



Early Snoring on
Christmas Eve in Akron

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My wife Thea and I decided to spend our first Ohio Christmas alone in our first home surrounded by what my mother would call our “early *shmoring*” collection. In Yiddish a *shnorrer* is a beggar who makes pretensions to respectability, a sponger, or a parasite. This is not exactly the most flattering label to bestow upon somebody. But in my family early *shmoring* has mutated into being defined as the accumulation of handed-down items a young married couple such as ourselves receives out of generosity to get their first home started. The early *shmoring* Thea and I have acquired is practical: a dining room table that had been collecting dust in my mother-in-law’s rural Indiana shed, end tables and a couch from Thea’s stepfather’s bachelor days, a hutch from our new neighbors, a coffee table from Thea’s father in Boston. The previous owners of our eighty-eight-year-old house even left a beautiful oak church pew in the breakfast nook. “Do you think they’re religious?” I had asked Thea when we first saw the home. We are now experienced *shnorrers*. People are always nice when they give us items but the unspoken code of *shmoring* is that they have been wanting an excuse to discard something and we actually need it. So, it’s a fair trade.

In addition to *shmoring*, Thea and I are also experts at creating our own rituals. We’ve always bonded over movies and these rituals often take on a cinematic angle. After we get paid each month we have a dinner and movie date. If we can’t afford going out we have a home movie date. Every Passover and Easter season I make

her watch Charlton Heston in *The Ten Commandments* and every Fourth of July she insists we bond over Stephen Spielberg's *Jaws*. These rituals are also fair trades.

Blended families can often be complex, but in our case it gets downright convoluted around religious holidays. I'm a recovering Jew, Thea's father is a devout atheist, her mother is a Chinese qigong master, and her stepfather is a Buddhist who still shows tinges of his evangelical upbringing. To one side of our new house lives a pastor and his wife with their four children and to the other is a retired nun. We seem to be covered on all divine fronts. But Thea and I prefer to call the winter holiday season "HanuMas." And as a couple with ambivalent devotion to anything other than each other, we turn to the great American religion of movie watching. Having survived four paycheck-to-paycheck seasonless years in a tiny one-bedroom in Los Angeles before moving to Ohio, what could be more appropriate?

Choosing a movie to watch on Christmas Eve is not a casual process. Our classification of what constitutes a "Christmas movie" is rather vague: the story only has to take place during Christmas. Thea's sensibility usually leans towards *It's a Wonderful Life* while mine is more in line with *Die Hard*. For our first Ohio Christmas I won a children's chocolate Hanukkah gelt coin toss and we settled on *Lethal Weapon* (Mel Gibson's anti-Semitism temporarily forgiven in the spirit of the occasion). I let Thea peel away the gold tin and eat the chocolate gelt as a consolation prize.

But, before we could indulge in Sergeant Martin Riggs taking on the bad guys in our former Los Angeles haunts, Thea had to spend at least an hour practicing meditation with our two cats. Christmas action movies are, of course, watched best on a peaceful mind. So, as snow lightly dusted our cobblestoned Akron, Ohio neighborhood, I cleaned up all the takeout Chinese boxes we had dug disposable chopsticks into for the past twenty minutes and pocketed the fortune cookie script telling me, "Your dwelling is your solace." My next job was to begin Christmas Eve movie watching preparations. Going for simplicity (or laziness,

depending on one's perspective), I decided to postpone arrangements until ten minutes before Thea joined me. I would instead practice my own form of meditation: house work.

When we bought our home, the previous owners were gracious enough to invite us to a neighborhood block party the week before our move-in date and show us all the little quirks of the house. We received a private walk-through, shown everything from how not to snap off the light switches that their children had routinely damaged ("You don't have kids," the husband, Jeff, had said, "they'll break anything") to how to turn on the external gas heater in the finished downstairs TV room. When we came into the basement corner we saw the remains of an old roll top writer's desk—the same kind I had watched my father pay bills from as a child back in Oregon. It was mostly intact but with several pieces scattered atop or resting on the concrete floor. When I said that I was a writer and the desk looked like my father's, Jeff turned to me and asked, "Would you like to keep it?" Several thoughts immediately surfaced. Yes, of course I really wanted it. No, I would not look forward to salvaging it. And the city boy in me wondered if we would need to get our real estate agents involved to protect either of us from lawyering up over it in the future even though Jeff was an attorney. Then again, it was obvious he hadn't done anything with the desk and maybe he was looking for an excuse to get it off his hands. Which is, of course, the catch of the early *shoring* relationship. "It belonged to my grandfather, Benjamin Floyd James," he said.

