

DAVID HARRIS EBENBACH

I'll Be Home

Including me, I know three Jews who go home to their parents to celebrate Christmas. We're sort of a support group for each other, despite the other differences between us. Karen's parents, for example, do Christmas just because they're go-along-to-get-along people, and they live in rural Ohio, where it's hard to be a Jew, for sure. Josh's parents, on the other hand, found Christ on a vacation in Canada. I don't know if they're Jews for Jesus or Christians or what, but it makes Josh turn colors, he gets so angry. Me, I'm the oddball of the group, because I converted to Judaism, three years ago.

Over those years, my family and I have developed a very polite system to make the season work. Ours is something of a compromise—they can live with me being Jewish, as long as I visit them in Florida to do Christmas with a certain amount of enthusiasm.

This Christmas, my father picks a winding route between the Miami airport and their house in Coral Gables. We don't talk much, but only because driving requires so much of his attention now. He intends the cruise along the Miracle Mile to replace conversation, driving me past all the fake-ivy-bedecked shops and the young women in small black dresses and Santa hats. He just hunches over the wheel in his short-sleeved button-down shirt

and occasionally points out especially garish storefronts, which are everywhere in this part of Florida. Whenever I get back from one of these trips and take a taxi into downtown Philadelphia, everything seems wonderfully gray. They tell me they could never live in that part of the country again—it depresses them. Yet they raised me there, once.

When we finally get to my parents' neighborhood, my father relaxes a little—he knows these streets well. "Driving isn't what it used to be," he says apologetically. "Sometimes I think they make the roads narrower and put the stoplights farther away every night, while I'm asleep." The houses are all brightly lit—palm trees wrapped in colored bulbs the size of limes, strings of lights along eaves and doorways, glowing plastic nativity scenes on the lawn and/or glowing plastic menorahs in windows. As usual, my parents' is no exception. The bulbs wink at me as the car rounds into the driveway.

Hardly anybody can understand why I ever converted, Jews included. Even my girlfriend Leah calls me a masochist, though she's glad I'm Jewish. She used to have a tendency to fall for Protestants, which drove her parents crazy. For

all kinds of reasons, we've found it really easy to fall in love. Sometimes we just sit around and marvel about it.

Karen, Josh and I all have significant others. They're as much part of the support group as we are, because they're so desperately needed. Every one of them Jewish, they hold our hands after we call home and listen to us sigh.

Christmas Eve is tree-decorating and pizza night at my parents' house. Once my mother's gotten my coat off and a mug of hot cider into my hand, she holds my cheeks and just beams at me. Her face is deep with the lines you get from smiling and laughing all your life, and her green eyes twinkle like crazy. My father then takes me by the arm, leads me to the bare tree. He's developed a ritual about this.

"What do you think?" he asks.

It's a big tree, dense, fat and tall, and it radiates a woodsy darkness out of the corner of the living room. The pair of armchairs have been moved away. "It's a beaut," I tell him. It certainly is better than the plastic tree Karen's family supposedly has.

"Well, how about this?" He taps a switch on the wall, and track lighting hits the tree, yanking it out of the shadows. "Boom!" he says. "Jumps right out at you, doesn't it?" I agree that it does.

Going through the boxes of ornaments has become an odd thing for me. Seeing all the rarities from that part of my childhood makes

me feel strangely nostalgic and distant at the same time. It also makes me think about my completely undecorated apartment. It's still very strange to be so willfully ignorant of the Christmas season.

Mom gets Handel's Messiah going pretty much right away. The room fills up with the chorus and the orchestra, and the scent of cider, which would be too hot for Florida except that my parents keep the air conditioner on maximum. It helps them to get into the spirit.

My father insists on keeping the track lighting off while we decorate the tree. Colored bulbs, drummer boys, reindeer, stars, glass balls, glass icicles, and Santas wind their way up the branches, each of us stepping back to make sure no spots go undecorated. When every place the eyes might settle holds an ornament, we call it done. The pizza—pineapple—has arrived by then. My father has us sit down in the armchairs, and hits the switch for the track lighting.

"Boom," I say, popping a cube of pineapple into my mouth.

