

His Favorite Time of the Year
A Story of Christmas Past

By Patric J. Miller

Dedications and Disclaimers

I started this project as a short story about a “Typical Miller Christmas,” a little something extra to give the girls for a gift. As I went along, I was flooded with memories and before I knew it, had twice as much as I had originally intended. I think this reflects not only the long heritage of traditions in our family, but the impact they had on all of us.

I realize that this being from my memory, it has a bit of a “male slant,” (a complete rarity in this family of twelve females). I tried to keep the memories broad in scope, but am aware that the perception of a twelve-year-old boy is different than that of an 11 year old, 9 year old, or two-year-old girl. I only hope that the common bond we shared, carried over into common memories.

The only other “disclaimer” I have, has to do with events in the story. It is true that I took some “artistic license” with time, as some of the events happened a year before or a year after 1966, the target year of the story. I had a reason for this, mainly it allowed me to purge from memory the “changing of the guard” from Father Lamer to Augs*#@%** (expletive deleted). In addition, the memories of these events of twenty-five years ago run together from Christmas to Christmas in ’65, ’66, and ’67. I’m old now...give me a break.

As it has turned out, the writing of this “story” has been a gift to myself as well. It is easy these days to grow embittered toward “life’s little turns” and forget what the holiday is really about. Like Scrooge and George Bailey before me, a simple new sense of perspective and appreciation for my “roots.”

For the richness of the memories created out of our love for one another during a “single moment” in 1966, this “little boy” thanks you.

First Signs

At last it was here. After weeks of waiting and preparation, his absolute favorite time of the year had arrived. And now, sitting cross-legged in the old armchair, on the verge of a turkey-dinner-induced nap, the events leading up to this moment began parading through his mind.

For as long as he could remember, Christmas had been the apex of the calendar year. The Fourth of July with all of its fireworks, Easter Sunday, with all of the new finery, even the best Halloween ever, with pillowcases filled almost to overflowing, paled in comparison. No other holiday was so steeped in traditions of family, friends and religion. In fact, it was always the events at St. Matthew's Episcopal Church that signaled the coming season.

It began long before the first store began putting up their decorations. In the Miller household, as early as September, groups of insanely laughing "church ladies" would descend for monthly "Bazaar Work Parties." He remembered years past when he and his sisters would lay on the floor by their bedroom doors, sneaking peaks of the activities in the living room and straining their ears to hear every piece of the latest gossip. In the morning they would awake to find a table full of this year's "special project." One year, velvet and sequin tree ornaments, another, spray painted thistle angel centerpieces, each year more glorious than the last. As the length and intensity of each party increased, the children knew it was that much closer to the Christmas season.

Toward the beginning of November, the Sears and Wards Christmas Catalogues would arrive.



The author's mother in costume for another "Church Lady" skit (we hope)



The "Church Ladies" in costume for a skit before one of the annual potluck dinners

He and his sisters would spend countless hours on cold, wet days, huddled over the forced-air furnace vent in the front room comparing different wish lists. Sears had a better selection of musical instruments, sporting goods and other "boy stuff," whereas Wards seemed to have the best selection of "Barbie accessories" and those great "real nurse and princess" dress-up sets. By the time Christmas actually arrived the catalogues were dog-eared and defaced with countless pen marks pointing out various favorite page numbers and items. More a history of the toy industry each year than an actual "wish list," the real fun was playing "point to your favorite thing on this page...ready one, two, three," and then screaming with delight as everyone fought to avoid getting stuck with something that was "stupid" or worst yet, "yucky."

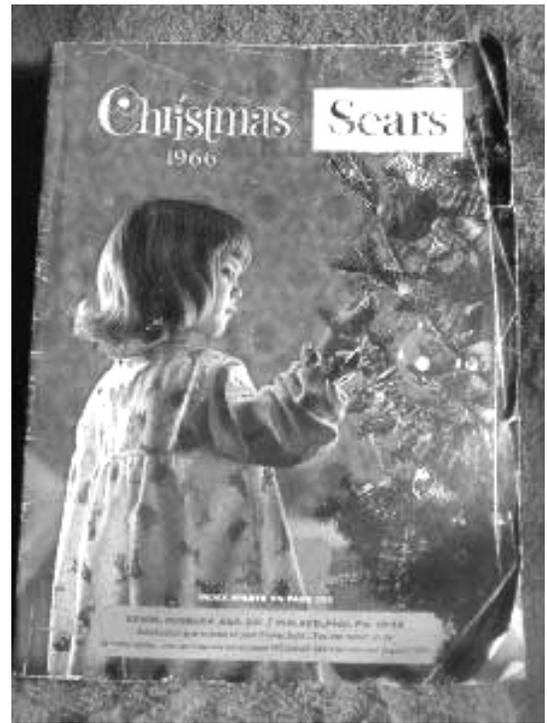
Thanksgiving always felt like nothing more than a false start on the season. Each year like clockwork, when

Santa would appear in the Macy's Thanksgiving parade, Dad would say, "I can't believe they're pushing Christmas this early," and every year the kids would all agree, like it was the first year it had happened. But shortly thereafter, the first Sunday in Advent signaled the true beginning of the season.

The Advent Wreath was usually comprised of a ring of Styrofoam to hold the candles, covered with fresh clippings of juniper, all placed lovingly in one of his mother's round, brass, "Jell-O" molds. Each Sunday the candles, three purple and one pink, would be lit prior to dinner in tradition order, with new juniper clippings added to keep the wreath smelling and looking fresh.

The first door being opened on the Advent Calendar always marked December 1st. Each year the children marveled at how beautiful the calendar was, and how cleverly the little numbered doors had been integrated into the sparkle-coated scene. As the oldest, he had held the cherished position of being first in the rotation of both Advent Wreath and Calendar. However with the addition of Molly, ten years his junior and now only two, tradition had flown out the window.

It seemed that while birth-right was something that the two older sisters had grudgingly come to live with, the entire concept was beyond explaining to someone who barely understood that three came after two on the Advent Calendar and that you couldn't just jump ahead to number twenty-four because it was bigger and easier to open. This was the first year in memory that the "sacred 24" had actually been scotch-taped closed from prying eyes and fingers. Each new morning was greeted by the sounds of "it was your turn yesterday, so now it's mine," and, "Oh, neat...a bear ornament," as well as comparisons of this year's calendar to last. As each day went by, he counted the ratio of doors opened compared to those closed, knowing that when there were thirteen doors open, they were on the down-hill stretch.



By Christmas the Sears "Wish Book" was dog-eared and worn from constant perusal



English Streets, Enchantment and Linen

During the first or second weekend of December, being careful not to take place during the “St. Rita’s Annual Spaghetti Dinner” (less conflict with the Catholics the better), the months of work parties came to fruition with the culmination of the St. Matthew’s “Dickens of a Christmas” annual bazaar. In one feverish Friday night, the entrance and reception area in the back of the church virtually burst forth with booths filled to the brim with gift ideas and decorations. This year was no different than any other in that this was the main time for the kids to do their family Christmas shopping.

For week’s prior, all of them had saved their allowances, forgoing model airplanes and troll doll outfits to be sure and have enough cold cash to get the perfect gift for each member of the family. Perhaps a notepad holder made from hand cut and varnished wood, with adding machine tape on its own roller instead of the customary pad. Maybe one of those “beautiful” angels for Mom’s collection, probably made by one of her friends, but “Mom just didn’t see it, or she would have gotten it for herself.” From hand-embroidered hankies to the latest in garishly decorated bookmarks, there was always the perfect gift to fit almost any budget and leave enough for a few game tickets for the carnival downstairs. With the gifts tucked safely away in the back of the car, later to be hidden under the underwear in the dresser, or in the top shelves of the bedroom closet, the kids were now free to enter the world of “big-time gamesmanship and chance” in the basement of the church.



His Mom and Dad were featured in a story in the Oregonian. Pictured are some of the creative wares made just for the Church Christmas Sale—pine cone wreath, toll painted bread boards, wise man tapestry and hand-rolled clay bells

Tickets, the currency of the Church Carnival, were found in two colors. Green tickets were purchased for ten cents each and used to gain a play at any of the different game booths. The much coveted red ticket was awarded for winning at a game of chance and traded in at the “prize table” for stuff you simply couldn’t live without on “Carnival Day” but wouldn’t have spent more than a nickel for in the “real world.” Kids of all ages would go temporarily insane running back and forth

screaming between the dart throw, bottle toss, fish pond, cake walk and roulette wheel (a booth that only the most foolhardy ever ventured near as it was left entirely to chance.)

Eight-year-old Anne and two-year-old Molly being the youngest of the family had opted for the safety of the “Fish Pond,” the only “sure bet” in the carnival. Toss your line over the blanket, wait for a tug and then reel in your prize. The prizes always miraculously reflected not only the age but gender of the kid fishing, and never ceased to amaze and please the recipient.

For the older kids, it was the prospect of cashing in and getting to the really “big stuff” on the prize table that made it all worthwhile. Sure, if you only had a couple of prize tickets in your possession you might settle for an authentic hand painted rubber snake, but what every kid lived for were the prizes that took fifteen or maybe even twenty tickets to win. It was a sign of skill, a badge of courage to be seen walking from the Carnival with one of these prizes in tow. Cameras, crystal radios and the “really neat” stuffed toys were among the “A-List” every year.

This year, both he and the oldest sister Jane (who for eighteen more days would only be ONE year younger than her brother) had “hit it big,” he claiming a camera and she a stuffed purple dog. Upon arriving home she hung the dog on her bed post in a place of honor and he upon realizing that the camera used some strange size of film he hadn’t heard of and required two “AA” batteries to make the flash work quickly conceded that it was “the hunt” that mattered and maybe next year he would leave the Carnival to little kids.



The Glory of Downtown

The magic “number 13” on the Advent Calendar had come and gone, and that meant that the next Saturday, would be the annual trip downtown with their Mom. A trip downtown with Mom was a little like seeing Europe with a discount tour group. A “seasoned downtown veteran,” Mom simply had the most efficient way to pack the most into the few hours they had together. They had caught the bus at 8:55, and on the way, set the agenda, including all of the “must sees” in their minds.

Upon arrival, the first thing to do was to walk the entire outside perimeter of Meier and Frank’s department store. Each year, the store had a particular theme in their decorating. Each of the large windows on the East and West corners off the building were the showcase windows with the most elaborate displays. Beautiful scenes made up of cotton snow banks with hilarious mechanical elves and animals interacting between one another, in a fairy-like environment of enchanted, twinkling



The first stop was always a complete walk around Meier & Frank’s to see every window, each more glorious and beautiful than the last

white lights. Unlike its poor cousin Woolworth’s across the street, Meier and Frank never lowered themselves to including advertising or prices in their display windows and only included product when it was a natural part of the scene. This left even a twelve-year-old boy with the feeling that “maybe this store cares more for me than just my hard earned money.”

Entering the store there was little doubt. Virtually every column, every counter and even the huge big brass clock, which marked the very center of the first floor of the store, had been adorned with garland, lights and colored bows (plum being the theme color of choice this year). Floor after floor, department after department Mom would go, all four children in tow, with their heads stretched ever upward as not to miss even one small bit of the glorious mixture of people, music and decorations.

Finally, upon reaching the tenth floor, they arrived at the very heart of Meier and Franks’ Christmas Extravaganza...Toyland! Not that any of them wanted to look at toys, as that territory had been well covered prior to now, it was simply that this was the epicenter for the “magical side” of Christmas. Santa, elves, reindeer, and candy canes all wrapped up into one “bigger than life” area of the tenth floor.

If the line for Santa was too long, which it usually was, it would be put off until another time. This most often occurred on a weeknight with Mom finishing her last minute shopping and Dad and the kids standing in line to tell Santa they had been good, what they wanted for their “Big present” and then receive a prize. This was the first year they had gotten candy canes instead of green, tin metal, Meier and Frank toy delivery vans. Perhaps it was the passing of an era, or perhaps Meier and Frank, thinking that little girls didn’t play with trucks, had opted for something that both genders would enjoy. Whatever the case, both he and his sisters had left, feeling a little “rooked.”



