# Christmas at Sandy Point

## (Or, Ghosts of My Christmases Past)

by
By David W. Griffith

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Yet another Christmas has come and gone, and reluctant to let it go, I spend the quieter hours sitting in front of a cozy fireplace that is festooned with greenery and lights, reminiscing over the childhood ghosts of my Christmases past. Off to the side, in its place of honour, our ceiling-high tree proudly stands, aglow with lights and myriad ornaments that are themselves a history of many past Christmases. I have spent all of my Christmases so far on the South Shore of Nova Scotia, where life is still lived at a less hectic pace and thankfully, old traditions, family values and seasonal rituals tend to endure.

As we grow older, our memories often fade, details begin to blur, and pieces of the mosaic go missing. It is in part because of this inevitability that I key these words, so that these precious memories, some now just fleeting, ghostly images, and others more richly detailed tapestries, will be forever saved before the fog of time forever obscures them. It is my hope that successive generations will be able to look back at what I now feel was a simpler, gentler, even enchanted time, when Christmas was less commercial and more magical and perhaps more human. This is less a chronology, and more a patchwork quilt of memories chronicling the smells, tastes, sights, music, laughter, love and anticipation that were Christmas. As they come to me, I write about them, and they are thus sheltered from obscurity as long as there are willing eyes.

As I look back and then return to my present, I see some things that still endure to this day, traditions

that have survived the years and have carried over to the present. Other memories recall warm images and echoes of loved ones now departed. Yet these voices still echo fondly through the warm medium of Christmas remembrance. At Christmas time more than any other, memories seem to burn more brightly, and perhaps by some divine editing unknown to us, it seems that the fond memories always come to the fore at the expense of the petty arguments, excesses and foibles that inevitably occur during the festive season.

And so I present to you, dear reader, my remembrance of childhood Christmases past in a little unspoiled place on the South Shore of Nova Scotia called Sandy Point. Perhaps you have similar patchwork quilts of your own, and perhaps these words will help you recall your own precious yuletide memories. Perhaps like me, you will wrap yourself in these memories like a warm blanket, raise a glass of eggnog in warm salute to the season, and fondly welcome into your heart and home your own ghosts of Christmas past.

Merry Christmas! May we never lose the magic of the Christmases that were, and let us resolve to keep Christmas past alive by sharing fond memories of this blessed and magical season!

# ADVENT

## WEATHER...

Cold! So cold your cheeks got numb, and your speech became slurred. That's how I remember many of the Christmas seasons of my childhood. Perhaps it's just a quirk of memory or a symptom of aging, but days like that seem rare now, often not happening well into January or beyond. Back then (we're talking the 60s here for the most part, and some early 70s), great fluffy blankets of snow often covered the ground well before Christmas, ensuring not only a white Christmas but a white advent as well. Snowmen were made then, and they lived long lives!

Excursions outdoors generally consisted of mummifying oneself in multiple layers of warm clothing, finishing off with a warm pair of home-made woollen mittens and a warm toque or cavernous fur-lined hood. The snow of those years sometimes descended as big, lazy flakes dancing downward so slowly you could almost discern each one's unique geometry as it drifted toward the earth. Other times, they came with a vengeance, as if driven by Old Man Winter himself in a fit of seasonal anger, the flakes whipping and swirling about amid breath-stealing gusts of cold December wind.

And the cold Decembers brought more than snow. Oftentimes the entire perimeter of the house was festooned with legions of icicles of all sizes, making it look like some kind of fairly tale ice castle, or perhaps a brilliant ice cave encrusted with crystalline stalactites. I recall "hunting" the biggest ones, hurling firmly-lacked snowballs to dislodge them, and then watching as they fell and stabbed the

snow-encrusted earth below. A few moments later I stood knee-deep in a snowdrift brandishing a weapon worthy or Norse god, or perhaps a unique winter confection meant to be nibbled and gnawed like a giant popsicle sans flavour or colour.

The abundance of snow also led to the careful construction of snow forts, crude little igloo-inspired enclosures that one could crawl into a sit in silent contemplation of all things Christmas, the dull glow of a winter's day just barely penetrating its icy walls. Two separate techniques were employed to erect these winter hovels, the first being careful stacking of great chunks of hard, crusty snow, and then filling the cracks with softer "fill" snow. The second technique, my favourite, involved simply shovelling and scooping soft, "packy" snow onto an ever-growing mountain. Once the desired height of the white stuff was achieved, it was packed and patted until a crude dome was fashioned. Finally the dome was scooped, hollowed out until a comfy inner chamber was carved into it. A final option at the point was to sprinkle or spray water over the finished product, which, once frozen, imparted a nice hard exterior to the fort. And then, you just went inside and sat, triumphant.

## THE POND...

How fortunate we were as kids to have a skating pond so close to home! A quick walk across the road led to a magical place where in winter one could slide, skate, play hockey or curl with stones found along the pond's edge.

The pond wasn't very big, but it was still big enough to skate or slide on. We always had to take care to check the ice first to ensure that it was thick enough to sustain our weight. An ominous deep rumbling reminiscent of an approaching thunderstorm was warning enough to stay off the temping glass-like surface yet a while longer. I remember two or three iron posts jutting up in the middle of the pond, and to this day can't imagine what their purpose was. They did serve as excellent brakes when one went into an out-of-control slide, I suppose. And those happened often.

