

Corduroy Christmas

Patti Gaustad Procopi



CORDUROY CHRISTMAS

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“CHRISTMAS? HAVE YOU REALLY THOUGHT about this? You know what Mom is like at Christmas.”

My dear sister laughed. “I think it will be wonderful. What better time to introduce someone new into the family? Christmas is a time of love and warmth and happiness.”

Always the optimist. I rolled my eyes which thankfully Lexi couldn't see because we were speaking on the phone. “They say Christmas is actually full of stress and unhappiness and despair. I've read suicides go up drastically over the holidays.”

“Well, if people have your attitude about the holidays that's probably true. Thankfully most of us are full of the joy of the season. Now your mission is to get Tony ready for the trip. Make sure he has the right clothes. Prep him a bit on the family. I'm counting on you, Izzie. Don't let me down.” And my sister hung up the phone.

I threw myself back on my bed and stared up at the ceiling. How had I gotten involved with this? Why did my sister always manage to inveigle me in her plans and plots? Try as I might, I could not resist her.

She was such a Pollyanna, always seeing the best in people and events. Despite all evidence to the contrary, she seemed to think Christmas at our house was a wonderful family affair.

It wasn't. My mother treated Christmas as something akin to the D-Day invasion. Every detail, every moment had to be planned out to the Nth degree. Each day had a schedule we adhered to with military precision. Each year Christmas had a different theme, and all decorations were related to that theme.

I think my mother started planning next year's decorations as soon as the current ones were packed, labeled, and stored in the basement. She kept a file of each year and what decorations had been used. She sometimes re-used decorations if they fit into the new theme.

This year's theme was "The Wizard of Oz." For the life of me, I couldn't figure out what that had to do with Christmas. What about Jesus? Angels? Shepherds? Wisemen? Even Santa and the reindeer would be preferable. The effing Wizard of Oz? Give me a break!

The fifteen-foot tree (the best fake tree money could buy) would be decorated from top to bottom by a team of athletic young men who could climb up and down ladders and reach over without losing their balance and plummeting to their deaths. Mother would stand below, watching their work and making suggestions on ornament placement so no spots were left bare.

For this year's theme, the tree (and house) would be decorated all in ruby red and emerald green. The red ornaments were actually recycled from the *Gone with the Wind* Christmas of five years earlier. They were called "Scarlet" red that year. "Waste not, want not," Mother said, as she proudly announced she would be reusing all the red ornaments. She had ten years of Christmas decorations piled in totes taking up half the basement, but she thought she should be congratulated on re-using some red stuff.

A *Gone with the Wind* Christmas? Sigh. I remembered that one. Once again, what did it have to do with Christmas? When Lexi and I were little, we had normal Christmases and normal decorations. The tree was covered with handmade ornaments Lexi and I had made, candy canes, and strings of popcorn. This was all before we moved into a huge house in a fancy neighborhood and my mother realized Christmas in Oakdale Hollow was not a celebration but a competition. And hence, the birth of "themed" Christmases. There were prizes given every year for indoor and outdoor decorations, best theme, best adherence to theme, best color combination, and on and on and on. Mother was a top contender each year.

And now Lexi wanted to bring an outsider into this madness. Into this carefully orchestrated, not very merry, family Christmas.

Lexi had met Tony her first semester away at college. She was dating one of her college art professors and Tony was his best friend. They hung out in the same arty student-professor groups. Smoking and drinking cheap wine and one day, the first professor was history and it was all about Tony.

I arrived at the same university at the beginning of Lexi's junior year. She and Tony had had a big fight and Lexi decided she was moving back home to attend the local college and pursue her studies there. Many phone calls went back and forth. Many tears were shed. Tony befriended me because he thought I would be his ally in winning Lexi back.

I liked Tony. However, I didn't think Mom and Dad (especially Mom) would. He was a typical 1970s art professor. Scruffy. Hairy. Smoked (various things) and drank. And he was poor. But one of his biggest faults was that he was Italian. And while I doubt he was overly religious, being Italian he had probably been born and raised a Catholic which my mother thought was almost the same thing as being a member of a cult. But worst of all, he was a Yankee. And Lexi wanted to introduce him to the family during the height of the most stressful time of the year?

The phone rang. It was Tony. "Hey there," he said with what sounded like a smile. "Do you think we could go suit shopping today? I want to be sure I have all the right clothes for Christmas. Lexi says your mother is a bit persnickety." A bit? I thought.

