

An Idiot Girl's Christmas

True Tales from the Top
of the Naughty List

Laurie Notaro



VILLARD

An Idiot Girl's
CHRISTMAS

*True Tales from the Top
of the Naughty List*



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To Idiot Girls everywhere

What I Really Want for Christmas

This year, I've finally come face-to-face with the truth: I'm getting crap for Christmas. I guess it really shouldn't bother me, and should come as absolutely no surprise. I always get crap for Christmas. I, however, do not get as much crap as my friend Kate does when she goes home to Minnesota for the holidays, and then she has to haul all of the crap halfway across the continent of the United States.

This year, to avoid the disappointment of asking for a leather jacket and getting a windbreaker with a reindeer on it instead (last year's tragedy), Kate has determined that she will beat her family at their own game. She is a genius.

We were out to dinner when she unfolded her ultimate plan of brilliancy. "Last night, my mom called and asked what I wanted for Christmas," Kate said. "And I thought for a minute, and I really wanted to say, 'It doesn't matter, because you'll just get me the first thing you see with a sale sticker on it at Wal-Mart.' And then I decided, why be disappointed? I'm never going to get what I ask for, so I told my mom, 'What I really want is some dish towels with puffy decals on them, preferably of a Christmas character, the cheapest washcloths ever made, and the biggest, whitest pairs of underwear you can find at Sears. That's what I want.' "

According to Kate, her mother giggled with delight. "Ooooh," she cooed, "that will be easy!"

So I'm taking the same route. This year, I've made my list and I've checked it twice, so this one is for you, Mom, who never fails to get me enough white cotton briefs to outfit a convent for a whole year, and other people who see fit to unload the Crap Wagon on me on what is SUPPOSED to be the Happiest Day of the Year. It is the DISNEYLAND OF DAYS, but I always end up hauling shit home that belongs only on a shelf at Goodwill. And no, it is not the thought that counts when the thought "Only a little is missing. She'll never know I used this."

WHAT I REALLY WANT FOR CHRISTMAS

by Laurie Notaro

What I really want for Christmas is a Big Mouth Billy Bass or a Travis the Singing Trout. The more the better, especially now that they're available in outlet stores for ninety-nine cents, being that the novelty has worn a rut into the ground deeper than the Oregon Trail. I could hang them on my wall all together, like they would be in real life in a lake. They are the funniest things I've ever seen, and

never get tired of hearing them sing.

Pick out a whimsical hat for me, something you've never seen another person wear that just beckons to you from the hat stand as you point to it and exclaim in uncontained excitement, "THAT Laurie!" If it resembles something a character from the classic ensemble Fat Albert or Captain Stubing of *The Love Boat* would wear or something you've seen on a pimp, it probably belongs on my head. If it has feathers on it, all the better—after all, who knows my style better than people who don't even know that acrylic gives me hives, and will be expecting me to wear it when they come to visit.

Always on my list is a scrumptious delicacy from my mother's favorite Wax Candle Baked Goods store. I don't know where my mother found a wax store that specializes in baked-goods and pastries and candles, but she did. Good work, Mom! Mmmm, mmmmm, just imagine a whole box of cupcakes—moist, rich chocolate cake underneath a virtual mushroom cloud of marvelous buttercream frosting bursting with a delicious, irresistible cupcake smell. And I mean bursting, filling up rooms of the house like you've just baked them. It's the perfect diet food, because biting into one is like biting into Jennifer Lopez's double-decker ass at Madame Tussaud's, kinda like sinking your choppers into a thick, dense bar of Irish Spring—without the flavor. Yummy yummy. Because having fake cupcakes that smell like real cupcakes around your house all day long every day is just what a fat girl needs to make her carrot-stick-and-cottage-cheese lunch last and last and last until it's time to peel back the film on her steaming, overcooked-to-the-point-of-dehydration Lean Cuisine dinner. Yummy. I can't say it enough. YUMMY.

Another thing I really want is chunks of hair from the hair carts at the mall. I want extensions, braids, and a big fake bun. How intriguing would I be, showing up every day with a new hairstyle? One day short, one day long, one day curly, and one day with cornrows? Please, make me beautiful (and mysterious!) (and blond!) (and redheaded!) (and raven-haired!) Gimme a head with hair, long beautiful hair! Shining, gleaming, streaming, flaxen, waxen, but most importantly, hair I *never have to wash*.

This next request may seem impossible, but I know it's not! I would love every article of clothing you can think of with Tweety Bird on it that you haven't already given me. Yes, everything! Go to the Warner Bros. clearance rack and just plunder! T-shirts, sweatshirts, socks, a coat, a hat, a windbreaker, sweatpants, tote bag, coasters—anything with Tweety Bird on it would be just incredible, even though I'm not the one who was so fascinated with Tweety Bird that I had him tattooed on my shoulder, it was my husband's ex-girlfriend.

Of course, I would enjoy nothing more than getting some really cheap bath crystals, so I could use them when I take a shower because I don't have a bathtub. If you could get some that smell like Pine Sol or an old lady's teeth, I would squeal with glee! Happy piglet would I be. What else would be more relaxing than tossing up a handful of crystals and running around my shower stall so they hit me and stick to me like kitty litter?