This ignited the emergence of all of Thea's Midwestern-bred manners. She said, "Oh, we couldn't take it then," knowing full well I wanted it. I had observed this ritual many times but had yet to master it (still haven't). As Thea has explained to me, Midwestern protocol requires that when such an offer is made a polite consideration for the owner's feelings is given without necessarily declining the gift. Then, the owner is to reaffirm his generosity and the item can be accepted (an Akron native recently told me that this ritual is intensified if one is Catholic). My fear here was

that Thea had activated stage two of this Midwestern protocol and Jeff might not instigate stage three.

“Jeff,” his wife, Judy, asked, “are you sure you want to give that away?” My hopes had been crushed.

Jeff looked at me and smiled. He could tell I wanted it. “It’s time, Judy.” I’d eventually be given an early *shnoring* computer desk from Judy as well for my upstairs office. Then he said to me, “Consider it a welcome-in gift to our home.” He patted me on the shoulder and proceeded to instruct me how to evacuate water from annual basement flooding, making me want to race back to our apartment on Casterton to double-check the insurance coverage I had just secured. “Don’t worry,” Jeff said, “I’m going to leave you my e-mail and phone number in case you have any questions about our house. Or if you need a lawyer,” he joked.

That first Christmas Eve in our new home, as my wife meditated surrounded by our cats in our attic bedroom, I passed through the living room cluttered with menorahs and dreidels on the mantel sent by my mother and stockings hanging over the fireplace as I drank black coffee from a mug with the words “Fine . . . I evolved, you didn’t” across the ceramic that my atheist father-in-law had given us. I walked by the Chinese protection amulet Thea’s mother had sent from one of her qigong retreats in China and made my way downstairs, thinking of my parents back in Oregon eating takeout Chinese with all their Jewish friends.

The finished downstairs room Jeff built himself was chilly. I knew Thea would want the external gas heater turned on, but I’m cheaper than ice water and left it off. I was wearing a sweater. Good enough. I had planned on doing laundry but I stopped. There against the wall was Jeff’s grandfather’s desk, completely restored. I stood for a moment and stared at it—proud.

Two weeks earlier I had opened the door to the basement, flicked on the light and there in the corner was the dilapidated roll top writing desk covered by dust. I had taken all of the random pieces not attached and placed them in the TV room, then went to move the desk base itself. It not only weighed too much to lift,

it was too wide to push through the door Jeff had constructed between the basement and the room he finished. After a quick assessment I saw that I could likely take the desk base apart with a screwdriver, move all the parts into the TV room, and then reconstruct it.

The roll top and top-drawer sections had come off the easiest. But the base and main drawer sections seemed to be interconnected and secured to three or four other pieces. It was sturdy alright. We wanted to buy an older house because we felt the cliché was true that “they don’t make them like they used to.” The desk proved to be the same. As my thumb and forefinger gradually numbed from twisting the screwdriver counterclockwise, I realized none of the sections were coming apart as the pile of rusty screws on the basement concrete multiplied. I then got on my back and scooted under to take a look at the backboard. It seemed all the base pieces reverted to it, but there was only one large backboard screw. Counterclockwise screwdriver turn, rust flaking off as it slowly emerged, sticking to my wedding band. One more turn, just one more.

The sound I heard before the entire desk fell apart and the base pieces came crashing down on me had been like the ping of a thin metal rod lightly tapping a triangle when I was in the percussion section of junior high school orchestra. What followed was more like the sound of firewood logs tumbling from a poorly arranged stack in the backyard. When I opened my eyes, already convinced my face was now so disfigured nobody would recognize me from my wedding pictures, I found the desktop resting on my chest with the backboard behind my head and all the other base components and rusty screws littered to my sides. Not a scratch, only my chest feeling like one of my brothers had sucker-punched me when we were kids.

