

## Do Accordions Ever Play in Tune?

### A Christmas List

1. Dad—a personalized calendar.

It is made with pictures of his old model cars. Some of the pictures show the house in the background at different stages of its development, going from the trailer and small wooden garage to the three-bedroom, three-bathroom house with a swimming pool, gazebo, car port, and three garages all bigger than the house itself. Also, my brother and I sometimes get thrown into the picture. In one, he is crouched down next to me, and I'm in a baby carrier. Then, in another, Dad and I are beside some unfinished car half-buried in snow, and I'm seventeen. I put that one as the December picture. It doesn't really fit in. The other pictures are finished versions of his award-winning Corvette, Camaro, station wagon, hot rod, Mercury, etc. The one in the snow isn't finished and probably never will be. It's just a heap of scrap metal on the land behind one of the garages, but it's one where he and I are together. Ever since him and my mom split, we don't have anything to say to each other past, "how are you doing." He still lives in the house with the three garages, but now he lives there alone.

*Your wife wants you to donate blood with her. There is a blood drive set up outside her office in one of those big vans in a We'll-Make-You-Feel-Guilty-Until-You-Let-Us-Stick-A-Needle-In-You kind of way. O Negative. The needle slips in and out and it's done. Harmless. You*

*both get milkshakes afterwards because that is what you would have done if your kids were with you, but they aren't because they're in their twenties and live in the next city over. They never come to see you. They never call you, only your wife. Mmmm, strawberry.*

2     Burton, my boss—a snow globe.

It has Kristin Stewart and Robert Pattinson looking dramatically into one another's eyes. With snow falling around them that glitters. He's a big man, but he loves his chick flicks. He runs the Italian restaurant. It is slowly deteriorating and desperately in need of repairs, but he still has Antonio come out and play his accordion on Friday nights. Enjoy the little things in life. I'm in school to be a teacher, working on my master's degree even though I'm only twenty-three. Most of the people in my classes are in their thirties. One girl, Megan, is thirty-eight. She is married to a guy who is working on his PhD. We had this theater class together and we were talking about shit. She said that she never even thinks about her husband cheating on her. That just isn't something that she has to worry about. They have two kids and they are happy. I wanted to slap her in the face and call her naïve. Her daughter is adorable. She came over to my apartment one time when we were rehearsing and she was super polite and talkative. She drew a picture of me and my cat and it's on my fridge now, next to pictures that Jacob's nieces colored. Burton is single. He was engaged to this old woman who had teenage daughters already, and they could have probably been happy together but he had to move down here four years ago when he got the job as manager. Long distance didn't work out for them. It's all rumor, but I

think he slept with a seventeen-year-old hostess and someone let it slip to the fiancé. He didn't get put in jail or anything, though, so who knows.

*You sell medicines to doctors. Modern day door-to-door legal crack salesman. Oencia, Trizivir, Abarelix, Abraxane, Infergen, Epogen, Rebetrone. All sorts of medication. You've long since forgotten your script that you memorized when you first started out in order to promote to the doctors. They all know you now. You make the same rounds to the same doctors and sell the same drugs. You don't remember what they're for. Melanie is a secretary for Doctor Vatel. You see her twice a week on Tuesday and Thursday mornings at 8:00. You roll in the drugs via suitcase and three minutes later she takes her smoke break. You fuck her in your 1968 Firebird. Then you head to Doctor Marshall's office. At noon you have lunch with your wife and listen to her talk about how she wishes you could spend more time together.*

3. Jacob, my boyfriend— a zombie poster, a zombie comic book, and season one of one of his favorite television shows on DVD.

The poster will show him that I can still be fun and let him put stupid shit up in our apartment instead of being one of those bitchy girlfriends that has to have all the decorations matching and symmetrically hung on the wall. That way he'll think I'm awesome, and he won't

feel the need to sleep with someone else. And then lie about it. I've decorated our apartment for Christmas. I hung all of the lights by myself and hung our stockings on the wall with thumb tacks. Ours are lined up perfectly with each other and then slightly lower and in the middle is a stocking for our cat. There's already a pack of treats in his. I put up the tree by myself too, but I waited until he was home with me so we could decorate it together. I wanted us to frolic around the tree and hang the balls and listen to Christmas music. We compromised. I hung the decorations while he watched Family Guy on TV. Dad has never liked Jacob. When we first started dating, he decided Jacob didn't look right, didn't make enough money, wasn't good enough. Didn't matter that I liked him, doesn't matter that I love him. He isn't allowed at Dad's house, even now that Dad is on his own. If Dad spent any time around him, he'd see that they are a lot alike. When Jacob plays guitar, it's the only thing that matters to him. He doesn't exist in this world anymore. Just like Dad with his cars.