Oh, and yes, you guessed it, Christmas socks! If there's anything that says, "Let's celebrate the birthday of your Christian Lord," it's an acrylic knit with metallic thread and a reinforced toe. I love Christmas socks! I love all kinds of Christmas socks—socks with snowmen, snowflakes, Santa, trees—and if I've been really good this year, get me ones with the word "Believe!" stitched right up the

side. I BELIEVE in Christmas socks! Christmas socks with bells? Jingly, jolly, and rockin' with holly! If you could score Baby Jesus socks, my God. Literally! Could I ever come down off that cloud? While you're in the foot aisle at Safeway buying my Christmas present, take a step to the left and grab a can of Tough Actin' Tinactin, too, because I'll want to wear these socks so much you'll have to kick me to get them off my feet, and eventually I'll need something for the itch and decomposition of my toes.

Don't forget a block of monogrammed Lucite, especially one with the meaning of my name documented on it to clear up the mystery and help ground my self-identity: "Laurie: Feminine form of the Late Latin name *Laurus*, which means 'laurel,' which was used to create victors' garlands. Saint Laura was a ninth-century Spanish martyr, a nun who was thrown into a vat of molten lead by the Moors." Ho ho ho! That's right. Nothing says love, class, and Happy Holidays like a clear chunk of Lucite plastic teamed up with my name and the inspiring tale of a nun who was boiled to death like a lobster.

If all of the Lucite blocks are already sold out (you can't take astonishing gifts for granted, you know), do me a favor; go the extra mile and bestow upon me a Rubik's Cube with your photo on all six sides! What's better than one photo of you? Why, SIX of them! What fun it would be to writhe in the eternal task of spending my spare time putting six of your heads on six of the appropriate bodies. Grand fun, I tell you, grand. The only way I'd have more fun is if I was beating my arms against my chest while cloaked in a killer bee colony intent on tickling me all the way into an anaphylactic coma.

If you're in a jam and suddenly realize that my name has vanished from your shopping list and you've never ordered that Six Sides of Me, Me, Me, Me, Me, and Then Me Rubik's Cube, fear not, do not curse yourself; something from your house is fine, preferably if it's used. Who wouldn't mind a little pre-loved bath gel or lotion, or soap that you've found a little too fragrant for your tastes? In the immortal words of George W. Bush during the time of overwhelming insurgent attacks in a hostile country, BRING IT ON! Shampoo that's not for you, pour some sugar on *me*! I understand that you've merely pretested it to make sure it lives up to the standards you set for giving gifts. I totally understand that. Kind of like when people would taste food for kings to make sure it's not poisoned except in this case, you spit a little back on the plate is all. That's all. Just a little spit. What's a little spit in a heartfelt Christmas gift? So little that you almost can't tell it's hardly there at all. *Hardly*. I would also love little sample soaps and tiny bottles of shampoo and conditioner from hotels. Make me feel like I've been on vacation without the expense or the hassle of enjoyment.

And lastly, FREE GIFTS that you've received for buying something you wanted are always welcome in my Christmas stocking! After all, if you're getting a free gift with something you bought, why pay for mine? Why should you fork out moolah for my gift just because I forked out moolah for yours? The look on our faces is payment enough when we open the Choo-Choo Train wall clock that you got as a bonus when you bought the "Riding the Rails" Hobo Train Set you've just spent the last hour showing us in great detail despite the fact that we have already seen it multiple times on television since the commercial offering the free Choo-Choo clock with purchase is on what you could term "heavy rotation" during the holiday season. Choo choo! Choo Choo! Every quarter, half, and full hour on the hour, choo choo! Enough to make a peaceful man take up shootin', or to understand why you'd pass on a perfectly good free gift like this. Free gifts are not always pleasant, let's remember that. Like parking tickets and VD.

Well, I can't wait for Christmas now, as I'm sure everything on my wish list will be bought, ordered, or scavenged from the musty, danky hall closet and all of my dreams will come true. Except for the one in which I'm in a business meeting eating a doughnut and when I look down to brush off the crumbs (oh, there are *always* crumbs) there's just a sprinkling of coconut flakes over my big, bare, naked boobs, although I am wearing a watch and a Hope Eternal Diamonique pendant from QVC that my mom got me last year. I hope that dream better not come true. That pendant is so full of fake sparkle it could bring in planes.

Merry Christmas!

Laurie

P.S. Oh, I forgot one thing: I sure could use some more white cotton briefs, and the bigger the better! We used some of last year's supply to cover bushes during the last freeze, and also as sheet for the guest bedroom. Toss in some nylon panties, too, because we're thinking about taking up skydiving.

Helpful Tips on How to Throw an Unforgettable Holiday Party and Die Alone in Six Easy Steps

I was walking by the TV last week when an episode of a local lifestyle show caught my eye. The featured guests, two police officers, were explaining how several factors were essential to making your holiday party a successful one, and that's when I eagerly pulled up a chair to watch uninterrupted.

Oh, good, I thought, they're going to fork over the recipe for Johnny Law's Jungle Juice, and I'm ready to write it all down, and this is what they said:

Holiday Prevention Information for those of you who are HOSTING Parties:

- Serve high-protein food, and offer nonalcoholic beverages.
- Encourage guests to designate a driver or offer alternative transportation.
- Never serve alcohol to those under the age of twenty-one.
- Don't let guests mix their own drinks, and "close the bar" ninety minutes before the party ends.
- Report suspected drunk drivers IMMEDIATELY to area police.

Now, I don't know how many parties those cops have been to in their lives, but in my book, those aren't tips on how to have a successful party; those are a step-by-step list of "Six Easy Steps to Become a Social Pariah and Ensure a Death So Lonely That Only the Stench of Your Corpse Will Breathe Life of Consequence to Anybody."

Okay, now the "serve high-protein food" part I can totally agree with, because if you ever lose me at a party, find the cheese platter. Sure, some people call it filler, but I call it "Little Squares of Love" and as far as I'm concerned, there's no reason to answer the door if you don't have little orange cubes with frilly toothpicks stuck in them behind it.