“What the hell are you doing down there?” Thea shouted from upstairs. Then I heard her socked feet on the floors above followed by the sound of paws. The desktop had not been terribly difficult to move off my chest. I picked myself up as I heard Thea

enter the kitchen saying, "I'll start the popcorn." We, of course, had a home movie date that night.

I decided it was fruitless to attempt cleaning up before she got downstairs, but one of the base drawer sections had lodged between the basement and the TV room. I would take just that one piece into the finished room and call it a night. I bent down and took it in my arms, and was halfway into the finished room when the bottom completely fell out. A smaller tumbling wood stack sound. This time on my Nikes.

"What on earth are you doing?" Thea called again.

I looked down and could see that this section was not solid. It had two smaller compartments. I went to take each piece when I noticed something sticking out of one of the small inner slots. I bent down and tweezed tan paper between my thumb and forefinger. It was a dusty booklet the size and thickness of a poker playing card stack. I could only hope for priceless baseball cards. When I opened it I found a collection of sepia-toned photographs glued together at the booklet's spine. There were women in dresses and men in military uniforms from long before I was born. I figured they had to have been taken in the forties or fifties.

I heard Thea coming down the stairs from the kitchen, turned and saw her stop. She was holding the popcorn bowl, staring back and forth between the pile of desk parts in the TV room and the now fractured base beyond the basement door. She looked at me and grinned. "Was this really necessary, tonight?" I decided not to mention my near death experience and didn't answer. "Hey, what's that you're holding?" She descended the rest of the stairs, saying, "God it's freezing down here. Turn on the gas heater." We had yet to use it. I held out the little photo booklet and fanned out the pictures. "Where did you get those?"

"They fell out of a trap compartment in the desk, just like a *Hitchcock* film."

Thea cocked her head and made her neck-length brown hair flop to the side in the way I've always found adorable. I love to make movie references. Sometimes they just materialize naturally.

Other times I do it intentionally so I can see Thea's cute reactions. "Who are they of?"

"I don't know, I assume Jeff's family since it was his grandfather's desk."

"What are you going to do with them?" I shrugged. "You should tell them you found them." It seemed obvious, but she was right. "And turn on that gas heater." Thea bundled herself in a blanket with the cats underneath on one of the early *shmorning* green corduroy La-Z-Boys her stepfather had relinquished to us. I went to the small external heater and, just as I remembered Jeff had shown me, opened the gas line and turned the pressure knob clockwise.

Twenty minutes later I was still attempting to turn it on. Just as I was about to kick the heater Thea said, "I smell gas, do you?"

I did.

The image of the house we just bought exploding along with the two of us and the cats after taking out a hefty mortgage instantly materialized. I was convinced I would never be able to pay off the place, but its utter annihilation—home owner's insurance be damned—was unacceptable. "Do you think we should call the gas company?" I asked.

A fifteen-minute debate ensued while the odor increased to the point where we thought we should open windows. Thea finally suggested, "Why not call Jeff; he said we could if we had trouble with anything."

"He was just being nice," I said. "He didn't really mean it."

"It's Ohio, get used to it, city boy." Thea always calls me "city boy" when she wants me to do something, knowing it will compel me to do it.

Just as I was ascending the stairs to find Jeff's phone number, we heard a knock on the front door. Thea and I stared at each other.

"Maybe it's another one of the neighbors with some sort of welcome-to-the-neighborhood basket," she said. We had already collected enough fruit and nuts and cookies to compete with our early *shmorning* enterprise. I went to the front door. Jeff was standing there, as if he had magically appeared in response to our panicking.

“Hey, guy!” he said and put out his hand. “I just stopped by to see if any mail has come for us.”

I had the feeling he really wanted to see how his house looked now that we were living in it. And I had indeed been collecting a healthy pile of his mail. But I literally grabbed him two-handed by his extended arm and dragged him inside, his eyes popping with bewilderment. “We need you right now!” I said. Thea emerged from the downstairs, still wrapped in a blanket minus the cats. She looked at Jeff with relief and told him everything.

