

Not Exactly SUGAR PLUMS

Agatha Hoff

If the visions of Christmas in your head are of little lambs, a cow, and an ass nestled near the Baby Jesus, count your blessings.

My head is filled with bizarre memories. There was a time when our home was inhabited by four children under seven, all of whom—were they young in the twenty-first century—would be called hyperactive and put on Ritalin. *All Is Calm* was not a carol I sang with conviction. During the month between Thanksgiving and Christmas the children's anticipation of Santa's coming reached a fever pitch. Pointing at items in the Sears toy catalog—which in those days constituted Santa's Bible—various children's voices would demand, as they grabbed the book back and forth: "Give me it." "I gotta have it." "No you don't." "I'm gonna tell Santa you hit me."

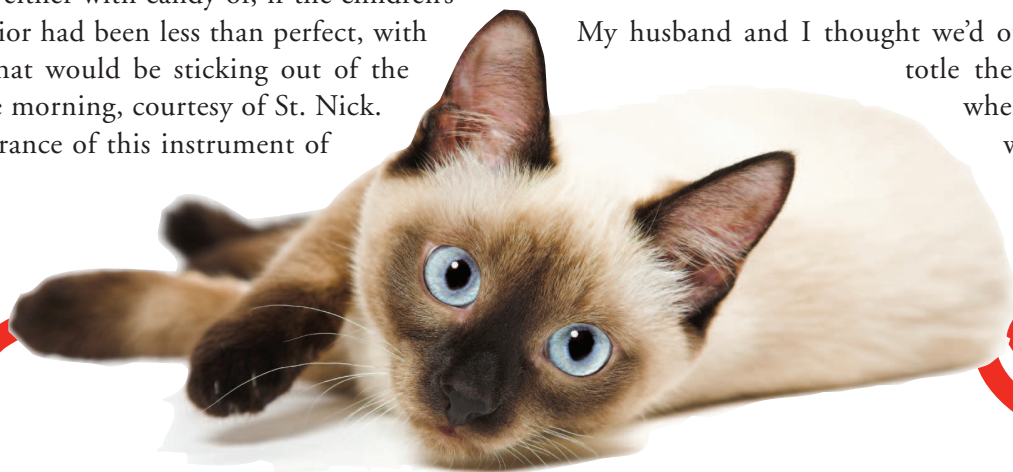
I must say that in Hungary, where I was raised, parents were smarter than my husband and I. There, we children hung our stockings the night before St. Nicholas's Feast Day, December 7. The stockings were filled either with candy or, if the children's past behavior had been less than perfect, with a switch that would be sticking out of the sock in the morning, courtesy of St. Nick. The appearance of this instrument of

torture gave fair warning that a child's conduct had to improve, or the Christ Child would leave nothing under the tree on Christmas Eve. This tradition, of course, had been invented to control the behavior of kids between December 7 and Christmas.

But I digress. No switches would have controlled the chaos at our San Francisco home when my husband and I were raising our little angels in the sixties. A Siamese cat—Aristotle—and a cockapoo—Snuffy—increased the turmoil.

Aristotle loved Christmas as much as the children did. The brighter the ornament, the better he liked it. One year—much to our darlings' delight and his own—Aristotle batted low-hanging ornaments on our tree until they crashed to the floor. The next year, we moved the shining balls up where he couldn't reach the fragile ones, or so we thought. The darn cat took up ballet. We watched him leap three feet into the air, pirouette, pause in midair, twist his entire body, and bat down the object of his affections.

My husband and I thought we'd outsmarted Aristotle the following year when we decorated with Styrofoam,



papier-mâché, and other indestructible ornaments. However, Aristotle took a running start across the living room, ran up the bark of the eight-foot tree, and perched himself delicately on top of the star at the pinnacle. The tree swayed back and forth. I swear Aristotle smiled as the tree rocked, enjoying the ride, before the whole thing came crashing down, much to the delight of the assembled children.

One year, I thought Aristotle finally got what was coming to him. He had a habit of flopping on his back on top of a basket full of laundry in the kitchen, pretending to be asleep. If Snuffy, our dog, made the mistake of sauntering past, Aristotle would reach out and scratch him, sending the poor dog yelping and whimpering through the apartment. On this particular December day though, the cat miscalculated, and his claws became caught in the dog's curly black fur. Snuffy took off, hoping to shake Aristotle loose, dragging the cat along, the remaining three cat legs flying, as he splayed on Snuffy's back. A cheering section of

kids made way for the racing pair as they approached the living room. It was at this point that the long-suffering Snuffy stopped dead in his tracks and shook himself as though he'd just come in from the rain. This maneuver had the desired result, sending the cat flying. Aristotle, as was his wont, landed on all fours and, for a second or two, actually looked a bit dazed. Then he executed a classic cat maneuver. He sat very erect and still for a moment, then slowly lifted his right paw to his mouth, licked it, and began grooming himself behind his right ear. He gave us all a very dismissive stare, as if to say, "Nothing happened, you stupid people—nothing at all."

**May your cat lounge in front of the fire
this Christmas!**

*Agatha Hoff is a former San Francisco court commissioner. She can be reached at ag2bike@earthlink.net. Her book, *Burning Horses: A Hungarian Life Turned Upside Down*, is available in bookstores.*

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