**THE STRICKLAND FAMILY’S CHRISTMAS REUNION**

--All happy families resemble one another, but each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way.

Leo Tolstoy

Most family reunions nowadays, if they exist at all, are held in Holiday Inns or other local motels because the family has become so geographically dispersed. Family members may fly into town and spend a night or two. Many families are so spread out socially and geographically that they have little in common with their relatives, and the younger generation is especially reluctant to participate.

Not so for the Strickland family, old and young. They still all lived within a relative short half-day drive of Bainbridge, in southwest Georgia, some 13 and 16 miles from the Florida and Alabama line, respectively. It turned out that all of those attending the family reunion lived in Georgia, with only one family from Alabama. The Stricklands despairingly called Florida a “northern state.” In fact, I won the prize for the person traveling the farthest distance to attend the Strickland family Christmas reunion in 1985, all the way from Athens, Georgia. My lady friend, Linda Strickland, had invited me.

In my limited experience, family reunions were held in August or September (at least in Indiana), but why not hold a Christmas reunion in the far Deep South. Just in case there was inclement weather, the reunion was always held in Bainbridge’s Martin Luther King, Jr., Middle School. The naming created a major controversy in this small rural community, some 55 miles south of Albany, Georgia, where Linda’s father, a Georgia State Trooper, allegedly helped arrest and put martin Luther King, Jr., in jail.

My girlfriend Linda warned me about her cousin, Jerry Rainwater, whose father was a Native American, no relation to her or to the Strickland side of the family, as she was quick to inform me. She said, “He’ll be drunk when he gets here, but he always hires a driver. Here’s the big thing though. He’s about 50 and last year he married a woman in her mid-70s. She is not right in the head. Maybe it’s Alzheimer’s disease” [Linda pronounced it “old-timers” disease.] I replied, “I look forward to meeting them and all of your kin.” She especially wanted me to meet her uncle Claude Strickland, mayor of Bainbridge. Linda may have intended me to be on display for her relatives but in my mind her relatives were on exhibit for me. I wanted to taste the flavor of folk in the remote rural south.

Linda and I were outside the school house when a white Lincoln Continental suddenly pulled up. Jerry crawled out of the back seat, whereupon Linda introduced us. Jerry lurched unsteadily to the passenger’s door, opened it, and introduced his wife, Catherine Sue Rainwater. The driver came around the front of the car and was introduced as Larry Bacnik, about the same age as Jerry. Then we all went inside where everyone was eager to greet them. I stayed in the background, having been introduced earlier and of course I had already met the mayor.

We were to eat around 3:00 p.m. Jerry and Larry went and removed a guitar and harmonica from the Lincoln and, without any to-do, began playing country music, Jerry on the guitar and singing in a slightly off-key tenor, sometimes lapsing into a kind of pseudo-soprano. Jerry proved to be an exhibitionist and, frankly, an inveterate show off. Larry, stone sober, played a mean harmonica. It was quite a captivating, spontaneous performance.

After a while, as we were counting downward toward 3:00 p.m., I began to realize Jerry was not the only one imbibing. Several of the men were openly quaffing beer, and some of the women, even seniors, were ingesting wine from Dixie cups. It was becoming quite a spirited Christmas, in more ways than one. Linda and I observed this evolving scene with amused curiosity.

Suddenly the music stopped. The Lincoln had sped off. It turned out that Jerry, who interrupted his playing and singing several times apparently to take nips from his whiskey bottle in the back seat of the snow-white Lincoln, had Larry drive down highway 308 to Florida to purchase a case of beer. After all, it was blue-law Sunday in Georgia, but not in Florida, that Yankee state. They were late for the sumptuous spread. Jerry made quite a splash when they finally arrived—to be sure everyone noticed him. We did.

Meantime, I made it a point to seek out Catherine Sue Rainwater. She was quite a Southern lady. The first thing from her mouth was “Jerry bought me that nice white car. Isn’t it just marvelous? He’s so good to me. It’s great to be married to another great man.”

Her first husband, long-since deceased, was Hugh Gillis, for whom the bridge between north and south campus at the University of Georgia was dedicated. The Gillises had a huge timber spread primarily in Wheeler and Telfair counties, and practically owned the tiny town of Lumber City, located where Wheeler, Telfair, and Jeff Davos counties converge. The family was also involved in state politics.

Linda had informed me that Hugh Gillis, who died unexpectedly at age 49 of a heart attack, had left his wife, now Mrs. Rainwater, several millions of dollars and considerable timber land scattered all across the Coastal Plain of Georgia. And Mr. Jerry Rainwater had become her legal guardian in charge of her finances and estate.

It was a wonderful Strickland Christmas reunion, with ample dishes of delicious and delectable Sothern cuisine. No one brought a carton of Kentucky Fried Chicken or a container of potato salad from the local Piggly Wiggly.

As the meal was turning to dessert time, Jerry dramatically jumped to his feet, displaying a sheath of papers and perambulating somewhat dizzily back and forth. He asked Mayor Strickland to step forward, looking somewhat befuddled, and Jerry—straightening up his back to assume his full height—announced the donation of 120 acres at the edge of the Bainbridge city limits to the City of Bainbridge to be used as the Jerry and Catherine Sue Rainwater City Park. Jerry also ostentatiously handed the mayor a sealed envelope, which Mayor Strickland had to open. Enclosed was a check for $5 million to plant grass, erect playground equipment, set up picnic tables, and build a pavilion. “The pavilion,” Jerry explained, “is fur further Strickun get-tos.”

Mayor Strickland’s face actually turned red with Jerry’s impaired presentation, as the mayor knew the source of the extravagant gifts.

Have you ever seen a mayor or any other politician with a red face?

The mayor regained his composure and in a deep voice briefly thanked “Mr. Jerry and Sue Rainwater.”

Before Mayor Strickland could be seated, Catherine Sue dashed forward and first hugged Jerry, nearly toppling him over, and then the mayor. She turned to the crowd and shouted, “Ain’t it marvelous what Jerry did. He’s so generous.”

It was an astonishingly Merry Christmas.