



By Margaret Evans, Editor

Like millions of Americans, my family and I have been grappling with the big Christmas Question. Should we stay or should we go?

If you're one of those folks whose knee jerks at the mere mention of traveling to see family this Covid Christmas, you should probably stop reading now. You will not be moved by my plight. For the rest of you, here's how it is with us: My mom will be 82 in January. She lost my dad a year and a half ago. She lives alone in Alabama. Thanks to last year's foreign exchange, she hasn't seen my daughter in almost two years. She's the quintessential "people person" and has been suffering mightily under quarantine. She knows her own mind – as well as the health risks – and she is begging us to come home for Christmas.

We know all the reasons why we shouldn't, so no letters to the editor, please. This situation is hard enough without the peer pressure. Besides, there's enough of that on Facebook.

It's kind of amazing we're even entertaining the possibility of going home, considering our family track record. In recent years we've had a string of bad yuletide luck. You might even say Christmas has been cursed.

There was that time, a few years back, when my entire extended family – all three generations – came down with a terrible stomach virus, suddenly and simultaneously, on Christmas night. Everybody except my father, that is. As I wrote at the time, “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.” I’ll spare you any more details, but whenever I think of that Christmas, the charmingly antiquated word “vomitorium” comes to mind.

And the worst was yet to come. A couple of years later – 2017 – my sister’s house burned down on Christmas Day. Twenty-five friends and family members – and several assorted pets – literally fled the holiday table, mid-feast. We all lived to tell the grim tale, thank God, but the house went up in flames before our eyes – along with everything in it – as we stood shivering in the front yard, waiting for the fire trucks. A holly jolly Christmas.

The next year, our fearless clan returned to the scene like a flock of Phoenixes rising from the ashes. My sister and her husband had rebuilt with aplomb, and renewal was in the air. I think that Christmas was fairly uneventful, but I might be blocking something. It’s all relative with my relatives.

My dad passed away the following spring, so last Christmas – 2019 – was to be our first without our dear patriarch. Envisioning Christmas without Dad was like imagining a tree without its star on top. He was a giant cornball about the holidays – a sweater-loving, carol-singing, light-stringing fanatic – and we were determined to be festive in his honor. Mom had recently joined the choir at the Episcopal Church, and we were all looking forward to watching her sing in the Christmas Eve service, a big to-do full of pomp and pageantry. “Midnight mass” they called it, though it was to start at 11 pm. Staying awake – and away from the wine – was our only challenge.

Or so we thought. While throwing together a light Christmas Eve supper for our large brood – four sisters, bros-in-law, nieces and nephews, etc. – Mom tripped on the kitchen rug and dove face-first into a countertop. For at least an hour afterwards, she kept insisting she would, *indeed*,
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still
be singing with the choir, even as her nose swelled and purple moons appeared beneath her eyes. Mom had been practicing her music for weeks – without Dad, choir was the thing getting her through Advent – and we were loath to pry this joy away from her. But the night wore on, the nose got bigger, the eyes got blacker, and pry we did.

By the next morning, there was something else that needed prying. Mom’s ring finger –

jammed on the counter the night before – had swollen up like a sausage overnight, and her wedding ring appeared to be cutting off her circulation. We tried butter and Crisco, but this level of “prying” was above our pay grade. So after watching her grandkids rip into their Santa loot and serving up her traditional Christmas breakfast casserole – Eggs Elegant – Mom finally allowed a couple of my sisters to drive her to the emergency room, where they ultimately had to cut off her wedding ring. (Hey, it was that or her finger. Mom’s not particularly sentimental about jewelry, but she *is* fond of her digits.) The finger was so enormous – and the ring so tiny – that the ER docs didn’t even have the right instruments for the job. They had to call in the fire department!

A couple of the firefighters remembered Mom from “the incident” of Christmas 2017. I am told they were handsome – as firefighters are wont to be – and that some unabashed flirting ensued. Even with a swollen nose and two black eyes, my mother’s not one to pass up a flirtable moment. This trip to the ER may have been the highlight of her Christmas 2019.

So now we come to Christmas 2020. My dad is still gone, there have been no more visits from firefighters (a mixed blessing), no book club meetings, no lunches with friends, and no choir practice for nine months. Sometime during this slow blur of a pandemic, my mom’s beloved mutt Scruffy died, which just about did her in. There is now a new dog in her life, Maisy, who seems to be running her ragged in the best kind of way. But, again, my mom is a people person. She needs to be *with* people, and do *for* people. Every time we talk on the phone, she complains that she’s “quickly deteriorating” in this quarantine mode, both mentally and physically. She says she “just can’t bear” not seeing us for Christmas, and while I know that she actually *could*, I’m just not sure she should have to.

While avoiding the end of this column, I was mindlessly scrolling through Facebook – I do that sometimes when I don’t know how to finish, because I don’t know what I think – and I came upon some news that punched me in the gut. A woman I’ve never met, but who feels like an old friend – I’ve been reading her essays and listening to her podcast for years – lost both her parents in a car accident yesterday. Just like that. Out of the blue. Two days ago, her beloved parents – her children’s adored grandparents – were alive and healthy and driving somewhere. And now they’re gone. She’ll never see them again. And Christmas will never be the same.

Life is so fragile. And so very precious. We weigh quantity against quality and pray that we never have to choose between them.

I still don’t know how this column ends.

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