

The Hot Christmas

The Twins, a boy and a girl, were born in September, three years after we moved to our new house. The boy, Marvin, preceded his twin sister, Miriam, by only four minutes. Mommy was glad they finally came - the heat and humidity during the summer had made her miserable.

School is out for Christmas vacation, and Mommy is in the hospital for some surgery. Daddy explained why, something to do with the Twins, but at the time the explanation was lost on me. I remember him saying quite forcefully to Mommy that religion doesn't matter when her life is threatened. That scared me.

"Linda is staying with us while your mother's in the hospital. She's going in tomorrow," Daddy announces one evening while we're watching television, "You all behave yourselves, and I don't want Linda giving me any bad reports. Okay?"

The younger siblings are too young to understand what is going on. Us three "older kids" look at each other and reply together, "Okay." We go back to watching the television. When the program finishes we'll go to bed, but for the moment we're still up.

Linda arrives the next day. No one knows how long Mommy will be in the hospital. It doesn't matter because we love Linda. She's been our babysitter for years. She is so pretty, and since she's a teenager she's up on everything. Plus we suspect she likes our Uncle Larry, so that's fine with us. Even more important, she teaches us the latest dances. The "Madison" is our favorite one. She has this special crackly infectious laugh. She's a good cook too, and we especially like her fried rice with bologna.

It's too cold to play outside so the house becomes our playground for the day. Typical Christmas anxieties and excitement about our presents drive us to be terrors today, according to Linda.

What did we do? We were just our normal pre-Christmas selves. Everything we did today seemed to be wrong - the argument I had with Jennifer over who would get the best presents, my teasing the others, the Twins crying because they miss Mommy. Poor Linda! I guess it's not easy taking care of seven kids ranging in age from nine years to three months a few days before Christmas.

We're sitting at the table eating our dinner and "picking" (Mommy's term) at each other. We seem to be on our worst behavior. Sitting all together seems to encourage unfriendly sibling behaviors. Linda can't take it anymore and she bangs her fist on the table and stands up. We immediately stop eating and fussing.

"Just wait till your dad gets home!" Linda is crying. Now we are sure we've done something wrong. "Go and watch TV and leave me alone. I need to feed the Twins! You older kids clear off the table."

For once, we obey, taking the plates into the kitchen and putting them in the sink. There is still some light "picking" going on between us but we know we're in trouble.

A few minutes into our favorite program, "I Love Lucy," we hear Daddy's car in the driveway. Anxiously looking at each other, while trying to remain cool, we all sit up straight. Except for the conversation between Lucy and Ricky, there is no other noise.

The back screen door and inside door squeak open in turn. Then we hear the swish of both doors closing. Linda meets him as he comes into the kitchen. We keep quiet. They're talking and Daddy's responses vary from "Hunh, hunh" to "hmmm" and the replies are rising in intensity. Linda's crying again.

We sense Daddy's presence as he walks into the dining room. We're all intently focused on the television.

"You kids come here right now!" Daddy's deep base voice rings out. I glance at my sisters and brother and see they're as scared as I am. Will we be denied our Christmas presents? Surely Daddy wouldn't let all those presents go to waste. Will we get a spanking? Daddy couldn't spank us all at once. He is strong, but it would be physically impossible.

One by one, we reluctantly get up from the carpet and walk sheepishly into the dining room to stand in front of our father. We all stare at the floor.

"So," Daddy booms out, "what did you all do today? And why did you make Linda cry?"

No one dares speak. Daddy is so angry. He stares at us, but we're not looking at him. We're scared! Nobody wants to rat out the other one.

He sighs. "No answers. Doesn't matter. Linda told me everything. I told you all to behave, and be nice to each other. Santa Claus doesn't have to stop here. He's got a lot of other places to visit." I know Daddy's implicating Santa in this so as not to spoil the myth for the youngest siblings.

"I'll decide later about what to tell Santa. Now, you all are going to take your baths, in turn, starting from the oldest to the youngest. When you're finished, each of you will get a spanking. Don't take hours in the bathtub or I'll personally come and get you out!!"

What cruel punishment! I visualize the thick red wooden paddle with the white lettering and the cowboy on a bucking bronco. This is his preferred correctional instrument. Sometimes he uses his hand, only on the behind, but he prefers the paddle.

I feel sorry for Jennifer. She is the first to meet her fate and will get the worst spanking. By the time he gets to number five his anger will be spent. She's only three years old so I imagine her corporal punishment will be just for show.

I watch Jennifer as she climbs the stairs to face her destiny, knowing that soon it would be my turn.