

Growing Up Between Two Christmases

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We were living on 7th Avenue in Columbus, Ohio when we celebrated Christmas 1943. It was the house my parents rented after the house on Frambes had caught fire.

Poor Mom and Dad, it had been quite a year for them. We left Pennsylvania a year earlier, on December 31, 1942, six of us plus Boots (our part Cocker part Terrier pup) all stuffed into the six passenger Buick along with as much of our household goods as could be wedged in. The 1936 six passenger had replaced Dad's much nicer nine passenger Buick which had two clever folding seats; that car had been totaled by a drunk in front of our house on Highway 60 between Bethlehem and Allentown. Since it was just after Pearl Harbor, Dad could not find an equivalent replacement vehicle even though the insurance company was obligated to pay for one. Tires, gasoline, butter, and other things were being rationed out by the government; goods were in short supply; the country was mobilized for war.

Yes, all four of us—Patty, Johnny, Billy, and Dicky were born in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, the Christmas city. It was founded by Moravians which is the reason Mother's family came to settle in Bethlehem. Dad's family came because of Bethlehem Steel. We were leaving family and friends behind when we headed for Ashland, Kentucky. The weather was miserable. We were bundled up in heavy coats; car heaters and insulation were not as efficient then as they are today and the car windows were foggy from the moisture produced by six sets of lungs (seven if you count Boots). For a time we could entertain ourselves by drawing pictures on the windows. But as the day wore on there were also times when we got on each other's nerves. Even Mother ran out of ideas to interest us.

New Years Day found us in the panhandle of West Virginia, near Wheeling, trying to find a way across the flooded Ohio River. The roads were two too narrow lanes which wound through the West Virginia hills. There were no guard rails; it was sleeting and the roads were icy. Dad was a man of steel in more ways than one. It was the work of organizing the steelworkers at Armco that was taking us to Ashland, but negotiating bad roads during an ice storm with a car loaded with family possessions and not always happy children certainly required steady nerves. I remember the lights of a town down in

the valley twinkling in the distance as we crept down the mountain. At the bottom, the road itself was flooded and Dad was forced to turn around and head back the way we had come. We were told that the bridge at Bellaire, Ohio was high enough to be above the flood waters. Dad steadily negotiated the ups and downs again and got us safely into Ohio and finally, crossing the river again at Ironton, to Ashland.

The United Steelworkers of America were making strides in creating safer working conditions for the men who worked in the mills. Dad was one of the key figures in these achievements. His Christian faith led him to seek economic justice for all and he was effective in helping others see this dream. It was decided that Dad would become part of the national team of the Union, the Congress of Industrial Organizations, CIO. After an idyllic summer, for us, in a cottage at Stoughton's Beach near Slippery Rock, Pennsylvania, we moved to Columbus, Ohio where Dad had access to airlines and trains which could take him wherever the CIO needed him.

That fall Patty had just turned 16, I was 13, Billy was 12, and Dicky was 9. Dad found a house to rent on Frambes Avenue just a block from the Indianola Presbyterian Church which was pastored by Bob Reed, a friend who had admired the principles by which Dad lived. The house was also within walking distance of the Indianola Junior High School, a fine progressive school. Billy and I had skipped a grade when we moved to Ashland because the schools there were behind those in Pennsylvania, and so were both enrolled in the Junior High; Dicky had also skipped a grade but was still in elementary school and Patty was in High School.

Later in the fall, the four of us were left in charge of the house for a few days so that Mother could go with Dad on one of his assignments. Mother and Dad had always been a team, whether with Union activities or family responsibilities, and Mother was a valuable part of that team when it came to Dad's work with the Union. We were each given our responsibilities. I was left in charge of the furnace. The house was cold on Sunday morning (was it November?) and so I shoveled in a generous amount of coal. Before we headed off to Sunday School, I realized that the furnace was getting too hot and so shoveled some ashes on top to cool down the very hot coals. After Sunday School, Patty and I heard fire engines and decided it was best to check our house before church. From the alley the house looked fine but when we got closer we were shocked to see the fire truck and ladders and firemen all about.

The fire had not been entirely my fault. The flues were clogged with soot and had not been cleaned out for years. The excess heat must have caused a small explosion in one of the pipes and the soot caught on fire. The fire went right up between the walls to the attic. All of our belongings were ruined with smoke and water. Most of Boots' puppies in the basement succumbed to smoke inhalation. The Wishards, friends in Moral ReArmament, took us in, including the one puppy, Douglas, who was still clinging to life.

I think it was Mother who found a house to rent in Colonial Hills and Dales. But, after one day, when she realized that the school bus ride would be an hour each way, she gave up that idea. Della Maddox, another MRA friend and member of the Indianola Presbyterian Church, told Mother and Dad about the house on 7th Avenue next door to her place, and that is where we spent Christmas 1943.

Mother and Dad had always transformed the house on Christmas Eve while we kids slept, so that come Christmas morning the house was magically transformed. But we were getting old enough to have figured out that it wasn't Santa who did all the work. Besides, Dad had been called out of town again.

Angel hair was the latest decorating fad and Mother had purchased a package. I'm sure that she wanted to make this a special Christmas for us after the trauma of the fire including the loss of the last puppy. Angel hair would be wondrous to behold! It was very pretty— spun glass. Patty and I (Billy too?) were solicited to help with the decorations that night. Angel hair was not the most cooperative material and we itched quite a bit from the tiny bits of glass which got on arms and in the clothing. But, the tree really did look nice. Instead of the usual twinkling reflections from the tinsel which had always been carefully hung, straight down, strand by strand, on each branch (and later removed for use another year— it had a special tinfoil odor about it), the angel hair reflected the colored lights in circles like a halo around each bulb.

We were understandably up early on Christmas morning to see the sight as well as to get a glimpse of the packages which were placed under the tree after we went to bed. We read from the Moravian text, including the Bible verses and certainly sang a song before a light breakfast of cocoa and a sweet roll and THEN we could open the presents. The only present I remember from that year was Dicky's; Patty is surely right that it was Mother's plan to bring a new pet into the family to replace our loss. Dicky opened a note that said his present was on the steps leading to the basement. A lid covered basket with

a big bow on it was brought in and Dick opened it. Out jumped a cat! Can you imagine how excited we all were and how our excitement agitated the cat? Joseph, with his coat of many colors, was a frightened cat, and headed straight for the tree which it climbed, with some difficulty, dodging ornaments, light wires, and the angel hair. Oh the angel hair! Down came the tree. We were not able to get the angel hair back into presentable form again after righting the tree; it was simply a tangled mess and we were all itching.

We never used angel hair again and I don't recall seeing it on other trees within a few years. I'm sure it was a health hazard worse than breathing cotton lint in textile mills or asbestos in homes or schools.

Looking back, 55 years later, I can see that 1943 was the year in which I began the important teenage rite of passage into the adult world. But, because I had such wonderful parents, I am merely amused when I think of angel hair on a Christmas tree. Neither angel hair, nor fire, nor death itself has held any real threat for me because I had been surrounded by such love that it permeated into my very soul. One of the songs we sang went, "Praise Him, praise Him all ye little children, God is Love, God is Love."

As we celebrate the love of God come down to earth, whether in the form of parents, the Christchild, a Presbyterian Christmas eve service, a Moravian candlelight service, a Catholic mass, a Jewish festival of light, or a time of personal prayer, may we all know that in love we can achieve peace on earth.