The alternative transportation part—sure, fine, fine, whatever. You want alternative transportation? Hire a limo, but all you're getting from me is the recitation of "252-5252 Yellow Cab" and my phone in your hand. I mean, I'm throwing a *party* here, I'm not running FedEx. If you positively, absolutely have to be back home overnight, dude, make some Mormon friends, but don't count on me to be your ride.

Then there's the "never serve alcohol to those under the age of twenty-one" clause, which I guess I can agree with because I'm married, but if I was still dating, I mean, that's like throwing away half of the sea full of very strapping, fetching fish. Perfectly good talent going right to waste. But hey, you know, I want to throw a successful Holiday Prevention Information party, and that means no drunk, sexy, virile younguns, apparently.

And then we have the "Don't let guests mix their own drinks, and 'close the bar' ninety minutes before the party ends" rule.

Honestly, I'm not even sure what I should say *first* about this.

Um, you know, the last time I had a party that ended at a specific time, I got hit after my friend went home because Rhonda Legarski attached the tape on the tail of the donkey to my mother's brand new red-velvet-flocked wallpaper.

Ninety minutes before the party ends? How are you supposed to know when THAT is? I mean, when the host flies out a window or is seen passed out in a bathtub or is escorted away in handcuffs, THEN I guess you can say, "Wow, we were supposed to stop drinking, like, ninety minutes ago," but come ON, man! Do you see me with my own TV show talking to dead people? I'm no psychic! I didn't go to school for that! How do I know when the party is going to end? That's a lot of pressure for a partygoer, you know! Most of the time I'm not even sure if it's still P.M., let alone trying to figure out when every alcoholic at the party is going to burst into a pumpkin!

Surely my FAVORITE has to be "Report suspected drunk drivers IMMEDIATELY to area police." Oh, sure, yeah. Especially if you want to have another party *next* year. Talk about having five pounds of cheese cubes on your hands. Absolutely, everyone is going to go to your house for a party, especially when you got seven people arrested last year *in your driveway*. "Let's go to Neil's party this year, I think it will be a whole lot more fun than turning myself in," or "You know, Sharon's party is the place to be if you ever wondered what a Field Sobriety Test was like." Sure, it's a good idea, but only if you're running for office.

So beware, folks, if you're invited anywhere this season, you might want to ask if you can peek at the Party Manifesto before you commit to an evening of fun that rivals time spent in a holding pen at the county jail.

Well, at least there you could say, "You know, you should have stopped drinking ninety minutes ago."

Naughty or Nice

Naughty or nice.

Naughty or nice.

It looked like I had a decision to make.

I wavered back and forth as I approached the line at the checkout as it grew, exponentially, by the second.

If you've ever been to a do-it-yourself craft store in the weeks preceding the holiday season, I can fully confirm that you have experienced the seventh circle of hell.

All I needed was a \$1.49 chunky rubber stamp in the shape of a jingle bell to make some Christmas cards, and I found myself fourth in line, right behind a lady with dyed ratty hair. Despite the two cashier's stations facing each other, some genius had decided that we were all going to form one line which stretched out into the aisle and placed me in front of a rack of twinkle-light nets on sale for \$2.99. After the third Glue Gun Queen grazed my shin with her cart and caught the bottom of my backpack purse with her elbow, I turned around and bellowed a loud "EXCUSE ME," just to prove that I hadn't taken my invisible pills that morning.

"Oh," the cart-wielding maniac giggled. "Those backpacks are so cute, but they can be such a pain sometimes!"

"Yeah," I agreed, flashing my gummiest, widest smile. "Though it generally isn't bothersome until someone tries to ram a cart up my ass. You can go ahead and try it, but I'd have to charge you my standard rate unless you have a military ID."

It was starting to get pretty hot in the store. At one of the registers, a couple was arguing with the cashier about a seven-foot fake Christmas tree that had been advertised but had sold out; at the other register, a woman who had gone to high school with Mary Todd Lincoln moved up to the counter with a wagon full of twenty-nine-cent gold and red silk flowers.

"Twenty-nine, twenty-nine, twenty-nine," the cashier announced as she scanned each tag.

"No!" the silk-flower woman crackled. "That one was from the twenty-five-cent cart!"

"I bet the last time you were behind a cart it was being pulled by oxen," I said under my breath.

“Twenty-nine, twenty-nine, twenty-nine . . .”

Suddenly, from the corner of my eye, I saw something suspicious, something miraculous. A man in a craft-store apron was moving slowly behind another register, and with his hairy hand, he reached over and flipped on his “open” light.

I don’t think you could have gotten a bunch of women to move more quickly if someone had announced, “Oprah is giving away free cars on the glitter aisle, and she’s paying for the tax this time!” Before I could even begin to move toward that line, however, the women behind me executed a cut-off and changed lanes without signaling.

The rat-haired woman and I gasped together.

“That’s not fair!” she shouted. “Nine people behind us just got in that line! We were here first! He didn’t take the next person in line!”

“The cashiers don’t care,” I said drolly. “The same thing happened the last time I was here.”

“Really?” the rat-haired woman said as I nodded. Then she raised her little rat head above the crowd, shot the new cashier a dirty look, and yelled, “Hey, YOU! Cashier man! We were here first! You didn’t even ask who was next in line!”

“What do you want me to do?” the cashier asked harshly. “Do you want me to stop helping this lady and help you instead?”

The rat woman thought for a moment and then looked him straight in the eye. “YES,” she hissed. “YES I DO.”

