

Staircases

When I was young, our mother's Christmas traditions formed the warp and weave of our holidays, and they were unlike any other family we knew. During the long Advent season when our friends were decorating their trees and speculating about the various gifts that had started to appear, the Green children were still waiting. Other than the family tree-cutting expedition when we all were pressed into service selecting the perfect tree at some tree farm, there was no preamble to our Christmas celebration. Our Christmas would appear all at once on Christmas morning. On Christmas Eve, there still was no tree, no decorations, and no gifts. Before going to bed, we set up the Nativity Crèche while reading the Christmas story, hung our stockings, set out cookies for Santa, and went to bed giddy with anticipation. In our family legend, during the night Santa himself would set up and trim our tree in addition to his more traditional offices.

I do not know the full story behind this tradition. At least part of it can be attributed to our mother's determination to keep the focus of Christmas on the Christ Child, and not on the secular holiday traditions that threatened, even then, to overshadow His birthday. But I suspect that mainly it derived from our mother's childhood Christmases. The poverty of the depression years was, for her, compounded by a personal injury judgment that taxed what little her father earned. As the manager of a downtown hotel, he worked late into the evening, including Christmas Eve, and Christmas was paid for by whatever Christmas bonus the hotel dispensed that day. On his way home, Grandpa Sitzenstatter would buy the last scraggly tree on the lots, hurry home, and while Mom was asleep, he would trim the tree, set out a present for his wife and daughter, have a last glass of schnapps, and at some point find his bed. He died when he was in his fifties, worn out by the stress of working and worrying, leaving his daughter to mourn the loss of the safe place in her childhood. I wonder if, from then on, she determined to wait for her Daddy to bring Christmas home in the morning.

In all the homes of our childhood the children's bedrooms were upstairs, so what passed after we finally fell asleep was a mystery. Waking the next morning we would run to each other's rooms and (probably ungraciously) wake any sleepyheads. Dressed in bathrobes and slippers the four of us would gather on the stair case, youngest first. With great ceremony Dana and Melissa would take the final steps into the living room with Sherrill and me close behind. There, somehow, the tree had been magically set up, lit and decorated, circled many years by a toy train set, and surrounded with our presents. The empty stockings were now filled with nuts, oranges, chocolates, and other small personal surprises. Stockings were immediate fair game, and required no permission to investigate on our own, and we would grab them, run to our parents' bedroom, "surprising" them with the wonderful news: "Santa came!" It was truly magical, and remained so even when we figured out Santa's real identity.

It is strange that from those early Christmases I remember the staircases most clearly. The excitement of gathering on the steps with Sherrill, Melissa, and Dana, then deciding the moment when we would make the final decent into the living room and find Christmas – I can close my eyes and be sitting there with them all once again. Today in Wilmington as I sit here with Mom while she dreams the afternoon away, I am back on the staircase once again. Just around the corner Mom and Dad have decorated our lives with their gifts of love, and its almost Christmas morning. Hurry Sher! Hurry Melis and Dana, you're first! Christmas is here! Mom and Dad, Christmas is here!