Once I had resolved to learn how to skate, dad had the pond enlarged and reshaped into a hockey-friendly rectangular rink. I never did make much of a skater, and made an even worse hockey player, but those seemingly endless days and moonlit nights skating on that wonderful pond are among my fondest and most cherished winter memories. Imagine a glassy sheet of natural ice surrounded by snow-covered trees and ice-glazed bushes and the sounds of winter birds punctuating the stillness of a winter's day, and you will know why no indoor arena could ever rival such a thing. This was the true majesty of winter.

The little pond is gone now; a neighbour's home now occupies that hallowed ground. But the pond will live on in my memory, and to those who wish to share in it.

## CRANBERRIES...

I cannot be certain that the annual cranberry harvest was exclusively a Christmas ritual, but it generally did happen around that time of year. After all, who would even think of decorating a Christmas plate with canned berries? Preposterous! Mom's homemade cranberry sauce, cooked lovingly in a big enamel pot atop the stove could never be duplicated in a can, and never will. I can still picture it bubbling merrily in its pot, a rich pink froth floating upon the surface, and bursts of steam floating heavenward.

I often accompanied dad on his cranberry journeys, which took us either into the woods across the road in search of promising bogs among the stands of fir and spruce, or perhaps along the shoreline, the sound of waves and the calls of seagulls, and the scent of salt air greeting our senses as we trudged through bushes in search of the coveted red berry.

Upon a triumphant return, mom would then separate the berries from leaves and sticks and work her magic in the big blue porcelain pot. Soon it would be a steaming, bubbling sea of molten red cranberry sauce, ready to be cooled and stored until the lucky day that it would adorn our plates as a colourful accompaniment to the featured bird of the season.

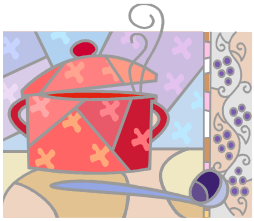
## MINCEMEAT...

To this day we still use mom's treasured recipe. Like many of its time it was less science and more art, exacting proportions less important than adjusting "to taste", pinches and dashes replacing teaspoons or millilitres. It took a lot of experience, a lot of tasting, and a lot of love to get it right. My unique and privileged role in this process was that of "official taster". The perks of this exalted position were obvious, and I must confess that on more than one occasional did I deem it necessary to have another taste, just to be sure, when I knew full well it was already perfect. Mom never objected, God bless her.

Ah the smell of mincemeat day! It permeated the house. Sweet aromas of cinnamon, cloves, allspice, apples, the tang of cider vinegar, and gamey aroma of venison (when we could get it), molasses and raisins,

suet and more, all intermingling, the slow heat blending it all into a culinary masterpiece. You can buy mincemeat nowadays, sometimes in bags and also in jars, the latter being so removed from true mincemeat that it seems criminal to even use that word to describe it.

Mom's recipe, handed down over generations, was and is the real thing, as it was meant to be, and I think that if perchance I had the opportunity to market this miracle and retire on the proceeds, I would not. Some things are sacred.



## OTHER SEASONAL FARE...

Aside from the aforementioned mincemeat and cranberry sauce, and the "Cratchit Dinner" that I will elaborate on later, other holiday fare wafts across the years and into memory. I remember the fruitcakes, dark and light (fruitcakes were never a favourite of mine, but mom's were of course the best if you *did* like that particular breed of cake), the curious Tom and Jerry (dark and light in one cake), and colourful gumdrop cakes, bespeckled jewel-like with multicoloured bits of the sticky confection. But of all the cakes mom made for Christmas, none could rival her crowning achievement, the pound cake! Made with a pound of real butter (no margarine wannabes in this cake!), a small finger of the sweet, dense treasure was almost a meal, and the taste was pure magic. Rich, yellow, moist, dense, what a magnificent mouthful of Christmas decadence!

## CANDIES...

One of the most difficult challenges of the advent of Christmas was waiting for the special candies that dad always purchased for Christmas treats. When I was very young of course, these only materialized in my stocking on Christmas morning, compliments of Santa. During my "post believer" years I always knew in advance where they were hidden away, on the top shelf of the closet in my parents' bedroom. Knowing I could not...dare not...open the packages before the appointed time, I often just sneaked into the room and stared at them, imagining the sweet and exotic tastes of those seasonal confections. There were the hard, semi-transparent red and yellow "barley toys", usually referred to by me as "animal candies" since most were in the shapes of various fauna. Then there were the exotic ribbon candies, in a rainbow of colors and designs. These seemed almost too pretty to bite into. Finally were the crèmes, soft and fudge-like on the inside, harder and sugary on the outside, and in various flavours and colors. They would melt in your mouth if you could wait that long, but of course you couldn't. My personal favourite was maple. There are so many varieties of candy available today, but somehow precious few of them, not even the high priced "designer" candies can match the sweet magic of those three packages resting atop the shelf in my parents' closet. Sweet remembrance!

## THE CONCERT...

Like my parents, my church career was an on and off affair, and my memories are therefore not vivid. One particular year does stand out, however, where our Sunday school class put on a little production one evening leading up to Christmas. My role, in addition to participating in the compulsory carol sing, was to deliver a brief monologue. I cannot recall exactly what it was about...perhaps a reindeer? I honestly am guessing here! I do however remember pulling it off without a hitch, much to the delight of mom and dad in the audience, and then departed after a brief curtsey. Why a curtsey and not a bow? I have no idea. I was just glad to get off the stage. Following the concert, we all participated in a little gift exchange. I got a Lifesaver Story Book, a timeless little gift that appears in Christmas stockings to this very day, albeit now with fewer chapters.

