

READER'S DIGEST





COVER STORY



The Season for Family Miracles

A mother's eerie premonition. An uncle's unusual joyride. The sweet wait for a dad's holiday treat. If you need a little extra warmth this year, these three wonderful stories will do the job nicely.

Dad's Mystery Package

My father resembled a fruitcake. One year, he even sent one. It never arrived.

BY David Rompf

ADAPTED FROM THE NEW YORK TIMES

A FEW YEARS AGO, my father arranged to send me a mail-order fruitcake at Christmas-time. Although I had a good job and owned an apartment in Manhattan, he feared my cupboards and refrigerator might be bare. I had recently moved from California, where my parents still lived in their suburban bungalow of 50 years, the house I grew up in.

He wanted me to have a particular

brand of fruitcake. Made in Texas, it was famous among fruitcake lovers—or, at least, among people who gave fruitcakes to those who were assumed to love them.

“It reminds me of my mother’s,” he told me in a phone call. “Hers was really moist, with lots of raisins.”

I later figured out that my grandmother’s version, which I never had the chance to taste, was probably a Depression cake, made without milk, sugar, butter, or eggs, scarce commodities when he was a child.

Born in 1932, Dad grew up during the Great Depression in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan. On most Christmases, he received two gifts: a pair of homemade socks and a small sack of oranges.

“My mother knitted the socks,” he said. “And those oranges tasted so good.”

Ordering the fruitcake was his way of trying to take care of me from afar, in an era that, in his mind, might at any moment turn economically perilous. Regardless of my middle-aged status, I was still his son.

“It should arrive the first week of December,” he said. “As soon as you get it, let me know what you think.”

I would be going to California for Christmas, as I do every year, and I was looking forward to his gift and to sampling the flavors that transported him to his childhood.

The first week of December passed with no sign of his fruitcake. Delayed



STYLIST: JACQUELINE DRAPER FOR THIS REPRESENTS



PHOTOGRAPH BY *Ted + Chelsea Cavanaugh*

by holiday mail, I assumed, or a backlog of orders.

I knew there would be plenty to eat in California. In addition to my mother's cookies, fudge, and other treats, my father always gave my sister and me each a large bag of assorted foods he called, rather plainly, the "Food Bag." He produced these from some secret spot only after all the other presents had been opened. One year, I listed the contents of my

* **THE FRUITCAKE
WAS HIS WAY OF
TAKING CARE OF ME
FROM AFAR.**



Food Bag in a notebook. I suppose I wanted a record for myself, for the day when I might not get a Food Bag for Christmas. That year, my bag contained a can of deluxe mixed nuts, a box of whole-wheat crackers, a Belgian chocolate bar, a stick of hickory-cured turkey sausage, a half-pound sack of California red pistachios, some English breakfast tea, and many other items, including an "Oh Deer Super Dooper Reindeer Pooper Jelly Bean Dispenser" filled with jelly beans.

I was 44 when my father gave me that Food Bag, and he was 72.

The bags had an uncanny but undeniable kinship with fruitcakes, featuring a little of this and that thrown together with intriguing results. They

were so overstuffed that I often had to put most of the food in a box and mail it home. One year I assembled a few of the healthier items—sardines, rye crisps, dried apricots—and on the way to the airport made a special delivery of my own to the donation center of a local church.

FRUITCAKE IS A polarizing concept, a triggering word. People love it or hate it and like to debate whether it's cake at all. In some ways, my father's character resembled a fruitcake: whimsy and a little nuttiness mixed with a sweet foundation.

When we were children and went to the local shopping mall, he liked to spritz on women's perfume—all of them. This was before men's cologne counters were common. Once they were, he would transform himself into a pansexual bouquet of exotic fragrances. On our drives home, my mother would say, "You stink! What did you put on this time?"

While working as a meat cutter in grocery stores, he was called Crazy Charlie by his coworkers and was known for workplace pranks, such as pretending to lock someone in the walk-in meat freezer. But he also gave out instructions to customers who didn't know how to roast lamb or make stuffing. When he came home from late shifts, he left candy bars under our pillows, thinking we might wake up wanting a snack.