“You don’t need to call the gas company,” he said in that pleasant Ohioan manner that lets one save face when essentially being told you’ve been foolish. It’s one of the little pleasantries I truly enjoy about living here. Jeff immediately showed me that I had to also push the pressure knob down while turning clockwise to ignite the pilot of the heater, a minor detail I had forgotten. When I asked about the smell of gas he simply said the line was open for a while without the pilot lit. Thea stared at me and we both felt stupid, but Jeff hadn’t made us feel so. And he had made no mention of his grandfather’s desk scattered about the TV room in pieces.

“Love the lamp,” he said as we emerged from the downstairs and walked into the living room near the fireplace, the spot where Judy had told us their son Cary had taken his first steps. The lamp was actually one of the few items we hadn’t *smored*. “Great, you have your stuff in here and are making it your own. You two remind me so much of Judy and me when we bought the place. How long have you been married?” After a quick rundown of how Thea had turned me down three times for a date before going out with me, we told him, then added that we had had a very quiet wedding with our parents when we finally moved to Akron, followed by dinner at Lanning’s Restaurant on Cleveland Massillon Road. “I took Judy there for prom!” he said, excited. It was the beginning of what I have now come to know as the Akron, Ohio one degree of separation.

“Oh, your mail,” I said. “It’s upstairs.”

“Great, let’s see what you’ve done with the place.”

I retrieved the mail in my study from Judy's old computer desk, but Thea was already showing Jeff our library room. "This used to be the nursery for each of our kids," Jeff said, perusing the bookshelves now lining the baby blue walls. Then he entered Thea's office and stopped cold. "Oh my God, we forgot to take my daughter Anna's desk with us." The piece of furniture in question was in the corner, a beautiful oak antique children's foldout desk (another early *shmoring* acquisition).

"Oh, it was my mother's," Thea said.

Jeff smiled. "It's practically the same desk and you put it in the identical place we had Anna's. You see, it was meant to be that you would live in our house."

When Jeff left I told Thea, "That was odd, him just showing up like that, even though it was perfect timing."

She shrugged. "It's Ohio." Now, can we have our movie date?"

"I'll make more popcorn." Thea smiled, then paused. "What?" I asked.

"You forgot to tell Jeff about the pictures."



That first Christmas Eve in Ohio I stood looking at the roll top desk. The day after Jeff had left two weeks before I had sent him an e-mail: "Hey, I found some old pictures in your grandfather's desk when I was putting it back together. They look at least 50+ years old. I'll keep them safe."

With Thea meditating, I abandoned the idea of doing laundry and went back upstairs and sat at the dining room table her mother gave us. Sipping my coffee, I thought about how far away from the west coast I was (oceans are not that convenient in Ohio). I reached out and took the booklet of pictures I had found in Jeff's grandfather's desk. There's something about old photographs I've always loved. Not just ones of my own family, but aged pictures in general. When looking at them I see the faces and the fashion and the settings and no matter where or when they were taken they always seem to transform into my family. Old photographs have always produced

a sense of wonder in me. For some, they are reminders of what to forget. For me, they instill a curiosity for what I never knew.

As I looked at the photo booklet I realized that the people in the pictures did not look too different from my own family. A young man in a uniform with his arm around a pretty girl in a dress could have easily been my grandparents just after WWII broke out. A man in a tweed hat with a feather in the brim might have been the great uncle I was named after. I wondered if the pictures had been taken in Ohio, assumed so.

And then there was the feel of the booklet. I wondered just how old it was, if there were once thirty-three-year-old hands like my own upon them, whose fingertips had held delicately to the edges as to not smudge the images. I wondered what it was like when the film was dropped off at the developer, the anticipation of the photographer seeing the prints. I wondered what the person who picked up the pictures felt seeing them for the first time, what it was like sharing them with those who had shared the original experience.

