

A Christmas Story

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When I was a kid the Christmas season began in our house sometime in mid to late September when we began to watch the mailbox on the front porch for the delivery of the Sears and Roebuck Christmas catalog. Sears sent out four catalogs a year; Spring, Summer, Fall and Winter. The Christmas addition was a bonus and what a bonus it was. It was huge with products to make the season bright for men, women, kids, the home, the car, and the pets. You get the idea.

The issue, of course, had close to thirty five pages of toys with pictures. As far as I was concerned, the rest of the book, which for the life of me I don't recall ever looking at, could have gone straight to the outhouse if we we had had one. The pages of toys were golden and were what dreams were made of. The timing of the arrival of the issue at our house was predicated on conditions and events that a nine year old kid could not be expected to know about. I and my siblings could only wait. When the waiting became too much we, the ones among us who were old enough to have mastered the art of verbal communication, were forced to enquire at specific intervals, say, every twenty four hours immediately upon arriving home from school,

"Did it come yet?"

"What?"

"Come on mom, the catalog?"

"Go clean your room."

Multiply that by 4 to 6 times a day, depending on who had learned to talk that year, and you can see why THE CATALOG was a sensitive topic.

But eventually it did arrive (early October?) and the battle royal began in earnest. The problem was that catalog brought the light of the ages into our house and only one flip through the pages of photos of guns, cars, construction sets, army guys, and, ok, dollhouses and other stuff shined the light of happiness on our humble abode. Each and every one of us believed deep down inside that this revelation had the power to bring true happiness into our adolescent world and 'I' alone was its prophet. We each needed time to sufficiently study the pages and choose wisely the correct 'One Big Gift From Santa' that all our future happiness depended on.

Well you all know how such convictions have played out in the Middle-East and around the world over the last few thousand years. It was not much different in our house. Major schools of thought arose, various sects mapped out their theology, summit conferences were called, and despite the shuttle diplomacy that caused some to cling to hope, the war began. In the end, it was usually a peace imposed from above that clearly allocated a specific time and duration for each of the combatants to have exclusive possession of the book.

Like all great texts, the catalog held secrets that could not be unlocked in one reading. With the precious time we had been given, we began to study that book like yeshiva boys. In those days, toys for girls and for boys were clearly segregated onto their own pages making it easy to eliminate at least half of the potential selections. Next it was easy to pick out several items pictured in the book as candidates for the short list. But a simple turning of a page had the power to disrupt the entire initial line up throwing the whole selection process into chaos. Studying the descriptions next to each photo was the only way forward. Problem was, even for us kids, the Madison Ave. sophistry of the copywriters made wading through the copy like a stroll across a minefield. After sorting the out right lies from the known flagrant exaggerations some solid intelligence could be gleaned

Over time the list could be whittled down and then by Thanksgiving a final choice was arrived at. With this major life event out of the way the next stage of preparation could be embarked on. Thanksgiving, although able to stand on its own as a major holiday, was in fact the gateway to the joy, happiness, and anxiety of Christmas. Certainly, the Christmas Season is the happiest time of the year. The message is abundantly clear from the media, the tinkling of silver bells on the street corners, the holiday greetings that are in the air, and even the jack-frost nipping at your nose. If you can't be happy at Christmas you will probably never be happy. Unfortunately, a less than optimistic message for many.

The wait for that magical day was long; good thing we always had a lot to do to distract us. Holiday shopping took up a lot of time and psychic energy. Making a list of all the folks a guy had to buy for, calculating and allocating meager cash resources, buying the stuff, and then wrapping them so they didn't look totally trashy under the tree next to the other gifts was enough to temporarily put a damper on the holiday cheer. Decorating was also a serious activity. In our Baltimore neighborhood most houses were decked for the season with garish displays of colored electric lights. There developed a certain level of competitiveness between the homeowners as to who could throw up the most gaudy and or holy display. Good thing for us, our mother refused to get sucked in. She said often that the bright flashing house lights made them look like bars or taverns. She never let us drape our house in lights. Later she did compromise and allow one electric candle in each window of our house, very understated and dignified.