The coveted green, tin delivery van was a wonderful reward for waiting in line to see Santa for what seemed like hours

Santa aside, there was simply no way they could be talked out of a ride on the monorail which ran around the ceiling perimeter of the Toy Department, through Santa Land and then back again. He was almost thirteen, a time of “ultimate coolness,” yet he breathed a little easier knowing that at least this year, the “twelve and under” sign on the monorail would not rob him of this experience. For one final time he clutched his sisters close to him and laughed and shrieked along with the rest of the kids as they made their way around the loop overlooking the beautiful holiday scenery. As he walked down the ramp, holding his youngest sister in his arms, he couldn’t help but feel the strange mixture of joy and melancholy that the realization of growing older brings. This feeling disappeared in a flash however, with the announcement that it was time for lunch.

Lunch at Meier and Frank’s was as much a part of going downtown as watching for the “Chinese House” and the “house made out of pebbles,” on the bus ride home down East Burnside. However, unlike most of the trips downtown where lunch meant a burger at the coffee shop, with its line-up of ancient waitresses in hair nets who never smiled, this meant something else... lunch in the “Tea Room!”



If you were 12 or under, the trip to Toyland was capped off with a ride on the monorail

The difference between the two was obvious at first glance. In the Coffee shop you found one long continuous counter, which wound around like a giant Formica snake.

OF RAILROADS, RIVERS and REINDEER

The Tea Room was filled with tables covered in linen, china and silver. The elegant decorations were festive yet tasteful, never giving in to being overstated.

Although their lunch order was almost always the same in either location—hamburgers--the way in which the meal was presented and served in the Tea Room was different in every way. The napkins were starched white linen, so beautiful you felt guilty wiping your mouth on them. The cokes were in real dinner glasses instead of fountain glasses. The hamburgers were served open face, a plastic sword holding the lettuce and pickle in place on your bun. Absent were the anemic little bags of potato chips. Each person had his or her own serving of French Fries cooked to perfection.

The most notable difference was in the waitress. Gone was the hairnet, in its place a starched white cap. Even more amazing, instead of being greeted with a look that simply screamed “hurry up and order, there’s people waiting!” our waitress doted on our every wish and was heard to say at least three times “what lovely children you have.” There was simply no doubt in our minds that this was “what life was about,” and no matter how many times the rest of the year we ate at the coffee shop, we could endure even the most wilting look from one of the “old hag” waitresses knowing that we had been on “the other side of the wall” and the waitress there thought we were wonderful!

Lunch complete, legs revived, it was time to cross the street to Lipman’s. Whereas Meier and Frank’s message seemed to be “you’ve worked hard all year now here’s a little Holiday reward,” catering mostly to the “cloth coat” demographic, Lipman’s décor seemed to convey the attitude, “If you don’t think you can afford it, don’t ask the price,” and definitely catered to the “mink and leather” set. The decorations were always the same. White everywhere. White sparkly lights, white dried branches, white poinsettias, even white stuffed deer in the escalator dividers.

Lipman’s only real Christmas attraction (aside from all the ancient clerks in the “scarf and accessory” department with blue hair) was the Cinnamon Bear. The Cinnamon Bear was part giant (well over six and a half feet) and part Teddy Bear, with a huge frozen smile on its gigantic stuffed head. The Cinnamon Bear didn’t speak a word or even make bear sounds. Instead, he just kind of stared at you with his huge frozen eyes and bobbed his head. After a few seconds of this and maybe a handshake or hug (his grip always felt like the hundred and twenty degrees it must have been inside the bear suit), he would hand you a cinnamon bear cookie and move on to the next kid.

Even in our family the Cinnamon Bear provoked a variety of responses. He and Jane had kind of smiled politely and shook hands firmly as if to say, “O.K., enough of this, just give me my cookie.”

Molly, being only two, felt that he (or was it a she?...You could never really tell), was pretty neat, and got all of the appropriate responses from the rest of the crowd when she sat on his lap and kissed him. Anne on the other hand, who had grown up with an abject fear of clowns (aftermath of some Fun-O-Rama parade gone bad), would trust him no further than arms length to collect her cookie and then scamper back to Mom.

Lipman’s had tried to have a Santa as well, with less than favorable results. Between the “Real Santa” at Meier and Frank and the Cinnamon Bear with his cookies, he had become the only

Santa in town who could have posted a sign reading, “No Line, No Waiting.” After a year or two of this, and a Cinnamon bear Radio Show on KEX, Santa was sent packing and probably ended up ringing a Salvation Army bell outside of Woolworth’s.

Lipman's was a ladies store from top to bottom, with four floors of women's and girls clothing in the very latest fashions. The men and boys department was stashed in the basement and in most cases carried the kind of clothes that as a boy of twelve you suspected were bought by women, for men and boys, but in which you wouldn't be caught dead. Salt and pepper corduroy pants, London fog full length rain coats and penny loafer shoes, were all stuff that meant instant death to a seventh grader in Junior High School. Still, it was Christmas, so he "ooed and ahhed" along with the rest of the ladies in his company, and knew he would be rewarded if he was pleasant, with fifty cents worth of "Swedish Fish" for the bus ride home.

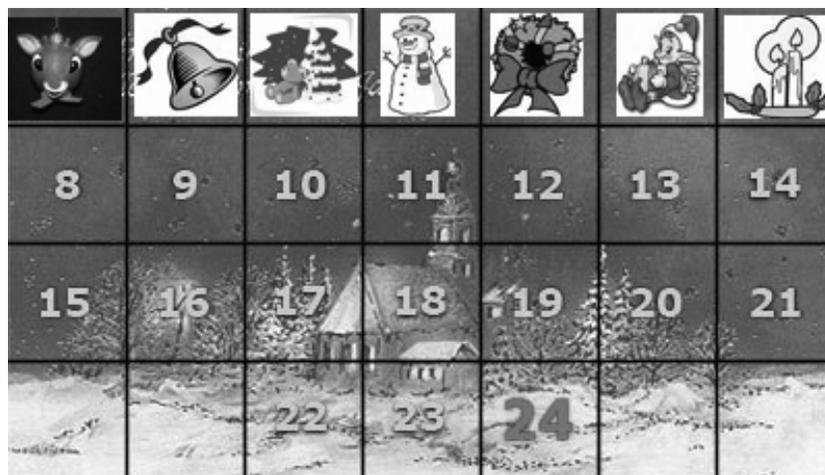
This accomplished, a quick tramp through "Nordies" (the namesake of the youngest sister), Woolworth's, J.K. Gills and then down to the bus stop to catch the bus home in time to make dinner, rounded out a glorious day had by all.

Since it's inception, Lloyd Center was thought to be the epitome of the "modern shopping," and at least once during the Christmas season, the family headed down to face the enormous hoards of "modern shoppers." For the most part he didn't mind it, but during Christmas, it simply didn't hold the magic of Downtown. The convenience of all of those stores "in one easy location," under partially covered walkways, it was at the time, the "World's Largest Shopping Center." Biggest or not, it's modern décor seemed "plastic" to him. Even with its amazing "doorless door," the Lloyd Center Meier and Frank couldn't hold a candle to the original Meier and Frank downtown. The decorations were "chintzy," it was too crowded, and simply didn't have the warmth of Christmas about its aisles.

Lloyd Center smacked of what he and his Dad detested most, "commercialism." Sure, it was fun to watch the ice skaters. They particularly enjoyed the "over forty set" of ladies who insisted on wearing those "real skater's outfits," and looked like giant purple and sequin pork sausages sailing around the ice.

Yes, they had "Alpenrose Dairy Land," but the lines were always a block long and when you finally got into the display (located in the bowels of the ice arena parking area) you were almost overcome with the smell of the animals and their straw bedding.

The life-size Nativity Scene was the best decoration on the mall with its giant camels and convincing looking Wise Men. But, even this was not enough to erase the memories and win you over if you had seen "Christmas Downtown," as they had. A visit to Morrow's Nut House for a caramel apple or a small bag of cashews, and he had had about enough of this experience and was always secretly glad to be headed home.



Their First Trip to Firland

When they were younger, getting a Christmas tree had always been an experience mixed with both excitement and dread. Bundled up in their coats, hats and scarves against the cold of the outside (as well as the inside of the car, as the heaters on the family cars rarely worked) they would do as most of America did, drive from tree lot to tree lot, haggling price with the attendant. Even after the tree was selected it was a crapshoot that the tree would actually last until Christmas without shedding the majority of its needles. If the right tree was not found at the first couple of lots, the tension in the car became palpable.

A real Douglas fir was always the choice, as Mom, being the daughter of a Nurseryman and Dad, being an Oregon native would simply have no other. Noble firs were “sissy,” and would never afford enough room to display all of their ornaments. Ponderosa Pines were for “artsy, fartsty types,” who flocked their trees and were simply pretentious by the family’s standards. It went without saying that anyone who had one of those hideous silver foil trees, with the rotating color spotlight that turned them from red-to-green-to-blue-to-yellow, was sacrilegious and probably signed their cards, “Merry X-Mas.”

This year was different. The garage, long since a “family room,” had with the new addition to the house, became the “living room.” Exciting enough on its own, the living room had one more feature that meant Christmas trees in the Miller house would never be the same...a ceiling height of more than twelve feet. It was a tradition to get a tree that went to the very top of the ceiling. It was also a tradition to pay no more than \$7.50 for a tree. For this reason, getting a tree in excess of ten feet at the regular tree lots with their seventy-five cents a foot price tag was simply out of the question. So, this year they had bundled into the old green station wagon and headed east into the country in search of a place called, “FIRLAND.”

Finding “FIRLAND,” wasn’t as hard as one might imagine. Any road within miles of the place had been marked with candy cane colored signs proclaiming “Ten miles to FIRLAND,” “Five miles to FIRLAND,” “TWO miles to FIRLAND,” and “FIRLAND 500 feet,” (this last one amazed even Molly, as by the time you had followed all of the other sings, there was no way you were going to miss “FIRLAND”). Arriving at the gate, they were met by a guy in coveralls, rubber boots and a candy cane colored stocking cap and a toothy grin, directing them to the “office.” The office was a small aluminum house trailer with a huge sign half the size of the trailer itself, with the word “OFFICE” written in candy cane colored paint. By this time they were beginning to get the drift that “Candy Cane,” was the main motif of, “FIRLAND.”

Next to the, “OFFICE,” sign was an equally colorful sign laying out the prices. It read- “NOBLE FIR- \$1.00 per foot, GRAND FIR- .75 per foot, Douglas fir- .50 per foot.” Even though they hadn’t completely capitalized Douglas fir, implying it was a less desirable breed than the others, they knew they had hit the Jackpot. After telling the guy at the office that they were after a twelve-footer-plus, with a wide-eyed grin, he had pointed them off to the “older, mature section,” of the sprawling FIRLAND property, up over the hill and away from the acres of closely cropped four to eight foot trees covering the sprawling fields nearest the “OFFICE”.

Like the pioneers of their earlier lineage, they had walked across the countryside with their measuring tape and a very dangerous looking rip saw that had been handed to them by the “office guy.” The first few trees they felt were about the right size proved to be smaller than their height requirement. It dawned on them that a tree that was more than twelve feet high was also going to be HUGE in width. Undaunted, in fact feeling just a little giddy, he and Jane both gone

off in another direction from the rest of the family and had found a tree that was of majestic shape and but seemingly beyond their need in height. Almost as a lark, the rest of the family was called over. The tree was measured, and at just a little over twelve feet, allowing for a little of the spindly top to be cropped, it was chosen unanimously to the wide-mouthed wonderment of he and his sisters. Dad laid into the task of cutting the tree down, and in a few brisk strokes, the tree fell onto its side.