"Sure. That would be great. What time do you want to go?"

"I'll pick you up at 11:00. Is that good?"

"Sure."

At 11:00 sharp, Tony showed up in his ancient Volvo station wagon. The standard college professor vehicle, but his had seen some rough years. It coughed and sputtered as I came out the door. Sitting in the passenger seat, I noticed daylight coming through the floorboards. I thought of my parent's Buick LeSabre and winced.

I assumed we would be going to the mall to one of the fancy department stores, but instead Tony drove us to a strip mall and parked in front of “Honest Frankie’s Discount Suit Shop.” The sign on the window read, “Ya gonna love how you look.” I couldn’t imagine my father shopping at such a place.

Tony must have seen the look on my face as he opened the door. “This place came highly recommended.” By who? I wondered.

We went inside, and Tony told the clerk he needed a good suit because he was meeting his girlfriend’s parents over the holidays. He then leaned closer to the clerk and whispered in his ear. I caught the word “price” and “not more than...”

“We got just the thing,” the salesman responded. “Just in. The latest fashion and a real bargain to boot.”

We walked to the back of the store. I sat while he took Tony’s measurements. “I need something ready to go. I don’t have extra money to spend on a bunch of tailoring,” Tony was saying as he took off his oversized jacket.

“I got it. I understand completely,” the salesman said as he measured Tony’s arms, legs, and shoulders. “Trust me. I got this.”

Stripped down to his jeans and t-shirt, I noticed how oddly shaped Tony was. His legs were short and a bit bowed out. His chest was large but his arms were thin. This was not going to be easy to get a suit off the rack without adjustment, I thought.

The salesman pointed Tony to a fitting room and told him he would bring him some suits. “I just gotta couple in your size. But you’re gonna love ‘em.”

He took Tony two suits and then came to stand next to me. “So, you’re the girlfriend?” He smiled. He had a gold tooth. And a pinky ring. This was like a bad movie.

“No. That would be my sister but she’s back home so I’m here helping out.” Why, oh why, oh why, did I let myself get involved? The knot in my stomach hardened. I had a very bad feeling about this.

Tony came out of the dressing room in a dark brown, wide wale corduroy

suit. With his wild shaggy black hair, sideburns almost down to his chin, dark skin and huge tinted glasses, he looked horrible. Like a dog standing on his hind legs. I stifled a gasp.

“What do you think?” Tony asked as he turned this way and that, looking in the mirror. I thought corduroy was not a good choice for him. Possibly for anyone. When did they start making corduroy suits? I think my father had a pair of corduroy pants which he wore on weekends when he met up with his male friends. They were rather elegant as all my father’s clothes were. This suit was ill fitting and ill conceived.

“Does it come in another color?” I asked, thinking maybe another color might be better. How could it be worse?

“Yeah. A nice light brown. I put that one in the fitting room as well.” The salesman smiled while pulling on the sleeves and legs of the pants. “This one fits ya great.” We obviously had a different opinion on “fits great.”

Tony went back into the fitting room. A few moments later, he emerged in the same suit in a different color. Was this better? The lighter color seemed to suit him better though it was an awful shade of brown. “Let’s get a shirt and tie to perk this up and see how it looks,” I suggested.

“Good idea,” said the salesman, hurrying off. Together we picked a shirt that seemed to improve the color of the suit and a tie that pulled it all together. Not great but not bad for what it was.

When we got to the cash register and the salesman rang him up, I saw Tony wince as he pulled out his wallet. It seemed quite cheap for a suit but Tony had already paid for his plane ticket and money was tight.

I got home a few days before Tony was due to arrive. All was calm. All was bright. The house looked amazing with everything just so. The “Wizard of Oz” tree glistened in ruby red and emerald green splendor. Actually, the entire house glittered in red and green.

“I know I will win in several categories this year,” my mother announced gleefully. “Take that, Pookie Smyth-Jones. You think you are the Queen of Christmas! You are about to be dethroned.”

“Hi Mom,” I said as I hauled my suitcase up the steps. “So nice to be home. The house looks great.”

She smiled at me as I walked by. “So lovely to have you home, dear. It’s what the holidays are all about. Family.”

Really Mom? I thought it was about winning.

