

Chapter 5

Christmas

The excitement for Christmas began with the coming of fall. Fall meant Deer Season; Deer Season meant Thanksgiving. Thanksgiving meant a short few weeks of school until Christmas vacation. Starting with the changing colors of the leaves, an undercurrent of excitement started to bubble beneath the surface of everyday nonsense. Killing time until December. It was like planning a surprise party; pretending everything is normal on the surface but suppressing laughter and the urge to skip everywhere.

By the time the first snow fell and didn't melt away, we couldn't contain our excitement anymore. It openly showed on our faces and we openly snickered because our family and friends didn't have a clue as to what we'd gotten them, but they were going to love it; we were certain of that.

The last few years I lived at home over Christmas break, Papa let me have my own little Christmas tree in my room, complete with 2 strands of regular lights, a my most favorite ornaments, and Mom's smallest handmade Christmas tree skirt. I'd put the presents I'd wrapped under it and beam with pride over my purchases and anticipated reactions. I'd write in my journal late into the night by the light of only the little Christmas tree next to my bedroom window, and watch the snow accumulate or the moon reflect into the snow and add hours to the Blue Period with its light.

As the years went on, we settled into a good Christmas routine that involved cooking, church, gift opening, family time, and then the rush of preparing for 40 friends and family

to arrive. The cooking began almost two weeks ahead of time. Bags and bags of potatoes, four different kinds of sausages, poppy seed by the pound, cookie dough ingredients by the truckload, smoked chubs from the one store in the tri-county area... Mom had to time the making of everything perfectly, and make ample meals on top of the Christmas cooking to avoid us "sampling" too much between now and Christmas.

Christmas Eve was dedicated to church. The church Christmas program was over a week ago, so my brother and I were no longer worried about remembering our lines, or all the words to "We Three Kings." We pulled out all the stops; Christmas dress for me, black dress slacks and a button-down for my brother, nice shoes despite the snow and ice (because Papa would drop us off by the front door under the vestibule), and hearts and heads filled with the lyrics to "Joy to the World." Christmas Eve service was also special because it was at night and we all got to hold and light small candles during the second-to-last hymn, "Silent Night." The ushers lit the candles nearest to the aisle, and then the flame was passed down the pew. When most of the candles were lit, the overhead lights in the church were all turned off-- one section at a time-- front to back, and soon each face was lit only by a flickering candle. Between the song and the yellow candlelight, it softened the heart to tears. ...And if there was a dry eye in the room, it was only because of the hot wax dripping down the skinny candles.

We always dawdled in the church entrance on our way out, wishing friends and Sunday school classmates, "Merry Christmas," and asking about family that was due to arrive and Christmas plans. Eventually, Papa put on his coat and overshoes to bring the car around and we piled in, admiring the Christmas lights on our route home.

After changing into our pajamas, we all convened in the living room and pretended to care about the 10:00 news and weather. Our minds drifted, like our eyes, a little left to the Christmas tree. We'd rise and straighten askew bubble lights or ask about this ornament or who was supposed to be showing up with the family tomorrow. In addition to the regular family members who lived nearby, Mom also invited a few elderly folks who didn't have family or anyone else to spend the holiday with.

Eventually, around 11:00, my brother and I were shooed to bed to wait for tomorrow. I don't quite know how, but eventually, I always managed to fall asleep.

When I was younger and Christmas was more about getting than giving, I set my alarm for 3:00 AM Christmas morning. I always had a flashlight on my headboard, so I grabbed it and slithered out of bed. I opened my door with more patience and stealth than I'd ever demonstrated all year. I stood in my doorway and looked left, at my parents' door; shut and no noise coming from within. Then I looked right, at my brother's door; again, shut and no noise. Wait. I heard something and listened harder. To my right. I turned my head toward the noise, and then away, giving my ear time to register the sound. My brother was snoring.

I crept down the hall, keeping the flashlight off for now. When my feet touched the cold tile of the entryway, I veered slightly left and into the dining room, then through to the living room to the east wall where the tree stood; a formidable, looming presence in the dark. I glanced behind me before turning on my flashlight, covering the light with my hand. As I loosened my grip, more light spilled out around my hand and on the slough of presents at my feet. I ran the minimal light over the tags; big one for my brother, medium box for me (shaken, sounds of tissue paper—maybe clothes?), small box for my brother, medium box

for my brother, big box for me (heavy; unable to shake—excitement mounting), and so on. Everything was wrapped, so there truly was no peeking, lest they know what I'd been up to in the wee hours.