The true weight of this glorious prize did not sink into the young man until he found himself straining to lift the top of the tree over his shoulder while his Dad had hoisted the trunk end onto his shoulder. Grunting and groaning, with each step in the mud seemingly more difficult than the last, they forged ahead toward the “OFFICE,” which now seemed miles away. The thing that kept him going were the sounds of utter disbelief and joy coming from his sisters. Jane just kept saying, “It’s huge,” over and over again. Anne kept shrieking with half sentences, broken by shrieks, simply unable to stop laughing at the excitement of the entire situation. Molly spent the entire time giggling, and slipping in the mud, as she did her best to keep up with the hunting party carrying its treasure to be measured and purchased. After a few “breather breaks,” the tree and its entourage arrived at the, “OFFICE.”

“Where’s this going?” the “OFFICE,” guy blurted out when he saw their tree. When they smugly told him it was going into their house with a twelve-foot ceiling, he finally quit shaking his head. Measured and paid for, (Just \$6.50 to their father’s complete joy), it took the entire party plus two other adult tree attendants to get the giant lifted onto the top of the station wagon and tied firmly in place. Tied “trunk-end-to-the-front” for better wind resistance on the ride home, the tree’s sheer size was evident by the small amount of windshield visibility left. Peering from its bowels, one had the sensation of being part of the tree, which by some enchantment had acquired the ability to fly more than fifty miles an hour. The smell of mud, sweat and tree pitch was overwhelming and the windows had to be cracked so the humidity wouldn’t completely render the windows opaque with fog.

Arriving home, everyone piled into the house screaming, “Mom, come look at the tree, it’s HUGE!” By the time they had all returned to show it off, several neighbors had begun coming out of their houses shaking their heads in disbelief. This had truly become an event, but the adventure had not yet ended.

It was decided to bring the tree in after a dinner break. Feeling rested and relaxed he and Dad had untied the tree from the top of the car and rolled it off onto the ground. Inside, the renewed shrieks of encouragement and excitement were heard from the gallery pressed to the living room window. Climbing the steps and sidewalk to the front door was not done without several slips on the rain-soaked grass. Upon arrival to the front door, it was obvious they had more than a bit of trouble at hand.

The base of the tree and its surrounding



By slinging a rope over the rafters, then pushing the base from inside the tree while his father pulled, the tree rose into place

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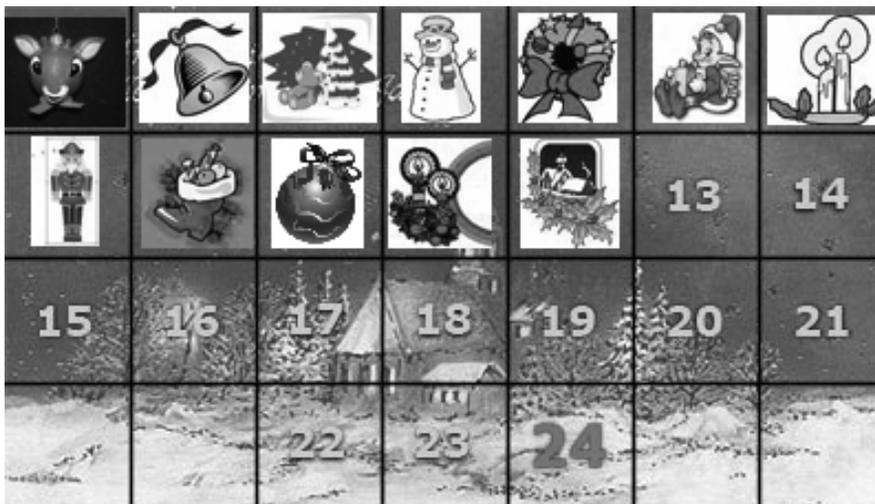
branches seemed clearly three times as wide as the opening of the front door. Dad with a nervous laugh simply said, "Don't worry, we'll get it inside," and grabbed the rope they had used to tie the tree to the car. They spent the next few minutes binding the tree as tightly as possible to both reduce the size of its spread and protect its branches from the ensuing battle. With that done, they commenced a tug-of-war against the laws of physics and common sense.

Each mighty grunt resulted in movement of mere inches. Tug...pull...grunt...it went on for what seemed like an hour. Again, fighting exhaustion he kept going by imagining what this spectacle must look like as well as the absolute absurdity of the situation. He was just thinking about the story of "Winnie the Pooh," getting wedged in Rabbit's front door when with a final grunt from Dad, the tree gave way and slid with a groan into the house.

Unbelievably the act had to be repeated to get it through the door to the new living room, but this done they began the matter of raising the tree into the heavens. The tree had a trunk far too large for any standard tree stand, so it was decided to place the trunk in a bucket and secure the top of the tree to the rafter. This would entail first guiding the treetop through the far side of the rafters and then sliding the trunk of the tree underneath until it was straight. Because there were innumerable books and nick-knacks that would need protection by the person guiding the tree through the rafters and past the book shelves, it was decided that his Dad would take the top and he would push from below.

This entailed becoming "one with the tree." As the tree moved up, the branches reached to envelop him in their lush, oxygen-laden greenery. At one point, all that was to be seen of either of the two "tree-pullers" was a pair of feet dangling from the rafters, another set of feet protruding from the space below the lowest branches. Each command of "a little more...that's it...a little more," was met by shrieks and giggles from the "peanut gallery" watching from the far side of the room. After a full twenty minutes of pulling and waiting, pulling and waiting, he had gotten the word that the tree was straight and was tied off at the top.

When Dad unbound its top branches and it expanded to its full width the family simply basked in the glory of this fantastic giant and the accomplishment of getting it there. It literally filled one half of the room and the output of fir-scented oxygen was dizzying. To the disappointment of all but the exhausted son, it had been decided to wait until the next night to decorate the tree, as to give it a chance to acclimate.



Blistered Fingers, The Bird Man and a Dance with the Wind

The next day they had all awoken to the fir-scented smell of Christmas. After cleaning the house of any remnants of the previous night's battle, the ornament boxes were brought into the living room and readied for the evening event.

Two nights prior, Mom had made her famous popcorn balls. A concoction of popcorn, Karo syrup and sugar, these hard balls of sweet, crunchy pleasure were a symbol of Mom's commitment and loving devotion to her family. Each ball was formed barehanded from a molten-hot mixture of popcorn and clear syrup. The children were banished from the kitchen, but this did little to hide the painful wails emanating from their Mom and heard throughout the house. Each ball upon cooling was wrapped in clear plastic wrap and tied with a colorful ribbon, usually red, a sign of the human blood sacrificed in their making.

Eating a popcorn ball was less a culinary delight than an acrobatic feat. Upon biting into the popcorn ball, quick decisive chewing, with vigorous working of the tongue was required to keep the teeth from becoming mired in the soft but adhesive caramel. Any hesitation required a great deal of digging, scraping and prodding of the teeth and gums to release them from this death-grip of sweetness.

Getting through one bite was no assurance that the next would go smoothly. In fact, it may require as long as a half an hour to consume a single popcorn ball measuring less than three inches across. Mom was careful to make them this size, as anything larger would have been simply cruel. It was not uncommon for a person to find bits of caramel or popcorn edged into their teeth hours or sometimes days after a popcorn ball feast, and even the most vigorous brushing could not insure its removal. All of this aside, the popcorn balls had become an absolute obsession with the kids and had to be rationed throughout the season to prevent any one child from overdosing and permanently cementing his teeth together.

After stringing the lights, the popcorn balls were the first to be hung in the tree, as they required tying the ribbon onto the branch, simply too treacherous after the ornaments had been hung. The size of the tree created a new game this year. Because each child had been allotted ten popcorn balls to hang, it soon became more of a competition of creative deception, making sure that enough popcorn balls were in plain sight to hide the fact that you may have a few more secretly squirreled away in places less obvious to the casual observer looking for an afternoon treat. Even as he sat here thinking about it all, he relished in the fact that long after the last visible popcorn ball had been found and eaten, there were still two more hidden inside the big "Weller ware," bowl at the top of the bookcase.

Decorating the rest of the tree this year had been a treat. Because this was his youngest sister's first "real Christmas," meaning this was the first Christmas Molly was actually able to help without the fear of complete destruction of the tree or surrounding collateral damage to the furnishing of the room. She was given a number of "kid-proof," ornaments to hang, each made of felt, plastic, or cardboard. The kids took great joy in helping her locate just the right place for each new treasure, all hung within the lower quarter of the green behemoth.

Again, because of the size and location of this tree, another new tradition had been born, the "bird man." The only way to really get all of the decorations evenly placed at the top of this immense piece of greenery was for Dad to sit perched like a bird in the rafters, as they all fed him ornaments to hang. The sight was both funny and alarming, as we knew a slip from his precarious perch would spell disaster.

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After the primary coating of balls and glass icicles, the special ornaments began to appear. Ornaments that had been in the family for decades, some as old as the turn of the century, these were the true heirlooms of Christmas. The “Peanut man,” made entirely out of a peanut and a string, delicate and comical at the same time. The “Bird Cage,” small and fragile yet regal in its age and beauty. The famous Silver Gourds, made one Christmas by Mom and Uncle Harry when they were all quarantined to their house in Libertyville, Illinois with Scarlet Fever. A few “First Christmas,” ornaments from each of the kid’s early childhoods as well as a few odds and ends of varying significance. Each child carefully took one or two ornaments and hung them in the perfect location, making sure that it was out far enough on the branch to be visible, but in far enough to be safe. Finally, in its rightful place of honor, Mom hung “The Clown.”

The kids had forgotten its heritage, knowing only that it was VERY Old and because it was VERY OLD...ONLY MOM COULD TOUCH IT! This was okay with everyone, because everyone was saddled with the grim fear that they would hang it in a place that wasn’t really the “right place” and that somehow it would come crashing to the floor and it would all be YOUR FAULT! So, they were content to witness the clown’s hanging and admire its presence from a safe distance. This accomplished, the tree was proclaimed, “officially decorated.”

Sitting in silent, peaceful reverence, lit only by the radiance of the tree lights, they were awed not only by the beauty of the tree, but the simple joy of being together.



Decorating the outside of the house had taken on new meaning this year. He had been allowed to do almost all of the light hanging on his own (with loud vocal assistance from his sisters of course). This year it had been really cold on the day he was to put the lights up. It was one of those days you only find in Portland, where the wind-chill factor is down below freezing, but it is too warm and wet to snow. He had worn his Boy Scout hiking boots, gloves, three shirts and his “furry animal coat,” (last year’s gift from Santa), and still envied his sisters when they were able to go inside and watch from the window when they got too cold.

He’d helped his Dad for years, so he knew the routine. First the lights along the front of the house, these plugged into the girl’s room. Then, the lights were strung around the two bedroom windows and into the bushes in front of the bedroom windows. These plugged into what was once his room, but was now Molly’s. Then all along the fence, being sure they were all perfectly straight, and lit up each little box in the “box and slat,” white fence, until they wrapped around the Newell post that held the front yard light.

When they had been to “FIRLAND,” the “OFFICE,” guy had allowed them to take some of the branches that had been pruned in the shaping of some of the other trees. He had taken these branches and with the skill of a one handed surgeon, nailed them with tiny finishing nails around the front window of the house. His frozen, numb fingers had been repeatedly brought

back to life by the direct and hearty smash of the hammer as it glanced off of the little nails. After a little less than an hour of this self-annihilation, the effect was complete with a beautiful frame of greenery and lights surrounding the window that his Dad would soon paint with this year's Tempera paint masterpiece.

After hanging the plywood Wise Men from the eaves of the house, (another marvel of his Dad's craftsmanship), the only task remaining was that of putting the twinkly lights into the birch tree in the middle of the yard. No small task, as the birch tree was tall and spindly, and its bark was the living example of "slippery when wet." Still, there was some perverse pleasure in conquering this white, harrowing mountain. After all, if his Mom could sacrifice the outer layers of skin from her fingers for popcorn balls, was this not a small price to pay?

The trick to doing this right was starting at the top of the tree and then winding downward, to get the worst out of the way, as it were. So, waving to his sisters he had grabbed a string of the clear bulbs and headed upward.