## OUTDOOR DECORATIONS...

The soft glow of Christmas lights shining through great clumps of white snow after a heavy snowfall must surely be one of the most beautiful sights of the season. Dad often put up the lights several weeks before Christmas, and coming some evening after grocery shopping in town with those lights aglow to welcome us back was pure Christmas magic. Such sights made the long hours of cold hands fumbling with bulbs and extension cords well worth it. The lights radiated a warm, inviting glow, unlike those new LED lights that are all the rage now. Their almost ghastly, lifeless glow is a far cry from the warmth radiating from those incandescent bulbs. Sometimes progress just *isn't.*

I remember one Christmas when dad, on the advice from a co-worker I think, thought it a capital idea to use those small disposable aluminum pie plates as reflectors for the bulbs in our outdoor lights. You basically punched a hole through the middle of a plate and then pushed the blub through, and Presto! A reflector. I'm not certain to this day how mom felt about it. It certainly was noticeable; perhaps too much? As for me, well I was a kid after all, so the brighter the better!

Last but not least was our light-up Santa who faithfully guarded our front door for many a Christmas. Seeing him standing there, beckoning among the myriad lights in the background just made me feel all warm inside. Now Santa has moved inside, his jolly glow radiating from within as he stands in his place of honour in front of the big picture window in the "good room". His colour has perhaps faded a bit,

much like memories do, but he is still very much the Santa of old. May he always shine his message of peace, joy, merriment and childlike wonder!

## BRINGING HOME THE TREE

Now here are memories too plentiful to even untangle! So many trips into the woods to bring back that perfect fir. So many perfect trees, sculpted by Mother Nature herself, having never seen the blade of a tree farmer's shears. The script was always the same. We'd leave early enough to have enough time to find *the* tree and drag it home, sometimes for miles, through the forest and into its place of honour in the living room. Some years it snowed, which was a mixed blessing, since although the forest was magically transformed into a wonderland of pristine white and rich evergreen, it was harder to discern a tree's shape if it was covered with great clumps of snow.

How I looked forward to those long treks into the forest with my father! The crunch of snow underfoot as we trudged happily through grassy field and tangled bush, the gentle trickle song of partly frozen streams, the haunting calls of winter birds and the skittering of squirrels among the trees, and the crisp forest air laced with evergreen scent are as vivid in memory today as they were back then, There were times when all I could do was just stop...stand

still...listen, and revel in the majesty of nature, whose kingdom I was so privileged to share in that moment.

It's funny – we never seemed to be faced with having to choose our tree. I truly believe that in those days the tree chose us. It just happened. All of a sudden there it stood, as if it had been waiting those many years for us to adopt it and let it warm our home at Christmas time, its branches waiting to be festooned with the Griffith decorations that waited patiently in boxes in our attic.

Dad would wield his hatchet or saw, and fell the tree carefully, and then our return journey would begin, the burden of the tree's weight more than offset by the way its discovery lightened our spirits. It was a true labour of love, conveying the tree through the words and bushes, seeking paths and opening in the woods to hasten our journey home and protect those precious boughs in transit. Once we heard the distant sound of cars on the road we knew the worst was behind us and that easier travels were close by. Soon, ruddy-faced, our breaths exhaled in great puffs of steam, we emerged triumphant from the wood and brought our tree home.

Many of our trees came from across the road, behind Cal's barn. There we found a path to conduct us deeper into the woods, but often we had to abandon the path proper to find a good stand of firs deeper in the forest. Sometimes however, the woods between our house and the shore would deliver the perfect tree. That was a good part of the fun of tree hunting, never knowing where you'd find it, a magical quest taking you away from the chaos of man's world and into the quiet sanctuary of nature's realm. Several Griffith

trees were, I think, brought home from other communities as well, such as when dad would go off on a tree hunt for school trees.

I remember vividly the last year we actually got our tree the “old way”. For whatever reason, maybe it was a coming of age of sorts, I would go solo on the annual tree hunt. I chose Cal’s woods as my starting point, and much to my delight found a splendid tree after only about a half hour’s trek. I could even see it beckoning from the path, so didn’t have to drag it far over wild or uneven terrain. I was so filled with pride as I dragged that pretty little fir into our yard and into a Griffith Christmas. Maybe my memory is embellishing things just a trifle, but I truly recall that fir as being almost perfect – symmetrical, full boughs, and the perfect height. Nobody disagreed.

After that year our trees were still natural of course, but were selected from local tree farms. We loved those trees as much as any, and accorded them the same honours as the wild cousins that preceded them. They most certainly were more geometrically perfect than any wild tree ever was, but as I look back now to that simpler time when a tree was found and not bought, I ask, what could be more perfect than a tree lovingly shaped by the hand of God Himself?

## CARDS

High postage rates have all but wiped out the exchanging of cards in our family today. What few we do exchange are often delivered by hand or even sent electronically. Back when I was a child it was an annual tradition to exchange with family and friends, and it was always nice to display the cards, with their festive artwork, some depicting the blessed first Christmas, others showing grand Currier and Ives winterscapes, and still others depicting Santa and his magical kingdom. It was always nice to receive a Christmas card from afar or just down the road.

