

# Christmas Snows, Christmas Winds

Donald R. Marshall\*

The snow fell today in the streets where trucks and buses spun it into a gray wet spray and left it splattered on parked cars and curbs, pantlegs and soggy shoes; and I feel that it must be falling now too somewhere on the fields and the fence posts, and that somewhere out there tonight when the light turns an icy blue and the dusty snow slithers along the highway like smoke, a black horse standing still in a white field will suddenly shiver and ripple its mane, and maybe a lone figure in coat and overshoes will trudge across that cold expanse with a pail of oats, puffs of steam trailing in the brittle air.

I passed a window where the head of an electric Santa Claus rotated from side to side. Along the crowded sidewalks a loudspeaker blared Fa-la-la-la-la over the muffled heads of passersby. In a crowd on a corner I saw a child licking at a clear red unicorn on a thin stick, and the snowflakes stung my cheeks and burned my eyes.

I remember those glass-candy animals; and I remember other things. I remember the days, the weeks, the months of waiting, interminable hours when December seemed worlds away. I remember tinsel moments even before October's leaves had turned to blue-gray smoke in the November air, when a sudden woody smell of pine or the far-off jingling of a bell sent crystal-shatters of Christmas tingling through my veins. I remember the smell of the new Sears and Roebuck catalogue when it came, and how the pages felt, and how,

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reaching with some inexplicable power through the endless blur of days ahead, it could steal a handful of Christmas and scatter it instantly, sugared and glittering, before us on the parlor rug where we lay. Every page was Christmas: even a simple plaid bathrobe became magically invested with hollyberries and mistletoe, and an ordinary pair of socks triggered immediately a chorus of carolers accompanied by chimes.

I remember the long afternoons at school when the radiator hissed, and bare branches, black against a chalky sky, made soft tapping noises at the windows. Weary of making crayon Christmases on sheets of paper, I would let my pencil plow a little furrow of dirt from the cracks in the floor while I longed for the passing of weeks and waited for that special day. And we would practice the songs for the Christmas program, and I would squirm restlessly on the little painted chairs, excited by visions conjured by musical fragments—the little town of Bethlehem lying so still with its dreamless sleep and its silent stars, the three kings bearing gifts and traveling from afar, and, perhaps the most glorious of all in those days, jolly old Saint Nicholas leaning his ear and promising not to tell a single soul.

After the endless days of painting and cutting and pasting and shellacking, the secret gifts—plaster of paris plaques or wind chimes of glass rectangles dangling by yarn from a Kerr lid—would lie drying on the low shelves by the radiator, while we filed, in homemade costumes of rabbits or snowflakes, tin soldiers or shepherds, into the little rows of chairs to perform at last before the nebulous faces of relatives and townspeople in the darkened auditorium. “Hark, the herald angels sing!” we chanted, the words to most of the carols garbled even to us, and our minds forever straying to the glossy images in the Sears catalogue. Then the program would be over and there would be no more going back to school for almost two weeks, yet the waiting would go on, only now it would continue in the home—watching from the parlor window for the first sign of a snowflake, carefully printing the letter and trusting it would reach the North Pole in time, studying the blackened flue of the fireplace and wondering how the whole miraculous thing could possibly be brought about.

I remember the days of Christmas card-making, my materials strewn out on the rug or set up temporarily on a bridge table but inevitably before the fire so that I could savor the piney smell and be as near as possible to the popping and crack-

ling fire, its sizzling sap seeming to whisper, "It's coming, it's coming, it's coming!" I recall the snips and scraps of colored paper; the homemade cards with cut-out windows; the obligatory winter scenes drawn laboriously with colored pencils, the village houses and steepled churches somehow owing more to calendar New Hampshires than to the Marysvales and Junctions and Circlevilles strung around me.

I remember helping to shake the snow from the tree propped frozen against the porch and running behind as Papa and my brothers dragged it inside through the door, fearing that its branches would be broken and lamenting that its trunk must be shortened. I remember my uneasiness as they grafted boughs in the empty spaces and my surprise and my joy at discovering pine cones and maybe even a bird's nest hidden somewhere in its upper branches. I loved the dusty-sweet and spicy smell loaned by the tree to the parlor; I loved even the sugary pine gum that stuck to my fingers and resisted soap and water, giving way finally only to the salty slipperiness of Mama's butter. And when the dusty boxes were brought up from the basement and opened on the parlor rug, I loved the smell of the candles as we unwrapped them from their crumpled tissue; I loved seeing each tangle of colored lights finally glow against the rug as we tightened every globe and tried each string in the socket to discover which burnt-out bulb was holding back the others; and I loved rediscovering each ornamental bell and ball, old friends momentarily forgotten since that January day nearly a year before when they were wrapped between the Sunday pages of *Maggie and Jiggs* and *Little Orphan Annie* and tucked away in shoeboxes to await December's resurrection. In those days our decorations were a melange of Christmases past and all the dearer for the memories they evoked; almost no ornaments—from the magenta foil cone awaiting candy and nuts to the fragile glass bird with the spun glass tail—were alike, and the tree lights themselves, many enhanced by metallic reflectors in the shape of water lilies or stars, ranged from a rotund little Santa Claus to an intricate and marvelous Chinese lantern. And when each member of this bizarre menagerie had found a hospitable bough, and when all the foil icicles had been hung until they dripped, silver and shimmering, from almost every needle, we hid the homemade tree stand under a cotton matting, sprinkled it with glistening mica flakes, and set up on its snowy whiteness a miniature cardboard vil-

