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HOW NOT TO... LET YOUR FAMILY RUIN THE HOLIDAYS

by Jenny McPhee

EVERY YEAR AS DECEMBER approaches, I find myself longing to return to the family hearth, where I might encounter chestnuts roasting on an open fire; a goose in the oven; Rudolph, Donner, and Blitzen prancing on the rooftop; and piles of brightly wrapped presents waiting to satisfy every heart's desire. Although these details (minus the reindeer) genuinely describe my childhood yuletide seasons, Christmastime at home was always a nightmare.

I grew up in New Jersey with four sisters and five step-siblings, and although (miraculously) I still like all of them, if you get too many of us under the same roof for any length of time, a kind of familial entropy ensues and I feel lucky to get out alive. Of course, this lack of harmony is our parents' fault. They fantasized that their patchwork brood was as precocious as the Glass family and as amenable as the Bradys, so they never looked too closely at reality. We're really just a bunch of savages. In her essay "On Going Home," Joan Didion describes returning to the place of our youth as a time to slip back into childhood dynamics of the more pernicious kind. In my case, that can mean a degeneration of the near-deadly kind.

My holiday memories include one sister chasing another with the carving knife she had been using on the goose; a stepbrother grabbing an African spear from above the mistletoe-adorned fireplace and hurling it at his sister, who narrowly escaped; and acid-laced marijuana that a stepsister substituted for the oregano in the stuffing. As we grew older, our attacks became less physical, more psychological—techniques similar to those that Baby Jane's sister used. Omertà (and space) keeps me from divulging more.



My husband believes I am suffering from a bizarre variant of post-traumatic stress disorder, because here's the thing: Every holiday, either I am visiting my relatives or they are visiting me. My husband got himself transferred to London believing an intractable ocean might act as a fender between my truculent family and us. Instead it has gone from bad to dire. One relative or another is almost continuously in residence. Family may have ruined my holidays, but now it is ruining my life. While my case is probably terminal, for

those who still have a chance I have devised 10 rules for preventing your relatives from wrecking everything.

- RULE N01: Never have a large family.
- RULE N02: Never live in a tourist destination.
- RULE N03: Never have a guest bedroom.
- RULE N04: Never work at home, but if you do...
- RULE N05: Never put a convertible sofa in your office.
- RULE N06: Never procrastinate by visiting websites such as *thebigdomain.com* that make family reunions seem perfectly normal.
- RULE N07: Marry an orphan. (Alas, my husband has a family, too.)
- RULE N08: Don't own a telephone. (My children endlessly scheme with their cousins about when they will next see each other.)
- RULE N09: Don't have children.
- RULE N010: Just say no.

Where will many of my family members be celebrating Christmas 2007? *London*. To do: Buy a few of those blow-up mattresses in case any extra people show up; remove all potential weapons from the house.

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