Decorating the inside of the house was a different story. Early in the season cardboard boxes were dragged out of the attic and memories of Christmas past in the form of various decorations were extracted from the boxes. There were all kinds of knickknacks generally with angel, elf, Santa, and reindeer themes to cover every flat surface in the house. There was a three foot long reindeer and sleigh including a jolly Saint Nick surrounded by miniature wrapped gifts all laid out on a blanket of white cotton for snow. Of course there was the manger scene with all the main characters, the Virgin, Joseph, shepherds, camels, and three wise guys. The baby Jesus would be added on the historically proper day. My favourite was a big thick foot tall red candle. It was always mounted in a bed of fresh evergreen boughs and was lit on occasion to create a mood. Over the years it became shorter and shorter as we burned it down. It was enchanting to watch.

We also had an Advent wreath on the dining room table. My mom was a convert and the best Catholic in the house. She insisted that we pay attention to the real meaning of the season. The Advent wreath was constructed of evergreen branches and had five tall candles. There were three tall purple and one pink candle on the perimeter of the wreath. The four weeks of Advent, waiting for the messiah, were marked by lighting first one and, on each successive week, another until all four were lit. The white candle in the middle represented the birth of the messiah and was lit on Christmas Day. Each night we stood around the table and solemnly lit the appropriate candles all the while trying not to think about the coming of Santa.

Of course the most important house decoration was the tree. Nowadays the plastic or aluminum artificial tree is accepted and even enjoyed in many homes. Not us. Anything but a natural, fresh cut tree was a sacrilege. Selecting the correct tree involved a great deal of preparation, skill, and not a little luck. After all, the right tree in all its glory was the very harbinger of our happiness. Timing was everything. Fresh trees were harvested in far off northern lands, I supposed, tied in bundles, and trucked to street corner tree stands around the city of Baltimore. It was dad, the only one with a driver's license, that did the preliminary scouting. Once a lot was found with the potential of having the best tree at the most reasonable price was found we would pile into the station wagon and check it out. My favorite place was the lot at Memorial Stadium where the Orioles and Colts played. How could we go wrong making our purchase in such close proximity to the legends of the city. It was almost like shopping with Brooks Robinson or John Unitas looking over your shoulder. The goal was to find and take home the perfect tree. It was one of the earliest lessons I was to learn; there is no such thing as perfection. First of all we needed a tree that would reach all the way up to the ceiling of our living room. It had to be full, bushy, and round to adequately hold all of the anticipated presents under its skirt. Finally. It should not have any bare spots where the trunk could be seen. It was a tall order but we did our best. Since he had the bucks, dad had the final say on the lot.

Once we got it home there was a tree protocol that had to be followed. The optimum time to purchase a tree was twelve to ten days before Christmas. If you wait too long the selection is in danger of being depleted to the point of having to settle. If you were to bring the tree into the warm house early, the

drying and browning of the needles is accelerated. We always put the tree in a bucket of water outside in hopes of slowing the inevitable. On the twenty second the tree was brought inside, cut top and bottom to fit the space and set up in the tree holder. The tree was decorated the next day on mom's birthday. Before the trimming could begin a honest assessment had to be done. Holes on the green cover could be corrected by turning the hole to face the wall. Minor less than full spots were noted and a strategy put into place to cover them with large or dangling ornaments. The next step was to lay down a base of electric lights. The prudent would plug in and test every string for burned out bulbs. The brash would insist that the bulbs all worked last year and immediately throw them up on the tree. Of course they always lived to regret it when time was squandered un-wrapping string after string to find the rogue bulb. More life lessons, learned, or not.

Our mom was a proponent of what might be called the random country school of decorating. Out of a dozen cardboard boxes several hundred random and mismatched, what are collectively known as tree ornaments, were extracted. Under mom's direction they were randomly hung on the tree with care. Any two ornaments that even slightly resembled each other in size, shape, color, or design were hung as far apart as possible. The overall effect should look like we turned our backs and threw the ornaments at the tree. There were bells, balls, bulbs, angels, dogs, birds, horns, stars, houses, hats, anything but rats. Some were small, others tall. Some hung down and were ideal for concealing slight imperfections in the medium. Most were old and the memories that they conjured up had to be savored and talked about before hanging. A few were new and there was usually an objection by someone. There were also discussions, disagreements, and arguments over proper placements. Involving esthetics, philosophy, position in the family hierarchy, and who was the favorite; the tree became a true work of art and an expression of the Downey family culture. It took many hours. The final placement was the angel on top. She was dressed in angelic lace and had a cherubic porcelain face. This operation required dad and a ladder.

Last but not least was the throwing of the tinsel to cover the entire tree in a way that would appear as if Mother Nature herself had evenly distributed the icicles. After receiving the word from mom that it was finished, we were free to begin hauling wrapped presents out of hiding places and put them under the tree. At this point the final period of waiting could begin.