As soon as I got to my room, Lexi came bounding in. “I can’t believe Tony will be here in a few days. This is going to be the best Christmas ever! I know Mom and Dad will love him.”

“I’m sure you’re right. What’s not to love? He’s a poor, scruffy college professor. Not to mention too old for you, and Italian and a Catholic.”

Lexi laughed. “You’re so funny.” I was amazed. How did she manage to completely ignore reality?

“Now I have to know. He’s all set for the holidays here. All the right clothes. All the right...”. She couldn’t finish that thought. Right what? Right pedigree? Right family? Right religion? The answer was no to all of the above.

“Yes, he’s all set. I helped him buy a suit. Told him what he needed to bring for the five days he would be here. Casual but elegant.” I was putting my clothes away while I spoke.

“He has casual but elegant clothes?” Lexi was mystified.

“No, he doesn’t!” I spun around. “And you knew that too before you came up with this hare-brained scheme. I told him to bring his ‘best’ clothes though I doubt he even has those. Hopefully at least he has stuff with no rips, patches, or stains.”

“At least he has a suit. He can dress that up or down. Maybe Dad can loan him some stuff.”

I blanched thinking of the wide-wale, light brown corduroy suit. “Hopefully,” I squeaked out, “though I don’t think they are really the same size. Maybe a sweater might fit? A cardigan? A vest?”

“Dad does have some lovely cashmere sweaters,” Lexi said and danced out of the room with stars in her eyes.

What's that old expression about even if you put lipstick on a pig it will still be a pig... or wait... maybe it was you can't make a silk purse from a pig's ear... the image of Tony in his rumpled jeans sporting one of Dad's cashmere sweaters. It would make no difference. Tony would not look any better.

I sat down on my bed, feeling despair. I knew how much this meant to Lexi. She had some dream of us all having a wonderful family Christmas together. The first of many, she hoped. We would all wake up Christmas morning in our matching plaid pajamas and eat pancakes with fresh cream and maple syrup. Then we would gather around the red and green tree and exchange gifts. It wasn't going to happen. No matter how hard she wished, dreamed, and hoped.

I liked Tony. He was smart and funny. He probably loved Lexi and would try to make her happy. What he didn't understand was Lexi was used to the finer things in life. She might enjoy "slumming" a bit at college and being all bohemian, but she was destined to live her life in the suburbs, attending teas, PTA meetings, and playing tennis and golf at the country club.

How many days would he be here? I started counting on my fingers the days and events he would have to survive. It was like some ancient game of endurance.

Day One:

Tony was arriving on Christmas Eve's Eve's Eve. He would be coming in the evening so all we would have time for is picking him up from the airport and bringing him home. Introductions all around. A drink, a snack, and off to bed. That should be fairly painless.

Day One would get a check for easy and survivable.

Day Two:

Christmas Eve's Eve was the day of the judging for the competition. The judges would be making their rounds through the neighborhood. Mother would be on pins and needles so it would be best for the rest of us to stay away. We could walk around the neighborhood and check out the competition.

Day Two would also get a check mark for easy and survivable since Mom would be distracted.

Day Three:

Christmas Eve itself. This was the most difficult day. After coffee, we would spend the morning preparing for the brunch buffet at the country club. This was one of the social events of the season. This is where the corduroy suit would make its first appearance, along with the new shirt and tie. (I suddenly felt ill. I hadn't thought about shoes. Did Tony own any shoes other than sneakers? I would have to get Lexi to check on Day Two, and they could run out to the mall if needed).

We would arrive at 1:00 and be shown to "our table." Center stage. Mother would nod and smile to everyone as she sailed through the room with us in her wake. She and dad might actually stop and chat with a few friends. They all knew Lexi and me, of course, but manners dictated Tony would have to be introduced. More potential for disaster. They would notice his long, shaggy hair and ask him if he was one of those hippie anti-war protestors. A shudder went down my spine. I should have discussed a haircut with him but it seemed a bit much for my role as his girlfriend's younger sister. Maybe Lexi could squeeze in getting him a haircut along with a new pair of shoes on Day Two.

After brunch, we would all return home and after a small dinner (since we would be stuffed from brunch) we would head to church for the evening service. Tony would have to wear his suit again. Same suit. Not so good. Maybe we could borrow a tie from Dad to freshen the look. We would walk there through the park, arriving early in order to get a prime seat. Church usually lasted an hour and a half since there would be tons of singing. Our choir was amazing so I always enjoyed this service. After church, there would be a champagne reception in the parish hall. How would Mother and Father handle Tony there? Some people would have already met him at brunch but he would have to be introduced to others.