We also had exchanges in school, although they tended to be more popularity contests than anything else. The student with the most cards at the end of it all was the overall winner, I guess. I'm just not sure of *what.* But we were kids after all, and back then it was a welcome diversion from regular school work and another sign that the beloved season was fast approaching. While cards were perhaps not as significant as some other traditions at Christmas, I miss them nonetheless.

## TREASURES IN THE ATTIC

To a young boy, our walk-in attic was always a dark and mysterious place, but as Christmas approached, those qualities were laced with an extra touch of magic, for there, in boxes amid the cobwebs, they waited, those magical and beloved Christmas decorations. Some boxes contained tangled masses of indoor and outdoor lights, not the mini-lights of today and certainly not those ghastly, otherworldly LED lights that are now in vogue. No, the lights in those boxes promised that warm and cozy glow that would adorn our tree and windows during the holiday season. Other boxes contained our well-used glass balls, knotted bundles of icicles and yards upon yards of golden tinsel. As the season approached, it seemed every time mom went upstairs, my heart would race. Would *this* be the day the ornaments came down, out of the darkness and into the light, to be readied for the decorating festivities to follow? Such anticipation!

## MUSIC

When I was a small boy, we had an old record player-radio console. I recall it as a rather large cabinet made from real wood (no veneers and wood "product" back then!), with a large speaker, a felt-covered turntable, and big oversized polished wood dials. It was as much a piece of furniture as it was an entertainment unit. Our record collection was a modest one; I think perhaps we had three Christmas records in total: two 78 RPM records, a song on each side (I remember *The First Noel* and *It Came Upon a Midnight Clear* on one), and a single 33 RPM LP full of pipe organ carols. Year after year this was our Christmas "collection". I don't think we ever tired of it or desired more. The stately majesty of that pipe organ music still rings loud and clear in my memory to this day.

## SANTA ON TV

In the days of my youth, our television choices were limited. In fact, I recall that during my "believer" years we had only one channel, the venerable CBC. About two weeks before Christmas, Santa would begin broadcasting and would visit via the airwaves every evening just before my bedtime. During these brief broadcasts the jolly old elf would share a few words of Christmas wisdom and perhaps allow us a brief glimpse into his "peekatwink" machine. This was followed by a visit to Toytown, which was essentially a well-timed commercial featuring a very human-looking, very pretty elf featuring a toy or toys from the sponsor (Simpsons? Sears? I can't remember). Then back to Santa to recite the sacred "Christmas Pledge". As I recall, it went something like this: *"I promise to be good, in every way, so that I can help make every day, almost as happy as Christmas Day*". A few "Ho Ho Ho's", and back to regular programming. But oh how I waited for that nightly broadcast, especially the final one on Christmas Eve. I could almost *feel* that cold North Pole air rushing into our little living room as Santa prepared to leave his cozy, warm dwelling for *my* house in just a few short hours! The magic had begun. Sleep would become increasingly difficult in those few remaining nights leading up to the Christmas Eve.

## TRIMMING THE TREE

Finally, the special day had come! No, not *that* special day, not Christmas day itself, but the day we would dress the tree in all its splendour to shine brightly and proudly in the corner of honour, wherever that might have been in any given year. Once dad had squared the trunk and steadied the tree in its stand, and mom had made that much-anticipated trip to the attic, it was only a matter of time. I could hardly wait to get my hands on those boxes! First mom arranged the lights on the tree, while we all unpacked and sorted the ornaments. We had an eclectic assortment of lights – standard coloured bulbs, frosted I think, as well as a small string of those curious bubbling lights, slender glass tubes filled with a coloured liquid that bubbled once they heated up. I could watch them for hours, enraptured. A few years later, dad brought home a set of oddly shaped milky-white lights that he got from Robertson's hardware, where he was working, Once these warmed up, they would change colour, each bulb a flashing, multi-coloured rainbow of light. I have not seen a similar product to this day. Were they one of a kind?

Once the lights were on the tree, I would assist in carefully extracting the delicate ornaments from the boxes and laying them out on the couches and chairs. Mom and dad would festoon the boughs with golden ropes of tinsel and shimmering icicles while the ornaments were carefully, lovingly laid out. And then, one by one, they were hung. I remember some quite vividly – a golden glass pineapple, a tiny multifaceted glass lantern, a miniature red mirror-ball – there were many

others but my memory of them is less vivid. Perhaps the best part of all, however, was *after* the tree had been trimmed. That was when I would stretch out on the nearby couch, snuggle under a comforter, and just stare at that magical tree now fully adorned for Christmas. During those sweet moments, the everyday world ceased to exist, replaced by legions of Christmas elves, gifts, toys, colors and the sweet scent of that proud fir. I could have lain there for hours, and often did, lost in the promise of Yuletide.

## THE TREE IN A BOTTLE

Today, several trees adorn the Griffith household at Christmas. Perhaps this all began many years ago, when as a child, I just *had* to have my own little tree in addition to the glorious family tree in the living room. Maybe I just couldn't bear leaving the beauty of Christmas when I went to bed, so I fashioned a little bit of it to keep in my room. Mind you, it was nothing fancy, usually a little scraggly fir or even spruce sapling, its "trunk" stuck into one of dad's empty "stubby" beer bottles which was a bit steadier than say, a taller 7-Up bottle. I few leftover bits of icicle and a few small unused ornaments graced its feeble little boughs. By today's

tree-farm standards, my little tree in a bottle would most likely be regarded by most as a “Charlie Brown” tree, but I loved it, notwithstanding.

