

Chapter 4

The Perils and Pleasures of Holidays

There's then, and then there's next



My standard model gingerbread house.

Like most people, I like the concept of reading poetry but don't have the patience to read it like it should be read – slowly, thoughtfully, seeking meaning, blah, blah blah.

That attitude doesn't reflect well on me, especially as a writer, but we are now living in a world of sound bites, tweets (God help us), and texts. I'm even less likely to read poetry now that my attention span has been corroded by the culture in which I live.

Despite all that, I have had a poem by Robert Frost on my bulletin board for thirty years. The title is "Reluctance" and I've memorized the last stanza, which is six beautifully crafted sentences that bring comfort to me in times of loss, especially during this season of celebration that can be as melancholy as it is joyous.

I had a holiday tradition that came to an end suddenly and the loss bears down on me this holiday season. When I was about ten years old, my uncle sent us a gingerbread house for Christmas. We hardly knew this uncle and it was the only time he gave our family a gift, so it was quite a surprise. Mom wouldn't let us eat it until after Christmas.

Finally, December 26 arrived and all five of us kids dove into the house. Much to our dismay the gingerbread was as hard as a rock and was so stale that none of us could eat it. The next year Mom and I decided to make our own gingerbread house and failed miserably. We used a sugar cookie recipe, and the cookie crumbled. We had no idea what kind of frosting to use to glue the house together. We gave up.

After I grew up and started a family of my own, I tried again to make gingerbread houses. I used gingerbread dough, which didn't crumble, and discovered a meringue that dries powdered sugar as hard as a rock. My tradition was born.

I became known for my gingerbread houses. I took one to work every year and my coworkers waited for the day when I walked through the door with the gingerbread house. They followed me to the break room and dug right in.

One year one of my coworkers asked if I would teach her how to make a gingerbread house. I knew she had been born to a fourteen-year-old mother who didn't teach her how to bake as my mom had. The next year I invited her and her six-year-old daughter, along with other staff members and their young daughters, to a decorating party at my house.

Many years later most of us had moved on to other jobs and my friends' daughters were in college, but we still gathered on the second Saturday in December to decorate gingerbread houses together. My tradition had become their tradition.

Two years ago, one friend moved to Arkansas and another to Oklahoma. Last year on October 30 I had a big surgery, an anterior cervical discectomy, and had to cancel my gingerbread decorating day. At this point, there were only a few people left in the group, moms and daughters that I had added a few years ago.

When I sent my save-the-date notice to my gingerbread friends this year, one confirmed and the other two had scheduling conflicts. A few days before decorating day the remaining girl let me know that her team got into the soccer playoffs, and she had a game scheduled for the second Saturday in December. My golden group of dear friends, whose daughters I had watched grow into beautiful young women, were gone.

Back to Robert Frost. The fourth stanza of "Reluctance" goes like this: "Ah, when to the heart of man/Was it ever less than a treason/To go with the drift of things, /To yield with a grace to reason, /And bow and accept the end/Of a love or a season?"

Frost put the last stanza in the form of a question. He is asking why the heart of man can't accept change to the extent that it feels like treason. When something I love ends, it is monumentally hard to accept. My friends moved on, and their daughters grew up. I search for the grace to yield to the passage of time. If I bow as I accept the end of a love or a season, I honor the cherished memories that will always remain.

Writer/director Mel Books put it another way when he said, "There's then, and then there's next." Less poetic, yes, but true. I'm starting my third gingerbread tradition with my three beautiful grandchildren who are becoming quite adept at decorating gingerbread houses. I know this tradition will pass too, but Robert Frost's poem will be on my bulletin board for the next thirty years, guiding my way.