Of all the places I have lived in my life, Ohio seems to be the only one that really reminded me of home in Oregon (people holding doors for you when you approach a building is more appealing than one might consider). But right then, on Christmas Eve, although it was not my own holiday, it was a time to be with family and mine were over half a continent away. Yet those pictures somehow became my absent family for a moment. My family was instantly with me in Akron, Ohio. I saw my brothers and their wives and children. I saw my aunts and uncles and cousins and grandparents. And I saw my parents. I stared long at one of the pictures—a man in a checkered shirt and suspenders who looked no older than me who was probably in his eighties by now or no longer in the world. I stared at him and could hear my own father shouting from the front door of my childhood house that he was home, that it was Christmas Eve and he had takeout Chinese for everyone and we were going to set up the eight millimeter film projector and watch home movies as a family, that he

had had a few three-minute reels developed just for the night. I could see myself in one of those reels, playing with *Star Wars* action figures on shag-green carpet. But it was no longer Oregon; it was now Ohio, where I was planting permanent roots.

I took a sip of coffee as I heard Thea coming down the stairs. I looked over my shoulder as she turned from the living room holding our oldest black Bombay cat in her arms.

“Happy HanuMas.” She kissed my cheek. “Ready to watch the anti-Semite kick some Christmas butt?”

Thea fed the cats as popcorn popped in the microwave and I worked the cork out of a bottle of Duck Pond Cellars merlot (a little taste of Oregon for the evening) I had bought at West Point Market on West Market Street. As she entered the kitchen from the breakfast nook to toss the empty Friskies can into the sink, the phone rang.

“It’s probably my mother,” Thea said. “I should have called her earlier.”

On the third ring I answered.

It was Jeff.

“Hey, guy, I got your e-mail,” he said. “Am I catching you at a bad time?” It was Christmas Eve, but it wasn’t a bad time. I told him that we were spending it alone in the house and were going to watch a movie. “That’s great. I remember our first Christmas in the house. Funny story, I’ll have to tell it to you sometime. Hey, if it’s not too inconvenient, do you mind if I stop by now to get those pictures you found? I’d love to show them to everyone at dinner tonight.” I looked over to our *shnored* dining room table and saw the little booklet resting on top of one of Thea’s gluten-free cookbooks. I told him it was no problem. “Great, I’ll be right over.” I asked him if he needed directions. He laughed and said he would see us soon.

I joined Thea in the kitchen where she was scooping Häagen-Dazs chocolate into a bowl. I told her I didn’t mind Jeff coming over, I liked him a lot, but it was a bit odd since it was Christmas Eve. Thea just shrugged and said, “It’s the Midwest.”

When the knock on the door came—this one expected—I was excited. Maybe it was the idea of being able to give Jeff the Christmas gift of those pictures. Maybe it was just inviting somebody into my new home on Christmas Eve even for just a few minutes—even if the house was more familiar to him than it was to us.

When I opened the door, Jeff was standing with a young girl.

“Eric, this is my daughter, Anna.” We said hello and I invited them in. Thea offered coffee to Jeff. He declined. “The place is looking good,” Jeff said, gazing about the front room. I had finally hung things on the walls since his heater and mail visit, mostly inherited artwork my grandmother had painted (not exactly *shnored*). Anna was already through the living room, snow melting on the shoulders of her winter coat. She walked slowly toward the back entrance to the breakfast nook. I noticed how she held her hands together in front of her coat buttons as she slowly turned her head here and there, seeing our things on the walls of her childhood home. Some of the furniture was in the same places. Our *shnored* couch was in front of the fireplace, but it wasn’t her couch. We had a similar antique clock that was my grandmother’s, but it was a bit different from the one her parents had displayed. When she finally unclasped her hands I saw her put one palm on the corner of the church pew left for us (not *shnored*, part of the sale).

Thea went to her. “Is it odd seeing the house this way?”

“Yeah, it’s strange” Anna said, not to Thea, more to the staircase leading to the upstairs where her bedroom had been transformed into our library that was filled with shelves we actually bought on sale at the Target on West Market Street.

“Wanna see your grandfather’s desk?” I asked Jeff.

We left Anna and Thea and I led him down the stairs he had built himself from the kitchen to the TV room. As we descended the stairs he told me how his now college-age son Cary watched him construct them from the top of the kitchen as an infant.

