

Be Ingl your own Santa Claus



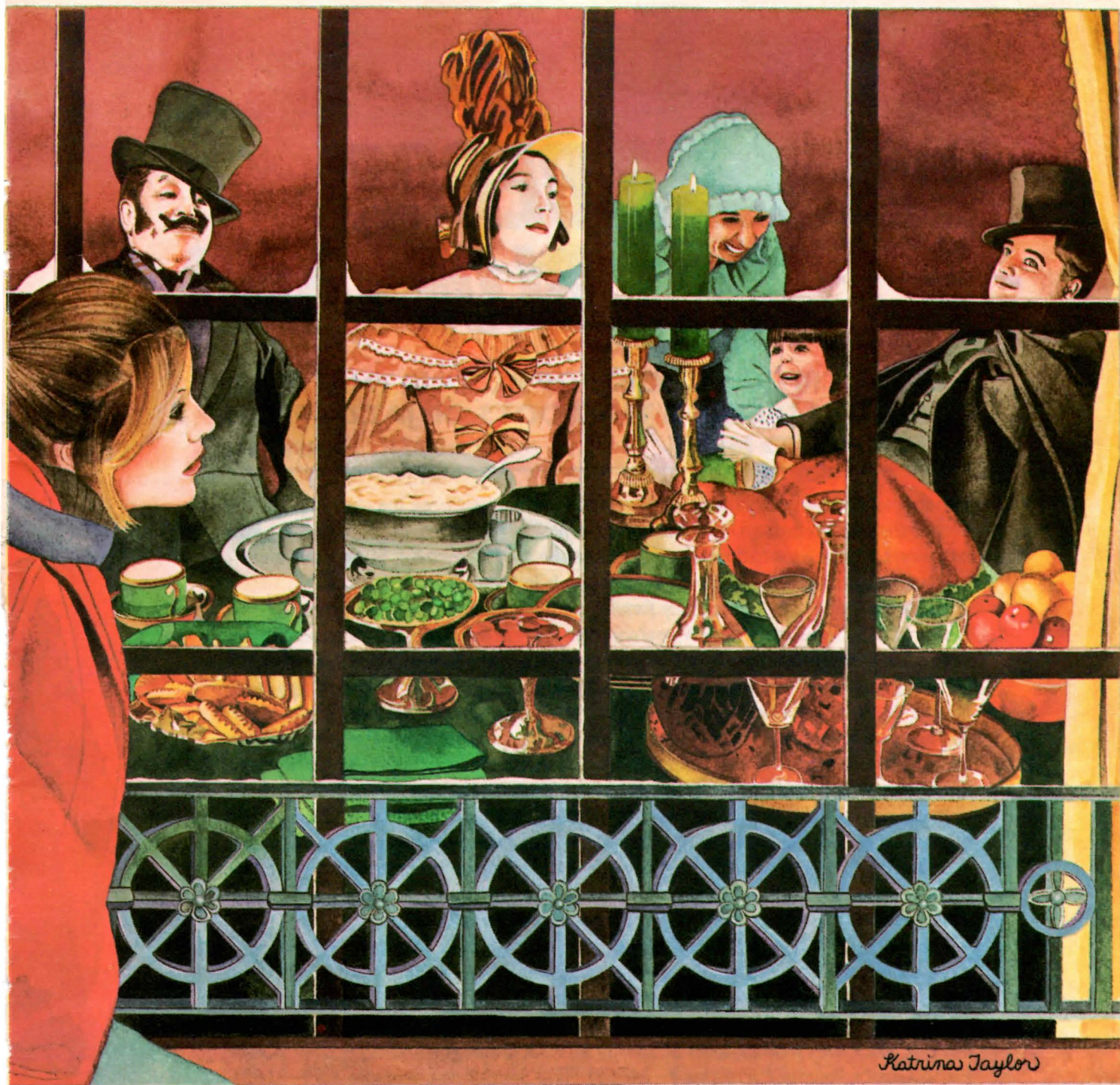
Entasy has a funny way of creeping up on us at holiday times, making home and hearth look pretty good. So how do you deal with the reality of a holiday spent alone?

BY BETTE-JANE RAPHAEL

As I look back on all the year-end holidays I have survived, I can remember only two wholly satisfying Christmases. The first was when I was ix and received a complete set of plastic pots and pans from my parents; the second was when, twenty years later, I received a complete set of gold earrings from the man I was living with. Not that I'm necessarily equating Christmas with loot. The pots and pans, the earrings - they were merely the outward trappings of inner satisfaction, the material bounty that spilled out of a spiritual cornucopia that happened

to be overflowing. The thing about those two Christmases, the central thing, was that I was happy. I liked myself. I felt loved and secure and worthwhile. I felt that the year I was leaving behind had been well spent, that I had grown and learned. (The year of the pots and pans, I had learned how to read and ride a bike; the year of the earrings, I had learned how to love.)