Courage, insanity or a slight case of frontal lobe frostbite, who can really say? Whatever the case, it wasn't until he heard his Mom shriek, "Patric, that's high enough!" that he even stopped to see where he was. He looked down to see his feet planted on the last possible branch that could support his compact weight. His sister's eyes were wide, their mouths moving without making a sound. This was not a time for panic; there was no turning back. With the wind whipping around him, bending the top of the tree back and forth, he affixed the end of the lights to the uppermost branch, looped the string of lights outward, then began his slow decent, leaving a crisscross strand of twinkling lights behind him. For a single instant, he saw himself not as the fat (some said stocky to be polite) little boy he knew himself to be, but a nimble, agile creature of nature, who was one with the elements around him. The wind, rather than an enemy trying its best to knock him onto the ground, seemed to be lifting him and blowing just the right direction at just the right time to bring the outermost branches to his reach.

Finally at the bottom, after hooking the lights to the extension cord running from the eaves of the house, he had looked up in quiet disbelief at the top lights in the now shimmering tree. Realizing this was one of those things a boy narrowly escapes without injury, he vowed that perhaps next year he'd go for "width instead of height."



Lights, Lips and Mayhem in Bethlehem

When it came to outside decorations, there was always a sense of friendly competition between neighbors on N.E. 116th Place. For years, the Obrists had been the reigning champions by the sheer number and intensity (they had those BIG twinkly lights) of their display. However, by adding a new string every year or two, and the addition of the “Plywood Wise Men,” twinkly tree lights, greenery framed Tempera mural and lighted plastic soldier on the front door, this year they had felt that they smugly outclassed anything other display on their street.

Winning the competition on 116th Place was one thing, but they were all humbled by some of the displays they saw during their annual Christmas light car trip around the rest of the city. Who would dare utter 116th Place and the infamous “Candy Cane Lane” in the same breath? The brash and garish displays of excess on “Argay Terrace” still brought “oohs,” and, “Wows.” But each year, it was by following the map to the winning entry in the “Oregonian Christmas Light Sweepstakes,” that evoked the most awe. Different every year, the winner was invariably the one who had virtually every square inch of his lawn, garden, house and garage covered with lights, figures and signs of “Peace On Earth,” “NOEL,” and “JOY TO THE WORLD.”

Multi-thematic-imagery was the norm here. In the front yard a full-size Nativity scene with real sheep in little corrals butted right up against a scene of Santa and his elves careening skyward in a real sleigh with motorized candy canes spinning on the roof top, and lights EVERYWHERE. A giant speaker system blaring “101 strings play your favorite Christmas Hits,” doing battle with the sounds of a candy cane and horse carousel turning merrily on the driveway. Nothing else even came close to amazing spectacle of excess, and you half expected to see the real star of Bethlehem appear over the T.V antenna holding up the gold painted angel at the peak of the roofline. It had also brought to his mind the thought, “What in the heck does this guy do the rest of the year?”

Maywood, Laurelhurst and all of the other older established neighborhoods, block after block, mile after mile they would drive until finally they would realize that Anne and Molly were asleep and maybe they should head home. Only one year had they fallen prey to “hype,” and driven outside of their favorite areas.

Two years ago, Mom and Dad had given in to better judgment (and a great deal of wailing from the kids) and driven all the way over to Jantzen beach to see the “KISN Radio Christmas Tree.” Advertised (On KISN of course) as one of the true wonders of Christmas, they had promised the biggest decorated tree in the Northwest (even bigger than Lloyd Center’s). So they had driven miles out of their way to find a huge line of cars circling a giant throbbing tree.

It was big; there was no doubt about that. After tuning into KISN, it was revealed that the lights were not so much blinking as sputtering in time to the music. A dim, jittery, almost random sputter of lights that made the tree seem more tired than festive. And to cap off this commercialistic monstrosity, the lights were actually fashioned into BIG PLASTIC LIPS! Their Dad had tuned the radio to KISN, and half-heartedly said, “Oh...I get it...they do kind of blink to the music,” but nobody was buying it.

The marketing genius at KISN that had dreamed this thing up had sadly missed the mark on the “true meaning of Christmas.” Needless to say, from that moment on, all of the children had taken anything KISN radio had to say with a dose of skepticism.

The lights and tree went up only a week to ten days before Christmas every year for a reason. They had to last through the entire season, which in their family lasted until Mom’s Birthday on January 7th. It also seemed to accelerate the events leading to the big day. Following the “Tree and Lights,” weekend, the last day of school was sure to follow closely with all of the school parties, programs and concerts.

This was his first year in Junior High, and although he sang leads in the Boy’s Choir at church, he simply hadn’t had enough electives to be in both choir and band at school. So, when this year’s Christmas concert had come around, it had found him playing a big bass clarinet in the concert band.

The novelty of the bass clarinet had already begun to fade, yet he felt a sense of duty to Mr. Sanford, the band instructor who had told him how much he needed someone “with his talent” to play the instrument. In a fit of vanity he had agreed and was now paying the price. Bass clarinet parts consisted of playing little more than droning low harmony notes, even on the most rousing selection, such as “Frosty the Snowman,” one of this year’s featured tunes.

Even worse, this change in instruments came at the same time as his growing obsession with the music of Beatles, and there were very few parts for a bass clarinet on Beatles songs. The pep band was even worse, as he was forced to sit in the bleachers at all of the home games dressed in a scratchy wool band sweater, geeky milkman pants, stiff white shirt and a goofy bow tie. Even more belittling, he was forced to watch all of the girls (including the Winfree sisters, his secret loves, and next-door neighbors), crowd around Kenny Walker, who played the drums, a cool instrument by anyone’s measure.

Nonetheless, he had made it through the first semester and was happy to see his family in the audience at his Christmas concert. He knew afterward they would compliment him and tell him how great he sounded, even if there was no way they could ever had distinguished his parts from the other low parts in the band such as the baritone horns and tubas.

The final Sunday before Christmas always marked a spectacle burned deep into the memories of any Church-going youth at St. Matthew’s Episcopal Church, the annual Christmas Pageant. Held in the evening after dinner, it was an event that evoked comparison from past “performers”, much as alumni players measure football seasons past. Though the players names changed, the elements were always the same, Mary, Joseph, Three Wise Men, a flock of shepherds, a gaggle of angels and a rubber baby doll (wrapped in a lovely blue flannel blanket) in the roll of “Baby Jesus.”

The much-coveted lead rolls usually went to older kids, either in the throws or on the verge of puberty. To have even a remote chance meant years of faithful “dues paying in the trenches,” of shepherd and angeldom. Stars of years past had set standards others strived to meet. Judy Saylor, as Mary, with Ed Cameron playing a solemn Joseph were surely in the back of this year’s leading player’s minds. The middle Savage girl Jackie (who most commented seemed small for her age) played Mary. A shaking and rather ineffective performance as Joseph, was handed in by Mark Heidigger (two years Mary’s junior...a true scandal).

The real action however was in the trenches. These minor players with no lines and few actions, almost always rose to the occasion to steal the show. From the costumes down to the props, it was almost an inevitability. To begin with, the angels ranged in age from two on up to sixth grade and their costumes consisted of sheets, cardboard and glitter wings and aluminum pie tins with the middles cut out for halos, which were tied onto their heads with strings under the chin. The shepherds wore

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bathrobes from home, tied with rough hemp rope, scratchy burlap cloaking the heads and tied on in like-fashion as the angels, and a few of them were given staffs and crooks (sticks).

The results should not have surprised anyone. Halfway down the aisle, to the tunes of “Angels We Have Heard on High,” (for the angels) and “Away in a Manger,” (for the shepherds), the action would begin. Some kid would trip over his or her costume to the amusement of all concerned, with the exception of the “trippee.” Pie tins would begin coming off to be tossed to the floor and even on occasion into the crowd. Staffs and crooks became prods to slow-moving shepherds, and the entire mass seemed to surge by leaps and jolts of inward activity that signified “less than angelic or shepherdly behavior.”

By the time “We Three Kings,” had rolled around (this year with solos from Jack Stares, Jeff Cobb and himself) and the highlight of the pageant had begun, (the beautiful “Joseph dearest, Joseph mine”) the scene had begun to take a turn. Jane, Anne and Molly (who at two and a half, with her blond hair and blue eyes was the darling of the Heavenly Body) in their Angel Finery could only stand by helplessly as the plot thickened.

It began when one of the shepherds, bored with sitting still, had stood up and begun to wander around. After a minute or two when nobody had stopped him, another couple of shepherds began to follow suit. This wasn’t going to go over with one of the middle sized angels who screamed at the top of her lungs, “WE’RE ASPOSE ‘TA SIT DOWN!” during the reading of the Christmas Story. With this, another duty-driven shepherd veritably tackled one of the offending smaller shepherds, and it wasn’t until Mr. Barker came out of the choir stalls that order was restored and the Pageant peacefully brought to its conclusion.

Afterward, in the basement parish hall, comparisons ran rampant, even going back several years to the time some well-meaning parishioner had donated some real hay as a prop. Seemingly harmless, this prop was quickly turned into a tool for poking and tickling by the shepherds.

Everyone again made comment of how cute and well behaved the “Miller girls were,” much to the pride of their older brother. He had watched the events of the evening with a mixture of hilarity and pride from the choir stalls. Proud at the dignity with which his sisters had carried themselves and beside himself with internal laughter when Molly had shook her little head and rolled her eyes at the Shepherds foul play. Punch and cookies consumed, compliments on acting and singing counted and acknowledged, (if with false modesty), another Pageant experience had been laid to rest.



Final Preparations and a Visitor in the Night

Christmas Vacation was in full swing now and the family thought of little else. Every day seemed full of last minute details. The kids had spent a day wrapping presents and then stowing them safely back in hiding places. Each child took great pride in the “individualized style,” of the packages. Molly, although still too young to have bought her own presents to wrap had spent the day merrily wrapping and unwrapping various blocks and cars from her toy box.

Bedroom decorations were another source of pride and competition among the kids. In years past, this had been as simple as a construction paper chain draped along the lines of the ceiling or a host of Kleenex angels hanging from thread “lifelines,” on a branch protruding from a pop bottle. But this year, due to the ages of the older two, combined with unseasonably wet and cold weather, forcing them to keep themselves busy inside, the war had escalated to new heights.

He had fired the first salvo. Being this year’s official Christmas Light hanger, he had been able to salvage a handful of the old individual screw-on light holders. The ingenious little devices allowed you to position them on any electrical cord, and then by screwing the back onto the light holder, bring the little metal prongs into contact with the power. In addition, he had laid claim to one of the branches that had been too large to nail around the front window (a little over four feet in length). After several hours of work with his bedroom door closed shut to insure surprise, he had called his sisters in to reveal his masterpiece. Glowing from his desk was a beautiful four-foot all “Christmas Tree,” complete with ornaments (some of the cheap glass balls Mom had rejected from the real tree), paper chains and the coup de’ gras...REAL LIGHTS!

Realizing that they had been outflanked, the sisters began the only defense they knew possible to thwart this vicious attack...they “went to tell.” This of course meant that one or both of the parents, if available, would be brought to referee.

Upon hearing both sides judiciously, “It’s not fair, he always gets the neat stuff,” and, “It was my idea first, they could have thought of it too.”), it was decided that they would either split the lights, or nobody would have them. No real decision there. Seeing this coming, he had already removed a couple of the lights from his tree (which was bending over from the weight of too many lights and extension cords anyway), and handed them over, along with the surplus lights he had strung around his mirror and dresser. Both sides satisfied, they had paid each other the required, if unenthusiastic compliments, and greater bloodshed was averted.

Another perfect rainy day activity was the annual “Christmas Cookie Day.” If there was any doubt about Mom’s abilities as a dinner chef, (stewed tomatoes in tuna casserole came to mind, as well as a brief obsession with a spice called “Javanese Sauté), any bad memories were quickly dispelled with her hand at the creation of cookies and candies. Each year he looked forward to the look, the smell and the TASTE of his favorite Christmas cookies. From the standard white sugar cookies they were allowed to cut with the huge variety of new and antique cookie cutters, to the wonderful trays full of coconut-fudge-layer bars, the selection was vast.