My father believed everyone was

always hungry and needed to eat. When we visited him in the hospital during a three-month stay—he was battling a vicious infection after heart surgery—he would ask whether we had eaten and never failed to remind us that the cafeteria would be closing soon.

“At least get a cup of coffee,” he’d say. “Don’t worry about me.”

A fruitcake, in his mind, was a perfect Christmas gift. The culinary jumble of jeweled fruits suggested an extravagance that belied its practicality: Fruitcake can fill your belly and has a long shelf life. In 2017, a fruitcake thought to have been brought on Robert Scott’s Antarctica expedition more than 100 years earlier was discovered to be in “excellent condition.”

THE DAY BEFORE my flight to California, the fruitcake still had not arrived. When my father called to wish me a safe trip, he said, “Did you receive it?”

“Not yet,” I said. “It’s probably delayed in the holiday mail.”

“Maybe it’ll be there today.” He fretted deeply about that lost fruitcake.

When I arrived at my parents’ house, he said, “Did you get the fruitcake?”

“No, but I’m sure it’ll be there when I go home.”

As soon as the word left my lips, I realized that *home*, for them, was a kind of triggering word. Because wasn’t this home? Wasn’t I home now, with my parents greeting me, asking whether I was hungry after the long flight?

In the living room, a Christmas tree

stood above piles of presents in glittery paper, and in the spare bedroom, my father, I knew, had hidden our Food Bags, concealed under large towels.

He remained hopeful the fruitcake would come by New Year’s Eve, when I’d be back in Midtown Manhattan, humanity roaring from Times Square.

January, February, and March came and went with no fruitcake. Though my father continued to ask about it, I never once considered lying and telling him yes, the fruitcake had finally arrived and was delicious. Instead I said, “That cake is orbiting earth, and sooner or later it will land.”

“That’s a good one!” he said.

His sense of humor never wavered, and as time went on he would bring up the perpetual journey of his fruitcake.

“I wonder where it is now,” he’d say.

“It’s taken a detour to Pluto.”

He liked that one too.

“Do you want me to order another, in case it never comes?”

“That’s OK, Dad,” I said. “I’ll wait for this one. It’ll taste even better after touring the cosmos.”

EARLY LAST DECEMBER, nearly a year after my father died from a failing heart, I got a call from a staffer at the front desk of my apartment building.

“You have a package,” he said.

I went downstairs to pick it up. The brown box had a FedEx label with a return address in Texas.

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Celebrating Like a Man

Uncle Ed was a tough guy of few words. But when he took me on a Christmas Eve drive, he gave me the kind of sweet memories that last a lifetime.

BY *Rick Bragg*

FROM **SOUTHERN LIVING**

I WAITED TOO LATE to thank Uncle Ed for that Christmas Eve, but I guess he and I were never the kind of men who wrote many notes, or read them. Even around Christmas, when a little silliness and frivolity is easier to tolerate, men of a certain time, place, and class are unlikely to have anything to do with a thank-you card. We would just as soon go caroling in a light-up sweater. Southern men like us tend to keep the holiday our way and let others keep it theirs.

Still, some Christmases are kept better than others. Some flash in and out of our memories, like a short in an old string of lights.

For me, it will always be 1969 that blinks back into my mind this time of year. That was when I first read

Charles Dickens's *A Christmas Carol* and saw it come to life, in a way, in the mist-shrouded mountains of northeastern Alabama.

I have loved Christmas all my life. As a boy, I loved the grocery store, where frozen turkeys and smoked hams piled up like cannonballs. There was, and is, a beautiful kind of sturdiness to it here, mirroring the people. Trees were real and came from these mountains, usually cedars and hardy pines. Our mistletoe was procured the old-fashioned way, by blasting it out of the trees with a Remington. The ornaments were mostly handmade and almost always crafted from twice-used aluminum foil. The star that crowned a tree in December was probably left over from wrapping a

tomato sandwich the summer before.

This was my Christmas. It was simple, never fancy, but there was in it a wonderful warmth. Uncle Ed's wife, my aunt Juanita, filled the whole house with the smell of her peanut butter cookies. Even the desserts were substantial; no sissy divinity candy would be tolerated here. My mama baked pecan pies that were so dense you asked not for a slice but a slab. Paper plates buckled under the weight. My aunt Joe made corn bread dressing you could eat with a fork, like cake.