## THE SHOPPING TRIP

One must recognize the differences in shopping back then to appreciate the importance, even sanctity, of this occasion. As I recall, there were no malls, just the downtown Halifax area, and several big multi-floor department stores such as Eaton and Simpsons. To a small-town boy, these stores were a veritable fantasy land with escalators (I recall being chastised more than once by store personnel for riding these moving staircases “against the grain”), and toy departments so huge they to seemed to fade into the horizon, with no end in sight. There were huge forests of toys, games, sporting goods and sweets to explore. What was a small boy to do, surrounded by such a cornucopia of treasures? How to reduce the seemingly endless parade of potential gifts to that “short list” to be addressed to the North Pole?

I can still remember the hours I would spend, a free agent traversing those endless aisles of toys and games while mom and dad did their own shopping elsewhere in the store for those boring grown-up gifts. Somehow, though, they always seemed to know which items I had developed a particular affection for, since those items invariably turned up under the tree on December 25! Whether a new Hot Wheels race track, a tabletop hockey game, a microscope or some other marvel of toy engineering, they always seemed to know. I can only surmise that they did in fact *spy* on me while I blissfully browsed those aisles, and forwarded the pertinent information to the North Pole.

Those surely were simpler, dare I say *safer* times; fewer stores, albeit big multilevel ones, yet a youngster could safely go solo while mom and dad went elsewhere. Imagine the likelihood of that happening today! It's funny though – today we have huge malls with a plethora of stores, products and services. Food courts. Gift wrapping depots. Coffee bars. ATMs. So much more. Yet despite all of this, it seems the shopping of days gone by was far less hectic and a lot more fun.

I should add that not all of our Christmas shopping excursions took us into the big city. Sometimes, the destination would be to what is now my present home town, Bridgewater, which boasted a Zellers department store that dwarfed anything Shelburne's Five and Ten could offer. A few hours working the aisles, followed by a meal at their in-store restaurant and we were back on the road, the family car stuffed to the ceiling with Christmas boxes. I recall being under very strict orders not to let my

curiosity get the best of me and dare to look in those bags and boxes! Those trips, whether a half hour or two hours in duration, seemed an eternity.

## ELSIE

Although memories of my late brother's in-laws are fuzzy at best, I do still recall fondly our holiday visits to Elsie's. She was a generous and kind soul who always seemed to put on a smile at Christmas, and who always went out of her way to make me feel welcome. How could I forget the stocking she always gave me! It was quite literally, a full size nylon stocking, so big it had to be dragged around once filled with candy and fruit. And the baking! I recall Elsie being a prolific baker, her tables and counters resplendent with sweets of all kinds. To this day there does seem to be a unanimous feeling among my family that while Elsie's treats varied in shape, size and color, they all pretty much tasted the same. Still, that taste was good enough for me, and her heart was in those cookies and cakes, so I say God bless her! Like my brother and others, Elsie has passed on to that better place; perhaps in the next life we will again sample her Heavenly treats.

# THE NIGHT BEFORE CHRISTMAS

## THE CHRISTMAS EVE GIFT RITUAL

I'm not certain how exactly the ritual evolved, but it came to be that on Christmas Eve, the adults opened their gifts. Perhaps it was meant to clear the way, or at least the space under the tree, for the morning festivities to follow. Santa did, after all, need some room to make *his* contribution. The Griffith gift exchange usually involved the whole family, sometimes even aunts and uncles, and perhaps even a close family friend or two. There was always room at the inn.

As I recall, the gift ritual followed a particular pattern from year to year, with some subtle variations. First, all would gather 'round the family tree. Someone would then assume the position of chairperson of the gift exchange, and then randomly select a recipient. Then, gift after gift would be handed to that individual, opened by that individual, and appreciated by that individual, followed by many hugs and "you shouldn't have's". Then, on to the next person, and the next...until finally we were literally knee-deep in wrapping paper, ribbon, boxes and bows, and perhaps more than a little influenced by Christmas spirits of the liquid persuasion. I recall fondly the warm feeling I got watching loved ones open *my* gift, even though oftentimes my purchase was heavily subsidized by mom and dad.

The Christmas Eve gift ritual was a busy, noisy, happy time that brings back so many fond memories for me. I can still hear those voices of delight, the feigned disapproval of such profligate spending, the

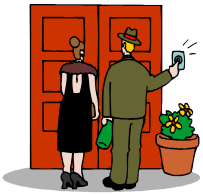
sincere hugs and the laughter as the tree glowed triumphantly in its corner, like an angel presiding over the Yuletide festivities.

## *THE CHRISTMAS STOCKING*

The wrapping and ribbons and boxes cleaned up, it was now time to find a stocking to hang. Most of the stockings belonged to dad, being bigger and hence capable of receiving a greater share of Santa's loot than my much smaller receptacle. The downside was that these were wool, yes, handmade wool stockings, and oftentimes some of the sticky candy deposited in them ended up being quite woolly themselves. Still, who was I to question my fathers, and Santa's wisdom? The sock was hung in a conspicuous place to ensure its eventual filling, usually on a wall in the kitchen or the divider between the kitchen and living room. There was a certain...gravity...to this act of hanging a stocking. As that nail or tack was driven, you *knew. This* was the night. Christmas was imminent. Now, only sleep separated this moment and the Christmas morn!