“Twenty-ni—”

A hush fell over the whole store and everyone just stared as the rat-haired woman made her way through the congestion to the front of the new line and plopped her stuff on the counter, never once dropping her head, never once unlocking her little red eyes from those of the cashier.

Sally Field couldn’t have done it better. I felt like clapping and throwing long-stemmed roses at her.

“Forty dollars and sixty cents is NOT right!” the silk-flower lady yelled to her cashier, her shaking finger pointing. “I had it all figured out on paper this morning! You’re trying to cheat me!”

The couple arguing with the cashier marched out of the store, the line moved forward, and the woman in front of me took her place at the checkout. Since she was purchasing only several boxes of string lights, the transaction was smooth, easy, and almost over.

“I will not be cheated!” the old silk-flower woman yelled. “We’re going to count these together, and then you’ll see what a cheat you are!”

The lady at the other checkout was signing her name to her check. It was almost over. Almost over.

if I could just hang on, although I could feel an attack of Mall Malice—Road Rage’s bitter little sister—coming on, and I very badly wanted to pinch somebody.

“And here’s your receipt,” the cashier said, smiling pleasantly to the light lady in front of me. I took a step forward, anxious, waiting. I was drunk with anticipation.

“I want you to plug in these lights to see if they work,” the lady said as she took the receipt.

I wasn’t sure if I’d heard her right, but then she opened the package of lights and started fishing around for the cord.

I believe it was at this moment that I fell off the teeter-totter, that I lost whatever grasp I had on what was left of my patience, and my pinching fingers began twitching.

Naughty, naughty.

“NO WAY!” I heard myself freak out. “No way. NO. You are not plugging in those lights. You DO NOT get to do that.” And then to the cashier, “She is not plugging in those lights.” And to the crowd of angry women behind me, “She wants to plug in the lights!!”

“I don’t have an outlet,” the cashier offered.

“But I want to see if they work,” the light woman insisted.

“I don’t get to test out this stamp before I buy it!” I bellowed as I held up my item, then pointed to the woman behind me. “She doesn’t get to try out her paint. Those are the rules.”

The light woman just looked at me, holding the cord in her hand.

I stood there, holding my stamp in mine.

Naughty or nice.

I turned around, put the stamp down on the closest shelf, and walked out of the store.

Then I drove to another craft store clear across town.

As I was standing eighth in the checkout line with another stamp in my hand, the cashier on the register over flicked on her light and a thousand women guided by glue guns descended upon her like she was a naked grapevine wreath.

“That’s not fair!” the woman behind me said. “She didn’t take the next person in line!”

“The cashiers don’t care,” I said. “The same thing happened the last time I was at one of the stores.”

O Holy Night, or The Year I Ruined Christmas

When I saw my mother's new Christmas tree, I have to admit I didn't know what to say.

"Nice, huh?" my mother said, beaming and nodding toward her new holiday finery. "It's nice, right? I bet you've never seen another tree like it! It is a beautiful tree."

"It's something," I finally offered, wincing a little to protect my eyes from the shining glare of the lights. "It sure is bright."

"It's not *bright*," my mother clarified. "It's *festive*. There's a difference."

I didn't say anything.

"There *is* a difference," she tossed out before she walked away.

If that's the case, then my mother's new tree had more festivity than the searchlight from the police helicopter that hovers over my neighborhood on any given Friday or Saturday night and can turn night into day faster than God or science. Gone was our old, blinking-colored-lights tree, the fake tree that took hours to assemble and boasted branches with needles so realistic they drew as much blood as hypodermic ones. Gone were the yarn, macaroni, and pipe-cleaner ornaments my sisters and I had made as kids, coldly replaced by new decorations made by craftspeople—complete strangers—from colored clay and yarn, which served as evidence of my mother's recent trip to the Holy Trinity Craft Bazaar at her church (I knew Jesus was good with the water/wine thing, but you should see what the Savior can do with some Fimo clay and a garlic press). And that was not all. The new, fancy tree itself was not so much a tree as it was a miracle of fiber optics, for the tip of each "needle" on each branch glowed, turning from red to pink to purple to blue to green to yellow and then back to red again, the whole spectrum of the rainbow in a hearty luminescence.

"You bought a Gay Pride tree?" I asked my mother. "I am so impressed by your social progress, Mom! The next thing you know, we'll have you believing in evolution!"

"Call it what you want," my mother said, pretending to be nonplussed. "But I was just lucky to get it. In the last minute before the QVC clock ran out, all of those filthy vultures swooped in and this tree sold out with *four seconds to spare*. I have never seen anything like it, and I'm just lucky that I knew a good tree when I saw it and acted quickly!"

"Well, I guess the good news is that Chernobyl has found a new industry in selling glowing foliage that's been exposed to massive doses of radiation," I said. "Does it come with a lead suit of armor, or

do you have to purchase that separately on QVC?"

My mother sneered. "Whatever," she replied. "I don't care if you like the tree or not. I LOVE the tree. I LOVE THIS TREE. I've just learned my lesson that if I want to touch the tree, it's best to unplug it and let it cool down first. I don't think my hand is blistered, but it's still stinging."

"Where's the gingerbread-house ornament I made in first grade?" I asked sternly as my squinted eyes searched through the branches. "And where are all of the candy canes Lisa made from pipe cleaners when she was in kindergarten?"

"Now that you're old enough to be a grandmother, I thought it was time that we moved on and had a Nice Tree without all of that crap on it," my mother said simply.

I blanched at her frostiness.

