The happiness we dream in others

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Once, many years ago, I read somewhere that an eighteenth-century French aristocrat committed suicide, leaving behind a note. “Too many buttons to do up and undo.” At the time, I found the story so amusing I never forgot it. Well, of all the buttons we routinely must do up and undo, Christmas is undoubtedly the most difficult, the most wearing, one of those that most contribute to undermining our fragile foundations. For a long time, ever since I can remember, the Christmas routine was like this: the Christmas Eve dinner was held at my mother’s house, with the hard core of four siblings born from my parents’ marriage, plus the spouses and the offspring. Lunch on the 25th of December was at each one’s parents-in-law. Dinner on the 25th was celebrated at the home of my father and stepmother Manuela, where the four siblings met up again, along with my father’s and Manuela’s son, as well as the daughters from her first marriage, plus the spouses and children of all these people.

It always struck me that my mother didn’t like Christmas. A fortnight before, she would say to me on the phone. “Ok, I’ll have to order the salt cod with cream and the turkey from the usual restaurant. What do you think, will two trays of cod be enough? And Amália, can she come with me on the morning of the 24th when I go to collect the food? Ask her later, ok? Oh dear, I can’t stand all this...”. In certain years she would go a little further and exclaim: “Oh, what the hell...”. Anticipation of the annoyance of piles of dirty crockery cluttering the kitchen superimposed itself on the agreeable prospect of seeing her children and grandchildren gathered in her house, overshadowing it. The truth is, the divorce from my father so many years before had soured the tiniest corners of her life, especially the festive occasions. Christmas was a day like any other, in other words something she wanted to get over and done with. It was very easy for her to foresee the

difficulties, the obstacles, the weariness. She was hard pressed to imagine herself being happy.

Manuela had a visceral hatred of Christmas and made absolutely no effort to hide it. There were too many of us, we ate too much, we represented a significant hole in the valiant monthly allowance my father made her for running the house and which, even within the festive context, he refused to increase. As there wasn't a table big enough at the Olivais apartment to seat those dozens of people at the same time, dinner had to be on the hoof, and there was always someone, a child, or an adult, who dropped food on the carpet or on an armchair, who made a fuss and overturned a glass of juice or wine. The stains perpetuated themselves from year to year, unmovable (my father couldn't care less, Manuela made it a point of honour not to clean them up), so only gradually did we see them fade into the upholstery. Manuela memorised the respective genealogies and insisted on reciting them out loud. "It was Rosário who made that stain there, three years ago." She seemed like the matriarch of an Indian tribe, bearer of the oral memory of little grievances, unforgiveable sacrileges.

The only person who genuinely enjoyed Christmas, apart from the youngest children, still unaware of the dirty tricks played by the world, was my father. He made up for the austere, joyless time of his own childhood. He began to shop in August or September. He had set up an Excel spreadsheet in the computer and filled it in obsessively, requiring assistance from Manuela, who huffed with rage. In the successive squares he wrote down the designation and price of the presents intended for each of innumerable beneficiaries so that the partial totals matched down to the last cent, or almost, and no one was treated unfairly. The amount he spent on each person, whether a child, stepchild, grandchild, the child of a stepchild, son-in-law or daughter-in-law, was obscene, only within the reach of a professor at the height of his career. And obviously he set a higher amount for the children than the adults. On the 25th, at the end of the afternoon, while we were arriving at the Olivais, coming from each of our parents-in-law, my father, looking thrilled, would begin to wander through the rooms in the apartment crammed to bursting with people and discreetly call a child into

his office. “Hey, Rita, come here, I’ve got a surprise for you.” The grandchildren already knew the ritual and would follow him, giddy with anticipation. Once they had reached the office, he would pull the door to, as if it were all a huge secret, pull a parcel out of the closet, almost always enormous, and say: “It’s for you. You can open it.” And the boy or girl would noisily rip open the wrapping paper and have that stupefied look of children for whom the world is still a permanent surprise and the buttons are always done up or undone for the first time, and the child would go running out with the present in his or her hands, to show it off to the brothers and sisters and the cousins, in a buzz of collective intoxication. Five or ten minutes later, once the frenzy had died down, my father would quietly call another of the children who were present, in a completely random way, paying no mind to age or family background. “Come here...”—And the ceremony of the visit to Ali Baba’s cave would be repeated three or four times for each kid, and the rollercoaster would rattle on all afternoon, as if my father’s office closet contained an inexhaustible supply of treasures. By the end of the evening, each grandchild would be surrounded by an enormous pile of presents, not sure of which to seize. My father’s eyes would shine with childish glee, as if he were having more fun than the actual children. And, although that orgy of presents annoyed us (“Where are we going to put so much rubbish?” “Will it all fit in the car?” “This is over the top, what a ridiculous waste!”) the ritual contained traces of something magical, and for this alone, Christmas was worthwhile.

For those five or six hours on the 25th of December, my father, a tortured, insufferable man, was genuinely happy. And we, his children, and stepchildren, tortured, insufferable people, felt relieved and happy, perhaps, for those five or six hours. Ruy Belo writes that “the happiness possible for us is always the one we dream there is in other people.” And this is very probably especially true at Christmas.

