

CHRISTMAS WHEN YOU



The way Christmas is, and the way it will always be, is the way Christmas was when we were seven. Still believers. Still dousing the Christmas Eve fire. Mom and Dad had callously left smouldering in the fireplace. Sure, Kris Kringle and Black Peter could do incredible things, but they had feet just like the rest of us and they'd burn in the orange coals. Fire safely out (and the screen pulled aside) and the biggest knee socks we had hung from the mantle, we trundled off to bed and honestly tried to sleep, partly from the conviction that if Black Peter found us awake he'd leave nothing but coal behind, but more selfishly because we were old enough to know that if we did manage to fall to sleeping, sooner would the tantalizing suspense of eternal night yield to the morning's living room bounty of OO gauge railroad track and doll houses with more furniture than our house would ever hold. The end of night was not, however, the final hurdle. There was a rule in our house - a rule never broken, as I remember - that not a soul could enter the living room until both Mom and Dad were up. We pulled their sheets off, we pulled them limb by limb from their bed. Dad would shave with a blade Christmas morning - I swear to this day that he used his faster Philishave every other day of the year. Mom spent literally hours making herself up. It was only when I was thirteen, and Dad was no longer there to read the labels and give out the gifts from under the tree in perfect rotation so nobody would feel forgotten, and the duty fell to me, the oldest, that I came to treasure and savour their eager anticipation, and realized that every minute I resisted their efforts to pull me from my bunk, the more would be their pleasure on finally being released into their Christmas garden of delights. For it occurs to me now that at that point I became an adult. The magic of Christmas as it exists for a child was gone from me. From that time on, my enjoyment of Christmas came from giving pleasure to my brothers and sister. I have never risen before nine any Christmas morning since.

In 1953, I was seven. The perfect age. But I had (manfully, I thought) hardened myself to the realization that for me, this year, there was to be no Christmas. Except for Dad, waiting for us in Germany, we were all aboard HMS Ascania, eastbound in the Atlantic, two days out of Halifax. Kris Kringle didn't have any permanent address for me, and, besides, everybody knows you can't douse the fire deep within a steamship's hold so the funnel won't smoke. The Cunard Line people, I realized even then, were too profit-conscious for that.

There wasn't much Christmas spirit aboard, either. There were 300 Jamaicans crammed into the third-class steerage, bound for the factories of Manchester and the ghettos of London. None wore much more than cotton, yet there were icebergs all around us. Christmas Eve, there was a brawl, and one of them was knifed. I wondered if Black Peter believed in guilt by association.

It wasn't hard to fall asleep that night.

Christmas Day, there were more goodies stuffed into every nook and cranny of our stateroom than I would have believed possible. Only recently did I find that the five Canadian mothers aboard, including Mom and Kenny Corbould's mother, had been up till four celebrating their loneliness with champagne, and had gone down to the third class cabins in their fortified state, where they proceeded to sing calypso songs and Christmas carols with their black friends until daybreak. Then they had come up to empty the plain brown paper packages with all the stealth of smugglers, to redeem my faith in everything that is spiritual and beyond rationality.



We met Dad at the Hook of Holland, at 4:30 in the morning of December 31, 1953 and we were driven to the Hotel Weimer in the hilltop village of Warstein in the first Volkswagen I had ever seen. It was early evening, but the trip seemed very medieval, not just because of the 500-year-old East Gate of Soest or the twisting cobbled houses leaned out over the pavement and shut out the sky, but mostly because there were few street lamps, and the ones that were there had nothing more than 25-watt bulbs in them. All of Germany was an eerie glow, and it was just the way you'd picture the place where Christmas trees and Hans Gruber came from, with churches everywhere and people still wearing lederhosen and snow falling softly through the gloom.

Hotel Weimer was gloomy too, inside its stained glass door. The darkness imparted the terrible majesty of age to everything inside the inn. Everybody tried to make us feel welcome, but they all spoke German, and, especially to a seven-year-old, only the familiar can bid season's greetings. We filed in. We dropped our thousand mile burdens.

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