But, his absolute favorite, the one treat that appeared only at Christmas time, were the chocolate-covered-shortbread-cookies. To taste one of these delightful little confections was to bite into the heart of Christmas itself. They were simple enough in composition, shortbread with a thin layer of chocolate and walnuts on the top. However, the smooth buttery taste and hint of walnut was simply elegant.

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Tray after tray of cookies would come out of the oven, only to be rushed into the stand-up freezer in the utility room. Seemingly enough pastry provisions to last the winter, they surprisingly would barely stretch through Mom's birthday on January 7th.

Perhaps it was the fact that the cookies came out for virtually any visitor or occasion, (even ten o'clock tea would suffice). Even more likely, it was sneaky little fingers prying away the cookie tin lids when "all was clear," who significantly depleted the contents of any container with the reasoning that "even a frozen Christmas cookie is better than no Christmas cookie." Whatever the case, each holiday was marked with the happy creation and consumption of this long-held tradition.

Uncle Fred had been sharing Christmas with the Millers for the past two years. Actually Mom's cousin, "Uncle," always fit better, and seemed to be the standard title for any of the relatives from Illinois (as witnessed by their Uncle Dick and Aunt Bette, Aunt Eva and so forth). They had visited him two summers ago and taken a ride in his little yellow "Corvair." They understood that he had sold it and now commuted by train to his job at a stock brokerage house in Chicago. The very act of riding a train, (his absolute favorite mode of transportation) every day, made his Uncle's lifestyle seem even more exciting.

Uncle Fred loved music, particularly opera and had sung in many a stage production. He played the pipe organ as well as singing in his hometown choir. A couple of years ago, he had sung "Oh Holy Night," at the midnight service at St. Matthew's. His voice, being in the soprano range had at first surprised the congregation, who up to this point had heard nothing of any real range than that of the warbling old ladies in the choir. However, after only a few measures, the entire church was enraptured by the absolute beauty and virtuosity of his performance.

He always took a plane from Chicago just a couple of days before Christmas. The thought that he only had a week's vacation was always amazing to them. As a teacher, their Dad had always had the same length of Christmas Vacation as the kids, sometimes nearly three weeks. The fact that Uncle Fred went to the trouble to spend the majority of his vacation time with the family was both noted and appreciated.

This year's trip to Portland International Airport (the pride of every Portland citizen) had been one that would not soon be forgotten. To begin with, Uncle Fred's flight was not due to arrive until nine that night, bedtime for at least three quarters of the kids, even by vacation standards. However, this being a special occasion, they had been allowed to stay up. At around eight, Mom had called the airport to check on the flight and its "Estimated Time of Arrival," only to be informed that the entire Airport was fogged in and everything was delayed at least two hours.

With this information, a feeling of dread had crept into his stomach because he knew that if the decision was made for any of the kids to stay home, it would mean HE would be home with them babysitting. Mom wasn't about to miss Uncle Fred's arrival and Dad was the only one in the family who drove, leaving him to "hold down the fort," while they went to retrieve their late-arriving relative.

Whether it was the sheer excitement of the event, or the effects of a popcorn ball and three cookies bestowed on them for "waiting nicely in the living room," when they finally got the word at a little past midnight that the plane would be O.K.'d for landing, the children were still wide awake. Much to his happiness, the younger kids were going to have no part of being left behind after the long wait, and in a moment of weakness, the parents had told everyone to get their coats and get into the car.

The roads were almost vacant as the family headed down 122nd toward Marine Drive, the route that wound down along the Columbia River. It wasn't until they had descended down the

hill, past the high school and archrival Fremont Junior high (where their dad taught), and into the farmland known only as the, “Cabbage Fields,” that things took an eerie turn. Almost instantly they were engulfed in a thick cloud of fog. So thick in fact that the car suddenly decelerated to a crawl. Not just pockets, this was a mass so dense as to render the headlights almost useless. The thought of going back was briefly entertained, but even time to “wait it out,” was no guarantee of success this time of year in the Columbia Gorge.

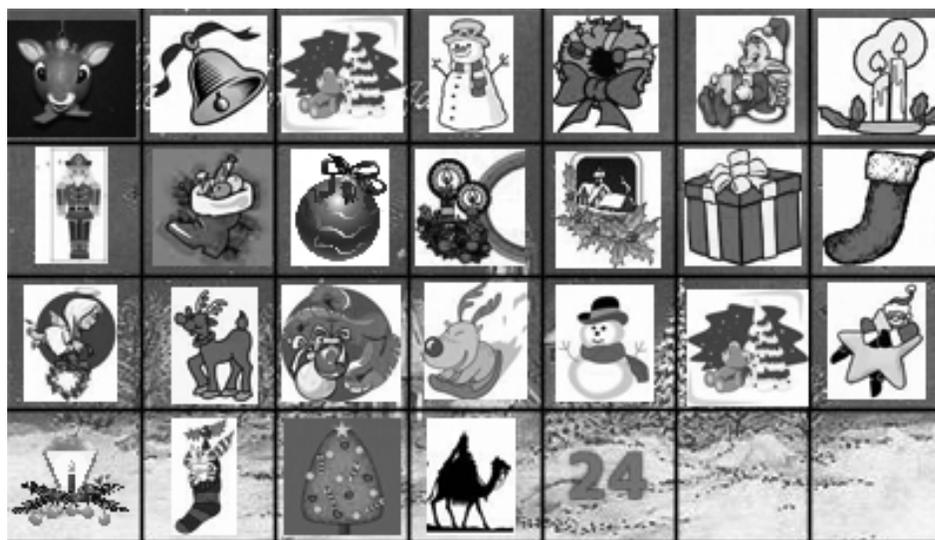
In a fit of mixed panic and relief he had yelled that he could make out the white line along the shoulder of the road from his window. Likewise, Jane said she could see the sporadic dotted dividing line from her side of the car. So, it was with the direction of both, yelling, “More to the right,” or, “Just keep it straight,” that they continued to make progress, if only at a walking pace.

Finally, as the road rose to meet the intersection at Marine Drive, the fog had thinned enough to make the turn safely. Fearing another undetected “white out,” Dad had never exceeded fifteen miles per hour down the two lanes twisting into the unknown. On the left, was the threat of on-coming traffic. On the right, they could face a plunge into the waters of the Columbia River, raging coldly at almost flood-level below them.

As soon as it had engulfed them, in an instant it had vanished, and they had broken through into a clearing. Ahead of them lay the airport with its beautiful red, white and blue lights sparkling in the crisp cold night’s air. They had made it safe and sound and a cheer of relief had rung out from all of the participants in this great adventure.

Even now, in the comfort of the big easy chair, the memory of this short expedition caused an involuntary shiver to overtake his body. Surely, their Guardian Angels had been working overtime to keep them from Harm’s Way.

When the plane and their now fatigued Uncle finally did arrive at just a little after One in the morning, the story was retold again and again with each storyteller adding his or her own twist to the details. Marine Drive was wisely avoided with the secondary route up 82nd Avenue being taken on the way home with no further incident. Even though it was nearly three in the morning before everyone finally got to bed, the excitement of their adventure and the fact that the next day was Christmas Eve made sleep an evasive, if not welcome reality.



The Hours Countdown

Christmas Eve morning had arrived with heads almost as fogged as the roads they had traveled the night before. To everyone's surprise and disbelief, Molly, who had by all standards should still have been in her bed, "dead to the world," had awoken at her standard time of a few minutes before seven.

Usually content to sit and watch cartoons until everyone else had stumbled into the kitchen, this morning she had awoken everyone in the house with her exciting revelation that this was the day to open the, "BIG door." This of course, was the final door on the Advent Calendar whose opening had been almost as eagerly anticipated as the very arrival of Jesus Himself. Coincidentally, upon removing the "safety lock," of scotch tape and gently prying the double doors of decorated paper back, there before them was in fact a picture of "Baby Jesus," bringing to mind the *Real Reason* for the coming celebration.

The chain of events taking place on Christmas Eve Day were all merely a precursor to the "Big Show," the Midnight Service at St. Matthew's. The afternoon wore on with little significance usually filled with "busy work," for the kids (dusting, vacuuming, etc.) and last minute adjustment of the decorations.

Almost always, a trip to the store was required to get some last minute detail for tomorrow's turkey dinner. If you remembered something after one in the afternoon, as they had this year (jellied cranberry sauce for the kids), you had to go to Fred Meyer, who to everyone's horror stayed open until six in the evening this year. He had wondered, as he looked into the pitiful faces of those who had been scheduled to work and probably really didn't get off until long past seven, if Fred G. Meyer was visited by ghosts on Christmas Eve.

Dad, had for the third year in a row read, "A Christmas Carol," to the kids as a before-bed treat. Having finished the night before, while waiting for Uncle Fred, its description of unearthly visitors was still fresh in his mind. The thought of the "Ghost of Christmas Future," with its terrifying black cloak and skeletal fingers paying a midnight visit to "Old Freddy G," seemed an appropriate if unlikely fate.

Last minute shopping accomplished, it was time to settle in for the countdown, marked off by traditions whose order were as constant as the tolling of Scrooge's beside clock. Dinner, always at 7pm, to help carry them through the evening, was for the third year in a row, "Taco Salad." This unusual if festive meal was tasty with its combination of lettuce, tomato, kidney beans, and hamburger bits, covered with a dressing of, "French's Red Ranch," and consumed in large quantities.

Sitting here thinking about it, it was more than likely the effects of this spicy dose of protein and roughage that may have been the actual source of what he thought was "nervous stomach," later during the church service.

At 8:30, the Nativity Scene was laid out on the fireplace hearth in the living room. This was a beautiful imported set Mom had gotten two years prior at one of Meier and Frank's, "Christmas Clearance Sales." Its heavy hand-painted figures were true "works of art," reflecting their traditional "old world," styling. Only the cow, with its funny spring horns would not have passed as part of a collection of irreplaceable treasure from another century.

Each figure was placed carefully in its traditional location. It was commented that “Dad should make a stable for Baby Jesus,” but the absence of this detail did little to diminish the overall effect of reverent splendor. Molly, as the youngest was allowed the hallowed honor of placing Baby Jesus into his manger. Although it had occurred to him that Baby Jesus was more the proportional size of a three-year-old to the rest of the figures, he had kept his comments to himself.

A bit of just plain “hanging out” followed the Nativity Scene. A few taco chips left over from dinner with a glass of Seven-Up to wash them down. By 9:00 it was time to start getting dressed. Mom and Dad allowed the kids to put their presents under the tree before they left for church. This was accomplished quickly and without conflict.

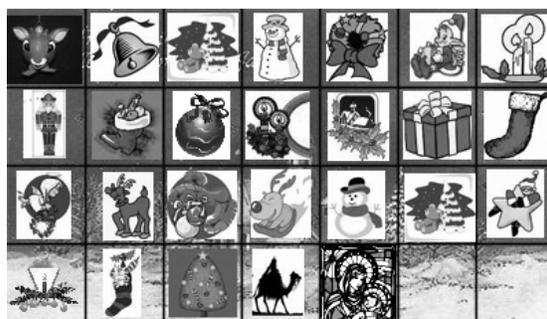
Other families put their presents out days and sometimes weeks before Christmas Day. In fact, his best friend Jack Stares and his family actually OPENED their presents on Christmas Eve!

How this act was not covered in the bible as being against God’s Law was simply beyond him. Besides, at almost thirteen, he knew his limits. It was hard enough not to go into Mom and Dad’s closet to peak at the unwrapped presents residing their from the beginning of October (to do so and get caught as his sister Jane had once done, was a source of unending shame). The pure temptation of having the presents under the tree with nothing but a thin layer of paper and easily removable scotch tape would simply have been too much.

He had even heard tales from the Winfree girls (the three sisters who had recently moved to the neighborhood to drive him into early onset puberty) of how they knew everything they were getting weeks before Christmas. Just knowing this piece of information about them stunned and bewildered him, as this would surely ruin Christmas morning, and leave little to live for in general. So he was thankful that the Miller tradition of putting the kids presents out right before church, with absolutely NO PRODDING OR SHAKING being the mandate of the hour, added, rather than detracted from the next day’s activities.

