

Let It Snow: Christmas Among Ghosts

written by Andrea Lambert | January 13, 2016



Come and taste my Christmas cookies! RuPaul sings on his “Sleigh Belles” album. I listen to it along with “Elvis’ Christmas Album” in December. Day after the witches sabbat Yule, I drive with my parents up to Reno, Nevada. Full frontal familial Christmas with my mother’s big Italian-Mexican family.

It is my first sober Christmas with my family. My abuela is 98. My father is 70. I am piercingly aware that none of us have very much more time left together. I hear talk about the return of militias. Republican presidential candidates in debates threaten “boots on the ground,” to ISIS. San Bernadino happens terrifyingly close to home. I tweet, “After Christmas it’s just winter and war, so I’m rolling around in all of this warm fuzzy holiday good-time-ness while it lasts.”

Come and taste my Christmas cookies! And I do. The first and favorite cookie I chose from the tin that my Auntie Carol sets out is Conestalletti. A traditional Italian cookie invented by my dead great-grandmother Noni. A tender shortbread cookie with the addition of whiskey and powdered sugar cut into star, bell, and scallop shapes.

Upon my mother’s frenetic googling the closest thing we can find on the Internet to this delicious cookie so enshrined in my family’s collective mythology is Canistrelli. That’s another Italian shortbread but without the whiskey. Different egg preparation. No powdered sugar on top. My favorite cousin Lauren says Noni must have just thrown a little whiskey into the shortbread and invented a cookie to be passed on through the generations. It is a mystery.

I eat spherical powdered sugar-covered Mexican Wedding Cakes and maple cookies as I sit with my aunt, mother, and grandmother in the kitchen of the house my grandmother and grandfather built together in 1954. We are at the perfect tipping point of four generations under one roof once my cousin and

his kids show up.

My grandma's kitchen is full of teapots. One has a masonic symbol on it. I ask my mother if my dead Italian grandfather who laid the elaborate tile in this house's bathrooms was a Freemason as well. My family is full of mysteries.

"He was in the mason's Union, but he was just a tile-setter," my mother says. I wonder if this is true. Did my grandfather really carry buckets of bootleg wine that his parents made around to the casinos as a child during prohibition? Lauren and I love to tell these legends of our family. With so much retelling we lose track of what is true in the mythos.

On my mother's bidding I get out the grill pan that I packed in my suitcase so that we can make Pomegranate-Glazed Grilled Chicken for Christmas Eve dinner. Green beans sautéed with olive oil and shallots as a side. A Christmas Eve tradition that my dead wife and I started that Christmas she came to Reno with me. I drink pomegranate juice out of a wine glass as the chicken sizzles. I like pomegranate juice a lot more than wine. It looks exactly the same in the wine glass. I keep having to explain that I am not drinking.

Reno: the biggest little city in the world. Reno: the ancestral home. Reno: where medical marijuana recently became legal to join old local favorites gambling and prostitution. Weed is keeping me sober from alcohol. It is harm reduction. Thank the Goddess and the Horned God it is entirely okay with my family if wacky cousin Andrea from Los Angeles likes to go out in the backyard periodically and look at the snow. It doesn't snow in Hollywood! A peaceful snow-covered porch swing in my grandma's backyard in Reno under the moon where I smoke a late night bowl after Christmas Eve dinner. It feels faintly sacrilegious yet lovely.

I watch the snow fall from beneath the ears of the bear hat that belonged to my dead wife. I found it in her forgotten suitcase when I was packing for this trip. I don't tell my relatives of the bear hat's origins when they compliment me on it. I swallow my pain. Finally I tell my mother, "it was a gift from my wife." My wife Katie watches over me, even in death. She wanted me to have a warm hat in the snow.

At my feet in the snow I find the sexiest black thong from my suitcase. My panties must have been in the backyard since last night's little marijuana moment. Must have gotten stuck to my gloves and inadvertently wandered out into this winter wonderland with me. I am so glad that my cousin, wife and his two little children who are arriving tomorrow did not discover this tiny thong of mine as I stuff my ice-encrusted panties into my leather trench coat pocket. Bullet dodged. For now.

The footsteps of a deer or a cat or a dog mark the snow. I tweet, "[#TonightIWish](#) that this Christmas full moon prevail over a momentarily peaceful world. May our disparate struggles find healing." I have trouble telling if the pipe is done because my exhalations in the freezing cold air are white like smoke.

The first thing I tweet on Christmas morning is, "Adulthood: when you're more excited by the coffee that just finished than the presents under the tree." The presents are over in a rush of crinkling aqua and silver paper. Rosemary olive oil from my Auntie Carol. A \$50 Target gift card from my uncle and aunt. From my parents: A Birchbox Limited Edition Luxe gift box, cat leggings from Beloved Shirts, a cat toy with an enclosed vial of catnip, Pacifica Tuscan Blood Orange Body Butter from Target, lighters, a \$25 Starbucks gift card, coffee K cups, and a candle. From grandma: Ferrero Rocher chocolates with \$50 cash tucked inside a card. From cousin Lauren: pork pâté, Petrichor soap, and body balm.