"Okay, yes, it's true," I snapped, "women my age are grandmothers, but only in countries where people are swallowed whole on a regular basis by boa constrictors and a home invasion means there's a tiger on your kitchen table. In that same country, you'd be considered a witch for living longer than an elephant. And what do you mean by crap? Gingerbread houses and candy canes made by the hands of your little children are now *crap*?"

"I'll tell you what," my mother replied. "I'll give you the crumbling, disgusting, bug-infested gingerbread house and torn paper chains and bent-up pipe-cleaner candy canes you made, and you hang it on *your* tree."

"Hey!" I snipped. "You signed up for the motherhood cruise, my friend, not me. Hanging on to my childhood memories and all the stuff I don't want in my own house is part of that deal, you know. Now, why would I want my house to be covered in caveman paintings and have a tree that looks like it was decorated by little monkeys? I don't have kids for a variety of reasons, including not ever wanting to hear my name on CNN's *Headline News*, but certainly having a Nice Tree is a top contender. Nice Trees are a luxury reserved for childless people; we don't get the tax deduction and we'll spend our twilight years alone and getting our diapers changed by a high school dropout named Kenny in a nursing home, but while we're still able-bodied and selfish, we get prettier decorations and furniture with not as many stains. I'm a clear-lights person now, and the colored lights and the construction paper ornaments are your responsibility. That's the balance. You're on my turf, MOM."

"I have wanted clear lights for a long time," my mother hissed. "I've always been a clear-lights person *inside*. It was you kids that wanted the mishmash of every color! I don't even have clear lights on *this* tree because of you! And balance? Do you *really* want to talk about balance? Because if you do, let's not forget The Year You Ruined Christmas. Let's talk about that, when the scale of motherhood was tipped so heavily it got knocked off the balance beam like a little hungry gymnast hit by a sandbag. I should have killed you that night myself!"

My mother loves to tell this story, because I think in her mind it really nails the point home to her audience that she has nothing less than Squeaky Fromme for a daughter and that I should have been incarcerated as a child.

Every Christmas Eve while I was still living at my parents' house, my friends and I would go together at a restaurant for a late-night dinner. The Year I Ruined Christmas was no different; my friend Doug picked me up, we went to another friend's apartment to have some drinks, and because I wasn't driving (see how responsible that is?), I may have had more than my fair share. Before I knew it, we were in the parking lot of the apartment complex, and everyone was splitting up and jumping into cars to form something of a caravan to go to the restaurant. I put my purse on top of the car and rifled through it to find a lighter for Doug, and then we were off.

We had a great time at dinner; we ate, laughed, drank some more, and had a wonderful Christmas Eve until the restaurant closed at midnight. When we went to pay the bill, I reached for my wallet, but it was difficult to find, being that my entire purse was gone. Although Doug, who had consumed enough alcohol to both kill and embalm him, accused me of being cheap and conveniently "losing my wallet," I knew well enough what had happened; I had left it on the roof of the car after looking for a lighter for him.

I wasn't really upset about losing my purse. I was a little loaded and I only had ten bucks to my name in there anyway. As soon as we paid the bill, we drove back to the apartment complex to try and find my purse, but it was no use, it was gone. What I was worried about, however, was that along with the purse I had lost my keys, and that meant that when I got home I was going to have to wake my parents up to let me in.

This was bad, particularly since it was very reminiscent of an occasion a couple of years before when I was a senior in high school and went to a party and I saw the guy I liked with another girl. Instead of getting revenge the way a normal girl would by forcing myself on his brother or best friend, I drank a half gallon of amateur screwdrivers, or whatever you call orange juice and gin. A whole Tupperware pitcherful. Didn't even get a glass. One minute I, a girl who had never even kissed a boy, remember saying to a friend, "He doesn't know what he is missing, because I am *good!* I am total *good!* And I'm not just saying that because I'm drunk. 'Cause I'm not. God, you're blurry! Ha ha ha ha!" And the next thing I knew, I was being swept out like Scarlett O'Hara in the arms of my gay friend Rhett Butler, Doug, who carried me to his car, which I threw up in, took me to his house, and put me into a bed, which I threw up in, and waited for me to sober up before my curfew, being that it was only 8 P.M. and the sky still showed streaks of sunlight.

Needless to say, by midnight, I was still more hammered than a nail, which was unfortunate because I needed to go home. Doug, who somehow summoned up more courage than Joan or Melissa Rivers, a plastic surgeon, threw me back into the car and drove me to my house. He then carried me to the side door and stood there, helpless, as I unfortunately regained consciousness and then, as any crazy drunk high school senior would do, decided to employ a bit of whimsy and kick the door repeatedly instead of finding my keys and simply unlocking it. That was when my mother appeared like a phantom out of the dark, sucked me into the house, and accused me of being on LSD, although anyone with a nose could smell that gin was the culprit, thanks to the vomit shampoo that was still in my hair. Therefore, every time I couldn't fit a key into a lock after dark, my mother, convinced she could sniff out drugs like she was a K-9 cop and I was the *Go Ask Alice* girl, would insist that I was under the influence of LSD, angel dust, PCP, speed, opium, peyote, or the reigning drug of terror she had seen a story about on *20/20* that week.

So on the Christmas Eve night I had lost my purse, I knew knocking on the door and waking my parents up would have no different results than it did when I was a kicky high school senior, except that I was being dropped off by a particularly friendly prelaw student who I just happened to be smitten with who had helped me in the unsuccessful hunt for my purse in the apartment-complex parking lot. I was really hoping my mother would cool her McGruff the Crime Dog bit long enough for me to seal the deal and get something more than a “Please stop driving past my house, you’re scaring my mom” demand when he delivered me home, but when he walked me up to the side door there was something I had hardly expected: a note from my mother.