lage, a colored bulb in each tiny house glowing softly through a doorway or stained-glass window.

I remember that spicy piney scent suddenly mingling with the smell of whole cloves and cinnamon bark simmering in the hot juices of apples, pineapples, lemons, and oranges that would become wassail to be ladled out in steaming cups for all visitors; and I remember it mingling with the smell of mincemeat pies and rhubarb pies as they bubbled in the oven, and with the smell of doughnuts sizzling in oil, waiting to be fished out and rolled in sugar and eaten hot. I remember peeking over the breadboard as the cranberries and oranges oozed through the grinder to become a sweet relish that tasted like Christmas; I remember the nuts and candied fruit dropping into the spicy batter that would be poured into pans and transformed into golden-brown fruitcakes inside the oven. I remember the annual appearance in the kitchen of figs and dates, an exotic touch of the East that suddenly seemed as right and as welcome as the camel-borne kings parading across our mantel amidst the pine boughs and scented candles.

By Christmas Eve the mound of presents growing under the tree had almost obscured the cardboard village, and each ribboned package there for more than one day had been rubbed and poked and pinched from every angle. But it was what was not there that we waited for most—not the hastily wrapped shapes that would inevitably appear sometime on that final eve, but those other things, finally placed unwrapped and glittering in the glow of colored lights, that would never appear until we had eventually drifted off to sleep, with or without visions of sugarplums.

A snowfall on that eve of eves had seemed beyond question, and I remember standing one year in my pajamas looking with incredulity through the window at only a gray-blue bleakness settling in on the dead and naked grass. Santa Claus's sleigh, even flying through the stars, seemed unnecessary and impossible without that obligatory frosty whiteness that *had* to fall and cover the world. And fall it did. As I pressed a wet cheek against the cold glass, feeling somehow cheated, I saw the first tiny flakes, like lint fluttering in the wind, slithering down the cold blue sky. The snow was necessary. In order for the miracle of Christmas to be, the everydayness of mud ruts and frozen gutters had to be lost under the sparkling magic of snow.

I remember the snow and I remember other things. I remember the year my stocking hung alone on the string by the fire. My brothers and sisters, suddenly grown away from such things, had turned to dances and caroling atop a horse-drawn hay wagon, and I would peek out of the window into the frosty night, at the faintest rustling of bells, to see them pass or hear them singing above the steady clopping of the mare's hoofs on the icy road. From my window, too, I could see down the block to the giant Christmas tree erected in the middle of the town. I could see its lights reflected in the shiny whiteness of the street and I could watch late shoppers balancing packages as they crept carefully across the ice, calling last-minute wishes to passing friends and then disappearing into the cold night.

I remember lying in my bed under the heavy blankets, wanting to capture every sound—would I hear a tap-tap on the roof or a slithering down the chimney or the clicking of a cup on a saucer as Santa drank the milk and ate the doughnut left for him by the fire?—yet I longed at the same time for sleep to come quickly in order to make the night disappear and the morning come. And when I awoke in the stillness of that blue-violet hour separating night and morning and crept down the darkened hall and through the front room where the big clock ticked away the last minutes of the night, I always stood entranced on the threshold of the parlor. What other moment could match that moment as I hesitated, scarcely breathing, my eyes taking in the pure magic of each carefully placed and glistening item reflecting the still-burning treelights and the rosy warmth of the still-smouldering fire, and retaining yet some vestige of the aura surrounding the white-bearded figure whose hand had placed them there—and left only a few sugary crumbs on the saucer by the hearth—perhaps only minutes before?