Despite this bounty I tweet, "My best Christmas gift was the negative Amazon review for *Jet Set Desolate* that I read for the first time this morning. Merry Xmas haters!!" It gives me an indescribable thrill to hear my website described as "a rabbit-hole of delusion" in the new review. A trail of gingerbread crumbs leading back to my witch cave, that is what I have been constructing on the Internet for years now. This new, one-star Amazon review that I read from my iPhone Christmas morning tells me that my master plan has been successful. Long, slow cackle.

My father and grandma aren't offended by my poem about the family in the *Writing the Walls Down: A Convergence of LGBTQ Voices* anthology that I give them as gifts. It's a Christmas miracle!! Grandma is so happy to see my name emblazoned in a real book it seems. Watching my abuela avidly yet perplexedly read the LGBTQ anthology I gave her gives me all of the feelings.

I search after the presents and wrapping have been put away. I find the wedding photo of myself and my bride in our Louis Verdad couture gowns tucked up on a shelf with the photos of the other cousin's weddings. My heart gushes with love.

I'm at the part of early middle age where you're so glad your parents are still alive that they become a lot less annoying. "You were breaking new ground," my father said to me about grandma's earlier perceived reluctance to hang the wedding photo of my lesbian marriage that I had sent her. I couldn't find the wedding photo when I looked for it before. I find it now.

Bundled in sweater coat, leather trench coat, dead wife bear hat, and leather gloves from Target I get into the way back of the silver Siena minivan that ferries my parents, grandma, and aunt to Uncle Jim and Auntie Ruthie's for Christmas Dinner. We are cautious with grandma's emaciated legs walking through the ice to the front door where we are welcomed with hugs. I tweet, "I'm about to be surrounded by my massive Italian-Mexican family over Christmas Dinner. Let the awkward questions commence!"

I tweet, "Appreciating the awkward endearment of these occasional big Christmas extended family things and thinking about how I'm going to write about all of it later." Periodically throughout the dinner I say to my father, "I'm doing research for my journalism," so that I do not seem like too much of a failure to him. No one asks the uncomfortable questions that I fear. I am allowed to drift along in a haze of warm light.

Amid 21 assorted members of my extended family I sip Martinelli's from a big red cup. When my mother offered me a wine glass for it I said, "No, I don't want to accidentally make any mistakes." She took me in her arms then and said, "I love you so much." After last night's pomegranate juice in a wine glass it feels safer to go with the big red cup, marking me as sober. I stay sober as my family drinks bottle after bottle of red wine.

I nip and tuck in to the hors d'oeuvres tray. Pesto with sun dried tomatoes. A cheese ball studded with almonds homemade by my cousin's wife. Mémé mix: a snack mix passed down by my aunt's ex-husband's French mother.

I load crackers up with duck pâté. Heavily tattooed cousin Lauren is a butcher on Vashon island. She brought five types of pork rilette with jam in small jars that she made from the jowls of a pig that they raised and slaughtered on that farm. I talk with Lauren and her fiancé about how they had to hire someone else to shoot the pigs and lambs that they butcher. The pain of missing the shot, ruining the meat and the animal's peaceful life.

We are a family of carnivores. I load my plate with Prime Rib. Christmas Prime Rib persuaded me to give up vegetarianism in 2000. I pour Béarnaise sauce with Tarragon over the medium rare beef. A scoop of broccoli salad. Sweet potatoes. Mixed greens with Dijon vinaigrette.

Another one of my family's traditions is homemade raviolis filled with cow brains for Christmas Dinner. I spoon the succulent pasta onto my plate. I ask Uncle Jim if the raviolis are made with brains as is traditional. He says the raviolis are filled with sausage, spinach, and cheese instead. I think back to my wife when she was alive that Reno Christmas in 2010 discovering that the cow brain raviolis were delicious and eating them hungrily.

Come and taste my Christmas cookies! A silver platter of Conestalletti, Auntie Carol's fudge, and every cookie the collective womenfolk made this year. I nibble on them. Sip my black coffee as my family lingers over cups of coffee with Bailey's.

When I am alone doing yoga in grandma's spare bedroom full of creepy dolls my Italian grandfather's ghost comes to me in this, the haunted ancestral home where he died. I see him as a ball of light on the wall and a white cloaked ghostly figure. I take a selfie with him because I took selfies with my mother and 7-year-old second cousin at the dinner. It's just what you do. I never got a chance to take a selfie with my grandfather because he died before cell phones had cameras.

When I show my father, my cousin and my therapist the selfie some can see the ghost and some see only a stoned girl in leopard print pajama's smiling goofily next to a blank wall covered in pink haze. Whether or not the manifestation is a ghost or my Schizoaffective Disorder I will take it as a Christmas gift. Better even than the bad Amazon review.

Grandpa came home for Christmas. I feel him lingering around my 98-year-old abuelita in her twilight years. It comforts me that he is waiting for her as I know my wife is waiting for me. Robert Frost writes, "And miles to go

before I sleep," I think of how much more living I have yet to do before I am ready to join her. Despite all of my conversations with the afterlife, I am in no hurry to get there.

I read my tarot over and over this night, every night on this trip looking for answers. The three dancing women on the three of cups that I uncover in a horseshoe spread beckon me home. I'll be home for Christmas. In this which may be my grandmother's last Christmas with her family I hold tight to the sparkling ball of my grandfather's ghost. The sparkling balls on my grandma's artificial tree that I Instagram.

A moment in time is made all the more beautiful by knowing it will not last forever.