

When the Perfect Christmas Goes Bad

When my wife was little, her family was Amish. Barn raisings, buggies, high-stepping horses, shoofly pies—the whole postcard.

Later, they left that life and became mainstream farmers. The suspenders and bonnets were gone, but they remained hard-working, no nonsense, sweep-the-porch folks. As good-natured a family as homemade jam and bread.

I grew up taking in the city. Mom and I would hop the streetcar into downtown Baltimore. Lights, crowds, noise, action—the busier, the better. Birthdays were a big thing, **Christmas**, bigger yet. Whoop it up. Break some eggs, make an omelet.

My wife and I met in college. I first saw Verna from across the cafeteria. Popular as a lemonade stand in summer. Prettier than an evening meadow blinking with fireflies. I was hooked. Proposed on the beach. We walked the aisle, started life together.

Verna kept everything worthwhile from her childhood and folded the rest into a drawer. Worked circles around any woman you'd know. Line-dried the wash, taught the kids, pinched the pennies. Joined me in whatever hoopla I wanted, but—in her mother's meat-and-potatoes tradition—*never* got exotic in the kitchen ... until one December.

Wishing to please—wanting some memories for the kids—she found a recipe book. Brimming with color photos. Promises of the perfect Christmas. The kind, no doubt, her husband recalled from urban days of yore.

Sugar plums in her head, practical impulses stuffed away in an apron pocket, she purchased the ingredients to yuletide bliss.

A concoction to bless the family forever.

The evening has arrived. The fortunate are assembled about the table. There is to be a holiday surprise:

“Festive Yule Log.”

Candles aglow, faces upturned. The platter of glory is borne to the table. Mother seated. Nod given.

Trembling forks sink into the first sampling mouthful. Eyes closed for concentration. The pregnant pause. ... A searching for words. The furtive glances. The first stifled chortle. Then, oh, the hooting and howling.

The slappings on the table.

The witticisms.

The criticisms.

Centered on the table, the Yule Log sulks—rolled in a fine gravel posing as crushed nuts. A taste akin to cream cheese blended with toothpaste—perhaps Crest, no, Colgate. As if sautéed in soy sauce, glued into shape by an application of Crisco. The look of a food item suspected of disease, held in quarantine at Customs.

Verna smiles weakly. Rises. Whisks the mistake into exile. All the while carols from the record player begin straying off-key and Misters Currier and Ives are ushered to the backyard, blindfolded, and shot.

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Solomon foresaw that many designs for **Christmas Eve** would go awry. Why else would he write, “Do not boast about tomorrow, for you do not know what a day may bring forth” (Prov. 27:1)? Or, “You can make many plans, but the Lord’s purpose will prevail” (Prov. 19:21, NLT)?

God has bigger plans for you than the perfect dinner. That's why He lets things go wrong. He's saving your appetite for the perfect eternity. He notices you smitten with this short life, feeling it slip through your fingers, trying to shake a snow-globe Christmas out of every December.

The *true* holiday magic is reserved for heaven. Every delight down here is a mere taste and teaser.

Knowing that, doesn't it ease the pressure just a bit as you flip through recipes on the 24th—biting your lip, pondering a go at that Festive Yule Log?

(By the way, Verna recovered nicely.)

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Steven Estes is a pastor who has known "better Decembers with my family than either Currier or Ives," but also understands a gray Christmas. A Better December draws on Estes' 23 years of counseling church members through the holiday season as well his other writings on the topic of human suffering.

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Learn more about Estes and his books at .