“Fantastic!” he said, seeing the desk restored. I instantly feared

that he would now want it back. But he simply pulled out all the little drawers slowly, one by one, and lifted the roll top, smiling. He then looked to the floor beside it. “Hey, you took that from the basement.” He was referring to a long shelf I was convinced had been part of the kitchen before it was remodeled that I had pulled from near the washing machine to store my vinyl records. But he was really staring at Hello People’s *The Handsome Devils* record he had left. He said casually, “If you ever transfer that album to CD I want a copy; they were the opening act when my brother took me to see Janis Joplin.” I decided not to ask what year that was, but it was cool to know that I had moved to a place where Janice Joplin had once performed. “The desk looks great. Now, let me see those pictures.”

As we ascended the stairs Jeff told me, “I wasn’t all that concerned about retrieving the photos, but Judy insisted. She’s the archivist/librarian/family historian and plans to take them to work and re-humidify and flatten them.” When we came into the dining room we found Thea and Anna talking.

I went to our *shnored* table and handed over the tiny booklet. Jeff opened it, began to grin and took a seat at the table. “Anna, come take a look,” he said. She stood behind his shoulder. “I’ve never seen any of these.” He began to point. “Those are my aunts and uncles in Mississippi. And those are my grandparents. Hey, that’s a great one of my grandfather.” He looked up at me, winked and returned to the pictures.

“Dad,” Anna said, “I’m sure they want to have their first Christmas in the house alone.” I couldn’t help notice that the pattern of her speech was very much like her mother’s when Judy had asked Jeff if he really wanted to give me the desk.

Jeff turned to me. “Oh, our first Christmas in this house was really funny.” Anna had that look all children have when their parents are about to tell a story they’ve heard too many times to count. “It was 1983, before I was a lawyer. I was working at O’Neil’s Department Store as an associate credit manager, so I had to stay until six-thirty at night or so—yeah, on Christmas Eve.

My whole family went to a Chinese restaurant. It's our own sort of ritual." Anna then gave her father a look as if to say, Yeah Dad, that's where we're supposed to be now. But I was thinking of my parents and fingered that fortune cookie script in my pocket. "I met everyone at the restaurant instead of going home first," Jeff continued. "My brother and his family had arrived here from Dallas that day, so after dinner we took them to see the new house. Judy must have left the house without making sure the front door was latched. We didn't have a storm door then. There was a terrible blizzard and the front door had blown open. We had a dog and two cats then." Thea and I also had two cats and my want for a dog was already an ongoing discussion. "We found all the pets huddled together upstairs trying to stay warm. The house was like an igloo; in fact, the water in the pets' bowls was frozen. It took over twenty-four hours and cost us about a hundred bucks in gas to heat it back up. When I came downstairs on Christmas morning it was still chilly. Funny, huh? Not then, though." Jeff looked back at the pictures. "God, these are great."

"Dad," Anna said softly.

Jeff looked up adoringly at his daughter, then back to us. He stood. "Well, it'll be great showing these to everyone at dinner."

"Don't send any blizzards to our door while you're eating Chinese," I said and smiled.

Jeff smiled back.

As I came into the TV room after walking Jeff and Anna out I could already hear Thea singing along to Bobby Helms' rendition of "Jingle Bell Rock" as the opening credits of *Lethal Weapon* came over images of the downtown Los Angeles skyline we had left behind after I was offered my position at The University of Akron. She handed me my wine and held out the popcorn bowl. I took a handful, noticing that our large black Bombay cat was sleeping next to Thea's grandfather's miniature Monon Hoosier Line train set left to us when her grandmother died, our calico on her lap. I decided to take a seat on the floor next to Jeff's grandfather's desk—his *snoring* gift to us. The warmth from the external

gas heater felt nice. I glanced at the desk that looked like the one my father used to pay bills from when I was a child. Then I thought of how Dad was the one who took me to all of the *Lethal Weapon* movies growing up and imagined him at a Chinese restaurant in Portland with my mother and their friends, just like Jeff and Anna were heading to. But I was in Ohio, and it felt wholly right for the first time since coming here.

I finally looked at Thea and said, “Happy HanuMas.”

We tapped wine glasses.

She smiled, leaned over, and kissed my cheek. “You, too.”