Day Three had the potential to be a complete disaster on so many levels.

Day Four:

Christmas Day. Possibly another easy day. We would sleep late, meaning getting up at 9:00 and then have a breakfast of pancakes. Another family tradition. Then we would gather around the ruby and emerald tree and open presents. Very leisurely, with each person taking a turn while the others watched. One potential for disaster—would there be any presents for Tony? Would Tony have any presents for the family? Not worth worrying about.

Day Four possibly survivable.

Day Five:

Boxing Day, as the English call the day after Christmas. Judgement Day, as we call it in Oak Hollow. This is when Mom would have a big open house for all her friends, neighbors, and competitors while everyone awaited the judge's decision on the winners. Mother would be smiling, a frozen, forced smile.

Day Five had the potential to go either way. Mother would be distracted so would hardly notice Tony. The need for a suit would be past so we could put that dog to rest!

Day Six:

Last day would be spent planning for the evening trip back to the airport. Tony and Lexi could go off on their own for the day. Mother would either be in an ecstatic or depressed state so once again she would not be interested in Tony.

Day Six would mark the end of the visit. We would have survived with maybe only minor wounds.



D-Day finally arrived. Could be Doomsday, though I was hoping for the best. Lexi and I drove Dad's Buick to the airport to pick up Tony. I waited in the car while Lexi went to meet him at the gate. I wanted to give them a few moments of privacy.

They arrived holding hands and gazing lovingly into each other's eyes. Whatever had caused their initial breakup was obviously a thing of the past. Tony threw his suitcase in the trunk and then climbed in the back next to Lexi. I was obviously acting as their chauffeur. "Hey Izzy," he said as he settled in. "Wow, this is a nice car. Looks brand new."

"It is," Lexi said. "My dad gets a new car every other year and then my mom gets the old one." Tony looked around, shaking his head. I thought of his ancient rattle trap Volvo.

We arrived home, and Lexi led the way, pulling Tony up the path by his hand. He had been staring incredulously at all the neighborhood decorations as we had driven along. Lexi had explained about the competition and how obsessed Mother was with winning. He hadn't said a word as he turned his head back and forth, trying to take it all in. Now he stared down at "The Yellow Brick Road" Mother had created on the path to our front door.

Mom and Dad weren't standing at the door when we came in. I guess they didn't want to seem too eager or make Tony nervous. "We're in the den," they called out. Tony stared down the hall at the fifteen-foot emerald and ruby tree. "Wow," he muttered softly. Lexi said, "I'll show you to your room later. Let's meet Mom and Dad."

"Sure. Okay. Fine." Tony was babbling as he wiped his hands on his pants. I noticed his jeans were not torn, stained or rumped. A good sign. Lexi led Tony into the den and Dad stood up and put his hand out. "So this is the famous Tony," he said with a smile. Tony smiled back, putting out his hand. His smile looked more like a grimace. Then Mom stood up and everyone was talking at once. I sat on a chair in the corner, watching. Seemed like it was going well. Day one, check mark.

After Tony had some refreshments, Lexi suggested he was probably tired and since it was late she would show him his room and get him settled. Mom and Dad said goodnight and settled back down on the couch. I followed Lexi and Tony. He was staying in the basement guest room which was actually really nice. I think there had been a plan for our grandparents to

move in with us, so Mom and Dad fixed up the room but my grandparents moved to Florida instead. It was quite cozy and even had a little fireplace, though I don't think it had ever been used.

Tony was snuggling Lexi and telling her how much he had missed her and was there any chance she could sneak down later for a real welcome. She demurred, saying Mom was a light sleeper and she didn't want to be caught. Tony was understandably upset by this turn of events. I think he thought they would be staying in the same room. "We're all adults here," he said to Lexi.

"Yes, we are, but unmarried adults," she replied, kissing him softly and brushing his hair out of his eyes. "See you in the morning."

I followed Lexi back up to her room. "I think it went really well," she said, flopping down on her bed.

"Early days," I replied. "Mom and Dad are quite well-mannered. It's not like they were going to be rude or Dad would demand to know Tony's intentions!"

"True. I'm pleased with how things are going so far." It had only been three hours. We had a lot more to get through.