Just before getting into the car to head down the hill, the kids hung their stocking while posing for a picture. The picture album was full of these kinds of shots, a black and white chronicle of the passage of time. Only last year had there been four instead of the three usual participants frozen with arms suspended, stockings in hand, heads turned to grin directly into the camera. Although her second “official,” stocking hanging, (her first Christmas being only five months old, her stocking was hung in proxy) this was the first year that Molly actually “got it.” She knew that when she was asleep tonight, Santa would come down the chimney and bring her presents. With the reports of the “radar sighting,” of Santa’s sleigh being broadcast by the KATU Eyewitness News Team, on the Ten o’clock News, she believed in this event as much as she believed that somewhere in the world, Baby Jesus was being born all over again.

Now, this final feat accomplished, it had been time for the biggest event of the Church Calendar, and as the events this year would unfold, the “Most Memorable Midnight Christmas Service Ever.”



“The Big Show”

Almost as soon as Thanksgiving Day had signaled the beginning of the season, Mom had made a decided switch toward Christmas music in the stack of records played daily on the stereo. This huge beast with its speakers that could be removed and separated for the “Full Stereo Effect,” was the family’s first real leap into the “modern technological era of the sixties.”

Most of their Christmas record collections were albums they had bought at gas stations or received as premiums for a fill-up and \$1.29, (“Firestone Christmas Favorites,” “Holiday Magic Brought to you by Shell Oil,” etc.), and had surprisingly good selections of both music and stars. Mahalia Jackson, Arthur Feidler and his Boston Pops and Harry Belafonte were but a few of the dozens of stars singing and playing on each festive offering.

For years, they had endured the sound of the little gold RCA Victor record changer, a relic from their Mom and Dad’s early married life together, and its tendency to send 110 volts to its operator without warning. The little record player was fine for the kids records and the huge stack of musicals from “My Fair Lady,” to “South Pacific.” But when Mom bought a copy of a “A Festival of Lessons and Carols with the Westminster Boys Choir,” a new tool for its reproduction was immediately sought.

It was the first record placed on the turntable of the new purchase. From the opening bars of the “Once in Royal David’s City,” sung a'capella by the lead boy soprano of the choir, to the final phrases of “Hark the Herald Angels Sing,” complete with HUGE pipe organ accompaniment, everyone had sat in silent awe of this glorious sound emanating from the beige and silver speakers in their very own living room. It was in fact the former of these two carols that had caused the pit of his stomach to tie into tight persistent knots that Christmas Eve.

Mr. Barker directed the choir for practically as long as there had been a choir at St. Matthew’s. He was a quiet, yet stern man, who in physical make-up resembled quite closely the description of Icabod Crane, in “The Legend of Sleepy Hollow.” Social friends of the family, the Millers had shared many an afternoon tea with the Barkers, Mr. And Mrs. (who had a great kind of English/Canadian accent) and Joyce and Gillian the two girls. Joyce was a year older than he, and Gillian the same age as his sister Jane.

Mrs. Barker was a beautiful dark-haired woman with an equally beautiful English accent. Looking at the couple, it was never really understood how this tall, somewhat somber man had landed such a catch. He knew they had met in the Second World War, and that Mr. Barker had served during the invasion of Normandy as well as countless other bloody battles in the winning of the European battle against the Nazis. Upon finding out this information, he had gained a secret admiration for the demanding, but soft-spoken man who led them in music that was usually far above their vocal abilities. He had taken bass clarinet lessons from Mr. Barker, and had seen a “fun side” to him once when Mr. Barker had gotten out his own clarinet and given the student a sample of energetic, and amazingly dexterous jazz and swing solos.

With friendship comes a sense of duty, so when Mr. Barker had announced the formation of a new Boys Choir, he had been instantly volunteered, along with his good friends Jack Stares and Jeff Cobb (whose mothers coincidentally were friends of his mother’s). Unlike the Over brothers, Jim and Tom, who were definitely there by parental threat alone, he and his friends grew to love the music and the limelight. Due in large part to the fact that their voices had not

changed, or worse yet, as in the case of Jim Over, in the middle of changing, their high soprano range gave them the lead parts in almost every piece.

Perhaps it was the fact that this was the third year of the Choir's existence, and Mr. Barker felt that they were up to the challenge. Worse still, perhaps he actually had deluded himself into thinking that they were GOOD! Whatever the case, this year he had convinced Father Lamer to break tradition from the regular service and do their own version of a "Festival of Lessons and Carols," along with the regular communion service. This meant the traditional entrance to "Angels We Have Heard on High, but with a twist. After the reading of the first lesson, there would be a special carol by the Boys Choir alone... "Once in Royal David's City."

Singing a solo during the pageant was one thing; a mistake or a loose note was hardly noticed with all of the poking and prodding going on by the Angels and Shepherds. This was very different. Second only to the solemn "Good Friday," service in reverence, the Midnight service was one of the most attended services of the year, head-to-head with Easter. Besides the combined congregations from the early and family Sunday services, every "twice-a-year Episcopalian," in Parkrose would make an appearance. He usually got a kick out of watching these "part-timers," fumble through the prayers, kneeling and standing at the wrong times, but this night, their numbers simply added an increased element of fear to the equation.

The church was absolutely gorgeous. Fresh evergreen garland hung along the walls, a candle in every window. Every other pew had a spire of tapered candle and an evergreen bow. The alter of the church was flanked with oversized Douglas Fir trees, without decoration other than their glorious natural branches of regal green. Along the front and to the sides of the sanctuary were countless red foil wrapped poinsettias, with the flowers in each vase a combination of poinsettias, holly and fir boughs.

It always seemed funny to him that the "part timers," must have thought that the church was always decked out to this degree, as Easter the only other time they filled the pews, was the only other time of the year the church decorations took on such proportion.

Miraculously, he had been spared the added danger of performing anything of high honor this year as an acolyte. Being only a seventh grader meant an occasional turn at the alter (#3, "plates and gates" or #2, the Book). However, this being Christmas Eve, these duties were performed only by the oldest and most experienced boys of High School age. These young men had earned the right to serve, by enduring years of Father Lamer's ardent training, including but not limited to the occasional rap on the head with "the Book," or a well-placed foot in the backside.

Carrying a taper next to the first cross (Jim Over) was a solemn if not "brain dead," duty. Keeping the brass bowl of the taper at eye level, he had marched down the aisle with his fellow "sheep," to the slaughter.

The place had been packed. Every pew, as well as more than fifty folding chairs set up in the back of the church were filled with Christmas worshipers in their most "Glorious Holiday Finery." He saw people sitting there he didn't even know were Episcopalians, as if some great



Proud Grandpa with the acolyte and choir soloist

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force had brought them all together to watch him screw up.

Halfway through the lesson he felt his face flush and his pulse quicken. His breaths became shallow gasps; much as he imagined a man trapped in an airtight vault may breathe to conserve oxygen. He looked over to his friends for some sign of comfort, (usually a sneer or goofy half smile), but found only the same ashen masks of terror he knew must now be affixed to his own.

Then there was only silence...sudden, unmoving silence, made worse by the fact that he now realized that every eye of the congregation was now fully staring at the front row of the "St. Matthew's Boy Choir." It was broken just as suddenly by the sound of a pitch pipe and an urgent whispered count-off, "1-2-3-SING," coming from behind them.

In times like these of great pressure, the mind out of a sense of protective safety, separates into to parts. One side springing to action while the other talks the performer through each move. Great athletes are said to talk themselves through every play on the field or gymnasium floor, slowing down time and space in their heads as they perform each move.

He too had heard a voice. But this was the voice of a "music critic," who had heard the beautiful recorded version of "Once in Royal David's city," by the Westminster Boys Choir. The voice had also been to all of the rehearsals of the St. Matthew's Boys Choir and knew the vast difference between the two.

"Once in Royal David's city, stood a lowly cattle shed," he had heard himself and Jack Stares sing into the vast resonant spaces of the church.

"Hey, not bad, and that echo really adds to the sound, but they'll never make the high part, here it comes..."

"Mary was that Mother mild, Jesus Christ her little child," had escaped his lips to touch the ears of the crowd, when the realization that this was going to sound pretty good hit him. In fact, for the first time ever, he realized that maybe Mr. Barker's words had been correct, that the sound of a live boys choir on Christmas Eve was unparalleled in all of Christendom.

As the next verses unfolded, the other boys and the pipe organ joining in to bring the song to its swelling crescendo, he had realized the rarity of this moment. Every boy had stayed miraculously on key, and in fact for one brief moment metamorphosed into a single voice of such depth and clarity, they had scarcely recognized themselves. Rowdy, rough boys who spent the majority of their time pushing, shoving and insulting one another loudly at every practice, had been transformed, if only for a moment, into angelic young men who could create a joyous reverent sound, that until tonight, had not been heard by the parishioners of St. Matthew's Episcopal Church.

On the last verse, he had actually been relaxed enough to simply enjoy the feeling created by the occasion. He also realized that in this was a different event in another way. Where in most cases, he sang for the simple reason of being able to do so, tonight he was giving back to the person who had made him join the choir in the first place. Tonight, he knew that this was a gift to his Mom, and that she knew he was singing for her. At the end of the song they had exchanged knowing smiles, and he had seen her wipe away the tear, as a lump of pride entered his own throat.

The rest of the service was the very example of Christian reverence. The mood now set, the boys had remained on their best behavior, not once giving in to the urge to make a strange face or rude noise to "crack someone else up." Only when Cal Abts, trying to signal a "hello" to his friends in the choir after receiving communion had tripped over his Father's kneeling legs, was there any serious chance of coughing, hacking laughter. Even then, the boys had only winced, bit hard on their cheeks and stared solemnly ahead.

For the first time in his young life, the prayers had seemed real. Although he had been confirmed last year and had memorized almost the entire communion service, the beauty of its words had only now been coupled with reason.

From the phrase, “ We acknowledge and bewail our manifold of sins and wickedness which we most grievously have committed,” in the confession, to the words at the breaking of the bread, “He took bread and broke it saying, this is my body, which has been given to you,” (In Father Lamer’s voice that sounded like Christ Himself), the words had seemed new to him. There, silently and earnestly, he thanked God for his family, friends and the opportunity to live in a great nation where the chance to practice your choice of religion as you saw fit was a Constitutional Right.

Then it was over...or so it seemed. Now acolytes again, they rushed to the tapers and cross hanging on the wall behind the choir, and lit the candles to prepare for the recessional march. As they began to move into position, Jack Stares suddenly grunted an almost silent exclamation of fear and panic, and then started moving rapidly toward Jim Over, whose cassock was now beginning to flare with accidental flame from coming too close to a taper. Jack nimbly beat out the flames, gave a look of abject relief to the others standing back in horror, and then fell back into position. The boys, far more afraid of feeling the wrath of Father Lamer’s foot at the next acolyte practice, opted for ignoring the event, and solemnly leading the procession back down the aisle and to the basement changing rooms to “Hark the Herald angels Sing,” nobody the wiser. Getting back to the changing room, the tale was told again and again, each time with the flames growing in size by each telling, until it was time to head back upstairs.

Too late for cookies and punch, the participants of this great production lingered long enough to wish each other “Merry Christmas” and exchange relieved glances, knowing fully well that they had performed far above their modest abilities and averted certain disaster.. He had even complimented Jack on his new sweater, although not without caustically pointing out that, “Only cretins open their presents on Christmas Eve.”

His oldest sister met him at the top of the stairs. The bond they shared from their earlier youth was still intact. Theirs was a special relationship born out of a less than two-year separation in age. From the countless times his little sister had followed him to kindergarten clad only in underwear in the cold rainy winter, to the time last year when he, as one of the umpires for the Championship game of the Sacramento Elementary Girls softball League, had called her out on strikes to end the game (resulting in his bitter tears in the restroom afterward at the unfairness of duty), they had been the best of friends as well as brother and sister. They had walked into the cold, clear night, chattering about the evening’s events and regaling one another with who said what, and to whom, and comparing notes on some of the more outlandish “church lady” outfits and finery.

