



As I intimated in my last column, I am often the victim of great expectations. I tend to idealize all sorts of things in my life, only to crash hard when the ideal turns out to me merely... real. The first step toward curbing this dynamic is, of course, recognizing it. (Check.) The second is maintaining a sense of humor. And I've found that if I can write about it, I can usually laugh about it.

To that end, let me tell you a little story about my Christmas. I'm tempted to call it "The Christmas From Hell"... but that would be misleading. (And maybe a bit sacrilegious?)

First, let me state that there's a good reason I tend to idealize Christmas – beyond the obvious fact that most everyone does – and that reason is this: Christmas in my family is usually pretty spectacular. I am one of four daughters, and at Christmas time, we sisters descend upon our parents' house on the banks of the Tennessee River, along with our spouses and kids, and all manner of festivity ensues. And ensues. And continues to ensue. My parents erect a tremendous tree festooned with ornaments from our childhood, Mom cooks one fabulous meal after another, cookies are baked, wine is consumed, pictures are snapped, gifts are exchanged, holiday music is blasted to the rafters, laughter rings through the house... and on it goes. For days.

This year, all was going according to plan, until Christmas Eve eve, when my mom's beloved old dog Patch playfully nipped my two-year-old niece Ellie on the cheek. When I say "playfully nipped" I mean "chomped down hard with his sharp canine teeth."

My sister's maternal reflexes kicked in immediately ("Give me my daughter, PLEASE!"), as did my mother's ("Patch NEVER bites! Well, he bit me once, but only because I came up behind him and *scared* him.") After some rushing about, rocking, and Neosporin-izing, Ellie was absolutely fine. But she now had two garish red marks on her otherwise pristine face... and the big Christmas Day gathering was less than two days away.

What mother hasn't been *there*? You know the scenario: You're headed home for the holidays, your sparkly new child in tow. You can't wait to show her off to old friends and extended family members – some of whom have never seen her, others of whom are desperate (so you imagine) to chart her progress since your last visit. And the day you leave, or arrive, or whatever... it happens. Upon her perfect, flawless, impeccable face there suddenly erupts a rash... or a bug bite... or a bruise. You try to tamp down your feelings of dismay. You know how petty they are. Your child is happy and healthy and that's all that matters. And yet...

Take heed, young mothers... if this hasn't happened to you, it will. And you, too, will be petty.

But my sister was strong – stoic, really – and didn't complain a bit, though I felt her pain. (A sister *knows*.) Fortunately, she also had nine-month-old Sadie to display, whose face was miraculously unscathed when Christmas Day rolled round.

And by then, Ellie's face was also much improved. The swelling had gone down and the red marks seemed less... red. She came traipsing into our Christmas Day gathering like an angel from on high, wearing the most gorgeous little-girl dress you've ever seen – puffed sleeves, hand smocking, the whole nine yards. The Christmas gathering – which included lots of extended family and hometown friends – was happening at another sister's house, 20 minutes from my folks', and some of us had converged on their back patio around the outdoor fireplace. Upon her arrival, Ellie came out to say hello, then began running around in the backyard... where she promptly stepped, slid, then fell, in a large pile of dog poop. Her mother, my sister – who, of course, also had the infant Sadie to contend with – had to change Ellie into some plain ol' play clothes and submerge her lovely Sunday school shoes in the utility room sink.

"She looked so beautiful in the first dress," my mom sighed, vexed by this turn of events. As the grandmother, she, too, had high hopes for the exhibition of this child. (I refrained from mentioning that Ellie'd looked even *more* beautiful before her precious Patch took his "playful

nip.”) Meanwhile, another sister – the one hosting the party and frantically organizing our huge feast – was making agonized apologies for *her* canine culprits, Lizzie and Chance. “I swear I checked the entire yard half an hour ago...”

None of this cramped our Christmas style too terribly much, and the day unfolded just fine. But I began to feel weary, and a little queasy, late in the afternoon. My brother-in-law Barney – our host – had suffered an upset stomach the night before, but nobody had taken it too seriously, including Barney. We all just chalked it up to “something he ate.” (Lord knows there was enough eating going on.) But my nausea got worse, and just as a whole new round of friends arrived for after-dinner drinks – did I mention we were also celebrating my parents’ 50th wedding anniversary? – I reluctantly (but emphatically) asked Jeff to take me home.

I’ll spare you the details of what happened when we got there.

As it turns out, there was an uninvited guest at our Christmas Day gathering. A stomach bug. And I was only the first of many – well, theoretically, Barney was the first of many – to make its acquaintance. Within 24 hours, my parents’ house had become a makeshift infirmary. My mom was down, my daughter was down, my husband was down. My third sister – she’s yet to make her appearance in this tale! – rushed her husband and stepson back to their house the next town over... and they all went down. And when I say down, I mean *down*. I was up with my daughter eight times in one night – while still sick myself – just holding the poor child’s hair back. Need I say more?

Over the next day or two, friends who had been at the party called to report that they, too, were down. This virus had gone seriously viral. Since I got it earlier, I recovered earlier – though “recovered” is a relative term – and found my weak, weary self cast in the unlikely role of infirmary nurse. (Ask anybody in my family – I am NOT the nurturer! My sister the nurse is the nurturer!) We all kept referring to it, optimistically, as a “24 hour stomach bug,” but new symptoms kept emerging (aches, pains, fever) even as the hours of duration multiplied. (I’m writing this column 5 days later, and I still don’t feel quite right.)

I am tempted, as I often am, to give my story a happy ending... to wrap it all up in a neat little package with a bow. But, even if one views life as a divine comedy – and I try, I really do – denying its sad chapters is dishonest and self-defeating. The truth is that Christmas, this year, went out with a whimper, not a bang. It started strong – it really did! – but it petered out pretty pathetically. My sister with the baby girls fled home to Charleston as fast as she and her hubby

could hit the road, and report that they have thus far been spared. My mom couldn't even kiss the babies goodbye – and was almost too sick to care, but not quite – and neither could my ten-year-old, who would like everyone to know that she threw up 12 times in 12 hours. (Cool, huh?) I never got to see my two Alabama sisters again, as they were now convalescing in their own homes, so our favorite annual tradition – sitting lazily around Mom's kitchen island, eating leftovers and indulging in post-Christmas gossip – was down the toilet... literally. My dad, strangely spared the bug, wandered around the house picking up toys, putting away food, and delivering Cokes to my mom, looking like some shell-shocked survivor in a wartime hospital.

As for us... we stayed a day longer than we'd planned, mainly because Amelia was too sick to travel. When we finally *did* drag our wan, wasted bodies back to Beaufort, she had a pretty good day in the car, but threw up one more time that night, for good measure. (For those who are counting, that makes thirteen.)

So, this year won't go down in our family history as The Best Christmas Ever. But so what? There were some genuine Christmas tragedies in the news this year – you know the ones – and I have friends who spent their first Christmas with an empty chair at the family table. In light of these realities – and especially in retrospect – our Christmas ordeal really does seem comical. Almost blessedly so, in its way. It wasn't much fun at the time, but we went through it together. And that's something.

As a matter of fact, I'm pretty sure that's everything.

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