

## **What Happened When I Spent Christmas Eve in a Basement with a Crazy Cat**

*I didn't exactly catch the holiday spirit, but I took a suggestion that kept me hanging on by my claws through the Next 12 Days of Christmas...*

It was Christmas Eve, 2013, and I was scooping poop from a litter box in my neighbors' basement. They'd rescued a feral kitten whose new habitat ranged from the hot water heater to the washer/dryer. Although it was icy outdoors and toasty within, this foster feline wasn't buying into her rehabilitation. But I was. I was three months sober.

Kitty was ambivalent towards humans. She darted about the boiler room, kicking up supermarket circulars that had been laid down for her comfort. As I shook Friskies into the bowl, she shouldered up to me, twitching her tail against my forearm, her throat vibrating under a flea collar. As I reached to pet her, she caught my wrist between her paws and bit down hard on the hand that fed her.

I was tempted to punt the little ingrate into the sewer trap, but instead I dialed a sober friend. Darlyne listened as I droned on about what I was sure would be my worst holiday ever, the bluest, *Blue Christmas* imaginable. After fourteen years of marriage, my husband and I had agreed to call it quits in September. Here we were now in December, Yuletide upon us, and that sparkling snow globe of a mental construct—the family Christmas—was shattering. There would be two trees this year instead of one, two piles of hastily-wrapped presents, and even two plates of sugar cookies, left for two Santas, because our younger son was only six, and very much still a believer.

I never doubted my decision to divorce, but I had misgivings when it came to the kids. I feared the emotional fall-out from all those times when mom's temper met dad's radioactive passive-aggression. I saw an acid cloud of neuroses raining down upon my sons from their parents' split, a psychic soaker that would take them years of therapy before they'd start to dry out.

I watched two lines of red dots on my forearms swell and connect, where the beast had scratched me. Then I lost it. I broke down bawling on a basement floor. After a while, Darlyne interrupted me. "Maria I get it. I do. it's a rough time. A really rough time. And it's good you're letting it all out. But we've been on the phone

thirty minutes now and I'm gonna pee my pants." "Ok," I said as I blew my nose into the deli section. "But listen," Darlyne said before signing off, "I want you to do something."

## CHANGE OR DIE

I had no idea what she was going to say, but I already knew I didn't want to do it. The default of my defiant alcoholic mind—then and now, drinking or sober— is "NO." But recovery, I have learned, is about *change*. And change often means saying "YES" instead of "NO." It means being willing to take suggestions—often awkward, tedious or unsexy actions that force me to sit with feelings and stretch my tolerance for discomfort. "It's just going to be so weird for the kids to wake up Christmas morning and not see two parents!" I wailed, ignoring my friend's bladder. I wasn't done catastrophizing. "Just listen," Darlyne was louder now. "I want you to do something, and I promise it will help."

At that moment, I had a choice: take in what my friend was telling me, or tune her out. Sobriety is about making choices, and I've made some doozies in my fifty-five years of frolicking between a few zip codes in New York City, with a Bacardi and

Coke in hand. And the takeaways from all my choices—good and bad—have always been there too. Only now I’m actually able to *take* these takeaways. Free of mind and mood-altering substances, I’m present for each new experience, and I can see my part in it. Sometimes I repeat the same mistakes, but these successive ones occur less often, and feel less calamitous. It’s getting better. And that feels good.

But I wasn’t feeling good that morning. I was cold and panicky. “What is it?” I choked. “Make a list of ten things you’re grateful for,” said Darlyne, “and save it in your phone. Then read it back to yourself, over and over again, for the next two weeks. Got it?” “I got it,” I sniffled. “You’ll feel better. Trust me.” Then she hung up. I was skeptical, and I didn’t feel better yet, but I did it. I squatted on that cellar floor, my tailbone pressed against the cold cement, and I took that sober woman’s suggestion. It was one of the better moves I’ve ever made.

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Ten things I’m grateful for:

1. My sobriety
2. My sons
3. My family (most of the time)

4. My soon-to-be ex (He's a good dad after all.)
5. All my friends (from 4th grade to the present)

What else?

6. My first cup of coffee in the morning
7. A good mattress
8. Food in my stomach
9. The sun rising over the rooftops

I don't remember the tenth. So I'll just add something now, something that could have been on that first list.

10. Pannetone

Yes, the fluffy bread, loaded with raisins, that you only see in supermarkets at the holidays. To go with number 6, coffee. For me, the small things on my list have come to matter too. Even when the big ticket items are absent—like the job with benefits, or the boyfriend—the small, quiet things are always there, if I look for them. Like the neighbor with the beehive in his backyard, who supplies me honey, nine months out of twelve.

*There!* I read the list in my cupped palm. Then I reread it. Well, I wasn't jolly yet, but I was functional. I dried my tears in an advertisement for holiday ham, then

stood up and got on with the business of making magic for my kids that Christmas Eve. And I muttered that merry mantra of a gratitude list over and over for the next twelve days and arrived at the new year, clean, sober, and—to my surprise—not absolutely miserable for every second of it.

Flash forward to 2020, amicably-divorced and effectively co-parenting, I feel far-removed from that bleak midwinter morning spent bawling in a basement with a bipolar cat. I still have days where I forget that I'm wildly blessed, days where I watch my teen on the tennis court and forget the shattered ankle, the surgery, the cast, and the flawless recovery. I still have sour days where I see only another wet towel on the bathroom floor and pistachio shells on the pillow case.

But on these days, thankfully, I remember what will slap me back into gratitude. I know that if I just jot ten things I've got going for me, it'll make me feel better. I also know that when I neglect to count my blessings, I'm more likely to cry over every glass of spilt milk or busted garbage bag.

When my twelve-year-old quips: "Quit trying to make your own disgusting chicken fingers and just take me to McDonald's," I don't collapse in tears on the

linoleum anymore, but instead, I rattle off my list. My sobriety is always on top, and my sons still take the number two spot (except today, the younger slides down to number eight.) My good health follows, then my elderly parents and my brother, who mows their lawn and drives them to doctors' appointments. I acknowledge my good neighbors, my shrink, my deep pre-war apartment bathtub, fat dogs with short legs, and my self-respect. Then I turn to William and say: "Put on your hoodie, we're going to McDonald's."