

Ted frowned at the turkey on the cutting board. “Is the meat supposed to be that color?” He sniffed the air. “And what’s that weird smell? It’s kind of like Old Spice mixed with shoe polish.”

Sally gave him “the look”, the one developed and honed through years of practice, the one that told Ted he was being a complete yutz.

“You’re hallucinating, Ted. There’s no smell.” She leaned over to look at the turkey. “It does look a little pink, doesn’t it? Maybe we should pop it back into the oven for a while.”

Ted contemplated further discussion of the objectionable smell, and then thought better of it. His normally unflappable wife had morphed into a stressed out bundle of nerves. This was the first Christmas since her mother died, the first Christmas she planned all by herself. Her family was coming for Christmas dinner and Sally wanted everything perfect. Ted lifted the turkey back into the roaster and heaved it into the oven, his arms trembling under the weight.

“Was this thing a sumo wrestler in a previous life? How much does it weigh?” He adjusted the temperature on the oven, moving it up to five hundred degrees. They did have to eat this Christmas, after all.

“It’s about thirty pounds,” Sally replied. She studied the magazine in front of her with its glossy photos of beautiful, yet edible garnishes. Unfortunately, the tortured tomato in Sally’s hand bared no resemblance to the elegant rosette in the picture. “It’s hopeless.” She plopped her mangled tomato onto the counter. It sagged, its star shaped points flattening against the counter’s surface like a dying jelly fish. “Maybe I’ll just slice the tomatoes.”

Ted watched tomato juice ooze onto the counter and down to the floor. “Good idea.”

The doorbell rang and Sally shot Ted a look of horror. “I’m not ready yet.” She pulled at her apron strings. “I haven’t changed, or finished setting the table. I didn’t even light the candles.”

Ted turned her around and unknotted the apron. “It’s not like Martha Stewart is coming for Christmas dinner. It’s just your family. They’ve seen us before, warts and all.”

“But this is different. This is the first Christmas . . . our first Christmas alone. I’m the oldest. Christmas is my responsibility now.”

Ted didn’t know where she got that misguided notion, but there was no time to argue.

“The kids and I will set the dining room table. You answer the door before someone freezes to the front step.”

She gave him a nervous smile before hurrying to the door. Ted found his offspring lounging in front of the TV in the basement. Ten year old Adam flicked channels with the remote, and thirteen year old Brittany lounged on the recliner. Ted pulled the earbuds from her ears.

“Hey,” she protested. “I was listening to that.”

“Not anymore.” Ted took the remote from Adam’s hands and clicked off the TV. “We’ve got company and your job is to set the dining room table. Tablecloth, napkins, the whole nine yards. And do a good job. Your allowance depends on it.”

“Is Uncle Dave here?” Adam asked. Sally’s brother Dave was Adam’s favorite uncle, which wasn’t surprising considering that Dave was such a big kid himself.

“I’m not sure. Let’s check it out.”

Upstairs they found that Dave had indeed arrived, along with Sally’s sister, their respective spouses and assorted nieces and nephews. After greeting their guests, Ted shooed Adam and Brittany into the dining room. He followed Sally into the kitchen.

“Is there anything I can do to help?”

Sally looked around her kitchen at the dirty dishes heaped high in the sink, the sticky countertops and the mound of mashed potatoes on the floor.

“Aside from blowing up this room? No, I don’t think so. Why don’t you fix everyone a drink while I get things ready.”

Ted poured rum and eggnog for the adults and gave the kids glasses of punch from the bowl Sally had set up on the sideboard. Presents were stacked under the tree to be opened after dinner. Ted sat back in his chair and enjoyed the conversation around him. Even Sally would have to agree that everything was going well.

Sally’s four year old nephew tripped over Ted’s shoes, landing face first on the carpet. The boy laughed, a glazed look in his eyes. He frowned at Sally’s sister and her husband. What were they giving the poor kid?

Sally walked into the living room, her smile dying slowly. Ted watched her gaze settle on the punch the kids were drinking before turning on him with “the look”. Now what had he done?

