

10-4-00

Christmas on Llano Street

The winter we moved to Dallas from Sherman, I was between my fifth and sixth birthdays. Our rented house on Llano Street was a neat clapboard cottage with a sheltered front porch. I retain few memories of the house itself except for the location of Martha's and my bedroom next to the living room. Above our double bed there was a window, or maybe two, through which I could see into the living room if I stood on my tiptoes on top of two pillows on the bed. I have no idea why the window was there on an interior wall. Was the living room added later? Was the opening a way of transferring heat from one room to the other? I can recall using this feature only once during the year we lived in that house. There was also a room in the unattached garage on the side of the back yard. These two facts are very clear in my memory because of events at Christmas.

I had asked for a puppy, and, since I couldn't remember ever *not* getting my top-of-the-list Christmas wish, I was fairly confident that the puppy would await me on Christmas morning. In several typical Christmas Eve waking periods during that long night, I remember worrying how the dog would be restrained until I could claim her. I doubted that my stocking was an option. But I had to trust Santa Claus' making some provision for keeping her from scampering about the house. Two or three times I distinctly heard the lonely little animal crying. I was well enough indoctrinated in the "do's" and "don'ts" of Christmas Eve behavior that I don't recall being tempted to rescue my puppy from her loneliness. But it did occur to me that I could check on her welfare by stacking Martha's pillow on mine, and standing on them to peep through the window. The house was totally dark, no moon, no street light. The few vague shadows didn't have enough substance to help me. Finally, to the faint cries of my puppy, I gave up and slept through to the legitimate Christmas morning festivities.

I burst into the living room and found an elaborate wrought iron stand with a lovely large blue bowl sitting securely on top. A strange enclosure for a puppy. Further inspection showed me that the bowl housed four gold and black very lively fish, swimming about in the clear water. Strangely, I don't recall being crushed that my puppy had become four fish, maybe because the fish were fascinating and lovely. Santa Claus probably knew best.

There was another surprise, in the form of a substantial white wooden doll house with several rooms on its two floors, inhabited by a miniature family of dolls and furniture scaled to their size. That was something that neither Martha nor I had ever dreamed of asking for. During Christmas breakfast I learned that Daddy had built the doll house for Martha and me - that was the reason we had been denied entrance to one of our play areas in the room attached to the garage.

The doll house and its furnishings were a durable, intriguing plaything for Martha and me for a long time. I have no idea what happened to it, ultimately, but I do remember grieving over some of the furniture whose tiny legs did not survive play from Martha and me and our baby brother who took a sporadic interest in playing house.

I learned how to handle the large, beautiful blue fish bowl and I faithfully kept it a happy environment for the original fish as well as for the replacements which followed over the next few years. I'm amazed today to realize that my disappointment about the dog was so minor that it didn't play any part in that happy Christmas Day. I'm also amazed that parents would give a large glass bowl containing water to a five-and-a-half-year-old child. They certainly trusted me more than I ever have trusted a five or six-year-old.

From these memories, I've been able to see my parents in a very special light. I feel that my lack of disappointment about the dog must have come from Mother's and Daddy's careful but unobvious preparation for thwarting my wish for a puppy. After all, girls of five and three and a year-old baby boy in a small house and unfenced yard would hardly be a good combination for a new puppy. I can't recall even a shadow of disappointment over my fish, which I know I had never considered as possible pets. My lack of curiosity about the contents of the garage room puzzles me, too, for I was an actively curious child about most things in my environment. For a place I had been accustomed to use at will, I had no problem with staying away from it for a week or two before Christmas. I guess I'm impressed with the expert parenting of Mother and Daddy, who carried off that Christmas with flying colors.



About three years before the events in this story.