



Treasure Trove

So here we are, in the runup to Christmas ... As you may well expect, because I live by myself, with my children now grown up and gone, Christmas is a pretty quiet time for me these days. But once upon a time, the days leading up to Christmas Eve were incredibly full of excitement and anticipation!

Perhaps the peak Christmas experiences for me came when I was about ten years old, and my brother would have been eight. Our family had been living in Canada for about five years by then, so our customs had become a bit of a mish-mash - the North American way of doing things blended together with what we had been accustomed to doing in England.

For example, Canadian families usually put up a Christmas tree in their home, and in the weeks approaching Christmas the presents would be placed underneath it, ready for opening on the big day. But English families didn't do it that way; we did have a tree in the living room, but there was nothing underneath it. As my brother and I went to bed on Christmas Eve, we each placed an empty pillowcase at the foot of our bed. When we woke up in the morning, there would be our presents, stuffing it full!

After a couple of years of doing it this way however, we switched over to the 'under the tree' system; opening the presents was then something that the whole family did together. Simon and I would of course wake up on Christmas morning at some ridiculous time like four or five o'clock, but the 'house rule' was clear - don't dare touch any of those presents until everybody was there! So the two of us had to wait ... and wait ... and wait ... watching the hands of the clock move ever-so-slowly towards the time when we thought it would be possible to wake everybody up.

"It's now seven o'clock. Should we wake them up?"

"No! She said not before eight, don't you remember?"

"Eight!?!? That's still an hour away!"

Finally, the moment would come when we would hear my mother in the kitchen making tea, and we would know that it was OK to get up. We would tear into the living room to see what new packages had appeared overnight, and then squirm around while waiting for everybody to be ready. We would then open the packages one at a time, with no violent tearing of the wrapping being permitted, taking turns between us.

What sorts of presents did we receive? My mother was nothing if not practical, and two growing boys of that age needed plenty of replacement clothing, so of course socks and shirts were a foregone conclusion, although in our minds these hardly even counted as 'presents'. But we had to politely say thanks for them nonetheless. I have a family snapshot here of we two boys posed in the living room after everything was opened. I think it might be from 1958 or 59. (This was before my younger sister was born ...)

Let's see how many things I can identify ...

* there is a long wooden toboggan behind us. (I wonder how my father wrapped that up!)

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- * a watercolour painting set
- * a globe
- * a carton of 'Tinkertoys'; a kind of construction set using wooden dowels and spools. (My brother has already made a few 'airplanes' with it.)
- * two packages of Meccano; another construction set, that used many small metal parts. (These would probably be supplements to the Meccano that we already owned.)
- * the first volume of a 'supermarket' encyclopedia (The rest would follow over the coming weeks, as my mother picked them up one-by-one while she was shopping for groceries.)
- * a pair of hockey gloves - Toronto Maple Leafs!
- * I am holding a large scrapbook (To be used with the watercolours, I suppose.)
- * a couple of toy cars are visible, and there is also some kind of toy army truck and tank
- * the rest of the pile is difficult to make out, but it will almost certainly be a few books, a few jigsaw puzzles, and a few family-type board games
- * not visible are the shirts and socks ... I guess my mother had already stashed those in our drawers!

And of course they are both smiling widely. Wouldn't you do too, with such a wonderful pile of treasure? Enough to keep us occupied all through the coming long winter months!

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