



By now, most of us are in the thick of it. Christmas parties, Jingle Bells, cookie cutouts, the Nutcracker, twinkling lights, deadline shopping and wrapping paper. Hanukkah is almost over, Kwanzaa is eight candle lights somewhere into the future, and we are entrenched in this millennium's second decade.

For me, December will be a blitzkrieg of finalizing projects at work, distributor meetings to review 2010 sales, price negotiations, and goal setting for 2011. Days in December will fly by faster than a gull catching a winter breeze over the Woods bridge, and before you know it, Walgreen's will have heart-shaped boxes lining the shelves in their seasonal aisle.

What we keep, what we have buried away in the rush of checking off lists and the clicking of knitting needles finishing off scarves for aunts and nieces, are the memories of Christmas past. Even Mr. Magoo and George C. Scott in their renditions of Scrooge in Dickens' *A Christmas Carol* had fond memories of days gone by, despite the bits of heartache woven in between the threads of merriment.

What are some of your sweeter memories of Christmas? Take some quiet time this season to pause and think back - gratefully. It is always hard to reminisce and not become sad because inevitably, in the remembering, there is always someone missing who will not share in this season's festivities. There are holes in the family fabric. Take a deep breath, hold on tight to your heart, and look back anyway.

My past Yuletides are filled with the smell of baking nut breads, the setting up of our manger scene underneath the tree in our living room, and a plastic white star lit by a single bulb, wobbling on the top branch of Tannenbaum. Christmas carols crooned from our Magnavox stereo, and stockings engraved with our names in black Magic Marker and glitter were hung on

a wrought iron railing in the hallway. The Advent calendar I made from a craft kit of sequins, and red and green felt, hung somewhere in the family room and counted down the twenty-four days leading up to Christmas. My mother always bought a box of candy from Kaufmann's department store to nibble on, and the house was lit up by large green and red lights strung along tiny hooks screwed into the front porch overhang by my dad.

Of course there were the toys. Recently, I asked a colleague what her all-time favorite Christmas toy was and she immediately singled out her Barbie playhouse. I was pressed to think of one single toy that was my favorite, and I chose my chemistry set. It was a favorite because receiving it signaled the fact that my parents trusted me. I was big enough to "play" with fire and unknown, powdery substances. I was in phenolphthalein heaven. I was a pretty weird kid.

Winter in the North is a time of sled riding and snowmen, boots and chapped cheeks. Even Heidi, our Weimaraner, would get in on the act, chasing after us as we sledded down the hill in the backyard, chomping down on the pompom on top of our snow hats, pulling them off, and running away. We had Secret Santas in grade school, a Christmas pageant filled with jubilant songs and off-key harmonies, and the annual thrill of going downtown, or to the mall, to sit on Santa's lap and let him know we had been good enough to earn and expect the fulfillment of at least one important Christmas gift wish.

I always had the job of wrapping whatever gift my Dad bought for my Mom and hiding it for him. This job seemed more important than anything one of Santa's helpers might do. It involved trust, the care and skill of wrapping her present just right, and the ability to keep a secret. I am not exactly sure how or why it happened, but one year as I was wrapping gifts in my parent's bedroom, I opened their closet and noticed a sheet on the top shelf. I peeked under it and discovered a stack of toys. Baffled at first, it took a few nights of tossing and turning in bed before I understood the treasure trove I had stumbled upon. This was my answer to the question of how Santa guaranteed presents under a tree in a house with no chimney.

I remember going to bed on Christmas Eve with foam curlers dangling from my head – my mother's futile attempt to give my straight brown hair a bit of a wave. Instead, the curlers made it even harder to sleep as my sister and I lay awake in our twin beds, anticipating the next morning's discovery of half eaten cookies and an empty glass of milk. We would pound our fists on the wall that separated our bedroom from my brother's, waiting for a signal to see if he was still awake. I know for a fact that one Christmas Eve I heard sleigh bells. I rolled to the foot of my bed to peer out of the window for evidence of hoof prints on our snowy front yard. I whispered to my sister in an urgent plea to confirm if she heard the bells too. She had. My

heart was pounding. Santa was in our house. Forget about any hidden toys!

Christmas Day always started before the sun came up. My brother, sister and I had to wait at the top of the stairs until my dad had the movie camera ready; the blaring, hot white spotlights making us squint as we headed for the stash of gifts under the tree. Heidi would bounce around, her stubby, cropped tail, wagging at the same pace as our excited heartbeats. We would open our personal pile of presents with ooh's and ahh's, and end with the finale of a stocking filled with underwear, costume jewelry, cologne, and twenty-five dollars. After mom and dad finished opening their presents, we sat down to a breakfast of nut bread, cereal and orange juice, bacon, eggs and coffee. Maybe I would put on a new sweater for noon Mass, but the rest of Christmas day was wrapped in the smell of a baking turkey, the joy of playing with brand new toys, and telephone calls to aunts and uncles in other towns or states.

The week after Christmas was filled with family visits, movies, bargain shopping, maybe a return or two, and time with my dad that was not available during routine work weeks. Decorations stayed up until New Year's Day when I helped my mom take down the tree, vacuum pine needles, and pack up the stockings. A pork roast and sauerkraut baked now, and my dad ate shiny, pickled herring for good luck and good fortune in the new year. The nut bread was long gone.

The memories are all there, hidden in the cracks and crevices of vanishing time. The remembering is worth the investment of time in an armchair. This season, turn on the radio or cable station with non-stop Christmas carols, sit back, close your eyes, and think back. What was your most beloved toy, a seasonal smell that wafted through the house, or a favorite Christmas ornament that always made its way to the front of your tree? Who were and are the people in your lives that are the essence of love and joy? How will you make this Christmas a lasting memory for you and someone else?

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