Careful not to break the spell, I would kneel down quietly to examine, first with my eyes and then with my fingers, each precious piece of a farm set with its hard-rubber pigs and cows, or, another year, a rustic fort with metal Indians and cavalry; once the featured item was a set of Tinker Toys, another time Lincoln Logs, and, still another, a shiny and complicated Erector Set. This was the special hour, that quiet hour before dawn, the room bewitched by the lights of the tree and the only sound an occasional popping of a spark or the

soft shifting of coals as the pine logs, now charcoal, crumbled into rose-gold embers. I worshiped this hour, these enchanted moments, when Christmas and I touched, and nothing broke the spell. Even the taking down of my stocking, which now bulged lumpily and heavily on the sagging string, was a ritual. As I turned it upside down, emptying the contents into the lid of a box, I loved every nut, every piece of ribbon candy or multicoloredhardtack, even the silver quarter that sometimes rolled down among the cream-centered chocolate Bunker Hills and the inevitable glass-candy Santa Claus or lion or unicorn. There would be an orange, too, and though it was exactly like those colder ones from the kitchen, it seemed marvelous and special; for just as the little nut-covered balls with the cream centers or the pastel-colored sugary mounds were identical to those in bowls on the bookcase, just as each almond and pecan and brazil nut, still in its shell, was no different from those waiting in the wooden bowl with the nutcracker, each one, like the orange, had been blessed by the hand of Santa Claus, and each one had been chosen and placed there especially for me.

Later on in the morning, when the parlor rug was lost under a storm of wrapping paper and ribbon, we would take turns winding the phonograph to hear Bing Crosby sing "White Christmas" and "Happy Holiday," and the smell of roasting pheasant or duck—shot the day before by one of my brothers—would be drifting from the kitchen while neighbors and uncles and aunts were stomping the snow from their feet outside the door and bursting in, arms full of presents, shouting out the greetings that we all loved. I never tired of showing one more time that marvelous portion of the chaos under the tree that was mine alone, and only in the late late afternoon when I lay drowsily on the rug before the fire and the house was quiet again, would I feel the melancholy seeping in, the sad sad thought that night was coming on and then it would be tomorrow and that tomorrow would be Christmas no more.

But there is something else I remember too. Sometimes I forget it—always I *try* to forget it—but it keeps coming back like a cold and brittle wind. It claims a part of those Christmas memories too—a part not willed to it or even acknowledged. Unwelcome guest in that memory world of gumdrops and candy canes, it sneaks along the edges of the mind, demanding

it be seen, heard, remembered. It is always there, tapping at the back windows like branches in the night.

There was a German family that had a farm a few miles from our town. We scarcely knew them for they spoke little and their English was poor and broken. But we would see them in the town in their faded pickup—the old man with dried manure on his boots, the woman with frightened eyes and a yellowish braid wound around her head. They had a daughter a year or two younger than I, a very quiet girl with pale skin and pale hair who wore hand-me-downs and moved through the halls of school with scarcely a word. Her English was probably as good as mine yet we never somehow remembered it that way. We referred to her derisively as Consolation; her real name was Helga or Inger or something like that but we always called her Consolation because someone, I think, had seen her once with her arm around a child who had hurt his knee on the playground. Sometimes she too wore braids around her head and then she looked like a strange little mother, grown old before her time. She never had any close friends as I recall, yet we often linked her name, in jest, with anyone we wanted to tease or get back at for something they had done.

One Christmas, when my friends and I were struggling to announce our maturity to the world—no stockings by the fire *that* year—we slid on the ice and wrestled in the snow outside the schoolhouse until the last cars had driven up in the dark, and the program had already begun with a rousing carol. We then trudged in, during that opening number, and noisily appropriated some empty seats on the front row. We poked each other while the second graders bellowed "Hark, the Herald Angels Sing" in bathrobe-and-towel shepherd costumes, and we traded whispered comments and stifled giggles at the fourth-grade angel with one wing flopping and at Mary with her tinsel halo askew. Then suddenly the junior high band was performing "O Holy Night" and Consolation, we realized to our great mirth, was playing a brief French horn solo. It began wobbily, two or three of the notes were blurbed, and once she even seemed to falter as though she had lost her place. We snickered, and tried, unsuccessfully, to pinch our legs to keep from laughing outright. She finally finished, her frightened eyes, resembling her mother's, dropping to her music stand and never leaving it until the program ended. When

it was over and we pushed our way through the crowd outside to where car doors slammed and sputtering engines sent up clouds of white exhaust, we passed by the faded pickup and I saw the old man there in the dark with his arm around the girl. She was sobbing against the heaviness of his mackinaw, and the woman was smoothing her hand over the girl's braids. "Race ya to the corner!" somebody yelled, and we took off, slipping and sliding on the ice and into the night.

Today the snow fell in the streets and the cars slipped and slid and spun around snarling traffic at every corner. The sidewalks are lost under a gray-brown slush, but maybe the snow will mercifully continue to fall and cover it all. Maybe down the highway where the snow blows like smoke across the road and a lone horse shivers in the wind, the snow will be thick and deep and white. Consolation, where are you now that the snow is falling once again on the fences and the fields? I didn't cry for you then, but I cry for you now.