"It jumps right out at you," Mom finishes.

I don't like sleeping away from my girlfriend. Settling into the oversoft bed, I find myself spooning with what would be Leah's back, my right arm wrapped close around my chest, my left hand cupping under her thigh. I curve around the comforter as though it's her, and get

not a bit closer to sleep.

I couldn't call her tonight because she was going to be at a Temple Owls basketball game, having gotten the seats free from Josh and his girlfriend, who have season tickets. Then, Leah said, she would get up early to go out again. She loves Christmas Eve and day because the whole world is available to her, with Christians too busy to use any of it. She hops between movie theaters and restaurants and whatever museums are open. I wish I could be with her, enjoying the mostly-emptiness of those places, the knowing looks passed between the Muslims and Jews and all the other deviants. But she will be home tomorrow, just to catch my call.

I open my eyes to glance around the room. The light through the window from the other houses' decorations is almost enough to see by. I have never lived here, but my parents have preserved the essence of my room in high school here—other guests stay down the hall. I take in the dark shapes of my old things—the shelves full of the first books I ever read, the lumps of stuffed animals in the corner, ice skates laced together and hanging over the closet doorknob. In the half-light, I can almost put aside how old I am, and that the size and shape of the room is somewhat wrong. The comforter, battling the air conditioned chill, makes me feel secure in the way that children sometimes do. As I wander around the fringes of sleep, I lose some certainty about where and who I am.

It's pretty deep into Christmas morning when I wake up. I can sense the tree and the presents in the living room, and I can almost feel Josh and Karen waking up to the same sensation. I wish we were in touch via walkie-talkies or something. Josh dreads this morning especially. He's Orthodox, though he was raised Conservative and didn't start shifting over until he was at Brandeis. It's almost as though his parents rebelled against *him* after that, after he sent them separate dishes for *milchik* and *fleishig*, started asking them about going to synagogue, testing their Hebrew. Now he and his parents have their territory staked out. They've both got a sort of basic God, but Torah and Jesus face off every time they're all in the same room. My parents and I don't have our territory clearly defined like that, especially since my folks aren't clear on what they believe, except that there should be family traditions.

I lever myself out of bed and head to the bathroom—just to wash my face; we stay in pajamas, in my family, for Christmas morning. It's still sort of strange that there are no stairs to descend on the way to the living room—everything in Florida seems to be one story. But the whole floor is familiarly full of the scent of coffee, and soon the smell of cinnamon french toast will join in. I find both my parents in their armchairs, watching the brightly lit tree and sitting with their hands on their laps like

kids who can barely restrain themselves from tearing into the gifts. I pull from my bag the ones I brought, and they're beautifully wrapped—before I converted, they used to be sealed up in brown grocery bags, but now I feel like I have to do better. I lay them in the spots each of my parents has long claimed under the tree.

"Well," my mother says after greeting me and offering me hot and cold beverages, "should we start with stockings?" She is wearing a forest green nightgown, perfectly complementing my father's bright red pajamas. Everybody is smiling fit to burst.

The stocking part is not unlike Chanukah, actually. Each of the eight days Leah and I exchanged the kinds of things that would fit in stockings—candles, earrings, good chocolate, canisters of film. Here I get very similar gifts, along with batteries, which mean that I'm getting something that needs them.

"Don't pay any attention to those batteries," Dad says with an anxious smile.

My father has always been ambivalent about the order of the stockings versus presents, because this way you get clues. But my mother thinks it would be anticlimactic the other way, opening pencils and wind-up toys last.

"What? These are for my old travel alarm clock, right?" I say. We all laugh, relieved.

At the bottom of my stocking is a note I wrote in crazy big print when I was about six years old. It says "Merry Christmas, Brian! Open this every year and then put it back." I

fold it up and return it to the toe, a little sad.

The phone catches us by surprise, right in between the stockings and the big gifts. My mother looks at both of us, almost bewildered, and answers it as though she's not sure what to do. "Hello?" she says. "Oh. Oh, hello. Well, how are you, this...this holiday season? Good, goo—oh, you are? Oh! Well, hold on, dear. Why don't I get Brian for you?" She hands it to me with wide eyes, and I take it.