*You get home from work. Your wife is in the kitchen asking you if you want to go out and do something tonight. You don't respond. You walk out the door to your garage. She should know that's what you want to do. It's what you do every night. Hammer. Saw. Sew. Weld. Staple. Screw. Bend. Meld. Go in for dinner. Your wife cooked you fried pork chops and French fries. You tell her she's trying to kill you, but eat every last one. When your drink all your sweet tea, you bang the glass on the table, and she gets up to refill it. She spills a drop on the table, and you call her a slut. She laughs like you're joking. You go to the couch to watch television. She cleans the table. When your daughter calls, your wife asks if you want to talk to her. You say no. You don't know what to say to her. She gets too upset when you just want what's best for her. Takes everything too seriously. You can't refer to her boyfriend as a thug without her hanging up*

*on you. Your wife sits down on the couch next to you. You are together, but neither one of you says a word. You want to tell her it was different when your daughter was home and could just talk to you in person, there was more to say then. And when your son was playing video games in the other room instead of the next city. There were more sounds, and it made talking easier.*

4. Antonio, my friend—a new bowtie. It seems fitting.

There are times when I look at Antonio waltzing through the restaurant and think about humping him on the cutting boards in the kitchen. That's unsanitary though, and we'd probably get some lettuce or something stuck in our asses. Plus, I love Jacob. Antonio has a certain grace about him when he goes up to a family sitting down for dinner and asks if they have any requests. I'm not good with people. Most times I give them evil looks when they tell me they want their food for free because they strategically placed a blonde hair in their pasta. We don't have any blonde cooks, but I can't tell them no. Burton says it's better to deal with them than have them ask for the 1-800 number, but I think we are letting them run all over us. Do it once, they know where to come back to for more.

They smile at Antonio. As he plays his music, they fall in love with him and each other all over again. I wish he worked every night of the week so that we never had any guest complaints. Mashed potatoes cold? That's okay. Steak under or over cooked? Oh well, listen to that lovely music. It's like an upper for the clinically depressed.

*You get a call from a doctor. It's about the blood you donated. There are antibodies in your blood and you need to go in for further testing. He explains it to you three times before you understand that he's telling you that you have HIV.*

*You take your wife out to dinner. Fancy style. Restaurant on the river with candlelight and sunset. She is glowing, she thinks you're being so romantic. You are quiet for most of the evening, but she doesn't notice. You're always quiet. You order the steak off of the Weight Watchers menu. She starts to order you some fried onion rings for an appetizer because she knows that you like them, but you don't let her. Cut her off in mid-sentence. The waiter looks at you, judges you, but keeps his large fake smile on his face. You just don't feel like onion rings tonight. She tells you about your kids. Your son recently got a job with your daughter at the same restaurant. She doesn't think he's going to be good at it because he's always been so introverted. Words keep popping into your head. Complicated, heavy words like love, death, infidelity. You don't listen when she tells you your daughter got an A on her last paper, and you don't respond when the waiter asks if you want any steak sauce. She answers no for you, and finally asks. What is wrong? Are you okay? You look pale. Now you have to tell her. Now is the moment. The words spill out. Loneliness. Work. Melanie. Blood drive. HIV. Love. You tell her you love her, but she doesn't hear you. She has silently gotten out of her seat and left the restaurant.*

5. Mom—a flower pot.

No dirt, no flower, just the pot. I'm going to paint it at this place downtown where you can paint pottery and they will fire it for you and make it look all snazzy. I'm not that good at

painting, but I'm going to try to do a funny scene of a dog sniffing a skunk who is sniffing a flower. I want to make it look like her dog. It's a pit bull that's full of energy that she used to replace Dad in her life. She calls the dog our sister. Mom's apartment is strange to me. I've never slept in it. It smells like dog and cinnamon because she has candles on the mantle, coffee table, kitchen table, end table, toilet counter, kitchen counter, on top of the television, and she carries one around with her in her purse. To burn away the smell of rotting flesh, she says. And just because she likes skunks. I'll probably get her a yoga mat too. She's been doing a lot of that lately to try to stay in shape.