## *CHRISTMAS EVE VISITS*

It was standard practice on Christmas Eve to visit the aunts and uncles. This generally consisted of visits to Aunt Florence (Foncie) up the road, and Aunt Margaret (Dimpie) in town. These visits were usually brief in duration, given the sheer enormity and scope of the evening's many festivities and preparations, and occasionally involved brief drop-ins to extend Yuletide greetings to special friends along the way. Sometimes I would accompany mom and dad on these excursions, though I must confess my heart was not in it. Leaving that Christmas living room on December 24 seemed...well, blasphemous! Still, it was a part, and a memorable part, of the Griffith Christmas Eve, and therefore must in hindsight be deemed a good a proper thing. Sure was nice to get back home, though!



## *OF BEDTIME, LIGHTS, AND ALARM CLOCKS*

It was difficult going to bed on Christmas Eve. Excruciatingly so! After all, were we not asking the impossible? Sleep? With Santa probably no more than few hundred miles away from the roof of our house? Was it even reasonable to expect a young boy to *sleep* under such conditions? But go to bed I did, not because I was at all tired, but because until I did go to bed, the Christmas script could not be written. This was the final act of the Christmas drama, and it required the intermission of my repose to precede it. So dutifully off to bed I went, closing my door and blocking every discernible crack around my door with clothing. You see, it *had* to be dark. Very dark. Santa was not about to materialize in a house lit up like downtown Halifax. His stealth required darkness, and I was happy to do my part.

With me, beneath my covers, was my alarm clock. It was set to 4 o'clock a.m., my arbitrarily appointed time to rise from my tortured Christmas Eve sleep and greet the magic of Christmas morn. I know I watched at least several complete revolutions of that hour hand before finally succumbing to sleep.

## *SILENT NIGHT, STILL NIGHT...MAGIC MORNING*

The shrill yet muffled ringing of an alarm clock beneath my pillow. The slow, foggy awakening of a solitary figure, long before any other souls were stirring. Rubbing sleepy, puffy eyes as slowly the realization sets in that it is Christmas morning. It has happened. *He* has been here, and left, furtively working his magic amid the shadows, scarcely making a sound, and seen by nobody, except perhaps the cats, and they weren't talking. During my fitful sleep he had entered, filled the stocking, deposited boxed gifts under the tree, sampled some milk and cookies (compliments of me, not to mention the carrot offered for the hungry reindeer), and then left, off to visit my friends' houses. In all likelihood he stood no more than a few paces from my very door!

I rose from my bed, still not fully awake, but awake enough to know what I had to do next. Stealthily, like a burglar in my own house, I crept, wraith-like, from my room. Nothing but silence, the air still thick with residual magic. No lights would be called upon. No, I would *feel* my way along the walls, seeking the sock that only a few short hours ago was an empty vessel and would now be bulging with Christmas promise. This was a silent pilgrimage. Nobody's sleep would be compromised. No, this was between me and Santa. The sock had to be first. Its contents would be smaller, mainly candy, fruit, nuts and a few smaller toys, perhaps some matchbox cars or planes or animal figures, balls, puzzles...but they were the first things that Santa filled, so it just seemed right to reveal them first. Once the sock was located,

often by touch alone because it was so dark, its contents were emptied one-by-one, and either eaten or played with, all in the dark still of night.

This could of course only go on for so long, given what was awaiting me just around the corner in the living room. Finally, when I could wait no longer, the last vestiges of sleep now fully purged, I would creep into the living room. It was completely and utterly silent. The stately tree was visible, even in the darkness, its myriad icicles catching and reflecting even the feeblest ray of light, perhaps from the distant moon and stars outside or a neighbouring street lamp or porch light. Or maybe it was just that sprinkling of residual Christmas magic that made the tree glow even before its lights were plugged in. A curious cat peered from its place amid the shadows, intrigued by this uncommonly early interruption of its slumber. Unfortunately, since the clock had not even struck 5 yet, some artificial light would be necessary. My rule was “tree lights only”, so I plugged in those lights, sat beneath my pretty tree, and let the magic of Christmas embrace me. For the longest time I could not even begin to open the gifts, as that would somehow, I reasoned, herald the beginning of the end of this magical moment of the fading year. But a boy’s resolve on Christmas morning is no match for the Day itself, and so the unwrapping began.

# ON CHRISTMAS DAY

## *GIFTS*

It's funny how, regardless of whether or not I got what asked for, the gifts I received were always just what I wanted. During the believer years, my benefactor was of course Saint Nicholas himself. During my post-believer years, mom and dad filled in admirably for the jolly old elf. Over the span of my childhood and adolescence as believer and post-believer (there is no such thing as non-believer, of course), I received many memorable and beloved gifts. I cannot recount them all, but some I still see with crystal clarity through the window of memory. Unlike today, the seeds of our innocent, youthful avarice were planted by the annual Christmas catalogue or perhaps a stroll through the aisles of a department store. There was less advertising compared to today's commercial assault waged via television, Internet, and numerous print and electronic media.

One of my most memorable gifts was a spy attaché case called the Secret Sam. This was the perfect gift for any boy growing up on the Man From U.N.C.L.E., Get Smart and other secret agent shows from that era of television. This ingenious device was an attaché case that housed all the pieces of a spy rifle, from the wood grain stock to the scope and silencer, and also included other spy gear that your typical neighbourhood spy would want in a briefcase. Why, it even featured a tiny camera that could surreptitiously take a real picture (film not included) while still in the case! I never did take a picture with that camera. Just knowing that I had the power, the technology to do so, was quite enough.

