

When you think of Christmas, what comes to mind? Santa Claus, great gifts, stuffed stockings, tinsel trees? When I think of Christmas, the first thing that pops into mind is not what gift I am hoping to receive, but who I will be spending Christmas dinner with. As the years have passed, Christmas dinner with my family has changed dramatically. When I was a child, everyone would come together and I remember how much fun it was to see all my cousins, aunts and uncles. To see what else Santa had left for us under my grandparent's tree. To rip through our stockings full of chocolate and penny toys, and love them. To stuff our faces with raviolis, meatballs, brijole and cheesecake. To fall asleep in my pop-pop's recliner because I was so full of food and so exhausted from waking up at 6 am, I could not keep my eyes open any longer. Nowadays, I am filled with a feeling of love, a feeling of joy and togetherness, a feeling of family every time my mind travels back to those long-ago holidays.

Our family festivities usually began in the middle of December. Everyone would come together at my grandparent's house to celebrate pop-pop's birthday and to decorate their Christmas tree. As I grew older and our family grew larger, this get-together became its own holiday. The highlight of the night was when Santa Claus himself would arrive at the house for a special one-on-one with each of the kids. We would all get a chance to sit on his lap and tell him what our hopes and wishes were for Christmas morning. Of course he asked everyone who was naughty and who was nice, but on that night, no one would admit to being naughty. Not in front of Santa himself! Santa then had some cookies, took some carrots for his reindeer and was on his way. All the kids would go to the backyard to wave goodbye. As we were searching the sky for his sleigh,

one of the adults hid on the roof and shook some sleigh bells to signal which direction Santa had flown off to. How exciting to have Santa Claus in our house, sitting on our sofa, eating cookies in our kitchen! After that, the tree decorating was nothing more than an afterthought, left up to the adults.

Christmas Eve was always a quiet night. I would go to church with my mom and sing carols in the candlelight. It was a time for my mom and me to spend together, just the two of us. We would go home and have meatball sandwiches for dinner because my mom cooked the meatballs and gravy for Christmas dinner the night before. After dinner, my mom would put on the radio and help me wrap any presents I still needed wrapped. I still leave the radio on overnight on Christmas Eve so if I wake up I can hear Nat King Cole singing about chestnuts roasting on an open fire.

Christmas dinner was just like I described before. Everyone together again, opening presents, playing with new toys, eating way too much good food. Just spending time together. At the time, I didn't think about the future. I didn't think about growing up and moving away, about losing people I'd love, about spending Christmas with someone new. It seemed like that's the way it was and the way it would always be. I miss that innocence. I miss the feeling of closeness that overwhelmed me at every holiday. But I look ahead to when I begin making new memories with my own children, to when the blessings of family renew again with a new generation. I will be forever searching for a way to rekindle those long ago feelings of family, togetherness, and joy.