“Please tell me you didn’t give the kids that punch.”

Ted winced. This was not good.

“I put a bottle of vodka in that punch. That was for the adults.”

For a second the room turned deathly quiet. Then parents scrambled to their feet and grabbed what remained of the punch in their children’s glasses. Sally’s sister Karen picked up her son.

“It’s not so bad, Sal. They didn’t drink that much. We’ll give them something to eat and they’ll be fine.”

Sally nodded, tight-lipped and mortified. Ted hung his head, feeling like the world’s worst husband. He followed her into the dining room, staying a respectful three paces behind her. He could practically feel the waves of anger that rolled off his wife and tumbled towards him.

She stopped abruptly in the doorway, then turned and stared at him, her eyes wide.

“What have you done?”

She pointed at the dining room table. Mismatched dishes sat on top of what appeared to be a pink and white flowered bed sheet. Instead of dessert spoons, soup spoons sat next to the paper napkins which had been hand coloured with childlike Christmas scenes. Serving as centrepiece, Adam’s favorite decoration, a Santa dressed in a Hawaiian grass skirt and lei, did his animated hula dance to the tune of “Tiny Bubbles”.

Dave and Adam began to hula along with Santa. “Isn’t it great Dad? We went the whole nine yards, like you said.”

Ted smiled weakly. “You sure did, son.”

“Ah-choo.”

Karen’s husband Mike began to wheeze. “It’s my allergies,” he managed between sneezes. “Is someone wearing Old Spice?”

Karen sniffed at the bowl of potpourri that Sally had painstakingly arranged. “It’s this stuff. We have to get rid of it.”

Sally grabbed the bowl, marched to the front door, and dumped the contents into the snow.

“So that’s what smelled,” Ted said as Sally walked by. She glared at him.

“Something else smells, Sal,” Dave said, as he sniffed the air. “I think something’s burning.”

Ted rushed into the kitchen. Black smoke billowed out of the oven when he opened the door and Sally threw baking soda on the grease that had ignited. The smoke alarm shrilled and children cried. Ted grabbed the pot holders and pulled the roasting pan from the oven, praying it wasn’t as bad as he feared.

It was worse. The turkey lay dry and shriveled in the coffin shaped pan, parts of it burned beyond recognition. The only decent thing to do now was to bury the poor thing.

Sally stared at the turkey, her shoulders slumped in defeat. Ted’s heart broke. She’d wanted so much for this Christmas to be perfect and he’d ruined it for her.

Though everyone crowded into the kitchen, the room seemed unnaturally quiet. And then from somewhere near the back of the room, Ted heard a chuckle. The chuckle grew into a guffaw and then a full blown laugh. Everyone turned to look at Dave, who was bent over with spasms of laughter.

“Sal, this is priceless. This is so Mom.” He wiped the tears from his eyes. “Do you remember how many times she burnt the Christmas turkey?”

Sally looked confused. “But Mom’s Christmases were perfect.”

Dave grinned. “Take off the rose colored glasses, kid. Mom couldn’t boil water.”

Sally shook her head. “I just remember things being so . . . right.”

“Yes, they were.” Karen looped her arm through Sally’s. “Mom was a terrible cook. But Christmas was always perfect just because she was there.”

After a moment Sally began to smile. “Do you remember the time she made that marshmallow and sweet potato casserole? It was the vilest thing I’ve ever eaten.”

Sally and her brother and sister reminisced about disasters of Christmases past over pre-dinner drinks. For the first time in days, Ted saw his wife relax.

Just after they paid for the pizza, Sally gave Ted a kiss.

“Does this mean you’ve forgiven me?” he asked.

“Only if you forgive me.” She winked at him. “You may even get lucky tonight.”

Ted tucked away that delightful thought. “What about your perfect Christmas? I thought you wanted it to be special.”

Sally kissed his cheek. “It is special, and it’s perfect. Just like Mom used to make.”