Perhaps one of the most curious toys I ever received was my beloved Super Helmet Seven. This marvel of engineering was a helmet that just bristled with all manner of gadgetry. I first noticed it on a store shelf somewhere in Barrington one evening while shopping with mom and dad. It was love at first sight, and I made it abundantly clear that Santa *had* to be advised of this find. It boasted a removable headlamp/flashlight unit, left and right signal lights, a buzzer, reflectors, ear flaps, a visor, and flashing police-style light and other amazing options. I laugh inwardly still when I look back and see my youthful self sporting this curious headgear. It seems as absolutely ridiculous today as it seemed perfectly stupendous back then. Put a device of that calibre atop an boy's head, and you put him on top of the world!

A few years later, during the post-believer years, I recall yearning for a chemistry set. Leafing through the Sears Christmas catalogue one day, I came across a magnificent one. This kit boasted not one, not two, but *three* panels containing vials of assorted chemicals, Bunsen burners, test tubes, beakers and all manner of odd glass tubing and other exotic lab apparatus. For the weeks leading up to Christmas, the kit became an obsession. Day after day I would open that catalogue to an increasingly worn page to just stare at that magnificent science lab and imagine it gracing our kitchen table. But alas, tragedy struck. As the magic day inched ever closer, mom and dad, not wanting me to be heartbroken on Christmas morning, delivered the devastating news. Sears was sold out of the beloved chemistry set. I was at first just numb...then melancholy, and then despondent. All of that staring, enraptured, at that page...for naught. The lesser kits on the page might have been available, but

they paled in comparison to *the* kit. They were mere toys! I still recall mom and dad even looking in the Sears store a few days later, hoping to perhaps find one still on the shelf, feverishly consulting store personnel, pulling out all the stops, God bless them. But it was to no avail. They were sold. All of them. The finality of it all! I would *not* have a chemistry set this year, and glumly resolved to put on a brave face and try to make the best of this tragic turn of events.

Christmas morning came, and despite now being a post-believer, I still made my way in the darkness, well before daybreak, to the tree. Some rituals never die, and to this day I still rise before the sun does, to greet Christmas morn in the quiet stillness while the rest of the world sleeps. I guess some of that residual magic persists today, and for me, always will. But I digress. Despite my disappointment, I opened my main gift with anticipation. My mother and father knew me well and would, no doubt, put something under the tree that I would at least like. As I peeled away the wrapping, my heart raced. An image became increasingly clear in the dim tree lights...lab equipment...a picture of an incredibly goofy-looking kid holding up a test tube. Mom and dad, God bless them, had found *some* kind of chemistry set, and so I resolved, despite my disappointment, to honour their effort by really trying hard to like this gift of love. Half-heartedly I opened the box. As I beheld its contents, my heart began to race, my sleepy eyes opened wider. I was captivated by what I saw in that box. More chemicals. More test tubes. More burners, and clamps, and stands. In fact the box contained more of everything that the now legendary catalogue kit boasted. But lo and behold, I lifted the box only to reveal a second layer of equipment beneath the first!

Ad what equipment it was! Exotic beakers and flasks, spiral tubing, vessels of all sizes and shapes. The alchemists of antiquity would have been envious!

Suffice it to say that this would become one of my most vividly remembered and treasured childhood Christmases. The magic of Santa had given way to the magic of parental love. I remember waking them both, hugging them tight and thanking them for this wondrous gift. As I reflect back to sweet moment in time, I see now that the gift wasn't just that box of glass and chemicals, but more the love and determination to make a young boy's Christmas special.

So many gifts, so many years ago; the fog of time has obscured my recollection of many of them. Still, some, like the helmet and attaché case stand out, as does the flying saucer. Ah, the saucer! This was not something I had asked for, but when I awoke one exceptionally snowy Christmas morning, to find a shiny aluminum saucer under the tree, I knew exactly what I wanted to do. After wolfing down a hearty breakfast and letting mom bundle me up in numerous layers of winter garb, I dragged my shiny new saucer across the field to Cal's hill, which began just behind Cal's house and then descended steeply. If one aimed himself properly, he could coast down the hill, enter the narrow path to the shore and coast non-stop halfway to the seashore. Quite a ride, if you could pull it off. The saucer was up to the task, and did not disappoint. Careening down the hill, spinning round and round, fingers secure in the hand-holds, I left Cal's hill and entered the woods at breakneck speed, the trees and bushes on either side but a white blur as I accelerated down that hill, finally coming to rest well

past halfway to the seashore. I climbed out of my spaceship quite dizzy, but triumphant as the roar of the ocean and call of seabirds sounded in the distance. I had that sturdy little saucer for quite a few years, and enjoyed many a mission down Cal's hill, but none would measure up to that maiden voyage on a Christmas morning, gliding down upon a blanket of genuine, fresh Christmas snow.

While on the topic of flying saucers, I would be negligent not to mention to year of the telescope. This was especially meaningful as it was, as I recall, one of those rare years that my brother Paul was home for the holidays. The little scope, once assembled and poised on its spindly little tripod gave me the universe, its little glass lenses wings that flew me to the vast reaches of outer space. How I remember the wonderment of seeing Saturn's rings, and the Great Nebula in Orion for the first time! To this day I own a telescope and explore the firmament. My little first scope was no match for the "big guns" I've owned since, but nothing can replace the sheer wonder of that first maiden voyage into space on wings of glass. This little gift gave me worlds beyond our own, and I pursue this passion to this very day.

