


An early Christmas

by J.A. Varner



As a youngster growing up in the early sixties, I recall the cheery red and green Christmas decorations winding around the light poles in downtown Lorain, Ohio, brightly glowing on either side of the main street of Broadway. As you faced north, the snow drifted down easily in flakes clumped together, making a feathery puff of white lace which I tried to catch on my tongue. I think I inhaled more snow than I tasted but the crystals pleasantly stung the lining of my throat. I remember the Sears building where my Dad liked to browse for tools and such, just past the theatre. Next door to the hardware store was a furniture store called Lee's, I think, with a picture of a bear on the sign. Right in front of the Palace was a small cart selling nuts, but it was lit up brightly and the warm interior kept the glass clear so you could see the hot cashews inside.

Across the street was the Woolworth's dime store that had all sorts of neat things to look at and touch. The wooden floors creaked as you walked on them and out of the large plate glass window in front I saw a row of children standing on the sidewalk, waiting to visit with Santa in his little red shack as others walked away with a contented smile on their face, a candy cane held tightly in their fists. The area teemed with happy families and it was so pretty with the colored lights creating a festive glow.

Inside, my mom liked to check out the sewing things and selection of fabric while I went to the toy department to look over options. Candy canes and dots hung in long strips of plastic and the carefully placed tinsel and shiny glass bulbs reflected all the bright colors of Christmas throughout the store. The music being piped in to the store's speakers was one of my favorite memories. Bing Crosby sang about "...dreaming of a white Christmas" and I think the sound of sleigh bells rang anytime the heavy entrance door opened and closed. I remember a long counter on the north side of Woolworth's where you could get a nice bottle of Coca Cola and spin around on one of the green stools. On this night, I recall lots of people milling around outside and it seemingly made no difference that it was snowing. The women would simply pull scarves tighter around their heads and the men tugged their hats down in front and turned up their jacket collars. Everybody wore boots over their shoes with the little buckles that made their own happy jingling as snow was stomped off, entering the store.

As beautiful as downtown was, my next favorite place to visit was the department store, O'neils. Later on it became known as the May Company at the Sheffield Center. I'll always remember going to visit the talking Christmas Tree (while parents apparently shopped covertly). It was a pretty big deal back then and as you waited in line you could hear the things the other kids were asking for and it

sorta helped you to make up your mind about what you'd like. This huge Spruce tree stood outside all year round but around Christmas time, you could go and tell it the things you hoped to get for Christmas and it would talk back and even ask if you'd been good! Man, Santa had spies everywhere!

At home, my brother and sister helped change the music on our record player and I remember mostly listening to "Santa Claus is Comin' to Town" and "Silver Bells." There was another song that Bing sang about "Christmas in Hawaii" but I could never get the words quite right. Mr Jingleling was on the tv with his funny bald head, bushy side hair and big ring of keys. His face was always the same three colors. In fact everything on our TV was the same three colors. You see, my Dad bought this plastic film and taped it to the front of TV screen. It consisted of three horizontal bands of colors; blue at the top to simulate the sky, orange in the middle (flesh tones?), and green at the very bottom (for simulated grass). All my friends thought we had color TV and came over to watch with us.

I remember one Christmas Eve, while waiting for Santa, there was a noise outside and my brother looked out of our bedroom window to investigate. Pulling back quickly, he turned to me and yelled that Santa was out there and had all of his reindeer with him! I became so excited I scrambled to the bunk bed and hid underneath the bottom bunk till all was quiet again. No amount of coaxing by my big brother could make me come out to see Santa and his reindeers for myself. After spending countless hours confiding in bearded elves, talking trees, aunts and uncles, and anyone else who'd listen, I was not going to get pushed into doing something that would likely get my name scratched off the "who's been nice" list this late in the game!

I woke the next morning to sounds of tickled squeals and ripped wrapping paper. I sped out of the bedroom, sliding sideways in my pajamas, eyes wide in disbelief as I surveyed the piles of colorfully wrapped packages. I was handed one of the big ones and I quickly tore off the paper. Inside was a really cool, red-painted, metal fire truck that had a long ladder, lights, a siren... everything. It was battery operated and there was a little fireman who climbed almost all the way to the top of his ladder before sliding all the way back down. Immediately he began climbing again. What genius invented this remarkable toy which imparted simple lessons about never giving up!

It didn't really matter what I'd asked of white bearded Santas or pungent evergreens, friends at school or brother and sister at home because I'd gotten everything that a little boy could ever have dreamed of... a special toy to transport my imagination to places only a boy could go!