him off with a blast of buckshot!" Papaw, seated near the warmth of the kitchen stove and dressed in a fresh plaid shirt, stoically nodded, one finger tapping absently on his coffee cup. He smelled of Old Spice cologne and cigar smoke.

To prevent an all out panic, Daddy quickly explained that the little man slid off of the roof, unharmed, and ran into the woods that bordered the back acre. I was informed that the reindeer were fine as well, having flown high over the treetops toward the airport.

Throughout most of our childhood, Daddy kept us updated on his antagonistic relationship with St. Nick. After a couple of years of this, I tried to get ahead of the game by making my father promise to not shoot Santa on Christmas Eve.

GIFTS AND MAYHEM

We were never made to wait until after breakfast, or Heaven forbid, a fancy brunch to open our gifts. My friend and neighbor, Donna, usually had to wait around a while. Some years it was nearly noon before her family got around to opening their gifts, handing them out one at a time in slow ceremonial fashion. I don't know how she put up with it. In contrast, our Christmas mornings were filled with hoots, hollers and whistles as we conducted an all-out assault on the boxes, bags and odd-shaped packages spilling out from under the tree.

Only a few of our gifts were wrapped each year. These simply wrapped items were special presents from Mama and Daddy, and sometimes they were homemade. They didn't have name tags, but Mama saw to it that each gift went to the proper recipient, preferring to spend what little they had on the actual gifts instead of fancy labels and ribbon. The majority of gifts, unwrapped, were from Santa himself, who never bothered with wrapping paper. Santa brought us jacks, marbles, yo-yos and a couple of simple board games. We were obsessed with yo-yos for a while and spent hours trying to "walk the dog" and "rock the baby."

Out in front of the tree was one thing that we could count on every Christmas: a heap of oranges, nuts and ribbon candy. This year, they were piled up in a shiny, new, bright-red wagon. The fruit, nuts and candy were



Credit Laura Hunt Angel

Laced with pecans, chocolate and espresso, this low-sugar pie will please all of your Christmas guests.



Wordpress

A classic dish: Pheasant wrapped in bacon.

the special gifts that Mama and Daddy remembered from their own childhood Christmases during the Depression. For Daddy, it wasn't Christmas without these humble reminders.

My favorite gift was a doll with a pull ring on the back. When the ring was pulled, the doll said one of several short phrases. I fell in love instantly, and the doll accompanied me wherever I went for years. One day the mechanism finally broke, along with my heart. It was the same day that Alan, Donna's brother, taught me to burp at will. But you've already heard that story.

We took turns pulling the wagon around the living room, dodging gifts, paper and toes. Our dog, a big black lab named Puppy, danced around us gleefully with her big tail bopping up against boxes, knee bones and anything else that got in the way.

It was near afternoon when we remembered to check our socks. We did not have fancy store-bought Christmas stockings so we used real socks. Gina got the great idea to use some of daddy's because they would hold more. They were filled with our favorite candies, and by the time we found them we were ready for a treat. We sat in the hallway and dumped them out in the floor to sort the treats into little piles. I especially enjoyed the Lifesavers books.

SUPPER TIME

When I was very young and the house was full of children, Christmas dinner often featured something that Daddy had got while out hunting. Back then our little community of transplanted Kentuckians still included a lot of uninhabited woods, wetlands and grassy meadows where small game and deer freely roamed.

This year, Daddy had got

some pheasants. While Mama wrapped the little birds in bacon, Daddy and Papaw sat at the table, talking with Mama while cracking pecans with a hammer. They put the shells in one bowl, the nutmeats in another. On the stove was a big pot of home canned green beans with potatoes. The steam from their cooking was collecting on the window above the sink. There were little rivulets running down to the sill, and in between the rivulets I could see watery streaks of Donna's house. I wondered if she had finally opened her gifts. Papaw had supplied a store-bought ham to round out the main course, and it sat on the stove top, too, covered in foil.

By this time of year the garden was fast asleep until spring, but it had done well, and Mama had put anything that would fit into quart jars. She had canned a few jars of whole carrots with Christmas day in mind. They were now laid in a pan, doused with salt, pepper and bacon grease and waiting to go into the oven.

As Mama worked in the kitchen, Suzi popped through the back door with baby Timmy in her arms. Her husband, David, followed close behind carrying a fruitcake, Daddy's favorite. Marti pulled up in the driveway and her boys spilled out of the car, yelling at each other to get out of the way. They each carried at least one of the toys they had received that morning. Together, Duane and Brian shoved open the front door and piled in, ignoring their mother's warning to stomp the snow off of their boots.

Marti came in soon after, with Patrick, her youngest, bundled in a snowsuit. She plopped him down and headed back to the car. Johnny, Marti's husband, was a chef, and he usually



Wikimedia

Made popular in the 1960s, the yo-yo was invented in ancient Greece.

worked part of Christmas day, but he had given Marti a big pan of Greek baklava to contribute to the feast. He would join us later, tired but happy to be there.