But even this sturdy a Christmas was too delicate for Uncle Ed, the hardest-working man I had ever known. He thought there was just something wrong about taking time off in the middle of the week—time you could have spent running a chain saw or on the end of a shovel handle.

And Christmas Eve was a workday like any other. I was ten years old that year, just idling around the house and yard, prowling through the wrapped presents under the tree, trying, with my X-ray eyes, to peer beneath the paper of a gift that looked suspiciously like a G.I. Joe, when he asked me whether I wanted to ride to Gadsden with him to look at a used dump truck.

Any other time, I would have knocked the furniture over getting out to his pickup. Country kids never miss a chance to go to town, to go anywhere. But this was the day before Christmas, just hours before all our kin gathered here for a big feast.

This year it was a deer roast as big as a buffalo—and a present exchange. Someone might bring a guitar or a French harp and even be brave enough to sing. In the meantime, there were cookies and maybe fudge to steal, aunts to irritate, and black-and-white reruns to rewatch on channels 6, 40, and 13. Then at five o'clock, the weatherman would show us precisely where on his radar Santa Claus was in relation to Calhoun County, Alabama. We believed in every bit of it.

**WE ATE BURGERS IN
THE TRUCK, LISTENED
TO THE RADIO, AND
SAVORED IT ALL.**



I would miss it all if I went with him, maybe the whole Christmas. Once he got started on a job, even if it was just a search for a truck, he would hang with it till it was done. Surely it could wait.

"You want to go or not?" he asked.

I had no spine. "I reckon," I said.

It was one of those winter days in the Deep South that was almost black by afternoon, so thick was the mist. The low-lying clouds were cold gray. It seemed as if the heater in the old GMC would never warm up, and we were halfway to Gadsden before my toes began to thaw. Parts of the city, an industrial town on the Coosa River, would be brightly lit, and shoppers would throng the downtown. Even

Goodyear, even the steel plants, would knock off early on Christmas Eve and join that celebration. But we steered away from the lights and headed into the graveyards of old machines that have been part of such cities since the start of the Industrial Revolution. We found, I was dismayed to see, a few million used dump trucks.

Then, in a Christmas miracle, Uncle Ed gazed down at his Timex and said we had bigger fish to fry. Looking at that truck was just an excuse, a ruse. We went to celebrate Christmas like men.

First, we headed to the day-old bread outlet and filled up the truck with fruitcakes, cinnamon buns, and doughnuts. Next, with powdered sugar on our lips, we turned down Broad Street and idled through the decked-out heart of the city on its most festive day. The storefronts were lit up, glowing, crowded with last-minute shoppers—daddies rolling new bicycles and mamas staggering under big boxes. Santa Claus stood ringing a bell on a corner like it was goin' out of style. I saw him again in the music store, strumming a guitar, and again in what I think was the Western Auto or maybe the Otasco with children on his knee. I asked Uncle Ed which one of them was the real Santy, and he just took a draw on his Winston and told me it was “prob'ly that fust 'un.”

Then we turned south toward the Big Chief Drive-In, which had one of the finest hamburgers in northeast

Alabama. We got two cheeseburgers each and a pile of fries that burned my fingers. It was too early for supper and way past dinnertime, but when you're celebrating, you can ignore such as that. We ate in the truck and savored it all, listening to the radio. I don't remember much being said but just hearing the song about the drummer boy and the one about the 12 days. Then he looked at his watch again and said, “The women will be purty riled if we don't git home.” But we took our time going back, too, admiring holiday lights, taking the longest way. And before the Christmas Eve celebration had even begun there on Roy Webb Road, we'd celebrated all up and down Gadsden, Alabama, and the north half of Calhoun County. It was as good a Christmas as I would have for a very long time.

I should have told him this when he was alive, but things get awkward the longer you live. So, even though it's too late now, I want to thank him for it, for letting me come along.

“And it was always said of him, that he knew how to keep Christmas well ...”

Some may hear those words of Dickens and think of fine literature. But I see Uncle Ed in the glow of an AM radio, smell french fries and Winstons, and hear the ticking of an old Timex that, in the most beautiful way, didn't mean a thing that day.

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