

A Harrowing Holiday Adventure

By



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Last weekend, it almost rained on my parade.

First, some background: I'm one of those high strung, hyper-sensitive people who mentally elevates every pleasant event that occurs semi-regularly – or even more than twice – to that hallowed realm known as "Tradition," setting up an endless series of sacred expectations that will inevitably be violated by reality, battering my soul and leaving me desolate.

Yeah, it's kind of a drag.

And so it was – almost – with this year's Beaufort Christmas Parade. I'd been looking forward to it for weeks – it's one of my favorite holiday traditions – and I was delighted when the weather turned cold the night before. (Earlier in the week, it looked like we might be facing another 80-degree Christmas parade, a phenomenon I stubbornly refuse to embrace as "tradition," no matter how many times it repeats itself.) Our daughter had been sick for a few days – threatening my tradition – but was now recovering nicely and felt good enough to walk in the parade with her dance company. Jeff and I planned to watch the parade from outside our Bay Street office, near the big clock, like we always do. (Except for that one time when I radically broke from tradition to march in the parade with a kazoo band, but that's another story.) Everything was coming together in the traditional manner . . .

Until Amelia refused to dress in traditional Christmas attire (aka "warm clothes"). And Jeff

decided he didn't feel like going.

Did I mention that I'm high strung and hyper-sensitive? My heart began to pound and I could feel my blood pressure rising. But as I sensed my plans and wishes – my "ideal parade experience" – beginning to evaporate, I decided to try something entirely new. (You might say I departed from my personal tradition.) Instead of engaging Amelia in a long, heated argument about her scant clothing, I decided to just . . . let it go. Instead of nagging Jeff to come along to the parade – an annual tradition on my part, I confess – I decided to just go without him. It would all be fine, right? Being cold in the parade wouldn't kill Amelia, and she might just learn a lesson. Watching the parade without Jeff was no big deal either, was it? He's not really a parade guy, and besides, there would be plenty of folks downtown to watch with. I'd see lots of friends. It would be fun. An adventure.

I dropped off Amelia at her dance studio on Greene Street, then drove downtown, feeling proud of my new loosey-goosey attitude. I had relaxed my grip on tradition, and the earth was still spinning on its axis. I was cool, baby. Just letting it roll. *Que sera, sera*. No worries . . .

I parked at the library and strolled down to the big clock. I was 45 minutes early, but people were already lining the street in lawn chairs, as they traditionally do. It was cold and grey and everybody was bundled up. I saw scarves and hats and lots of cute little mittens. Suddenly, visions of my own child – in her thin leggings, tank top, and lightweight jacket – danced in my head, leaving no room for sugarplums. Despite my best efforts to bar the psychic door, I felt Mom Guilt creeping in. *Great. Just great.* Mom Guilt is typically the beginning of the end of my good time. And my good time hadn't even started yet.

(Deep breath. Put it out of your mind, girl. She's not a baby. She's 12-years-old and she's dressed the way she wants to be dressed. You warned her. . . . Oh, who are you kidding?! You're her mother! You should have made her layer up!)

I looked around for somebody to distract me from my Gollum-esque monologue. In a sea of rosy, scarf-wrapped faces, I recognized not a single one. I decided to text my good friend L who always comes down for the parade. (A couple of times, we'd even popped into Luther's beforehand for a Bloody Mary. It was almost a tradition!) Surely L was around here somewhere. "Are you downtown for the parade?" I texted. A few minutes later, I got a one-word reply: "Nope." That was it. Just "nope." I felt my spirit sag.

Determined to salvage my parade experience – my beloved tradition! – I crossed Bay Street and peered in the window of one of my new (but already traditional) hangouts, the Old Bull Tavern. There were people gathered around the table near the door. They looked happy and cozy and . . . completely unfamiliar.

I turned left onto Port Republic Street and glanced into another of my traditional haunts, Emily's. There were folks sitting at the bar, watching TV. I had never seen them before in my life.

I wandered back down to Bay Street, where the crowd was growing. I looked around, feeling hopeful, only to find myself facing an even larger mass of absolute strangers. Traditionally, I'm quite good with strangers. I genuinely like most people I meet, and I make conversation easily.

Not this time. I kept trying to strike up a chat with folks to my right and left – "How 'bout this weather? Brrrr!" – but nobody was interested. Nobody was even polite. A couple of people actually looked right through me, as if I were invisible.

What was going on here? I felt like I'd entered an episode of the Twilight Zone. What had become of my warm, friendly, small southern town, where everybody knows your name and you never meet a stranger? And where, for God's sake, was the freaking Christmas spirit?!

This was serious. The parade would be here soon, and I was not having a good time. I was cold and lonely and riddled with Mom Guilt. I was feeling neither merry nor bright; my yuletide was far from gay. My tradition was in real peril. I was in danger of having a Bad Parade.

And then it started to mist.

I hurried up the stairs of Common Ground, thinking a nice cup of coffee might warm my body and my spirit. I opened the door, and there must have been at least 50 people standing in line with the same idea. They looked at me blankly. Fifty blank-faced strangers. Was this Christmas

in Downtown Beaufort or the Zombie Apocalypse?

I backed out into the cold, dank, soul-crushing bleakness . . . then had another idea. Upstairs in my office, I found an open bottle of red wine left over from the night before when a few friends had gathered on the porch to watch the boat parade. (It's becoming a tradition.) There was one lone Solo cup left, and I filled it half full, then ventured back out into the crowd. (This was probably illegal, so shhhhh . . .) As I walked back toward the big clock, I heard someone call my name. It was like a small miracle! It was also a huge relief, because at this point, I was beginning to doubt my own existence. (Was I really here? And if so, where exactly was here?)

There were my pals D and L (a different L) on their bikes, looking chilled but cheerful. I had never seen two such beautiful faces! I hugged them tight, as if my life depended on it. (I felt like it did.)

And then, I heard something even more wonderful than the sound of my own name. At first, it was barely audible, just a tiny echo from somewhere far, far away. Then it got a little louder . . . and a little louder . . . and a little louder still . . . and then it was filling the air, this glorious sound, and a glorious sight appeared with it. It was the Parris Island Marine Band, marching with their traditional dazzle and precision, playing "Joy to the World" with heartfelt gusto. Suddenly, everybody was clapping and cheering and smiling at everybody else. And they were even smiling at me! Those rude, stand-offish strangers were my new best friends. *Let heaven and nature sing!* It wasn't cold anymore, though it was still misting. And now, my eyes were misting, too.

The parade was here, and it was going to be fabulous! My tradition was safe for another year.

And all it took was a couple of friends, a cup of wine, and the United States Marine Corps.

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Epilogue: My daughter tells me she'll definitely be wearing gloves and a scarf in next year's parade . . . unless it's 80 degrees. (I told her to perish the thought!) Merry Christmas, y'all.

Tradition!

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