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# Embracing the Robo Elves

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Festivity on Fire: Growing up in Miami, the author avoided the Clot family's Christmas display.

Even though I grew up a mile away from the Clot house, I didn't visit it until my 30s. Not happily, at least.

The house first came to prominence in the early '70s, when a man named Bill Clot transformed his home in the Miami suburbs into an impressive Christmas display, a miniature village populated by mechanical Santas, reindeer, angels, penguins, villagers, elves and holiday lights. At some point, "impressive" became a woeful understatement. The display grew and grew until it included more than 700,000 lights and 2,000 feet of miniature train track. It took two weeks to set up each year, and monthly electrical costs approached $5,000. Most nights during the holidays, the streets surrounding the Clot house were cluttered with wide-eyed pilgrims. And now I was one of them.

When I was a kid in Miami, the Clot house was on my radar, of course, but mostly as a place to avoid. I was a local, and the prospect of being drawn in by a neighbor's obsession, especially one as kitschy as this, seemed faintly embarrassing. Plus, any kind of winter wonderland in Miami smacked of aggressive artifice. Fake snow can't hide the fact that it's 80 degrees and humid. Then there was the religion issue. I didn't observe Christmas, on account of being Jewish, and so I didn't have a great interest in angels or elves. Culturally, aesthetically, meteorologically, the house had too much about it that offended (or at least escaped) me. I went off to college, then moved to New York, and got further and further away from the Clot house, in every sense. Whatever

suspicions I had about the benefits of a massive Christmas display in the middle of the Miami suburbs only intensified.

When the kids arrived, my wife—who has a demonstrably higher tolerance for holiday kitsch—suggested that we take them to see the Clot house when we were down in Miami visiting relatives, as we did each winter. I shrugged. What did I care? The first year we drove over there was 2006. My older son was 5 and the younger one was 2. It was raining lightly, and about a half-block away, the drops on the car windows picked up the glow coming off the place. Both kids sat up as straight as they could and tried to see. "How many lights are there?" my older son said. "Millions?"

"Not even a million," I said. My wife glared at me. I parked the car, which took some effort—I don't mean that it was hard to nose into the space, but rather that it was difficult for me to admit that I was voluntarily spending part of my vacation gawking at a massive, somewhat garish Christmas display in the town where I grew up. We got out and walked around, and people pointed and laughed at the odd mechanical animals, the ever odder mechanical humans, the constellation of lights on the lawn and on the roof. Volunteers handed out candy canes. Christmas songs spilled out of unseen speakers. When we got back into the car, my older son couldn't stop smiling, and the little one kept turning to see the house as we drove away.

After that, we took the kids to the Clot house every winter. My older son looked forward to it, and said so. My younger son got old enough to request stories about earlier visits, like the time we had to change his diaper near a giant candy cane or the time he insisted that a reindeer was a dog. My wife seemed to enjoy herself. I tagged along, sometimes churlish, sometimes bored, always at least lightly ironic. Once I said that the house was a little cheesy. I didn't begrudge the Clots their obsession, and I wasn't without admiration for their achievement. I just didn't want it in my vacation, in my town, on my time.

Last year, the Clot house went dark. Bill Clot died of cancer in 2007 and his grown son, after soldiering on through 2008, decided to end the tradition. When I learned that the Clots had shuttered the display, my first thought was relief. No more braving traffic. No more false smile. No more Christmas earworms running through my head all night. All was calm; the kids didn't ask after the place, and they didn't even seem to remember it. But then, this year, as we got ready to go to Miami, the younger one brought it up. "When we go there, can we see the Christmas house?" he said.

I told him it was closed. "Why?" he said. He looked concerned. I explained. He didn't look any less concerned.

My older son tried to put up a brave front. "The house was fun, but a little cheesy," he said. My wife glared at me, and I shrugged. How can you know when your cynicism will be reflected back at you? It was the last night of Hanukkah and we lit the candles, all nine of them, and watched as they burned down. "That's lots of candles," my older son said. At the far end of the room, they were reflected in the windowpanes, so that the nine were multiplied many times over. My younger son said something but I didn't hear. I was thinking ahead to Miami, wondering how I'd feel when I drove by the Clots' street and didn't see the cars and the lights, didn't hear the voices of other pilgrims raised in childlike wonder. I had spent years resisting the house, sometimes even mocking it, and now I felt only sadness that it was gone. I was missing the thing I never even knew I liked.

*Mr. Greenman is the author of several books of fic tion, including "Celebrity Chekhov" and "What He's Poised To Do," both published this year.*

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