The very sight of the tree with its several hundred wrapped presents underneath made the waiting excruciating. Over the final few days the pleasure of the anticipated happiness built towards its peak. I keenly recall laying on the sofa one evening and just watching the tree lights blink, listening to carols, and wondering if this was the height of happiness or could I ever be happier. I had been completely caught up in the myth of "the happiest time of the year". The longest night of the year was Christmas Eve. Without a doubt the most popular strategy was to go to bed early and Christmas morning would come earlier. This plan fell apart when you lay in bed for hours listening for the sound of tiny hooves on the rooftop. For us kids Christmas morning came early, real early; four thirty or five. The parents were always intent on sleeping longer. We were forbidden to go down stairs until dad got up and went down first to turn on the tree lights. All we could do was to send one of the younger siblings over to the parents door to ask if it was Christmas yet. The first few times the answer was an emphatic no, you kids get back in bed. But finally it was.

Then the orgy of gifts began. With the lights blinking and Christmas candles lit, we were allowed downstairs. We each located and went directly to the place in the living room where our own 'One Big Gift From Santa' was set up. After a sufficient amount of time had passed while we admired our gift from Santa, dad began to hand out the presents from under the tree. He would pick up an interesting shaped package, check the tag, and call out a name. The owner would immediately tear off the wrapping and ribbon and show it to everyone. As we moved through the mountain of presents the discarded wrapping paper became first a pile and then a knee deep wave. I quickly divided my swag into two piles. One was the vaguely practical such as socks, gloves, scarves, hats, and underwear. In the other was the good stuff. As dad came to the end of the pile we turned our attention to evaluating the haul. Volume was only one consideration but it was the most apparent. Some assembly was always required and some stuff needed the correct number and size batteries. Things needed to be manipulated and explored. Inevitably it happened; a crack or a snap. Something was broken. A Little bit of the happiness began to slip away. Then there might be a crunch, got to be more careful. In fact on closer examination the quality, color, size, and all around coolness didn't quite match the catalog photo burned into my memory. It was part 22nd for the course and I could live with it but the heights of my happiness were now only a memory as reality set in. It didn't get better.

After cleaning up and reorganizing the field of battle it was off to High Mass and Christmas dinner. It was all good but there was no doubt that the pinnacle of happiness had passed. The following week was vacation and with no school there was plenty of time to try and recover. The lights, music, and decorations had lost their ability to enchant. By New Years it was clear there would be a long slide with nothing to look forward to but spring. It became clear that Christmas was over and next Christmas was almost a year away. A good three day blizzard was the only thing that might cheer me up at that point.

This post Christmas slump into reality became a reoccurring thing for me. Over time I was able to adjust by downsizing my expectations. I was able to put a damper on the feelings of exhilaration that the season coaxed out of me. Later, in middle and high school the best presents I got were books. Books didn't break and I learned I could get more happiness out of them by sitting in a quiet place and letting my mind go. I read everything I could lay my hands on. The local public library became my home away from home. It was the perfect place to spend hot summer days, enjoying the air conditioning and traveling the world. My literary tastes ran to realistic drama and adventures. He

I identified with the heroes of biographies and novels. The likes of Lincoln, Daniel Boone and JFK became my mentors. Vince Lombardi became my coach. Gerry Kramer and Jackie Robinson were like teammates. I developed my moral compass by reading the lives of the saints. Deep in my bones I felt a longing to be a hero, a saint, or even a martyr. It was a rich internal world that I fed constantly.

As I got older, historical novels enriched and expanded my view of the world. I learned about China from Pearl S. Buck. I sailed up and down that exotic country's rivers aboard a gunboat in *The Sand Pebbles*. I voyaged to Hawaii with Michener. I hunted Michigan's Upper Peninsula and darkest Africa with Hemingway. I joined the Marines and went to war courtesy of Leon Uris. Like a sponge I absorbed the scenes and characters of the people in my favorite novels. I swaggered through the hallways of the hospital alongside Randall McMurphy and found a new role model in Kersey. My occasional battles with mom and dad reminded me of standing up to the Big Nurse. Without realizing it, my own character was shaped by the world of fiction.

Now days I live in South Korea and Christmas is a one day holiday celebrated mostly in the Christian churches and by young couples. That's alright with me. I'll spend the holiday reading and writing.

Merry Christmas to all.