*You get a call from your wife. It's been three weeks since the restaurant, since you last spoke. She tells you that she has seen a lawyer and drawn up the divorce papers. There is no working this out and there is no going back. She tells you that she's always told you she would never beg you to stay. You beg. Please stay. She tells you that she went to the doctor. Just to check. She has HIV now, too. She cries, and tells you she hopes you never forget that you are the reason not only that she will die, but that she will die alone.*

6. Mags, my best friend—a bottle of Kendall Jackson.

I will end up spending the night at her place on Christmas day. As tradition dictates, we spend the night drinking wine on her couch that is cozily situated on top of her roof. It's a flat roof, not a slanted one so it isn't super dangerous or anything. She is sleeping with Antonio, so we may get serenaded if he's there. Maybe I'll envision a threesome, and then feel guilty about it

when I see a text from my boyfriend saying he misses me. Then, instead, I'll want to go home and fuck him and I'll completely forget about Antonio. Mags and I will talk about the presents we got and how shitty our lives are.

Mags's parents are still together, but have this pact where they have agreed to sleep with other people as long as they don't bring them home. To create a familial atmosphere, they say. She avoids them every Christmas via our sleepover. They send her a post card in the mail that says "Wish you were here" and has two hundred dollars in it. She doesn't call them to say thanks. Mags hates both of them. One time, she ran into her mom when she was out on a date with another guy. He was super old and gross looking. He barely talked past, "Nice to meet you," and Mags's mom yelled at her for being there, even though she hadn't known beforehand that she was going to run into her mom being a slutty attention whore. Her Dad actually has a girlfriend. They've been together for two years and he sleeps over at her place on the weekends. When Mags does go home, which is rare, her parents overact, saying, "Yes, dear, I would be happy to pour you some more tea," and "You look stunning in your dress, sweetie." I don't blame her for hating them.

*You diet. You exercise. You listen to audio tapes of people in other cities and other countries who try to motivate you to stay positive. Your life is not over yet. You tell Melanie what she has. She tells you that she already knew it. You slap her in her office in front of everyone and subsequently you lose your job. You try to call your wife but she doesn't answer. You try to call your daughter and your son but you can't think of anything to say. I'm sorry I slept with*



*someone else, you want to say. Silence. Awkwardness. Excuses. They hang up. They don't come to see you, but you know they have been to see your wife. You imagine them all sitting in her new living room laughing with each other and you vomit. You meditate. You take pills. AZT Break. You go to the doctor. CD4 Counts tell you that your white blood cells are at 370, below the healthy goal of 500 to 1,000 but above 200. Above the AIDS mark. You go to your garage less and less.*

7. Greg, my brother—a desk chair.

He already has two, but one of them squeaks like it's getting paid to, so loud the neighbors complain, and the other one swirls you around like a ride at a fair. The second you sit in it you're rotated 180, then you change direction to make the reverse 180. It never ends. He's broke. He lived on unemployment until they cut him off and then went that day and got a job at my restaurant. When he isn't working, he's sitting in the spinning squeakster playing some sort of online game on his computer talking to people in other states. He may never see these people, but he is content to call them his friends.

He doesn't like to talk about what dad did. There is no food in his apartment. Instead, he eats at the local diner every day. All he needs in life is enough money to get by on, a working computer with fast internet, and a game to play. He is the happiest person I know.

*You go to see your wife at her apartment. It is decorated in different colors than your house. Than the house you lived in together. She doesn't let you in the door. You ask her for*

*Christmas dinner with the kids. As a family. Just this once if it doesn't work out. You tell her you need this. "What do I need to bring?" she sighs.*

*Christmas Day. She is at your house at six sharp.*

*Can I help you set up? She asks, but you tell her to have a seat at the table. You did all the cooking yourself. You pull the seat out for her. You pour both of your glasses full of tea. You do all of the work for her. She looks around and comments on the Christmas decorations you put up. There are a few poinsettias around the place. It's the best you could do.*

*The kids get there twenty minutes later. They bring in presents and set them in the other room before joining you at the table. Forks hit plates. Glasses are brought to lips and put back down on tables. You look at each of their faces. Solemn. Broken. You say something nice about your daughter's boyfriend. Tell her she can bring him to dinner from now on, if she wants to. You give your son an extra hundred dollars after dinner when no one is looking. Tell him to enjoy a few extra meals on you. They perk up. They start to talk to you like maybe, just maybe they can pretend for this moment that this is reality.*

*But there is nothing you can give your wife. Ex-wife. Nothing can make up for the damage you've done. But she looks at you. The whole time you are talking to your kids and cleaning the table after dinner she stares at you.*

*"You've changed," she says. "You're dying and it's cured you."*

