

## A Very Merry Dysfunctional Christmas (Night)

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Growing up in Philadelphia, our grandparents on both sides of the family did not live far away from us. We would see both sets at least once a week and even more during the summertime and holidays. They could not be more different from one another. My mom's parents were fun, loud, and happy. Whenever we had gatherings on that side there were games, activities, hugs, and lots of food. My grandparents on my dad's side were Irish Immigrants and much quieter and more reserved. They showed their love for us not so much with hugs, but with a quiet support of whatever was needed for school, church, or play. Their generosity was an expression of love for us. My mom's parents were very poor and their expression of love was hugs, kisses, and being happy around us. My Irish grandparents were happy, as well, but always with a sense of seriousness and worry for the future. They wanted our basic needs to be met; clothing, food, and the things needed to succeed.

My parents had one very strict Christmas tradition. All throughout December through Christmas eve night, family was welcome in our home. The day after Christmas family was welcome and we ourselves would visit grandparents and aunts and uncles, but Christmas day was a family day; parents, children and no one else. Of course as with most rules, there are exceptions. One Christmas in the late 60's (I believe 1967), my parents made an exception and invited both sets of grandparents to Christmas dinner, which for us was around 5:00PM. This was a real rarity. I can only remember both sets being together at baptisms and seeing pictures of them at my parents wedding at the same table. I didn't even think they knew each other. Of course, my mom gave all us orders to be on our best behavior. Both of my grandfathers could drive although neither grandmother could. Late on Christmas afternoon, my father took both my brother Kevin and I to go pick up his parents. My mom's dad drove my grandmother and himself to our house which was less than 5 minutes away. Once we got to my grandparent's house, Kevin and I rushed into the house to give our grandparents a hug and wish them Merry Christmas. My grandfather was sitting on his chair as usual smoking his pipe and humming classic Irish folk songs. My grandmother was in the dining room looking somewhat angry and sad. She gave us a hug and I went to hug my grandfather. I could tell by his eyes that his happiness to see me wasn't simply because it was Christmas day. I could smell the strong whiskey on his breathe. When my father entered the house, my grandmother talked to him about how my grandfather had been drinking all day. My father asked Kevin and I to help my grandfather up off the chair to see if he was able to stand. After a few minutes we were able to get this Leprechaun up, but he was so unsteady on his feet and so drunk that my father decided to get him upstairs and put him to bed. I have never seen my grandmother so mad. She was following us up the stairs hitting my grandfather on the back with her black shinny purse as he sang all the way up. My father with his 9 and 10-year-old sons slowly navigated the stairs, moving my grandfather up to his bedroom. My grandmother was yelling in Gaelic to him and I told her, *"Grand mom, you hitting and yelling at him is not helping the situation!"*

After getting him to bed, my grandmother told us that she still wanted to come to dinner and that he would just sleep it off. I have never seen her so upset. On the way home to our house, my brother and I heard my grandmother speak to my dad. Whenever she called him "Jackie" she was serious. My grandmother never cried, but I felt so bad for her on this Christmas day.

When we arrived at our house, my other set of grandparents were already there. Once entering the house, Kevin and I returned to playing with the gifts and toys we got for Christmas. My mom told all of us to go play in the basement as we waited for dinner. From the basement I could here my grandfather's voice. He was a tall and very thin man that stood about 6'4". He was extremely loud once he consumed a few beers. The louder he was, the more beer he had consumed. There was still laughter coming from upstairs so I knew he was not too drunk at this point.

After about an hour, my mom told us to come up for dinner. We had to wash our hands since we were playing with our train sets which could produce a little grease. As we sat down for dinner, I noticed the eyes of my grandfather were equally as red as my leprechaun grandfather and I was worried. The meal went okay until my grandfather

started to demand more beer, salt, and other things he needed to eat his meal using an expletive (nothing more than 'damn'). However, his voice got louder and louder. As a little boy, I remember when being at my grandparent's house and when he got loud, I hid behind a chair on their porch because his voice and large frame scared me.

We managed to get through dinner. After dessert, my dad brought my grandfather to a chair in the living room where he began to doze off. My grandmothers help my mom clean the table and we were sent back to the basement to play. Later that evening my dad brought all my grandparents' home. My grandfather, the very next day (in a much better state) came and picked up his car. He used public transportation to get to us.

Years later as I reflected on this Christmas in particular, I could not help but feel sorry for both my grandmothers who had to put up with husbands who drank way too much, way too often. They loved the men they married, but life was hard for both of them. My tall and slender grandfather would leave my grandmother broke when he died with 3 mortgages on their home. He would die only a few years later in October of 1969 of a brain aneurism. My grandmother lived 34 more years as a widow until she was almost 97. My Irish grandfather died in 1974 of dementia at the age of 76. They were fine financially because as Irish immigrants saving was ingrained into their heads independent of personal issues. My Irish grandmother would die on Christmas day in 1983 in Hot Springs of dementia as well. She was 79. I cried at the deaths of my grandmothers, but not my grandfathers.

I share this 'Christmas' story with you because my family is dysfunctional. I do not come from a perfect family in which everyone continues to live the faith and everyone does what is right. My grandparents did live the faith. My Irish grandfather would drink himself silly on Saturday night, but be in the pews the first thing on Sunday morning. Even my loud and boisterous grandfather never missed Mass.

My parents were active Catholics. My dad was even a permanent deacon ordained in 1993 for the Diocese of Little Rock. My 4 siblings and I were all baptized and raised as Catholics. This is where the 'perfect' ends. Only my brother Kevin and I are practicing Catholics now. I mean it when I say that my brother Kevin is more 'Catholic' than I. The other 3 encountered difficulties in life with poor decisions, rocky marriages and substance abuse. None are practicing Catholics now. All my 10 nieces and nephews were baptized, but none are practicing. None of my great nieces and nephews are baptized. Other than my relationship with Kevin and my sister Anne, not much goes on with my other two brothers, Dennis and Michael. With both my parents gone, there is nothing to bind us together. It is sad, but it is my reality. I own the dysfunctionality in my family.

I know many of you are in the same situation as I am. Whether you have a dysfunctional family life or that 'perfect' family. Christmas time is here. There is always something good, even in the hard situations that dysfunction offers. For example, back in 1967, both my grandfathers were drunks, but my grandmothers were strong women which taught me a valuable lesson about strength in times of trial. This December I will at least text my siblings and offer them a Merry Christmas. The root of our relationship is my parents whom we have in common and that allows me to pray for them and wish them well. I offer you this prayer:

*Heavenly Father, bless our families this Christmas Season. I ask You to protect those families close to You. In times of difficulties, divisions and hurt feelings, offer all of us a true sense of peace through the blessing of the coming of Your son once again in our lives. Bless our families united in faith and joy, bless our families that are separated and hurting this Christmas. Bless those who suffer addictions of any kind and offer all of us an understanding of our shared joy in loving and serving You.* **WE ASK THIS THROUGH CHRIST OUR LORD.**

**Father John**