The next morning after breakfast, I asked Tony if he had dress shoes for his suit. He allowed as how he had "something" that would work. That didn't sound good but not my business. I noticed he had used some hair cream to slick his hair back so it appeared to be more under control. Still, it looked too long and a bit greasy. But that was Lexi's problem.

Mom was in a tither, and we all knew we should leave right after breakfast and stay gone until dinner time. One never knew when the judges would arrive. Tony and Lexi borrowed Mom's car and said they were going to drive around and go out for lunch. After all I had done, I was abandoned. Dad retreated to his office and shut the door. I asked Mom if there was anything I could do to help even though I knew there wasn't, and then excused myself for a walk around the neighborhood. I would check out the competition on my own.

We all returned to the house at 5:00 which was the official time the judging ended. Mother looked somewhat satisfied but grim. It was always hard to read the judge's reaction. I told her I had checked out the other houses and felt confident she had this one in the bag. She smiled weakly. We had a nice, quiet meal. Tony and Lexi looked very happy and couldn't keep their eyes off each other and kept playing footsie under the table. So childish. Day Two checked off with no disasters. This was going well.

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Day Three. Christmas Eve, the hardest day of them all. After coffee, we all retreated to our rooms to get dressed for brunch. Mother took an especially long time getting ready. Lexi and I were ready first and waited for Tony to join us. I took several deep breaths, hoping the corduroy suit looked better than I remembered.

As he walked up the stairs, Lexi sucked in a deep breath as she stared down at him. "How do I look?" He smiled up at her. He looked... awful. If possible, worse than I remembered. The suit in the light of day was not light brown but more of a baby diarrhea yellow. Lexi dug her nails into my wrist and muttered, "Come with me," through clenched jaws. "Wonderful," she smiled at him. "I'll be back in a sec. Wait in the den. Izzy and I have some last-minute things to take care of."

She dragged me through the kitchen and out into the garage. "I asked you to do one thing! One thing!" She was practically yelling even though she was fighting to keep her voice low. "Help Tony pick out a nice suit, and this is what you helped him pick? This corduroy monstrosity the color of vomit?" Her eyes filled with tears. I felt terrible.

"Lexi. I'm sorry. I told you I wouldn't be any good at this. We went to some awful discount men's store and he told the clerk how much he had to spend, and this is what they had in his price."

"It didn't come in any other color?" she wailed.

“Yes, it did, but that color was even worse, believe it or not. It was dark brown and it made him look swarthy, like a pirate. I thought this one was better with his coloring.”

“This isn’t better with anyone’s coloring!” She was on the verge of hysteria. “Why didn’t you loan him some money or something or anything? This is going to be a disaster. Can you imagine Mother walking into the country club with Tony in this suit?”

“You knew Tony didn’t have much money. He had to get a plane ticket which took most of it. I told you this was a bad idea. Christmas was the worst time for him to come and meet the family.”

Suddenly the door opened and Dad stuck his head out, looking quizzically at both of us. “What are you two doing out in the garage? Tony is waiting in the den and your mom will be down in a minute.”

“Just some Christmas plotting,” I said with what I hoped was a bright cheerful smile instead of a tortured grin. “You know Christmas! So many surprises.”

Dad laughed and gestured for us to come inside. Thankfully, he is not the suspicious type. Mother would have grilled us until we broke down and confessed everything.

We all walked into the den together where Tony stood awkwardly. Had he picked up on Lexi’s horror over his suit? “Hope you’re hungry,” Dad said. “The brunch at the club is a killer.” He then looked at Tony’s suit. You could tell he was a bit confused. He didn’t know much about fashion. His tailor advised him on what he should wear.

“Corduroy,” Dad said, looking at Tony from head to toe. “Is that coming back into fashion? I remember wearing corduroy as a kid. You don’t see it much anymore. Interesting color.”

“The man at the suit store said it was the newest thing,” Tony replied without any conviction, thinking maybe he had been conned. He yanked nervously on his cuffs and the bottom of the jacket.

Mother walked in at that moment and could not hide the look of horror

when she saw Tony. She almost recoiled. The look on her face was enough to make the rest of us recoil. She struggled for a moment before composing herself. "Are we all ready?" Her voice seemed unnaturally high. "Time to go."

