



The Bones of Christmas Past

These days, stores seem to break out the Christmas decor as soon as the Halloween candies can be cleared away.

That may be a good thing for sales, but the long holiday season is hard on those away from family, those who have lost loved ones, those have lost the chance to be *with* loved ones because they must work. Count me among those who refuse to shop at stores that stay open on holidays, days that used to be sacrosanct and reserved for family, rest and worship.

My mother, a nurse, often chose to work on Christmas, joining Jewish colleagues in the emergency room so that co-workers could spend time with their families. It was a decidedly Christian thing to do, even though Dasher, Dancer, Vixen and Comet couldn't have dragged my non-believing mom into a church.

Mom's schedule often caused our family Christmas celebration to slip-slide around December. Often we'd take off on a ski vacation. The winter I turned eight, we were skiing at Winter Park when I fell, sustaining a spiral fracture. I screamed in agony the entire 48 miles from Winter Park to Kremmling's tiny Memorial Hospital. When Dr. Earnest Ceriani and his nurse pulled on my leg, straightening it so that the bone would heal soundly, it felt like hellfire beneath the skin.

But that wasn't the worst of it. My family had exchanged gifts on December 13, so they planned to ski on the 25th. I would have to spend a miserable, boring Christmas day alone in the clinic! In lonely, windswept Kremmling, a town mostly famous for having the coldest temperatures in the Lower 48!

It turned out to be wonderful.

Dr. Ceriani's Irish nurse came to my room and danced a jig for me. She also brought me a papier-mâché Christmas tree embellished with beads. It had been fashioned over a mayonnaise jar, and when its lid was unscrewed, a treasure-trove of candies tumbled out.

I can picture all that so clearly.

Three decades later, while walking around downtown San Francisco on my straight, strong leg, I happened into an exhibit documenting a historic piece of photojournalism from *Life* Magazine. Called "The Country Doctor," W. Eugene Smith's photo essay followed Dr. Ceriani making his rounds in 1942. The images showed exactly the same scene I encountered 17 years later: A lonely country doctor. A tiny clinic. A barren mountain town.

But the rest of what I remembered didn't show on *Life's* prints. It was etched into my bones: A mayonnaise jar. A jig. A stranger whose kindness touched me to the marrow.

May all your Christmas disappointments prove as delightful.

Nicolette Toussaint, Editor

ON THE COVER: Santa decoration hanging along the "Ornament Trail" near Carbondale.

PHOTOGRAPHY BY ASHA IRONWOOD

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