

Naked Curiosity

by Dennis Scott-Bush



A Slap-Happy Holiday

Nothing meant Christmas like Bitch-Slap Santa.

When Martin and I lived in San Francisco, the home next to our apartment building had big bay window. Every year, a few days after Thanksgiving, Bitch-Slap Santa was hoisted into its position of prominence and the switch was flipped.

There was no actual, from-the-factory labeling that identified our holiday neighbor by the name we called him. But the way his would-be wave looked like a forceful backhand wallop made him Bitch-Slap Santa to us.

It was a far cry from the decoration traditions with which I was raised and, certainly, that was part of Bitch-Slap Santa's appeal.

Tasteful, white candles were the only holiday adornments my father permitted in our windows. A single faux flame burned brightly in each, giving passersby the misconception that our home was warm and welcoming.

The candle rule was just one of many Yuletide traditions and rituals. We did the usual things like going to church on Christmas Eve, playing with the Lionel train set under the tree and watching my father get progressively more intoxicated.

Christmas mornings were a distilled version of our everyday life. My father asserted control for control's sake. My brother was quiet and distant. And my mother fought back tears and encouraged us to tread lightly so as not to provoke my father's predictably unpredictable rage.

Oh, there's no place like home for the holidays.

"Can't we just have a nice Christmas day?" my mother would ask, every year.

She believed that, if all the desired presents were purchased and if my father abstained from abuse (of alcohol and of us), we'd have the perfect, holly-jolly Christmas. She was delusional.

For me, it was never about the presents. They always seemed like some end-of-the-year compensation for surviving the previous twelve months.

But, in general, presents have power. Children are cautioned that Santa knows if they've been bad or good with the bottom line being that good children get gifts and bad children don't. It's the same with corporate employees. Do your job well and there'll be a little something extra in your paycheck around the holidays.

Should we be good for goodness' sake or because, otherwise, we risk the no-present punishment of Santa, our parents or bosses?

Christmas has become a catch-all time to reward the people in our lives for a year's worth of meritorious service. And there are expectations for those bonuses at every level of connection.

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In early December, several years ago, I went on two dates with a man. We stopped seeing each other, soon after. A few days before Christmas, he showed up at my door with a package for me. I had no gift to give him, in return, and he was clearly disappointed and annoyed.

"I spent a lot of money for that watch," he testified. "I thought you'd at least return the favor."

"The last time we got together, I felated you for forty-five minutes," I retorted. "I thought you'd return that favor."

Both of our expectations were left unmet. It's true that we'd both been givers but we were really more concerned about what we assumed we would get.

My dear friend Susan and I decided, years ago, that we wouldn't exchange holiday tokens of our esteem. Instead, we'd be sure to celebrate the gift that each of us is to the other. Every time I hear her voice on the phone or click on an e-mail from her, I unwrap a wonderful present. I know that sounds positively Pollyanna but it's true.

Holidays often take on an extra level of stress for lesbian and gay people, because of familial difficulties with, or out-and-out rejection of, our sexual orientation. Because of that, members of our community have a particularly keen understanding of the difference between the families we're born into and our chosen families of friends and lovers.

When we're weighed down by old traditions that exist only because, "that's the way it's always been," it's time to seek out new traditions. When closed-minded folks would rather see our chestnuts roasting on an open fire than share a holiday meal with us, we need to surround ourselves, instead, with people who love and support us every day.

Let's make the Yuletide gay. And let's worry less about gifts and more about giving. Bitch-Slap Santa would want it that way.

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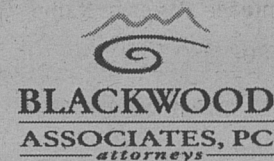
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