The holidays in between those two, down to and including every Arbor Day and Flag Day on which the sun rose and set, had not been much to write home about, even when I



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had spent them at home. There had been the New Year's Eve when, unable to stand the taste of Scotch, but vaguely aware at the age of eighteen that it was the classy thing to drink, I had drunk nothing but Scotch and ginger ale and become appropriately *non compos mentis*. There had been, later on, Labor Day weekends spent in a ninety-degree-plus New York City, my only company a broken air-conditioner. And finally, there had been that first Christmas after college when, determined that "you can't go home again," I had sat watching a Yule log burn on my

eight-inch black and white television set - a less than spiritually uplifting sight - the image accompanied by the sound not of carols, but of a steady drip from the sink in the pullman kitchen on the wall behind me. It was definitely not a Ho! Ho! Ho! Christmas as I recall, and when Channel Nine wished me and my loved ones their "SinceTe Best Wishes," I understood, in a flash of consummate clarity, why the suicide rate hits the top of the charts around December twenty-fifth.

It was a true epiphany (maybe not quite as important as the one the

shepherds received, but still, no small potatoes), one that I felt deserved further scrutiny. And after asking around a bit, I soon discovered that being lonely, feeling down, worthless and miserable, were not uncommon reactions to the Happy Holidays. Most of my contemporaries, having left the security blankets of their homes and families, seemed to have similar phobic reactions at one time or another, especially to Thanksgiving and Christmas and New Year's. We had all, it seems, grown up in families where these days had *(continued on page 93)*

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a life of their own, often accompanied by time-honored family traditions, like my grandmother's chicken-liver-and-raisin stuffing or my friend Sandy's yearly visit from her Uncle Ben, who for some reason always brought her and her sister umbrellas. We had sort of taken holidays for granted as days planned for us and served up with all the trimmings by mothers standing over stoves and fathers standing over bars. And while that first Thanksgiving or Christmas away from the nest might have seemed like a great adventure from afar, it could seem pretty rotten from the vantage point of a studio apartment with a brick-wall view. All of a sudden, from that standpoint, home-and-hearth holidays could look pretty good.

Recollections of our family feasts might even take on a suspiciously Dickensian quality, with all of our friends and relations - viewed by us outside in the snow somewhere- sitting gaily around a plum pudding in a firelit room drinking wassail. (Now I have never eaten plum pudding in my life, and I'm not even sure what wassail is, although I seem to remember reading, in *Beowulf* probably, that it is a warming drink served on festive occasions; but we're talking about fantasy, not reality, and fantasy has a funny way of creeping up on us around Christmas and Thanksgiving. It's like the fantasy of the perfect relationship, the one we think everybody except us is having. It's not true; it doesn't exist, but the fantasy of it does feed the fires of depression.)

Trying It on Your Own

And so, faced with the prospect of spending the holidays alone, and armed with a newly and hurriedly acquired appreciation of hearth and home that consisted of fact and fantasy in about equal parts, some of my peers elected to scoot back to the nest that first year away from it. Others copped out entirely by going on vacation. A few, like me, tried going it on their own, with varying degrees of success.

But over the years I, along with my friend David and my downstairs neighbor, Ken, and most of the rest of my acquaintances, have developed other ways of dealing with The Holiday Blues (hereinafter referred to as THB). Each of us, of course, according to his or her style, has a favorite approach. David, a party lover for most of the year, has managed to affect a kind of mental block toward the holiday season. I remember once telling him about a New Year's Eve party I'd been invited to, offering to let him

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come along as my escort (a less than completely altruistic invitation, considering my only other choice at the time was my butcher). David had looked at me blankly and said, "New Year's Eve? When is it?" And he wasn't kidding; he really didn't have any idea that it was less than one week away.

And then there is Ken, a serious attorney, sober and straight as an arrow for most of the year. Yet somewhere toward the end of November, I begin to get a definite whiff when I pass his apartment door of something that could be incense but isn't. By the middle of December, it practically comes up through the floorboards. Once, Ken told me he was going to his parents' for Christmas, so when I met him on the stairs Christmas morning, I was surprised. "I thought you were in Los Angeles," I said to him, to which he replied, looking dreamily past my left ear, "I *am* in Los Angeles."

