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Don't sweat the picture-perfect holiday details

By Elise Seyfried

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By Elise Seyfried

In honor of my late mother, Joanie, I briefly thought of celebrating Thanksgiving this year as we did all through my childhood.

I would buy an off-brand, frozen turkey and forget to thaw it until the morning of. So, after roasting for six or seven hours, it would still have icy spots. My solitary veggie dish? The gourmet combo of canned green beans, canned mushroom soup, and canned French fried onions. (Perhaps I would do as Mom did one year and totally forget to serve it at all. We found the

casserole much later, sitting inexplicably on top
of the driver.)

OF THE DAY.)

If I was feeling extra festive, I would plop a can of jellied cranberry sauce on a plate. If I bothered to offer dessert, it would come out of a box, already baked and marked down for quick sale.

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My sisters and I grew up mystified by tales of bountiful Thanksgiving feasts. If Norman Rockwell had painted our Turkey Day dining room scene, the predominant feature would have been Dad's beer cans and ashtrays overflowing with Pall Mall cigarette butts.

Food was something our parents resorted to only after a lengthy cocktail hour, and the meal was frequently interrupted by "smoke breaks." The year we girls got the mumps just before Thanksgiving, Mom was extremely relieved that she was off the hook - we couldn't swallow anyway.

We were *that* family, the ones who never did a holiday right. It was all Mom could do to get any kind of dinner on the table on ordinary days, much less "special" ones. If it wasn't heated in a

foil tray, or boiled in a bag, it didn't come out of
our kitchen

OUR KITCHEN.

Mom actively resented cleaning, much less decorating, so we were always the house without jack-o'-lanterns and festive holiday outdoor lights. Our sad-looking Charlie Brown Christmas trees were always purchased on Dec. 24, and they tilted dangerously in the stand once we got them home, which always resulted in massive ornament breakage (so no heirloom Santas and snowflakes for us).

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As for Valentine's Day, St. Patrick's Day, and Easter, forget about it! If it weren't for the intense elementary school pressure to buy cheap boxes of valentines for our classmates, Mom's Feb. 14 expenditure would have been zilch. Dad never, as I recall, brought her roses or chocolates, and I don't remember Mom caring much. Though we were Irish through and through, there was nary a shamrock in the house to celebrate St. Paddy. Dad didn't even switch from Rheingold beer to Guinness to mark the occasion!

I was so desperate to pretend we observed Easter with bunnies and baskets of candy that

one year, I actually staged a Polaroid photo of my siblings and me dying eggs (and I bought the dye

siblings and the dying eggs (and I bought the dye myself with babysitting money).

But guess what? We turned out OK anyway.

As little ones, we didn't know the difference between our home and everyone else's. When we grew older, we either compensated by doing our own cooking and decorating or just let it go. Looking back, after raising my five children, I understand much better the level of adult exhaustion that underlay our upbringing.

While I fussed a thousand percent more than my folks did, I recognize that my elaborate Ukrainian Easter eggs, homemade Valentine cookies, and Christmas Wonderlands were incidental to our family's happiness. She may have been a total holiday dud, but what my mom did do right was love us and encourage us to love each other - so we did, and still do.

Mom has been gone almost 10 years now, Dad 21 years (the cigarettes got him at age 67). A lot of holidays have passed since Joanie last tackled Thanksgiving dinner. This week of giving thanks, I roasted a fresh turkey and baked my own pies. But I will always remember, and be grateful for, my goofy, much-loved family of origin. And as I recall the hilariously sparse and sketchy Thanksgiving meals of my childhood, I will smile.

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