A sadder bunch of people had never arrived at the country club's Christmas Eve brunch. Mother was mortified. Father was confused. Lexi was furious at me. I was furious at Lexi. And Tony was devastated. His moment of glory. His moment to shine in front of Lexi's family had all been undone by the unfortunate choice of a diarrhea-colored, wide wale corduroy suit.

Mother sailed through the club not stopping to speak to anyone, obviously not wanting to have to introduce Tony to anyone she knew as her daughter's boyfriend. She waved gaily as we dragged in behind her, each managing to plaster a pained smile on our faces.

When we returned home hours later, Tony ran down the stairs to his room and shut the door. Lexi gave me one last dirty look and ran up to her room and shut the door. I slumped down on the couch. How had this become all my fault?

We reassembled in the living room around six to get a quick bite before church. Everyone claimed to still be full from brunch even though none of us had much of an appetite and hadn't really eaten anything.

Mother came into the kitchen with a sweater and a necktie of Dad's which she handed to Tony. "I thought you might like to change a bit before church. Lexi told me you inadvertently left some of your clothes on your bed so you don't have your full range of choices. Hopefully this will fit."

I stared at Lexi. Where had she come up with this nonsense? Well, maybe it was better than saying Tony had no taste and no decent clothes. I glanced at Tony. He appeared to be completely humiliated. Now he knew his suit choice had been the worst decision ever. He mutely took the sweater and tie and went back downstairs to change. When he came back, he wouldn't even look at any of us.

The sweater fit. Not perfectly, but it fit, and Dad's expensive silk tie upgraded the outfit. Tony still had to wear the corduroy pants since the only

other thing he had was a pair of pants he was saving for Boxing Day and his jeans. I hadn't noticed before how the corduroy pants seemed to accentuate Tony's short, bow legs.

We walked silently to the church. It was a beautiful evening, and I hoped we had gotten over the hump. Day three had not been a great success but we had survived by the skin of our teeth.

The service was lovely. The music amazing as always. Even Tony seemed to relax a bit. I noticed Lexi taking his hand and squeezing it. He didn't pull his hand away but I didn't see him squeeze back. At the reception, Lexi followed Mom and Dad around and introduced Tony. I was still miffed at being blamed for the entire fiasco so I hung out by myself.

Christmas day dawned with bright sunshine and crisp, cold air. Once again, we all slowly made our way to the kitchen where Dad fried up enough bacon to clog all of our arteries and then made stacks and stacks of pancakes until everyone begged him to stop.

Taking our coffee, we went to sit around the tree. It was actually a beautiful tree and if it hadn't been given the title of "The Wizard of Oz" tree I would have liked it.

Dad played the role of Santa, looking under the tree and pulling out presents to hand to the recipient who would then read the card before carefully unwrapping the gift. Tony actually had gifts for everyone. He had done a print of Lexi in wild psychedelic colors for my parents. They expressed great admiration for his artistic efforts, but I couldn't see it fitting in with their décor. I also got a small print. He gave Lexi a beautiful necklace an artist friend had made. He probably traded some of his art for it. She claimed to love it, still I sensed a chill in the air that hadn't been there yesterday morning.

After clearing up and putting away all the gifts, the men retreated to the den to watch TV and the women went to the kitchen to start Christmas dinner. This was a meal to rival Thanksgiving in abundance. We cooked for hours and then sat down and enjoyed the feast. Or pretended to enjoy the

feast. An odd mood had settled over everyone. I knew Mother was tense because tomorrow was judgement day but I wasn't sure what was going on with Tony and Lexi. After clearing up and washing all the dishes, Lexi claimed she had a headache and was going to bed.

I think we all survived Day four.

Boxing Day was another beautiful winter day. We all got our own breakfast because Mother was busy getting ready for the caterers and making sure all the decorations inside and outside were perfect.

We all dressed up again. Tony wore a pair of Khaki pants and another one of Dad's sweaters and neckties. He looked miserable. He and Lexi seemed to be ignoring each other. The caterers arrived and set out tons of food. I literally didn't think I could eat anything but nerves took over and I started snacking. Neighbors and friends began to arrive and gushed over Mother's decorations. The "Yellow Brick Road" in the front drew particular compliments.