“Laurie,” it read. “We know that you don’t have your keys, so knock when you get home. If you’re still sober enough to read this, do NOT do your drunk dance on the door, and if you’re on angel dust the front window is not a liquid pane of glass as it may appear in your druggie state, so do not crash through it. You will be grounded.”

I couldn’t figure out how my mother knew that I had lost my keys, but as soon as the door opened my best, glorious, magnificent, and totally bitchin’ dreams came true. So much so that I didn’t even care that my almost-suitor had bolted to his car and sped away after learning that I was apparently peaking on angel dust and may have been about to take a stroll through a plate-glass window, thinking it was a beautiful paradise waterfall.

Because inside my house was another sort of paradise just waiting to be revealed when my father opened the door.

Swinging from my mother’s fingertips was my purse, the same purse that had slid off a car roof and landed in the parking lot of my friend’s apartment complex. On that cold Christmas Eve night, after it fell off the car, it sat there for a while until a uniformed security guard making his rounds spotted the purse on the asphalt, saw the imprint of Doug’s tire tracks over its belly, picked it up, opened it, and found my wallet and my driver’s license with my address on it.

Ten minutes later, at my house, my mother had just sat down in the living room with a pack of Winstons and an ashtray and was watching the opening moments of *Cagney & Lacey* when the doorbell rang. She steadfastly ignored it, devoutly hoping that someone else had heard it, such as my father, who was watching *The Fall Guy* in the family room, or my sister Lisa, who was watching *Miami Vice* in her room, or my other sister, who was watching *Dynasty* in her room, and would rise to the obligation.

The happiness and solace of a family on the eve of the biggest family holiday was about to be shattered even more than if their oldest daughter was tripping the light fantastic on some illicit substance and then completely ruined Christmas by attempting to pass through an architectural feature of the house.

That was because, despite three doorbell rings with significant pauses in between, my mother finally ground out her cigarette and answered the door. There, to her annoyance and displeasure but certainly not to her surprise, my mother saw a police officer. A uniformed police officer, and in his hand was my driver’s license. That, I’m sure, did not surprise her, either. I’m sure she thought I had been arrested for crashing through various windows around the neighborhood, trying desperately

find my real house while lost in the crazed, psychedelic fog of an After-School Special.

No, the shock came when my mother realized I was not handcuffed in the backseat of a cop car parked outside our house, glittering like a diamond covered in shattered glass and blowing air far from my mouth on the window; rather, she saw a cop hold up a flattened purse with tire tracks imprinted on it, and she heard him say, “Laurie Notaro . . . run over . . .”

“. . . run over . . .”

And in a flash, in a glorious, golden moment, I had suddenly died in a truly tragic incident on Christmas Eve, which was far more dramatic, sad, and utterly spectacular than any Death Fantasy I could have ever dreamt up. It was an incredibly impressive and breathtaking death, I had to admit, and I imagined my mother as she crumpled to the ground as if falling through a trapdoor and sobbed heavily as she took on her new role of “Grieving, Heartbroken Mother Who, She Realizes Now She Should Have Been Nicer and Kinder and Should Be Regretful About Being Thrifty and Making My Sainted Daughter Buy Her Clothes at Kmart During Junior High School. Laurie Deserved Better. Namely, Casual Corner.”

It was the gift that every girl dreams of, to be dead long enough for your parents to realize how meaningless their lives were without you, how they were suddenly and at once deeply sorrowed at all of the horrible injustices they caused you, how they had truly never appreciated your natural gifts of beauty and grace, and that they really should have bought you a nicer car, being that their beautiful angel would have such a short time on earth and should have spent that time driving the restored 1960s convertible Mustang she had openly AND PUBLICLY desired. But nope, she spent her last, short, fleeting moments driving a 1980 Chevy Citation, ever so clearly a GRANDMA car, with fake red velvet upholstery, a hatchback, and an interior that smelled like spoiled milk and sometimes meat. Being temporarily run over by a car was the best present I had ever received, and I didn’t even have to do anything dramatic to get it, like write a note or buy some rope.

It was indeed a holy night.

Then, unfortunately, my reverie was cut all too appallingly short when the “cop” stepped forward to inform her that it was only my purse that had become acquainted with several car tires, not the girl whose purse it was. He had merely wanted to return it.

“I was dead?” I asked my mother eagerly, trying hard to fight the urge to jump up and down in glee. “Oh my God. I can’t believe it. This is fantastic! Did you cry?”

“Well, almost,” my mother confessed. “But then again, there was the relief of getting a second use out of your prom dress.”

Having me spend all of my eternity in black-and-hot-pink polyester taffeta would have been a grand revenge on my mother’s part, and there was no doubt in my mind that she would have done it, too, although that skirt, complete with hoop, was so big the coffin would have had to be shrink-wrapped to keep it closed. No mind, I’m sure she would have voluntarily sat on it graveside before it was time to lower me down, as her friends looked on and sadly shook their heads at a mother who treasured her

child so much she sat on the casket to be closer to her daughter, even if she was a miserable drug addict who ran around maniacally in a parking lot until she got bounced by a car, all because she was hopped up on dope.

“You didn’t cry?” I asked again. “Are you sure?”

“Cry? When I found out you were alive, I wanted to kill you myself!” my mother said as she threw my purse into my chest. “Well, that’s it. You’ve ruined Christmas. When a cop shows up at your front door on Christmas Eve, that’s it. Your holiday is shot.”

“Wait,” I said, shaking my head. “I’m confused. Did I ruin it by dying . . . or did I ruin it by *living*? Or maybe . . . I was just *resurrected*. Like you-know-who.”