Satisfied that my brother and I received roughly the same number of presents, I checked the milk and cookies we'd left out. Milk gone, and one bite of cookie left. I wondered how many cookies Santa ate on a night like tonight surely the crash from the Christmas cookie sugar rush had to last about a week. But then again, he's Santa. He's magic. He probably didn't have issues with crashing from sugar.

I turned off the flashlight and crept back through the living room, dining room, down the hall, and into my room. I turned the knob completely and eased the door shut. Positively giddy with excitement, I tossed and turned for an hour before getting back to sleep.

Commotion coming from the living room woke me three hours later, and I traipsed out for gift opening.

My brother and I sorted the gifts into piles for everyone in their traditional seats. Me on the floor in front of the fireplace (that was only lit once a year on this day, but much later in the day), my brother on the couch, Papa in his recliner, and Mom in her chair with the ottoman. And we'd take turns opening. I liked the spot by the fireplace because everyone else was in front of me. I could watch everyone's unwrapping style (ripping paper or saving paper), or their poker faces... as Papa pretended to be surprised at the 100th tie or Old Spice aftershave he received from us. Sometimes Papa genuinely surprised Mom. Their running "joke" at Christmas was that Papa would wrap a piece of wood. She would usually be wary because sometimes what she needed and what Papa thought she needed were two totally

different things. The piece of wood itself was usually a 1x6 or 1x8, and he would write in permanent marker on it something like, "It's another BOARD GAME! This coupon is good for one weekend with the in-laws without complaining!"

Then they would end up discussing it. Should they do something else with the money or time that Mom needed or wanted more?

When the unwrapping was done, hugs and thank yous were passed all around, I would stand at the north windows and stare as far away as I could, over the tops of the trees, and say, "Thank you, Santa." We picked up the wrapping paper and stuffed it in the biggest box or a trash bag to be burned in the wood stove. Then my brother and I would cart off our gifts to our rooms and pick out which of the new clothes to wear today. Mom would race to the kitchen and start heating up lunch and making last-minute dishes for the horde of relatives to come.

Pretty soon, the din rose to apocalyptic levels with orders to bring up the two big tables and all the chairs up from the basement. Wipe them down, get out the tablecloths and napkins—no, the good napkins! No, *paper* napkins at the kids' table! Get the electric burner from the closet in the basement; I need more cooking space! Where did you go? It doesn't take a half-hour to get the burner! I needed that an hour ago! What do you mean "what closet!?" The closet with all the canned food stuff downstairs! Oh, never mind; I'll just get it myself. Come here and stir this. Are you eating that directly out of the ladle? Oh, for crying out loud! Well, does it need salt? While you're there, try the poppy seed noodles- do they need more sugar? OK, get the table set. Where is your brother? Tell him to get out of the shower; he's not the only one who needs to clean up! OK now, go get the benches from the

garage; we'll put them against the wall so the wall won't get dinged by chair backs all day long. Why is it so cold in here? Who left the door open? Were you born in a barn? (An ironic statement on Christmas, but detrimental to anyone pointing that out just now.)

We all busted our butts to find the best setup for two 3'x12' tables in addition to our usual dining room set in our limited dining area. There was only 18 inches between the parallel tables with the chairs pushed in, so with everyone seated, no one would be able to get in or out. Perfect.

I was charged with dusting the living room, collecting all the chairs from around the house, arranging extra seating in the living room, setting the tables, turning on all of the decorative lighting, removing our coats from the coat closet, hiding the laundry, answering the phone, and making sure the basement was situated for us cousins to destroy later. My brother and Papa got the tables and chairs wiped down and arranged, then Papa started at the top of the stairs, wiping them down as he went to the basement to "tidy up his side of the basement." Clearly, that was code for "I'll just slip down here and get out of the fray for a while." Mom always hollered down to him to not add any wood to the stove because she was hot standing over the stove and besides, pretty soon it would be 80 degrees in the house with all of the people in it. Sometimes he would listen to her and other times she would pierce him with a glare as she fanned herself and he'd shrug and say, "I only added one piece to keep the coals going!"