EVENING COMES

It is already dark out, and the married sisters have gone home. Mama is trying to fit the leftovers in the refrigerator, putting what doesn't fit out on a table in the enclosed back porch. At this time of year it is cold enough outside that the porch makes for a good second refrigerator. Gina and Neanie are in the hallway playing a game of pick-up sticks, which we call "pixie sticks," and I vaguely hear their soft chatter.

I'm in my pajamas and sitting at Daddy's feet, my precious doll held to my chest. Daddy is playing Silent Night on his big, beautiful Martin guitar. His rich baritone fills the house, lulling me to sleep. I am trying very hard to stay awake but soon find myself leaning against his legs. My eyelids grow heavy until I can no longer stay awake. I don't remember when he carried me to bed.

THE RECIPES

Here are two dishes that will make any Christmas dinner sparkle. Although they read like haute cuisine, both are actually quite easy to prepare.

JANE AUSTEN'S PHEASANT WITH BACON

This recipe is based on one that 18th-century author Jane Austen preferred. To be true to her original I left "pheasant" in the title, however most of us would no doubt replace the pheasant with Cornish game hens. Austen also recommends wrapping the birds with parchment, but since most modern diners enjoy a nicely browned bird I omitted the paper. If you decide to use it, reduce the oven heat to the highest temperature recommended on the parchment's directions for use and adjust the cook time accordingly.

12 strips raw bacon
4 pheasants (or Cornish game hens), with giblets

Salt and pepper to taste
¼ cup drawn butter or melted lard
1 bunch fresh parsley, chopped fine
2-3 green onions, sliced thinly

Preheat oven to 450 degrees F. Line a baking pan with foil and spray it with non-stick spray or brush it with a bit of lard.

Cut each piece of bacon in half, then take half of the slices and dice them into small pieces. Remove the giblet packets and pat the birds dry; salt and pepper them. Remove the livers from the giblet packet and lightly season them with salt and pepper. (Discard the remaining giblets or save them for stock or gravy if you wish). Place the diced bacon in a skillet and saute until it's crisp, 6-8 minutes. Remove the bacon to a bowl, leaving the grease. Add the livers to the hot skillet. Saute until the livers are cooked but not browned, no more than 5 minutes. Let them cool slightly, then chop fine and add them to the bacon. Combine the bacon and livers with the parsley and onions, seasoning as needed. Lightly stuff the cavity of each bird with 1/4th of the mixture. Place the birds side by side in a baking pan. Lay 3 strips of the remaining, uncooked bacon over each bird. Baste the birds with the butter or lard. Bake for about 1 hour, or until the thickest part of the thigh reaches 180 degrees F. If the birds are browning too quickly, cover them with a sheet of foil for the last 15 minutes or so. Serves four (one bird per person).

LOW SUGAR DARK CHOCOLATE ESPRESSO PECAN PIE

I don't know who came up with the saying "easy as pie," but I'm certain that it was someone who always buys those awful, pre-made pie crusts because the crust is the hardest part. I assure you, however, that the crust for this pie is honestly easy as pie. There is no rolling involved and you can throw it together in seconds using your food processor. I must confess, though, the finished product is a bit of an expense. The Lily's brand sugar-free dark chocolate chips (available at The Fresh Market, Evansville) cost around \$8 for a 9-ounce bag. However, as a gift item for sugar-monitoring family and friends this pie is a memorable treat. You can get two pies plus some extra from one bag.

Now, on with the recipe. At the moment the finished pie is sitting on the counter, softly calling my name.

ALMOND FLOUR CRUST

For a beautiful, uncrumbly crust, make sure you use almond flour, not almond meal. I used Bob's Red Mill brand, which is available at nearly every grocery store in our area. If you don't have a sifter, use a tablespoon to loosen up the flour in the package, then spoon it into your measuring cup.

2 cups almond flour
¼ teaspoon salt
2 tablespoons shortening or room temperature coconut oil
1 egg

Place all ingredients in a food processor and pulse until blended. The mixture may look crumbly but it is not. Scoop the dough out and simply press it into a 9" pie pan. Set the crust aside and prepare the pecan filling.

THE FILLING

2 cups pecan halves
½ cup sugar free chocolate chips
1 cup sugar-free maple flavored syrup (I used Cracker Barrel brand)
1 cup Splenda or other sugar substitute
2 teaspoons instant espresso
3 eggs
3 tablespoons butter, melted
1 teaspoon vanilla

Preheat the oven to 350 degrees, F. Evenly layer the pecans into the bottom of the prepared pie crust. Layer the chocolate chips over the top of the nuts. In a large bowl, whisk together the remaining ingredients until the espresso is dissolved. Pour the mixture over the chocolate and nuts. Made with sugar substitute, I found that the pie was fully baked in about 45 minutes. With real sugar it may take a bit longer, so check the pie with a wooden pick to ensure that it is fully cooked before removing from the oven. Serves eight.