“That is not the point,” my mother insisted. “And you just made God sad by even *thinking* that you were just like His only begotten son. A stranger saw me get all worked up because your purse got hit by a car. Not a person. *Just an accessory*. Look at that purse. I bet you got it at a thrift shop.”

“I did,” I said proudly. “It was a dollar. And by the way, it wasn’t a cop, it was a guy in a windbreaker and a hat who took ten dollars out of my purse! Look. My wallet is empty. He stole my money!”

“Well, I am so glad I almost had a heart attack over a purse so cheap you couldn’t buy it in Kmart,” my mother said. “I guess he deserved something for driving all the way over here. And you still ruined Christmas!”

I didn’t care. It was the Best Christmas I Ever Had, even if my purse did bear the brunt of the tragedy by being pummeled by a Honda Civic and then mugged by the hero. My mom thought I was totally, truly dead for a few seconds, and that in itself was a gift so precious it couldn’t be taken back. It was my favorite Christmas ever, and I’d do it again in a heartbeat if given the chance.

“Don’t be so mad, Mom,” I added, trying to console her. “I could always die next year.”

Now, over a decade later, standing in front of her fiber-optic Rainbow Brite tree, my mother was giving me the same look she had the night I rose from the dead.

“I love this tree and I have paid my price as a mother for every Christmas that you have been alive,” she declared. “*And dead*. I am done with Crap Trees. I wanted a Nice Tree, so I bought one. I have earned it. And I don’t want to hear another thing about it.”

“Mom, don’t you understand?” I said in one last sneaky, underhanded attempt to get my way. “When you hang our weevil-eaten ornaments on the tree, that’s how we know you love us!”

“Oh,” my mother said without skipping a beat, “I guess four years of orthodonture to rein in your *Hee Haw* teeth wasn’t enough, huh? You thought you were being sneaky by lying on your headgear chart when I was writing out those checks, but who paid the price after all? All of that money and all you got was Buck Owens’s mouth. That’s right; you make fun of my tree, I’ll make fun of your overbite.”

If that was how my mother responded when the word *love* was introduced into a situation, I was more than happy to bow out now before she saw fit to hurl me into her fancy new nuclear reactor of Christmas tree and melt the skin on one whole side of my body.

On Christmas Eve several weeks later, we gathered in front of the fiber-optic tree and passed out presents.

“That is some tree,” my sister noted, squinting while the needles slow-burned from an aching glaring yellow into a forest-fire red, as did the sheen on our faces.

“At least someone appreciates it,” my mother said as she tore into a giant QVC box. “If I had waited five more seconds, I wouldn’t have gotten it. Everyone wanted this tree.”

“Well, it’s no wonder. It’s a sauna and a tanning bed, with branches for complete coverage. Did I come with welding goggles so that you could actually look at it without burning your retinas?” my sister laughed as she opened a wax candle in the shape of a mini pound cake from my mother. “That thing is more damaging than a partial eclipse.”

“Look at you open those presents, Nicholas!” my mother said in a desperate and cheap attempt to divert attention from her emergency flare of a tree. “The wrapping paper is just falling off your gift. You look so excited!”

“I’m sweaty,” my nephew said as he wiped a line of perspiration from his forehead. “Your tree is hot, Grandma. My presents are getting soggy from my head.”

“Come over here, we’ll put some sunblock on you,” my sister said as she ripped open wrapping paper to expose a wax cinnamon bun.

“I don’t want to be an alarmist,” I mentioned. “But if we’re going to stay in this room, I think we better move the presents away from the tree. Having paper, cardboard, and batteries near that thing is simply inviting both danger and the fire department.”

“LEAVE THE TREE ALONE!” my mother roared as she stopped opening her gift. “Why do you want to ruin my Christmas? Isn’t one ruined Christmas enough for a lifetime? All I wanted is a Nice Tree. I wanted to finally have a Nice Tree. What is wrong with that?”

“Nothing is wrong with it,” my sister agreed. “You can have a Nice Tree. I happen to have a Magnificent Tree. I have nothing but Lenox ornaments on it that I got at the outlet mall, and clear lights. Yes, that’s right. *I said clear lights*. I’ve always known I was a clear-lights person and I’m tired of living a brightly colored lie.”

My mother gasped. “What about the kids?” she cried. “What about all of the ornaments they made you this year? Nicholas made reindeer out of clay, and David molded his hand in plaster! Doesn’t that mean anything to you?”

“You know,” my sister replied. “I love my kids, but Nicholas is in the first grade. He brought home eight primitive clay formations that look like doody with legs. David has been sneaking into the living

room and watching Will Ferrell movies after we go to bed, and in his plaster mold, he's clearly flipping the bird. Putting those things on my tree with a bunch of Cheerios ornaments and paper chairs is simply not an option. My Magnificent Tree is magnificent for a reason."

"See?" my mother said as she shook her finger at me. "What did I say? Lisa agrees with me!"

"So I bought the kids their own tree," my sister finished. "And it's in the family room and it has a lot of their decorations on it. How could I not have our family tree? How else would they know that I love them and their legged reindeer poops and middle fingers? That's our family on that tree and in those ornaments; there's no way I'm going to leave them in boxes until they disintegrate."

My mother, perfectly stymied, sat there with nothing to say. After several seconds, when it was clear that even though she was out of the five-foot radius of the tree's hazard zone and that her face was still a little too shiny, she finally relented.

"Fine," she said as all of our faces turned from green to blue to purple. "Fine. Next year, I'll bring your ornaments back out, all right? But I'm not putting them on this tree, they would just be kindling and Christmas trees should only catch fire if you live in a trailer. Anybody care if I unplug it? It's starting to make me nauseous."