People showed up anywhere from a half-hour ahead of the appointed lunch time to a half-hour late. We greeted everyone like we hadn't seen them all at some point throughout the week admired new clothes and boots, and I took coats and hung them in the coat closet.

Mostly we stayed around the entryway to be close when Mom said it was time to eat and Uncle Dennie was there to "ask the blessing." And there was the added bonus of all the desserts being piled on Mom's kitchen desk, perfect for scoping out what to save an appetite for-- and snitching-- if I was feeling particularly brave. Prior to 1988, Grandma was the bearer of the Christmas cookies. All shapes, sizes, and colors of sprinkles would show up on dozens of trays. I'd sneak my hand under the cellophane as I set them down on the desk and come away with one or two. And she was kind enough to pretend not to notice.

The boys would try to stand where they thought the lunch line would start to get at the food first. Through the years we discovered that buffet-style lunch was the easiest, although our kitchen and dining room weren't really set up for it very well. The kitchen was filled with all the moms, fussing over and putting the finishing touches on this or that; the living room held the patient and grateful elderly, struggling to hear a conversation amongst themselves over the din in the next room; and the dining room was filled with everyone else clamoring over food, wishing each other "Merry Christmas," and corralling the youngest while assessing the safety of the surroundings and the locations of the nearest breakables.

After Uncle Dennie said the prayer, the boys took two steps forward to begin the line. The aunts and uncles, tired of chastising, just rolled their eyes and stepped aside. Honestly, us girls weren't much better. There was always more than enough food and desserts, but we were always concerned about getting enough. The running theory was, first to eat, first to the desserts.

The quietest it was in our house on this day was always prayer time and right after most everyone was seated and eating. Spoons would scrape up the last drops of soup, followed by a buttered roll to wipe the bowl clean. Knives would cut sausages, and then the sausage would sop up the sauerkraut and mashed potato mix. Sodas in plastic cups would bubble audibly. Soon the murmurings about how delicious everything was would begin to float around the room and settle on the proud moms, making them blush and deflect the compliments to polite conversation about recipe changes between this year and last, phone calls received from family who couldn't be here, and stories about gift opening from that morning. That led to storytelling in general, mostly to the detriment of the kids in the room, so we grabbed one more round of desserts and headed off to either our bedrooms or the basement.

Our basement held the allure of having 4 arcade games that Papa took in trade for work he'd done for some folks. We had Crash, Pinball, Space Invaders, and Speedway. We challenged each other, but no one was better than my brother and I, since we mastered them the first year. After we all got sick of that, we moved on to the family room part of the basement. Opposite Mom's craft corner was a TV and we had a large selection of VHS movies, so after a half-hour debate, we agreed on a movie to watch.

I remember watching *Armageddon* and *Independence Day* for the first time in the basement with my cousins crowded into beanbag chairs, the couch, and on piles of pillows. Sometimes the aunts and uncles would get curious about our lack of commotion and one of them would check on us and get sucked into the movie right along with us.

After the movie we all trooped up the stairs like a herd of buffalo and dug into the food again. Usually just desserts this time. There was a veggie platter for the guilty, who would rather balance their sweets with something nutritious, but usually no one under the age of 15 did that.

Once most of us were back in the dining and living rooms, Mom would corral us in tighter into the living room for what eventually became The Initial Game. Instead of buying each family member a gift, we started out drawing names and only getting that one person a gift. A year or two later, it evolved into "The Initial Game." At Thanksgiving dinner, we would write our names on a scrap of paper and 2 to 4 initials of a gift that we would like. Then Mom would put every scrap of paper in a jar and each person would draw. As a giver, you had to buy the person whose name you drew a gift that somehow matched the initials. Try not to spend more than \$25 and make the gift useful. It was always so interesting and funny to hear the giver's (typically humorous) story of turmoil and angst over what to give the person, and all the guesses as to what the initials could possibly mean. In some cases, it was obvious, but usually unattainable within the \$25 parameter of the game. But in other cases, it was impossible to know, but fun to try to figure out, and at least resulted in a useful, if not misguided gift. One Christmas I was in college and doing a lot of driving, my initials were TTT for a Toyota Tacoma Truck. My cousin Andy drew my name and got me a Tow strap, no-Tow cables (jumper cables), and Tie downs (bungee cords). Another year my initials were MN for "Mystery Novels." My cousin-in-law Liz got me a Mini-Nativity (nativity scene in a snow globe), and a Mink (k)Nockoff (soft polyester throw blanket). I enjoyed the stories and we would all laugh so hard.