After my father died, there were one or two exhausting Christmas, more exhausting than usual, in which without much effort, we aped the routine of past years. There were practically no children left, the offspring had grown up, now they were adolescents or young adults, some already

married or shacked up, as we used to say. They looked among us, the members of the generation that came immediately after, for someone who could fill the gap my father left, the bearer of the Christmas torch, someone who would take pleasure in that childish manner, someone able to redeem himself, on the afternoon of the 25th of December, from the meanness and badness of the rest of the year, the rest of life. We ourselves, the siblings, sought this person in our ranks. The most obvious candidate, moreover, was Clara, my oldest sister, always eager to organise, regiment, make arrangements so that everything ran smoothly. She seemed like a very focused juggler, who doesn't want to drop a single ball, whose gestures revealed great tension, as if the least false move might bring in its wake unspeakable disasters. And this obscure cataclysm always lying in wait prevents the members of the audience from enjoying the pleasure of the spectacle, it leaves everyone exhausted and in distress. No matter how hard we tried, we couldn't project on to her the same indulgence, the same vicarious delight ("at least, my father enjoyed himself") as in the old days.

Now with no extenuating circumstances, the fatigue of Christmas was plain for all to see. Too many buttons to do up and undo. As we grow old, we become convinced that, in the years that have gone before, we already paid a certain tribute to good manners and expediency. We tell ourselves that if there were any debts, now they are definitively paid off. We feel ourselves weakening, we know we are no longer invincible, we must spare ourselves. A tense or merely boring Christmas Eve dinner, full of forced silences, exacts an emotional cost that we are no longer willing to pay. We become miserly with our effusions, our joys, even our words. We realise that most people don't pay attention to what we say. We become much more miserly with our time. Once we get to a certain age, we feel a permanent physical pain. In our back, our neck, or else a knee, the clavicle we broke years ago. We spend time dreaming of a genie in a lamp to whom we say: "My first wish is to get back the body I had at thirty." We spend our time taken up with our pain, measuring it, fleeing from it, hoodwinking it. This demands great concentration. All sound upsets us, distracts us. The voices of those who don't belong to our inner circle, the spouse, the children, become noise.

What was previously picturesque becomes painful. We don't want to witness the erosion of other people's marriages, we don't want to be in the front row seats watching a couple bickering or arguments between parents and children, on which Christmas bestows particularly dramatic and bitterly comic nuances. We see ourselves mirrored in other people and we take fright. We don't want to know. And we are terrified by repetitions, raining in the damp, series of analogue events, that we now know are not infinite. There are too many buttons to do up and undo, but, at the same time, we are overtaken by the dark impression of a countdown.

Five years ago, I persuaded Amália and my daughters to spend Christmas abroad. It didn't take much to persuade them. Straightaway, I announced this decision to the rest of the family. Clara was very shaken. I don't think she has forgiven me to this day. The others shrugged their shoulders and said: "You're doing the right thing." My mother told me: "Great idea. Next year, I may do the same." We left for France, almost on an adventure. On Christmas Eve, we dined in an enormous Chinese restaurant with a buffet, on the outskirts of Bordeaux. It was absolutely packed. In Landes, in the foothills of the Pyrenees, we made friends by sheer chance with a couple of sixty-somethings who lived in a village. They invited us to spend some days at their home before we returned to Portugal. The house was still full of Christmas decorations. The man told us he believed in Father Christmas. We thought it was a joke, then we realised he was absolutely serious. He told us he had already visited Father Christmas's village in Lapland, with his grandson. He had a huge, framed photograph on the wall, taken on the visit to Father Christmas. He showed us the letters he wrote him every year with his wish list, asking for presents, he showed us the answers he would receive promptly, on headed paper from Father Christmas's village. While he was showing us all the corners of the property, he told us, delighted: "At midnight on Christmas Eve, I tiptoe out of the house without them seeing me, I dress up as Father Christmas in the barn, over there, hidden, I walk all the way around and light the bonfire down there, at the end of that field. There's a tradition in this country, all the families light a bonfire behind the house, everyone wants their bonfire to be

the biggest, so it can be seen from farthest away. My grandson peeps out of the living room window, and when he sees me with my false beard and my red suit, he shouts out. 'Look, Grandmother! Look, Mother! There's Father Christmas, lighting our bonfire!' Then I continue along this path, in the darkness, I go all round the fields, so as not to be seen, I return to the barn, change my clothes, hide the Father Christmas costume, go back into the house, and my grandson comes running and says: 'Grandad! Grandad! Father Christmas came and lit the bonfire, and you didn't see him!'" That year, as usual, everything had happened like that, just a few days before. That man was moved when he told us this. He got emotional telling us that one day, his grandson would realise the truth. That man believed firmly in Father Christmas and yet, he dressed up as Father Christmas in order to charm his grandson. And, with an incredible purity of soul, he didn't seem sensitive to the unbridgeable contradiction inherent in these actions. He was a juggler who managed to keep all the balls in the air at the same time, with a touching naturalness and joy. He reconciled us a little to Christmas, he reconciled us a little to ourselves. Seeing someone happy is perhaps the only way of being happy to which we have access. It's perhaps the supreme form of complicity, of benign contagion. We returned to Portugal, we took up our lives, we continued to do up and undo buttons. Never again did we spend Christmas with my mother, my brothers, and sisters, with our nephews and nieces. We built a new routine on the ashes of the previous one. That couple of French sexagenarians, as well as the son, daughter-in-law and grandson, became our adopted Christmas family.