My sister and I just smiled at each other as my mother, with a dish towel over her arm to prevent a major skin graft, pulled the plug out of the wall and the room turned dark, then dropped by 20 degrees.

There's a Gun Somewhere Under the Christmas Tree

Right according to plan, the moment my poor future mother-in-law opened her front door, she looked at me as if she had just seen me slide down a brass pole and shake my bare hips to a Nazareth song as a fat biker rewarded me by sticking a buck in my thong.

It was absolutely horrible.

And I suppose she had every right. There I was with my bleached and pink and purple hair; what else did I expect? Certainly, I'm sure, she expressed a sigh of relief that I hadn't just been on the news for diddling the president or a congressman, so things could have been worse, but still. I was far from Julia Roberts, even as a hooker in *Pretty Woman*.

When the ghastly moment passed, my boyfriend's mother bravely put on her best smile and invited me in.

After all, it was Christmas Day.

Frankly, I just wanted to find the bathroom and stay there, and I probably would have, had my in-laws-to-be not thought that my absence was due to snorting a pound of cocaine rather than boning with a chilling fear.

"I don't understand your friend's hair," I learned later that my boyfriend's sister said. "Why is it so many colors? And so unbrushed? I've only seen homeless people with that kind of hair."

"I used to have purple hair," my boyfriend reminded her. "And the knotty parts are just a couple of dreads; they're supposed to be there."

"Why is she wearing cowboy boots? Is she in the rodeo?" the other sister inquired.

"People wear combat boots who aren't in the army," my boyfriend reminded them.

"And this is the girl, Gloria, that you've been seeing?" they asked.

"No, this is the girl, Laurie, that I'm going to *marry*," he reminded them.

"Oh," they all said.

I really tried to put on a good show, to smile, to act pleasant, chew with my mouth closed, all of the stuff. I even retired the red lipstick for one day and switched to the Saucy Mauve that I had left over

from my duty as my sister's bridesmaid.

In a kind maneuver to make me feel like I was part of the family, my future mother-in-law took me upstairs and asked if I'd help her wrap some last-minute gifts, a duty I couldn't have been more grateful for. It would permit me a few minutes out of the spotlight, I thought as I wrapped and followed her instructions for which tags went on which presents, enough time for them to get used to me, and now maybe the children wouldn't cry or ask if I was a witch when they saw me come back down the stairs.

As I returned with the wrapped gifts, my boyfriend met me on the landing.

"This is horrible, they hate me," I told him as I handed over some of the presents. "I think I'd rather have my next Pap smear broadcast over satellite TV or have my credit report published in the paper just about anything than go back in there."

"It's fine, it's really fine," he said. "They seemed to like you a whole lot more when I told them you weren't pregnant."

"Oh, good, good," I said, nodding my head. "They think I'm Courtney Love, don't they?"

"Listen, you're wearing a bra, aren't you?" he whispered. "Because somebody said something about maybe seeing a boob . . ."

"Yes!" I whispered back. "Of course I'm wearing a bra! You know we have to wear bras at the magazine because if we don't, the police surveillance team might mistake us for one of the porn people making movies in the office downstairs from us!"

"Just checking," he said. "Just checking. Keep your arms crossed, just in case. Okay, are you ready to open presents?"

"No," I answered honestly. "But I wasn't ready to be the boob-flashing rodeo witch that I apparently am, so let's just go."

The present-opening began, and with the paper tearing and the kids squealing, for a moment everything seemed okay as I sat back with crossed arms and watched.

"Wow, thanks, Mom," my boyfriend said as he held up his gift. "A *Snow White* video!"

"Thanks, Mom!" his sister said excitedly, holding up a pair of pearl earrings. "They're beautiful!"

"Aren't . . . those the earrings I asked for?" his other sister stuttered.

"I didn't have this on my list, but I guess we could use it," her husband said as he poked at what looked like a nursing bra. "I know I've gained a couple of pounds, but do I really need it? Tell me honestly."

"If anyone unwraps a gun, I'm calling first dibs," my boyfriend's brother asserted.

Everyone looked very confused except for my future mother-in-law and me. I already knew what had happened, and against all odds, no matter how impossible it seemed, I had completely destroyed the family's holiday even further than I had when they thought I was a pregnant, homeless stripper with knotted hair.

In my haste, in my stress, in my panic, I had apparently stuck the wrong tags on the wrong gifts, damaging the gift exchange, and as a result, a three-year-old was handling a Leatherman tool with about eight different knives on it, two sisters were about to rumble under the Christmas tree, a grandpa was possibly in our midst, and it was suspected that a coveted Diaper Genie was hiding somewhere under a tag with the phantom Gloria's name on it.

"I'm so sorry," I professed over and over again. "I am so sorry. I don't know how this happened. I am really, really sorry."

It was then that my boyfriend's nephew, a frisky, one-year-old toddler, waddled up to me and immediately went straight to second base, making a far quicker move than his uncle ever did. I didn't know exactly what to do, so I just sat there, trying to smile as he grappled at my right boob and trying to pretend I didn't have a baby feeling me up.

"Oh, he must be hungry," his mother said as she laughed and pulled him off me.

"Wow," I said lightly. "I've never been mistaken for a snack bar before."

"Here," my boyfriend's brother-in-law said as he laughed and tossed me his nursing bra. "I think this is probably for you."

They all laughed, and I laughed, too. When I looked at my boyfriend's mother, I saw that she was chuckling as well, and when she finally looked at me, she winked.

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