"Hey!" Leah yells. "Guess where I am?"

"Where?" I'm thrilled and scared at the same time.

"Ha! Don't give me that, buster—you've already figured it out," she says. I look around at my parents, who are talking in whispers.

She's at the Miami airport, of course.

Nobody's on the roads as I drive out to pick Leah up. The non-Christmas people are out somewhere, monopolizing places, but they're not here. Maybe they're sleeping in, though it's getting late. My mother has decided to start the french toast while I'm out, because we're falling behind a little. They have both expressed great joy at Leah's arrival, but I don't believe it. It's not that they don't like her—they go on about her each time they visit me—but this is Christmas. Her presence is something like

Judaism breaking the rules, sending too many players onto the field.

Me, I feel like I'm leaving my family to go get

my family. I drive even faster than the few other cars that are out, in a part of the country where everybody speeds. Josh would tell me to watch myself, because the cops are probably on the watch for speeding Jews on a day like this one, but nothing happens.

You can't go all the way to the gates at this airport, so I meet Leah by the baggage carousels. She is heavily overdressed, in long sleeves, jeans, and a jacket. Naturally, it's cold back in Philly. For a minute, all the carousels seem to stop while we hug. Her black curls smell like her conditioner, which I have come to associate with happiness. Then we step back and hold one another at arm's length-absorbing distance.

"Temple won," she says, smiling sharply, "though they had to scare me by being behind most of the time."

"Bastards," I say.

I walk Leah in ahead of me, like I'm presenting her to my parents. She gets my Mom's arms immediately, and then my Dad's.

"Merry Christmas," she says with a bright smile.

"And happy holidays to you," my mother says.

"Are you hungry?" I can smell hot butter and cinnamon.

Leah checks me with a glance and then nods eagerly. "On the plane I had to give my ham and cheese muffin away. Whatever happened to

cereal?"

Unlike Josh, Karen tells me there's no conflict at all in her house. Her family is like the Roman Empire, absorbing every tradition that walks by. Some Christmases they have a crèche, wreaths, albums of carols playing. Others they just have the gifts. When Karen gets back from seeing her parents, she is invariably more bossy than when she left. It's the lack of structure at home, she says. Somebody needs to take charge.

Mom's french toast, as always, is so good that it's hard to imagine ever eating any other kind. For a few moments, Leah and I just eat, wrapped up in the pleasure of it. Plus I'm having trouble making conversation, because I can't seem to handle both Leah and Christmas in my head simultaneously. It's like being two people at once—part of me wants to find out what among my gifts needs AA batteries, and part of me wants to huddle with my girlfriend in the air conditioning.

"Wow—this is delicious," Leah says, and my mother thanks her. "Just amazing. Hey, thanks for welcoming me. So here I drop in, right in the middle of everything, huh?"

"No, no," my father says, shaking his fork.

"No, no."

"Well, I hope I'm not too much trouble. But so tell me—how do you usually do things around here, anyway? I want to get the full

experience.”

I want to hug Leah—she’s hit on just the right thing to say. But then my mother speaks up.

“We don’t really have anything planned,” she says, glancing at Dad. “We thought we’d just play it by ear.”

I stop chewing and stare at my parents like they are aliens. “Well, weren’t we going to open the gifts next?”

“That sounds like fun,” Leah says, all bright eyes.

“Oh, that can wait,” Mom says. “Wouldn’t it be fun to go out?”

I check my watch as though it can explain what’s going on.

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Dad, Leah and I spend the rest of the afternoon on a driving tour of Coral Gables and Miami again. Mom’s at home, cooking. The roads are still empty, downtown, in the suburbs, everywhere. When we pass Miami beach, though, Leah asks if we can stop. When she gets back, she wants to be able to tell people back in Philly that she put her feet in the ocean. Dad waits in the car.

“Want to swim for Philly?” I say as we kick our way through the hot sand.

“No bathing suit,” she says. The sky is a kind of tropical blue and very few people are out, though I see one family that looks Middle Eastern sprawled out on beach blankets.

“Well, I guess we’ll have to stay here, then.”

