



## An American Yule

Every Christmas, they bake tens of cakes: for friends, neighbours and strangers. They manage this generous act despite living in poverty.

Truman Capote's classic short story *A Christmas Memory* (1956) depicts one holiday in the lives of seven-year-old Buddy and his (unnamed) 60-year-old cousin. The simple, though enchanting, yuletide tale illustrates their preparations for the holidays, reflecting many facets of American culture. Every year, the two greet the festive season in a similar way.

Buddy remarks: "It's always the same: a morning arrives in November, and my friend, as though officially inaugurating the Christmas time of year that exhilarates her imagination and fuels the blaze of her heart, announces: 'It's fruitcake weather! Fetch our buggy. Help me find my hat'."

First, they gather pecans from a grove of trees in their garden. The work is tiring; for three hours, they search among leaves and frosted grass. They haul the nuts into the kitchen. "Caarackle! A cheery crunch, scraps of miniature thunder sound as the shells collapse and the golden mound of sweet oily ivory meat mounts in the milk-glass bowl."

Then, they must purchase the main ingredients for their cakes. Buddy's first person narration and excited tone capture the excitement of this ritual.

"Tomorrow the kind of work I like best begins: buying. Cherries and citron, ginger and vanilla and canned Hawaiian pine-apple, rinds and raisins and walnuts and whiskey and oh, so much flour, butter, so many eggs, spices, flavorings: why, we'll need a pony to pull the buggy home."

However, the young man stresses that, "before these Purchases can be made, there is the question of money. Neither of us has any". *A Christmas Memory* is set during the Great Depression. Buddy's family, like others during those challenging years, lives in hardship.

The small amount of money that Buddy and his cousin are able to save is kept hidden "in an ancient bead purse under a loose board under the floor under a chamber pot under my friend's bed". One way or another, Buddy says, "we do each year accumulate Christmas savings, a Fruitcake Fund".

Capote's story not only portrays these sombre years, but evokes the author's own childhood, spent in the south of the U.S. The tale's nostalgic spirit is heightened by the sensory appeal of the descriptions of the pair's activities.

"The black stove, stoked with coal and firewood, glows like a lighted pumpkin. Eggbeaters whirl, spoons spin round in bowls of butter and sugar, vanilla sweetens the air, ginger spices it; melting, nose-tingling odors saturate the kitchen, suffuse the house, drift out to the world on puffs of chimney smoke. In four days our work is done. Thirty-one cakes, dampened with whiskey, bask on windowsills and shelves."

The natural world, and its canvas of sights and sounds, is also vividly painted by the author's lavish prose. As the two holidaymakers trek through a forest, the spirit of America's untouched, untamed woodlands comes to life. "Frozen rime lusters the grass; the sun, round as an orange and orange as hot-weather moons, balances on the horizon, burnishes the silvered winter woods. A wild turkey calls. A renegade hog grunts in the undergrowth."

A Christmas tree must also be found. The ideal candidate, Buddy comments, is "twice as tall as me. A brave handsome brute that survives thirty hatchet strokes before it keels with a creaking rending cry". The tree is decorated with available materials; it adds a delightful touch to the holiday decorations.

Yet the true character of Christmas lies in the story's characters. Their generosity and kind-heartedness, displayed in the poorest of material seasons, enriches the most joyous of divine seasons.

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## The Gift of Light

For many, they are an attraction. For some, a nuisance. Others scarcely notice them. Yet, for one family, a house decorated with Christmas lights has become a gift to the sick.

For the past 20 years, Lynn and Gary from Baulkham Hills, New South Wales, have been dressing their home for the holidays. Santa's workshop first catches the eye; a Mr Claus doll is even making toys inside. Look carefully and you will see that the illuminated reindeer on the lawn move. If you peer into the windows of the house, you will be greeted by an enchanting, snowy kingdom of miniature houses, trains, Christmas trees and ice rinks.

This suburban treasure takes "four solid weekends" to arrange, according to its owners. The display is evolving, too; this year, two life-size elves and gift boxes have joined the other features. What began as two sets of fairy lights has turned into a glittering wonderland, costing only approximately \$120 to run for six weeks.

However, the most beautiful aspect of the arrangement is the cause that it supports. Visitors will notice several blue moneyboxes dotted around the front lawn. The coins that graciously flow into these tin cans will help the Children's Hospital at Westmead.

Last year, the owners collected six such containers. Their generous donation to ill children was made possible by caring, open-handed guests. This year, again, the crowds that file past their home will fill the cans, in a gesture that embodies the true spirit of Christmas.

To encourage visitors, a basket of caramels sits on the letterbox. However, the promise of lollies is surely not the true driver of kindness.