Now a trip back to an even earlier time, when I awoke to discover what is perhaps one of the most beloved of childhood toys, the train set. I remember it clearly despite the chasm of years. It was a sturdy little black locomotive, several cars and a red caboose, and had a smokestack that could, with the insertion of a special tablet, puff out real smoke. A transformer with a single knob controlled its speed and direction on a simple circular track. No fancy figure eights, no

detailed landscapes. But oh the hours upon hours of fascination that little locomotive provided!

Board games, tape recorders, table hockey games, race tracks, hot wheels loops, science kits, microscopes, chess boards, Pong, books...so many gifts do I see as I peer back through the lens of time and behold my boyhood Christmases. I was never disappointed, and never wanted more than I received (at least I hope I didn't – both my elfin and parental benefactors were most generous, and I was truly blessed to have had so many happy Christmas mornings). Now, when I awaken on Christmas morning (I am a half century as I write this), I pause and curl up on the couch near the tree, and stare into the newly-lit fire in the hearth, watching a young boy as he creeps into the living room to open that chemistry set...that little train...that flying saucer...

## *THE CRATCHIT DINNER*

Christmas Day was a busy day, to be sure! The Day at the Griffith home usually followed the same tried and true script. After I made my nocturnal trek to the stockings and tree, I would open my presents, followed by a long, uninterrupted period playing with them until mom and

dad woke up to see what Santa had left for me (or to see if their own choices were being favourably received, which of course they were). Then, once all the wrapping paper was disposed of, the toys lovingly arranged under the tree, I would eventually curl up by tree, quite exhausted from my pre-dawn rising, and succumb to a long winter's nap.

When consciousness finally did return, the house was a bustle of activity. Mom was up early, very early, to prepare the big turkey and convey that bird of honour into the oven. This bird would eventually be the centrepiece of what my father always called our "Cratchit Dinner". Given the hearty and sumptuous meal that ensued, I am certain that this was not the Cratchit "feast" shown Scrooge by the Ghost of Christmas Present, but rather the Cratchit feast that followed *after* that good spirit's intervention! Oh the smells of Christmas day as the feast approached! The savoury scent of mom's perfect dressing and gravy, the spicy promise of mince pies heating up in the oven, the hiss and splash of squash, turnip and potatoes boiling merrily away on the stovetop. Such a commotion of sounds and scents that no mortal senses could ignore! Bob Cratchit, the good Ghost, and Mr. Dickens himself would have heartily approved of my mother's masterpiece.

Our Christmas table was never a showy one, but rather a homey, warm, inviting one. The family, and sometimes friends as well, would share in the feast, and we would eat until the juicy turkey and its supporting cast ultimately rendered us all sated and content, and finally, unconscious, dad's ferocious post-Cratchit dinner snore a testament to the meal. Strewn over the various couches and easy chairs we

slumbered as the feast worked its magic on us and ushered us all into the land of Christmas sleep. A powerful thing, this Cratchit dinner, to immobilize both adult and child alike!

Our family meal is to this day called the “Cratchit Dinner” and we have not strayed at all from that tried and true formula established by my mother in days gone by. Turkey, mashed potatoes, homemade gravy stuffing, squash, turnip, cranberry sauce, followed by the best mince pie known to mankind. They say change is a good thing, to be embraced, and that may very well be the case, but some things I truly believe to be sacrosanct. The Cratchit Dinner happens to be one such thing. And now as I prepare each year to partake of our own juicy turkey and all the trimmings, I can still hear my father’s voice echoing across the years, “Now this...is a Cratchit dinner!”

# OF CHRISTMAS PRESENT AND YET TO COME

I began this little patchwork quilt of treasured Christmas memories just after Christmas last year. As I type these words, it is about two weeks till Christmas 2007, I am but a few days shy of turning fifty, and my little journey back through the mists of time draws to a close. The trip has been a pleasant one for me, as I hope it is to any who share in my reminiscing. Few things warm my heart this time of year more than the sweet remembrance of those innocent and simpler times. Why did I write this, one may ask? Well, perhaps to package this warmth for others to unwrap, in the hope that it might warm their hearts as well. Perhaps to keep alive these precious memories long after these fingers have fallen forever silent. Perhaps just to pass on this little piece of who I am to my own children and their children so that the Griffith Christmas endures.

Maybe, despite all of the commercialism, the LED lights, the political correctness and other aberrations that seem to have crept into the festive season and threaten to dilute its magic, there are others out there like myself, remembering similar times and similar magic, and passing their own legacy down to successive generations. I truly hope so. We must never allow ourselves to lose the essence of Christmas, that childlike wonder that reminds us that we are, and will always be, children of God, for as the great Charles Dickens penned in *A Christmas Carol*,

> "...for it is good to be children sometimes, and never better than at Christmas, when its mighty Founder was a child Himself".

And now I close, warmed by my sweet memories of childhood Christmases long past, and I anticipate this coming Christmas with the same childlike sense of wonder. I will never give that up, for you see, childhood may be something we distance ourselves from as we grow older, but we never truly abandon it. Nor should we. Ever.

Merry Christmas!