The men were always talking, it seemed to me. Most of the time I didn't understand what the conversation was about, and therefore didn't care to stay and hear the remainder of it. After establishing that this was once again true, the cousins would make a plan. For many years, us girls would play in my room until some petty argument would ensue and we would split up, eventually returning to the desserts. The boys would grab their .22s and BB guns and look for something to shoot in the woods out back. As we got older, we learned to play together. The more memorable of those plans included building snow forts and playing hockey on the pond at the farm. In boots. ...with shovels. ...and glow-in-the-dark hockey pucks.

Over the years, more of us cousins opted out of the movie and joined the moms in playing games or the men in the living room talking. The moms usually played games like Pictionary, Taboo, gin rummy or Sequence; innocent enough on the surface but roiling just below with an almost violent competitive nature previously believed to be unattainable by these people we knew as our... mothers. Even if I was the odd-man-out for this hand or this whole game, it was worth it to see my aunts (church choir leader and piano player, boy scout troop mom, and church treasurer amongst them) accusing each other of mis-playing hands or bending the rules.

And when I joined the guys in the living room, I realized that the conversations weren't so confusing if you stayed for most or all of it. The conversations were usually hunting stories from deer seasons gone by or epic winters with 10 or more feet of snow. *Good stories.* Stories of Uncle Dennie's escapades in Alaska, stories of when they all were kids. It was always so hard for me to imagine my Papa as a kid. To think of Papa raising Cain with his

brothers and making my sweet, Christmas-cookie bearing Grandma angry? Unfathomable. I can't even remember the last time I saw Papa run, much less perform all of the stunts I heard about over those Christmases.

During the lull of the late afternoon, there was always a few who fell asleep. My uncles who were out plowing roads all night so families could see each other on Christmas day, my uncle and cousin who had been up since 4 AM milking cows and cleaning the barn, and a few who were just tired.

Everyone was called back for dinner after evening milking, around 8:00 PM. A late dinner, but we'd snacked all afternoon, so it wasn't so hard to wait. Uncle Dennie asked the blessing once again unless he had to be out plowing from snow that accumulated throughout the day. And once again, we saddled up to the plethora of foods we rarely got but on this day every year, and therefore felt obligated to eat far more than we should. We were much slower to eat and savored the food this time, but we still ate too much. It's always a little easier to think of our favorite Christmas foods with a slight nausea, and vow to let another year go by before indulging again. We did everything a little slower after dinner. Dragging our feet like reluctant little kids, trying not to pout because two months of preparation and planning had come to fruition and ended too quickly for everybody's liking.

However slowly because of the full hearts and tummies, the moms cleared the mess of dinner, wrapped up leftovers, rounded up gifts, hustled up the dads who had started a new round of storytelling, corralled kids (newly-revived thanks to dessert), found footwear, encased their clan in their coats, and spent 15 minutes in the entryway hugging and

thanking everyone for the gifts and the great day. The hugging and thanking would normally take longer than 15 minutes, hence applying the coats first. By the time everyone was overheating, they were ready to venture out into the cold to head home.

When the last guest was safely down the driveway, Papa shut the front door, locked it, turned off the outside lights, and exhaled audibly. He paused for a few moments to appreciate the silence an empty house brings. The silence seemed almost louder than the din of an hour ago. The long-ignored fatigue in feet and legs started to settle in as lead. From where the edge of the entryway meets the dining room, we surveyed the damage and decided what had to be dealt with tonight and what could wait until tomorrow. Papa made the first of those decisions while Mom did the final rinse cycle on the kitchen and dining room.

To avoid the silence morphing into an emptiness, we all tried to turn the remainder of the day into any other normal day; the routine of jammies, bathroom rituals, watching the weather and making plans for tomorrow. Plans for tomorrow always helped most, but it was still sad to be over the anticipation of another Christmas. Soon I would remember that New Year's is only a week away and fall asleep making a list of everything I wanted to do before school started again.