While David and Ken use a variety of avoidance techniques in order to get through the holidays, others I know try to fend off THB by steeping themselves in the three F's: friends, family and food. My friend Janet, for example, usually fairly discriminating in her choice of companions, will, with something akin to desperation,

call up everybody and anybody she's ever known and invite them to her house-or try to get invited to theirs - during the holiday season. She once gave a Christmas party where I met not only her best friend from the third grade, but the leader of her old Brownie troop, her dentist's nurse and her favorite checker from the supermarket. It was not, in my opinion, a terrific party, although I did finally learn the correct way to pack a grocery bag. (Once, in a near panic about the approaching holiday, I too planned a party for Christmas Day. Unfortunately, it was the same year that a blizzard was planned for Christmas Eve. Only four of the most desperate invitees struggled through the drifts to my apartment, where we all learned a useful lesson: Sometimes when you pool your loneliness, you risk drowning in it.)

My own favorite prescription for avoiding THB is to go somewhere that has palm trees, preferably California, where the romance and nostalgia of Christmas tend to get put in a rather ridiculous perspective. This may sound like an expensive way to find redress, but believe me, it's hard to get sentimental about tinsel on a taco stand.

And yet all these machinations don't really get to the heart of the

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issue. Because the thing about holidays, I've come to realize, is that we expect so very much from them: love and kisses and self-validation; relief from anxiety and any little neuroticisms we may have picked up along life's tricky path; warmth and laughter and sweetness and light and whatever else we see in the egg nog ads. And no one day, no matter how nice a day it is, can give us all that. It's like expecting someone you love to give you everything you need all the time. No relationship can do that.

Holidays and Love

It's not an accident that holidays are a little like love affairs. It is Christmas morning, after all, more than any other morning of the year, when we're most likely to open our eyes expecting to be loved. It's the morning we're most likely to look around and wonder, "Where are all those people who used to fill my stocking while I was asleep, who beamed at me while I opened the packages they had so carefully wrapped, who loved me whether I deserved it or not?" And when we start asking questions like that, Holly Golightly's "mean reds" can appear faster than a Big Mac.

But the nice thing, the really nice

thing, is that even if those people are at that moment far away - or, perhaps worse, too close for comfort - even then all is not lost. Because the most important person in the world, the most sensitive individual around, the one who knows *exactly* what makes you feel good and cheers you up, is still close at hand. And that's you, cookie! And you can be loving and giving to yourself. You can provide yourself with all the goodies that used to be provided for you. It's scary of course, having to do it for yourself, but it's also very, very powerful.

I had just such a Christmas two years ago. My parents were spending their first retirement winter in the sunny climes; my sister and her kids were in Europe; my last boyfriend and I had called it quits the previous August; and my best friend and her lover had decided at the last minute to go to Barbados.

Out of desperation, I suddenly got brilliant. I remembered that Ken, just downstairs, gets hungry after he has those little cigarettes. He also gets very funny. I knew these things because he had come up to my apartment twice in practically the middle of the night to raid my refrigerator and help me watch old movies on

television. I called him and invited him for eight o'clock that night, the Big C.E., Christmas Eve.

Ken arrived with daisies for me and little cigarettes for himself. We ate in front of the fireplace on the table and chairs I had moved in from the kitchen. Cold champagne, hot chili. We laughed a lot. At eleven-thirty we watched a terrible movie that made us laugh a lot more. The next day, Christmas Day, Ken reciprocated by taking me out for an elegant, outrageously expensive brunch.

Giving It to Yourself

It was, all told, a terrific Christmas. (My third, now that I come to think of it.) I had figured out what made me feel good - laughter, champagne, firelight, old movies, among other things - and I had given them to myself; I had, in effect, been my own Santa Claus. This can be pretty heady stuff, and I recommend it highly. I don't know what makes other people feel wonderful during the holidays, but surely everyone has special rites and delights. You just have to figure out what they are, then go after them.

A final note about holidays, one that I hope will help *next* year's November and December rites of passage, is this: I know now that if I have a rotten year, if I spend it doing work I don't find gratifying and relating to someone I don't find satisfying, if I don't have contact with people who please me, if I don't laugh or learn or do things that make me feel good about myself, then the chances are I won't have terrific holidays. Because I will probably be expecting them to reclaim my life for me, to provide me with all the things I haven't been providing myself. And holidays are really no different from the rest of the days we let slip by, except that they tend to punctuate those other days, to point up either our success or failure at living them - which is why holidays can be so depressing, or so joyous.

I guess what I'm saying is that if I live everyday as if it were a holiday, a special once-a-year kind of day, and squeeze every bit of satisfaction out of it that I can, then the whole Thanksgiving/Christmas/New Year's issue isn't such a loaded one. The holiday season becomes like the maraschino cherry on a sundae, a colorful finishing touch, but nothing when compared to the ingredients it tops: the ice cream, the whipped cream and the hot fudge of everyday life.

Bette-Jane Raphael, who wrote "The Meeting Game" in the April 1978 issue of Your Place, is a free-lance writer whose work has appeared in many publications, including Psychology Today, Glamour and the Village Voice.