Finally home, there was little to do but get ready for bed and try to fall asleep as fast as they could to bring on the next day’s long awaited events.

Laying in bed, bathed in the gentle light from the single candle burning on his dresser (to guide the Light of the Christ Child into the home), he realized that this was a Christmas Eve that would never be repeated. Surely by next year his voice would begin to change, and there was talk by the older boys that this was the last year they were going to sing in the choir, which would reduce its numbers to fewer than six. But somehow, this fact was not one of sadness, but one of relief, for there was simply no way that they would ever top the events of this year’s Christmas Eve Service. With this thought drifting through his mind he had fallen to sleep.

Christmas Morning

When it came to Christmas Morning, the kids needed an alarm clock about as much as a construction worker needed ballet slippers. No matter how late the children had finally dropped restlessly to sleep the night prior (in this case n early 1:30 in the morning) they seemed to awake far earlier than the “Parental Minimum,” set each year.

In years past, when both children and parents were younger, the hours set to see if Santa had come, had been a standard 5:30. However, this year, due in large part to the lateness of the Midnight Service, the children had grudgingly agreed to 6 o’clock.

When they were of the age when telling time was a bit of mystery, the parents had endured the persistent ten-minute invasions of their bedroom and restless slumber with pleas of “Is it time yet?” But now, being older and beyond the age of even pretending, “We didn’t know,” they had synchronized watches, much as the leaders of a battalion of restless soldiers might the night before a big battle.

Jane and Anne were the first to awake. In years past, it had almost always been the big brother gently coaxing awake his sitters long before the appointed hour of disclosure. This year however, between his Uncle’s late arrival two nights prior and the tremendous release of nervous energy last night, his sisters were forced to shake him from a deep state of sleep. Within seconds upon realizing that this was Christmas Morning, he had been renewed with a burst of adrenaline and jumped out of bed to check the time.

It was 5:12 in the morning. With just a little over forty-five minutes to go, this was going to be a piece of cake. Jane, who at eleven was an “old pro at this Christmas Morning Stuff,” already had the playing cards ready to go. This mindless, yet effective activity had become a tradition three years earlier, when he had set the all-time “early wake-up record” of 3:25, and had found themselves with more than two hours to kill before waking their parents.

Now, with a game of “21” in full swing, they filled the remaining minutes with hopeful chatter and incessant hushed giggles. Reminiscence of years past, talk of what Santa may bring, and constant updates on the time filled their conversation.

At just a little before the final ten-minute countdown, he had gone to awaken Molly, who surprisingly was still sound asleep. They were taking no chances, as last year they had been forced to wait almost an additional 40 minutes “until the baby wakes up,” to begin the morning’s activities. He had found Uncle Fred, who was sharing Molly’s room, conscious and responsive to his statement that, “It was almost time.”

As he passed Molly’s door, he had given one excited glance to “The Sheet.” “The Sheet,” was nothing more than its description, a simple bed sheet. But upon its hanging, covering the entire entrance to the hallway, it was magically transformed into a barrier that could not have been stronger if it were cast of heavy wrought iron. Cutting off from sight the entire front of the house, including the tree, presents and even the “Elf Scene,” which miraculously appeared every Christmas Morning on the commode, this portal had been penetrated only once in any previous year.

When he was in third grade, a strange inquisitive year at best, the temptation had gotten the best of him. Having his room, (now Molly’s, first door down the hall) and the Christmas presents,

(until this year in the front room, a mere ten feet from his bedroom door) so near one another, was simply more than he could take.

He had awakened at around 2:30, far too early to wake his sister, and throwing caution aside, had slid through “The Sheet,” into the living room beyond. He had found the atmosphere within the room strangely unsettling. The presents were there, but gone was the “magic of the moment,” created by first glance into a room lit only by the colored lights of the Christmas tree. Undaunted, he had groped around in the darkness to find his present from Santa, a “Real Bow and Arrow Set” with a twenty-five-pound-pull, fiberglass bow.

Blinded by the excitement of this discovery, he had actually ventured further into the realm of stupidity and tried to string the bow, “just to get a feel of its pull.” Halfway through this action (which required the bow to be bent around his leg while the bow was bent and the string was slid into place), the bow, as if possessed, had suddenly leapt from his hands and struck the ceiling overhead. He had sat in frozen panic, waiting for the sound of his parents damning voices or thundering footsteps, and had been amazed when neither transpired. He had re-packaged the bow, making sure to put it back exactly where it had been found, and then had skulked meekly back to his room and into a restless, troubled sleep.

When the children had run screaming into the living room with the rest of the family a few hours later, he had hoped that by some “Frank-Capra-like-movie-magic” it had all been a bad dream. But there, on the tip of his new bow, was a white scrape that only he knew had not been there prior to his terrifying adventure into the Netherworld of “behind the sheet.”

The lesson fully learned, he had never again repeated the act, not even confessing it to his sisters, who would be shocked and mortified at this unthinkable transgression against tradition. Since then, including this very day, he had waited for the appointed time to run with the rest of his siblings to awaken Mom and Dad, and get them moving toward the long awaited “moment of truth.”

They had all traveled down the plush green carpeting of the hallway leading to their parents’ bedroom. Although not fully grasping the situation, Molly had skipped and danced at the end of her big brother’s arm, tittering gaily as they made their way to their parent’s bedside.

Greeted by an unconscious groan, and the request for “just 10 more minutes,” the kids had replied, “no way, it’s six,” and prodded their Dad and Mom into a sitting position. Then, in the energy charged atmosphere, sitting on their parents’ bedside, they had waited to hear the words from their dad that signaled the REAL beginning to Christmas Morning.

Christmas was their Mom’s time of the year; there was no doubt about it. She absolutely reveled in getting the right gifts, making the right cookies and carrying out every tradition to the letter. But, it was Dad who had the job that carried the most power in those early morning minutes.

Just as the starter of the Indianapolis 500, with his cry of “gentlemen start your engines,” could keep the race forever in limbo by simply not dropping the green flag, Dad could stretch the time it took to “see if Santa came,” into an eternity. Barely daring to breath, with their Dad’s excited words

“IT LOOKS LIKE HE CAME!” they had virtually flown down the hall, past the now yielding “Sheet” and to the living room.

The sight that greeted them had been part Rockwell, part Dickens and part Van Gogh. The Christmas tree shined bright, illuminating an unbelievable assortment of packages and treats, but the colors seemed more vivid and dreamlike than any Saturday Evening Post cover. Each child had unconsciously headed toward their area of presents, as it was always the tradition that Santa put the presents around the tree in a stratification of age, starting with the youngest to the far right and ending with the parents and Uncle Fred on the left.

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The first things to catch his eye were the “Troll Animals,” a smiling “Troll Turtle” and an equally effervescent “Troll Donkey.” His heart had skipped a beat of dread. Could Santa, knowing that he had a Troll and had played long hours with his sisters and their trolls last summer, mistakenly thought he might want one of these leering little creatures?

But no! In the next moment, he saw nestled in the area of his presents, one of the latest “must have,” pieces of technology of the day; a transistor radio! This was no cheap little radio like the ones he had seen at Woolworth’s, with their funny little Japanese names. This was a “Magnavox,” American made, and complete with it’s own leather carrying case and earphone. In less time than it takes to say “Grandma Got Run Over by a Reindeer,” he had the little radio blaring with the “Christmas Top Forty” from KISN.

The room was filled with shrieks of joy as the older girls embraced their Trolls and Molly her “real baby doll.”

“How did Santa know this is what I wanted?” they had all said in amazement, as this year they had decided to just see what Santa brought them. The one exception, little Molly, although happy with her doll, had asked Santa for a motorcycle, and it was nowhere to be seen.

“Why don’t you see what you got in your stocking?” Dad had suggested. There, among the Hershey’s kisses, candy cane, apple, tangerine and packet of assorted combs the children had long since grown accustomed to finding in their stockings, was in fact her beloved motorcycle. Santa had been vindicated by a technicality of delivering the wish, if not in the actual size the “wishee” had in mind, but had forgotten to clarify.

Like a chronological library of the “latest and greatest kid things,” Santa had always come through in years past, each gift marking another year’s passing toward maturity. The “Tonka” fire engine in first grade, the Army truck with “real working search light,” in second, his real bow and arrow in third, his beloved HO scale model railroad in fourth, a “Kenner” bridge building set in fifth, the “very mod furry animal coat” in sixth and now here in seventh grade, a real sign of his impending teen years, a transistor radio.

The ritual that followed had not been modified from the beginning of time itself. Starting with the youngest child, the entire family watched as each respective person opened all of their gifts. Upon checking all of the “fringe presents” that may have “co-mingled” with another person’s pile for any last unopened gifts, the torch was passed along to the next youngest. This had been made even less bearable on him with the addition of each younger sibling. As much as he loved them all, it was the one time of year when one or two fewer siblings would have suited his patience fine.

Almost as fun as getting presents was watching somebody else open a gift you had given them. It was important to look for first reactions, to see if what you had bought or made was “just the right thing,” and was not going to end up in the top drawer of their dresser, or even worse, at the bottom of the toy box. A sincere hug, kiss and “Thanks Patty!!” were sign enough that he had hit the mark.

Finally his time to unwrap had arrived. Carefully and thoughtfully he had opened each gift, taking time to read each card and nametag so the person who was taking notes for the “Christmas Thank-You-Notes” could get all of the required information recorded. It was an unwritten law that you simply didn’t “tear into the wrapping and grab the present inside.” The person who had taken the time to select “just the right gift,” and then wrap it for you deserved the respect of slowly removing the ribbon, the tape and finally the paper on each gift. This ritual also gave the recipient a chance to “make a last minute guess” at its contents.

Some were obvious. The large soft, squishy boxes (always from Meier and Frank) contained pants, shirt or sweater (matching socks would show up for his birthday a week later). For the past

couple of years, he would receive a record album. Although hard to disguise, albums were always a true mystery. It could be something his mom thought he would like (usually not Rock 'n' Roll) or something that was a "sure bet" as in this year's "Sergeant Pepper's Lonely Heart's Club Band" from the Beatles.

Last year his Mom had discovered, with a little luck and sleuthing, (a postcard to England to one of the marketing heads) that the line of Britain's lead soldiers he collected were to be discontinued. She had bought almost everything her budget would allow, and now for Christmas, Easter and Birthdays was dispensing the stash. This year he had received a box of "Egyptian Camel Corps" complete with "Sikhs straddling camels while taking aim with their carbines."

Perhaps the longest standing tradition between he and his Mom had been the "annual book." Being a voracious reader, he had eagerly awaited the unwrapping of each year's volume, ranging from books about lead soldiers, fairy tales, sports exploits and more. This year had a special twist in that he had recently become obsessed with studying the First World War.

He had gone so far as to spend countless summer hours dressed in his self-made aviator's costume, complete with authentic pilot's goggles and plastic .45 caliber side arm, sitting in a lawn chair on top of the Railway Express Cart in the back yard. Only he had known what exploits his trusty "Spad XIII" and he had braved each day. All the family saw was their "slightly cracked" son/brother clinging firmly to a "plumber's helper" plunger with a bicycle grip attached to the end and his thumb poised over the "trigger," a nail driven through the grip into the wooden handle. His head had been a blur of constant movement, searching the sky for some member of "Richtoffen's Flying Circus Squadron" and then engaging them in battle, sometimes being the victor and sometimes the victim spinning helplessly to the ground.

Rather than discourage their son with a request to pursue a "less frivolous" pastime, they had encouraged his thirst for knowledge with books. This year, the latest addition to his collection was "Time Life's history of World War One." But even more spectacular, when he had followed the directions from the gift tag on the present to page 126, there in front of him was a picture of his own Uncle Irving Hook, playing a piano in the trenches of France.

