

Over the River and Through the Woods!

September 30, 2022

Why do I love Christmas so much? As you might expect, I get asked that a lot.

There are many reasons why I love Christmas, but let's start at the beginning... it is because of that magical wonderland, that hub of holiday delights, the Christmas Village come-to-life where presents rained from the skies and we could eat our weight in holiday foods each and every day.

Where is this place of dreams come true? It was Grandma's house, of course.

For many years as a kid, my family and I would make our annual trek from our rural Illinois town down to the suburbs of St. Louis, Mo. To this day, I still get a slight thrill of excitement whenever I see the Arch – it was a sign that we were close to Grandma's house!



The night before we left, I could hardly get any sleep. I would be so excited to see my grandparents again. My brother and I would stay awake late into the night trying to imagine what Christmas would be like this year, what gifts Grandma and Grandpa would get us, and how much fun we would have playing with the toys at their house. I'd finally fall asleep at who-knows-what o'clock, only to be awoken by my own excitement as soon as the sun light broke the horizon or I caught that first whiff of my dad's coffee.



And then into the car we'd pile and yes, we'd literally go “over the river and through the woods” to grandma's house. Which is kind of funny to call it that since Grandpa was the one who bought the property, designed the house, built the house, paid for the house, and worked around the yard to make the most delightful of any gardens or landscapes in the entire Midwest... but for some reason it was Grandma's house.

My grandma was a tall, elegant, Norwegian woman who loved us all with every ounce of her being. She looked like Mrs. Claus, and I'm pretty sure she was. When we'd finally get done with the long five hour car trip, she would be there to greet us at the front door with smiles and hugs



My Grandma

and lipstick kisses. Grandpa would be there too with hearty hugs that lifted us right off the ground. While my parents unpacked, we would be whisked into the kitchen for snacks or we'd snuggle up with Grandma on the couch and we'd tell all the exciting things that have happened in our lives since we saw them last (which was probably just a couple of months back in July, or maybe even as recent as Thanksgiving!)



Grandma was constantly in the kitchen – cooking, preparing, planning. That's how she showed you she loved you – she gave you food! Each and every meal we would be stuffed beyond all hope of ever being hungry again. I remember one year, I helped Grandma make some gingerbread cookies and I covered mine completely with M&Ms – which today sounds kind of gross, but back then it was pure sugary bliss. Some of the best memories I have were of the times we sat around their dining room table, in a room completely decked out for Christmas. We laughed, we talked, we ate and ate and ate! I'm glad to say that today their dining room table is currently in *our* dining room and it helps us carry on the traditions of many Christmases past.

Grandma not only kept our bodies fed, but our minds fed too. She would bring out a stack of books that she found for me at yard sales – Hardy Boys mostly. She kept me well supplied! I remember when I was young and first learning to read, she would sit patiently next to me as I read aloud to her from story books. She is one of the reasons I am such an avid reader today. The soundtrack to these days were the classic Christmas songs on the radio – Bing Crosby, Nat King Cole, all the greats! - or sometimes for something really special, Grandpa would bust out his Christmas records... or put on a Spike Jones record if mom wasn't around!

In the evening, we would make time to sit around the Christmas tree, the lights in the family room dimmed so the tree glowed brightly in the dark. Sometimes we would sing Christmas songs, sometimes we would chat, and sometimes we would just sit and be still – a lost habit for many of us.



Take time to slow down and contemplate the season! YULE be glad you did...

Christmas eve at Grandma's house would be the most magical of days. We'd get clad in our red, footie pajama's, get our pictures taken while setting out a plate of cookies and



Me and my siblings on Christmas eve. I'm the one on the right, obviously excited for Christmas!

milk for Santa, hanging up our stockings by the fireplace. They had a REAL fire place, that's how we knew Santa would come to their house and not ours. (This was long before Tim Allen's The Santa Clause movie showed us how he got into houses without chimneys...) After all this excitement, we would then be sent off to bed with expectations that we would soon be fast asleep with visions of sugar plums dancing in our heads. Well for me, they didn't dance so much as they rocked out with passion and glee unlike any have ever seen. HOW COULD YOU BE

EXPECTED TO SLEEP WHEN SANTA WAS ON HIS WAY? When would he get here? What would I get? How would he know what I wanted... And why did Santa look like grandpa? (more on that in the next post...)

In the morning, we'd burst forth from our rooms as soon as we were allowed and tore into the stockings full of candy, treats, little gifts, and an orange. Always an orange! To this day, the smell of oranges reminds me of Christmas. We didn't ever get any major presents in our stockings – those were saved for under the tree! I think the stockings were used in order to give us something to do while we waited for the grown ups to have their coffee and breakfast! However, one year I got a gift in my stocking that impacted my life. Grandma and Grandpa gave me a couple of “how to draw” art books in my stocking, and those books inspired in me a life long love of drawing and creating.

Before we got the presents under the tree, we would have to eat breakfast! And what a breakfast it would be. It reminds me of the descriptions of the feast that the Ghost of Christmas Present had when Scrooge in the Christmas Carol came peeping around the corner of his room and he saw “*Heaped up on the floor, to form a kind of throne, were turkeys, geese, game, poultry, brawn, great joints of meat, sucking-pigs, long wreaths of sausages, mince-pies, plum-puddings, barrels of oysters, red-hot chestnuts, cherry-cheeked apples, juicy oranges, luscious pears, immense twelfth-cakes, and seething bowls of punch, that made the chamber dim with their delicious steam...*”



The Christmas days spent at Grandma's house were some of my happiest. I hope this year you are able to make Christmas special for the family in your life. Be a part of the celebration, be a part of making things jolly! I learned much from my grandma, but if there's one thing I won't forget it's this – Christmas joy is for people of ALL ages – whether they be kids from 1 to 92!

How will you help make Christmas special this year?
Let me know at cozychristmaspodcast@gmail.com!



These guys get it! How will you make Christmas special this year?