She puts her arms around my chest, sideways, and squeezes me. “Am I messing things up? Should I have stayed home?”

I squeeze her back. “No,” I say, though I am really only answering the second question.

Leah keeps her shoes off in the car so the ocean can air dry off her feet. She’s amazed at how warm the water was. Her Massachusetts family vacations in Maine, where in August the water will turn you cobalt blue. She showers Miami with compliments, filling the conversational space my father can’t while he’s driving.

“It takes us fifteen minutes just to get ready to go outside these days,” she says, “all the coats and the scarves and the wool socks. Luckily we hardly heat the apartment, so the shock isn’t as bad leaving it. You must love it here. Warm all the time!”

My father smiles shyly at her.

Mom greets us at the door in a yellow apron, smiling with pride. “I called the Liebners’,” she tells Dad, “just to make double sure the dinner I made is kosher. And they say it is. After all, now there’s two.”

“Critical mass,” I say.

We pass by the living room where the tree stands kind of stiffly, as though wondering why it’s still surrounded by gifts. The table, again, is set up in the kitchen, though we usually eat this meal in the living room. In fact, the spread is different than usual, too—instead of green

beans and mashed potatoes there's wild rice and steamed broccoli. And there's no turkey. It must still be in the freezer, because Mom's got a roast cooling on the range. She catches me looking at her.

"Something new, I thought," she says.

I wonder how much time Mom spent running around after all this food, or if she already had it in reserve. She's completely unreadable tonight. Even with all the heat from the oven, she has yet to break a sweat.

After dinner, Leah runs to her bag to get my parents the gift she bought them in Philly. It's wrapped neatly and elegantly in brown paper, which I see she cut from a grocery bag.

"Well, thank you, dear," my mother says, "though we . . . we didn't get you anything, because you don't . . ."

"Oh, no, it's not a Christmas gift in particular. It's just, well, here I show up on your doorstep, so it's more like a thank-you gift."

"Oh, okay then," my mother says, and she begins to open it as though relieved. It's a box full of different teas and gourmet coffees and cocoas. My parents seem to like it.

"So, are you guys going to open your gifts now?" Leah asks.

My parents exchange a glance. "Why don't we play cards instead?"

"You want to save them until later?" I ask.

"Well, who says we have to open them tonight?" my Mom says.

"Who says we have to *open them tonight?*" I repeat. If Karen were here, she would take charge, but she is not.

"Son," my Dad says reasonably, "what's wrong with playing cards for a change?" My mother gives me a smile.

I guess that on some level I'm starting to understand. It's not Christmas right now, for them. They can't even go through the motions.

I help my Dad remember the rules to Rummy 500.

That night, I really do spoon with Leah, and she falls asleep easily, exhausted in part from being the big winner in cards. While I listen to her breathe, the front of me becomes completely warm, just on the edge of sweat. Yet the air conditioning remains a force, roaming over my back with cold feet.

Eventually I get up, unspooning myself carefully so as to leave Leah in the same comfortable curve. I tuck blankets all around her to shield her from the chill, and then pad out of the room. Everything is quiet. Usually when I get up to use the bathroom, I can hear my Dad snoring in their bedroom, but now, as I stand still outside my room, everything is perfectly quiet. For a moment, I just absorb it. Then I head for the living room, running my hand along the wall to keep me on track through the dark.

My eyes have started to adjust by the time

I get to the living room, partially because neighbors' colored lights shine through the window. I can see the lumpen shape of the Christmas tree spanning the distance from floor to ceiling, and the mounds underneath it. I wonder if we will ever unwrap these things. If we will have to wait until next year. Then I

look further around.

They are in the armchairs, my parents, and I see the whites of their eyes, so they are awake. Like me, they're in the dark, staring at the tree, and silent. They sit almost like they did that morning, hands in laps, but without that barely restrained energy. Now they look tired, unsure.

Without looking directly into their faces, I sit between the chairs. We sit like this for a long time. I don't know what they are thinking—whether Dad will soon get up to turn on the track lighting, or Mom to make cider, but I am waiting for them to do something. I am waiting for someone to shift at all.