The completion of the children's gift "defrocking," was a signal that "halftime" had arrived. Although still just a little after eight in the morning, it was time to take a short break for tea, Schneken (the most glorious concoction of caramel, nuts and pastry known to mankind) and organization of presents and garbage. This entailed separating the "salvageable" bows, ribbon and wrapping paper from the adornments that were simply "unsalvageable." Then, each child had put all of their presents into a large cardboard boxes, which helped keep things separated and organized, eliminating any confusion over similar looking mittens, socks or "Troll Paraphernalia." It was also time to get "the bird" in the oven, which meant the rest of the morning would be filled with the wonderful smell of roasting turkey.

This done, the kids had watched Uncle Fred open his presents, with his high-pitched and happy "neatos" blending right into those of the children. It was beyond the comprehension of any of them that they should ever have a Christmas without Uncle Fred, and his youthful excitement as well as his appreciation for their treasured traditions made him an important part of every Christmas Morning.

Mom and Dad had, as always, filled their entire gift opening portions of the morning with the time-tested and honored phrases "Oh I know what this is...Oh, Lionell!" and "Now darn it Margot that's too much!" and "Is that the one you wanted?" The love on their faces for one another was a testament to what they had accomplished as both parents and mates. It was during these exchanges of true love and commitment that the rest of the world seemed to melt away and the children became mere spectators of the moment.

Christmas Day

The next hour as always had been spent picking out which of the “New Christmas Finery” they were to wear for the day, getting dressed, helping to clean up the house and fielding phone calls from the relatives. A call from Grayslake, Illinois from Aunt Bette and Uncle Dick had been followed quickly by one from St. Helens and the other side of the family.

The kids had all literally slid across the hardwood floors to the phone to thank “Sweetie Pie” for the hand-knitted slippers they were all wearing on their feet. In addition, this being the first year he had begun to learn the guitar, he had found a “Johnny Cash sings Folsom Prison Blues,” as one of his gifts from his Grampa Miller, (“Little Grampa” as sister Molly called him). The family had spent one long ago Christmas Eve in St. Helens with their Grandparents and cousins, but as the Christmas Eve service had become ritual, this practice had been replaced by a “post-Christmas visit” to their Dad’s hometown.

Grampa Burrige had called once around eight to wish everyone a “Merry Christmas” and check the weather. This was followed by two more calls in the last three hours to again--check the weather. Being a Nurseryman by trade and family tradition, he had two great fears during the winter; silver thaws and wind--both of which could wreak havoc on his stock. Although less than an hour away by car, he dreaded the drive this time of year. It was suspected by everyone that Grampa had spent so much time in the fields with his hands in the dirt of the nursery that the feelings and emotions of his trees and shrubs ran through his veins. It was these emotions that kept his visits short when even the hint of foul weather was approaching. Unlike other years, the weather this Christmas had been one of those days Oregonians cherish for their rarity during the winter--crisp, cold, and clear. Perhaps it was this fact that bothered Grampa even more, as “this must be the calm before the storm.”

They had made the trip into Portland at just a little after eleven to pick up their “Aunt Edith” (another of the aunts who was really a second or third cousin). Aunt Edith had long been his favorite Aunt. She was a retired school teacher and tutor who really understood children, regaling them with her tales of “Three Billy Goats Gruff,” the “Three Bears” and other favorites as well as the constant reports of the latest exploits of her “boyfriend,” Robin Hood. It seemed they were always just a minute or two late in arriving to actually meet Robin, but Aunt Edith always had some little gift or treat he had left for the children. Even today as they had arrived to pick her up at her fifth floor apartment in the posh “Terwilleger Senior Retirement Center,” they had asked what Robin’s plans for the holidays were. She had assured them that the men of Sherwood Forest celebrated Christmas in a “big way” and had invited her to share it with them, but that she would never pass up the opportunity to be with us on Christmas day.

They all knew this to be true, as they were sure the “Merry Men,” did not have “Onion Dip and Wheat Thins” as part of the Christmas Day Hors d'Oeuvres. All of the children knew that wherever the Onion Dip was, they would find their Aunt Edith. They also knew that getting a few of the What Thins before they were gone took diligence and quick hands. The Wheat Thins consumed, everyone had made due until dinner time with ruffle potato chips and “Bugles,” a “New Corn Treat” in the shape of festive bugles that if eaten without dip for lubrication would stick steadfastly to the roof of your mouth like a communion wafer. Pacing was the key, for the children had learned to eat enough to be happy, but not so much as to ruin the turkey dinner soon to follow.

Just when nobody had thought they could stand the wait one moment longer, Grampa’s green sedan had pulled up in front of the house. Greeting Grampa and Mildred was always a

bittersweet event. Mildred was frail and in pain much of the time, (the result of some very badly bungled radiation treatments for cancer). This meant the children needed to be gentle with their hugs, being careful not

to touch her left side. With Grampa, it was always the fear of being the recipient of one of his legendary “wet kisses.” Unlike Aunt Edith, whose only true drawback is that she had a “bit of that little old lady smell” about her, Grampa’s clothes, face and hands had the smell of honest clean sweat mixed with the earth, an aroma that was distinctive and at the same time comforting.

The cries of “Hello Willie” and “Hey there, Blue Eyes” rang out among more kisses and hugs. After a quick description of the drive into Portland, it was time to gather around the table and find your places. The table in this case, was in fact, two tables. The picnic table had been brought in from the backyard for the “big people,” and the card table was set up for “the kids.” Beautiful linen tablecloths hid the fact that neither table was of the “real dining room table variety,” but the true distinction was that of the place settings.

The “good china,” a family heirloom, was used just twice a year: Thanksgiving and Christmas. The elegant green blown-glass water glasses, heavy real silver cutlery and china plates were part of this meal, steeped in tradition. A nametag was beside each place and he had been pleased to find his at the “big table,” for the first time ever. This meant two things: Safety from the quick fingered hands of his sisters trying to steal a bite of his raspberry Jell-O, and that he been allowed to share the adult appetizer, shrimp cocktail!

After the grace had been said, (a traditional dissertation from Grampa that always surprised everyone with its eloquence and length without note cards), he had eaten this rare holiday delicacy with a mixture of pride and horror. Pride at being recognize with this “coming of age” honor, and horror at the taste of the cold, spongy shellfish with the spicy “non-catsup” red sauce. Upon finishing the shrimp and lettuce “treat” he had found himself glad that he still had a couple of spice drop candies left in the “nut cup” at the side of his plate, allowing him to “clear his palette” for the turkey.

The dinner that followed was one of favorite dishes and a couple of endured traditions. A huge turkey (in excess of twenty-five pounds) was extracted from the oven, its innards of steaming sage dressing delivered into a huge earthenware bowl. Jane as always, was first to grab a piece of the crispy and tasty skin (not an easy feat with ten olives stuck on the ends of your fingers). Upon the carving of “the bird,” Dad began the parade of food around the table.

First the turkey, light meat with a little dark on the side...then the mashed potatoes and dressing, with its bits of turkey giblets and spices...next was a toss, either the peas with mushrooms, which he liked, or the fairy cabbages (Brussels sprouts) which he didn’t like. It didn’t matter, the eating, or at least trying of each was a requirement. One or two sweet potatoes with marshmallows (endured with ambivalence), a healthy scoop of raspberry Jell-O with fruit cocktail inside (getting a cherry was the goal here), though not too close to the turkey or potatoes, as the Jell-O would melt and ruin the flavor and color of anything else on the plate.



Grandpa Burrige always said a grace that was known as much for its eloquence as its length

OF RAILROADS, RIVERS and REINDEER

Finally, when you had the perfect balance of foods and colors on your plate, it was time for the crowning touch, the appropriate blend of gravy and cranberry sauce over the top of the turkey dressing and mashed potatoes. This accomplished, the only thing left to do was to eat it all, repeat the cycle and then sit back to breath a sigh of contentment and pain that could only mean another successful Christmas dinner had past.

But no dinner was complete without the traditional “plum pudding.” The part of “provider,” of this traditional English dessert was Aunt Edith’s role in this great annual passion play. Although he liked this strange concoction of bread, raisins and fat, boiled to perfection by “the ladies at Trinity Church” (Aunt Edith’s parish), it was met with less than rave reviews by his sisters. Perhaps this was behind the other part of the tradition, coins hidden inside the pudding covered in rum flavored “hard sauce,” a bribe to get English and American children alike to eat this brown, steaming, mass of goo heartily.



Molly, Uncle Fred, Dad, Aunt Edith, Mildred, and Grandpa Burridge crowd round the Christmas feast

It had become a given that by some “predicable tradition,” the kids would find pennies, the adults nickels and dimes, and Dad, being the person serving the pudding would “amazingly” find a quarter, much to the cheerful groans of less “lucky” diners. He had three main questions in his mind about the plum pudding. First he wondered what ingredient in the dessert was so potent as to veritably clean “like new,” any part of the coin with which the pudding came in contact? More so, how many people had touched the coin they usually found inside a mouthful of pudding? Even more puzzling, why didn’t they all die of some dread “pudding and coin commuted disease?” None of these questions was enough however to keep him from requesting seconds, or at least another dollop of “hard sauce.”



A plum pudding sits waiting for the Christmas revelers to find the coins within

Following “the feast,” they had filled their time with talk of school budgets (a traditional meal topic at every family gathering), church news and showing off the boxes of Christmas presents. This was always tantamount to a “pop quiz” at school, as the correct pairing of each gift to the name of its giver was a sign of gratitude and appreciation. It had been fun this year as always, to watch Grampa’s face as you thanked him for the presents he had “bought you.” As in reality he had given Mom the money, and she had bought and wrapped the gifts, tagging them with, “Love Grandpa and Mildred”. The look on Grampa’s face was always a mixture of surprise followed by a “you’re welcome,” a smile and another wet kiss.

Upon completion of this, and the perfunctory offer of “just one more cup of tea,” they had heard their Grampa’s statement that he “wanted to get home before dark and the weather changes.” Another wet kiss, a wave goodbye, and they were back on their way to Hillsboro.

He and Dad had then taken Aunt Edith back to her apartment. She was moving much slower these days, having recovered from a broken hip last summer. They had both lingered just a few more minutes than usual, making sure she had everything she needed before leaving her to await the return of her boyfriend in the “forest green tights.” The realization of her inevitable passing fell upon him as he read the long list of “memorial services” posted on the bulletin board next to the elevator as they left. He had said a silent prayer that this would not be the last Christmas she shared with them, while somehow knowing in his heart it most likely would be.

The drive home was filled with the sounds of small talk as he and his Dad struggled to stay awake due to the effects of lack of sleep and a major overdose of turkey dinner. As they had listened casually to the “Great sounds of KISN 91 AM” they had both agreed that “Jingle Bell Rock” was a stupid song, and about the only thing worse was the infinite number of versions of “I saw Mommy Kissing Santa Clause.” They had driven along, the radio blaring far louder than his mom would ever allow. Perhaps it was another trick to stay awake, or perhaps it was as he suspected, that his Dad actually liked the music and loved sharing it together with his son. Whatever the case, they both sang along when Manfred Mann came on the air with “Doowadiddydididumdiddydoo,” and tried their best to make the sounds of the Theremin on the chorus of the “Good Vibrations.” Finally, they had passed the huge arches of the “Gateway Shopping Center,” signaling the advance of the last few blocks along Halsey Boulevard to their home.

Now, at last it was here. After weeks of waiting and preparation, his absolute favorite time of the year had arrived. Sitting cross-legged in the old armchair, his new book in one hand, a popcorn ball in the other, he closed his eyes to bask in the glow of his Mom and Dad cuddling quietly on the couch, and the fire crackling in the woodstove on the hearth.

For this one moment, all was right in his world. For this one moment, there was no war, no racial tensions, and no threat of famine, political assassinations or nuclear destruction. For this one moment, time itself seemed suspended and nothing else existed but the love he felt for each and every member of his family. He knew inevitably that time’s passage would mean the loss of some of those with whom had shared this day, as well as the advent of adulthood, marriage and a family of his own. But, at this moment he knew that no matter how many changes life brought, or how many miles separated them geographically, the depth of their love and the traditions they shared would forever be in his heart.