At 5:00, the entire neighborhood gathered outside by the small park and awaited the judgement. The judges stood in a gazebo with a microphone set up in front of them. One stepped up and began the list of winners. It was a wonderful coup for Mother. She won best-in-show (or whatever they called it—Best of the Best) and several other categories, including one for the "Yellow Brick Road." Everyone clapped. Hugs and kisses were exchanged among winners and losers, and they all laughed and said, "Wait until next year! I'll beat you then." On the surface it was all quite congenial with an undercurrent of hurt and resentment.

Finally, the judges announced the theme for next year's competition would be "Scheherazade and the 1,0001 Nights." I could see everyone already beginning to make plans. I knew my Mother would spend the next day poring over ideas. She whispered in my ear, "I can reuse the gold coins from *Treasure Island*." I wanted to say, "How about next year we do Jesus?" But I didn't.

We had survived Day five, and tomorrow Tony would fly back home.

Overall, I thought it had gone well. The only off note was the corduroy suit. Honestly, I couldn't figure out how everyone got so worked up about one outfit. Sure, it was cheap and ugly, but it was hardly the end of the world. No one died.

That night, I woke to muted voices from the living room. They sounded angry but I couldn't hear what they were saying. I got up and crept to the head of the stairs. It was Tony and Lexi. They were bickering but I had no idea why.

I crept down the stairs to listen. They were arguing about the damn suit. And of course, I was being blamed again. They didn't seem to be able to agree on much of anything except they both agreed I had planned to embarrass Tony by getting him to buy that damn suit! I wanted to run into the room and slap them both. Tony was also going on about what snobs we all were and how pretentious we were, and my Mother didn't seem to realize there were starving children in the world who could be fed with all the money she wasted on Christmas decorations, and my Father bought new gas-guzzling cars every year (every other year, I wanted to shout).

The worst insults seemed to be hurled at Lexi. She was a spoiled rich girl. She enjoyed hanging out with her working-class boyfriend to show off how open minded she was. And it went on and on. Finally, after she shouted she couldn't wait until tomorrow when he would be gone, he stormed back downstairs saying it would be the happiest day of the trip for him.

I hurried back to my room and jumped in bed. I seethed with anger at them for entangling me in their pathetic relationship and blaming me. I hadn't wanted to get involved in the first place.

I woke to the fire alarm going off. I jumped out of bed. Oh my God, I thought in alarm. Was the house on fire? I ran out into the hallway almost colliding with Mom and Dad. Lexi soon joined us. "I've already called the fire department, let's get outside and wait."

"What about Tony?" Lexi shouted hysterically.

"Go outside with your sister and Mother. I'll get Tony," Father replied,

heading down the stairs.

Firetrucks wailed in the distance as we waited on the sidewalk. Dad came out alone. "I couldn't get into the basement. It's filled with smoke. I called and called his name. He couldn't have slept through that alarm. He probably went out the back door."

Lexi buried her head into Mom's shoulder and cried. Mother was looking stricken. "My totes with all my decorations," I heard her moaning softly. "All gone."

The firemen were quickly on the scene and poured into the house. Lexi shouted at them to look for Tony. Fifteen minutes later, the chief came out and walked up to us. "You're lucky. Not really a fire just a lot of smoke. We found something smoldering in the basement fireplace." He held up a scrap of cloth. We all leaned forward to look at it. Through the soot we could see a bit of light brown, wide-wale corduroy fabric.

"I think it was an accident," the fire chief went on. "It appears they forgot to open the flue. Probably not familiar with fireplaces."

Tony was nowhere to be found. His suitcase was gone, along with him. Mom was relieved to discover her totes of decorations had survived. Dad was happy the house hadn't burned down. Lexi was not speaking to me.

I thought it had been a deliberate message. "Take that, you snobs," he probably said as he shoved his suit in the fireplace before grinding his cigarette into the fabric to set it on fire. It made me sad. He had been so proud of that suit. So looking forward to meeting the family. I was thinking of switching to the local college next semester.

### ***About the Author***

Patti is a former army brat who lived all over the world before settling in the rural community of Gloucester, Virginia with her husband, Greg. There they raised three daughters and numerous cats and dogs.

After retiring from working at two area history museums, Patti finally had time to do the things she always wanted to, including writing. Moving constantly made it difficult to make friends and form lasting relationships. Her writing is about emotional connections, friendship and family.

In addition to writing, Patti fills her days with rescuing raptors and other birds, and researching her family's past on Ancestry. She and Greg also love to travel and have been busy checking off their bucket list.

