

The Wooden Hill

by Eva Dinkuhn Mahoney

The wooden hill started in the front hall, just under the window that faced the driveway. The first five steps had the window on the right and the banister on the left. The next five had wall and railing on either side. Then came the landing with another window on the right. The stairs continued to the left.

The stairs were strong, wooden and, if memory serves me well, cherry, or at the very least, stained red. Most of the steps had a black vinyl mat attached to them with a tack in each corner of the mat. Those steps that did not still had the four tacks and black specks of vinyl trapped under them. Those tacks were prone to snag a sock or cloth slipper.

This was long before deep pile shag carpet covered the whole downstairs and the stairs. Long before my dad covered the walls with paneling. My dad did all the work himself, he boasted. Oblivious to him, was the fact he finished two years after shag and paneling went out of style. Before the remodel, when the stairs were just wood and the walls that surrounded them covered in bird printed wallpaper, in the late sixties, it was on these steps, the lower three, where my brothers and I waited patiently for the return of our parents each Christmas morning.

Mom and dad had decided to supplement their incomes with money earned from a morning paper route. They did not have to deliver to the doorstep; they just had to shoot a paper into their respective customer's paper tube on the side of the road.

Their motor route started at 4:30 each morning, giving them the opportunity to get back in time to get my brothers and me off to school.

I remember so clearly those pre-teen Christmas mornings, when we awoke, Mom and Dad would have been long gone. Flannel clad and sleepy eyed, my brothers and I would come down the stairs to see what Santa had brought us. I believe, now, we were exceptional children because we never peeked. We may have picked up a box, wrapped in Christmas paper, or if Santa had run out, and he often did, the Sunday comics. We may have shaken it but we never tore the paper. We just knew we had to wait.

From the vantage point of the front hall window, Jim, Ed and I could see the snow covered driveway as we waited on the stairs for the "paper car" to return. We would play a game to see who could guess correctly whether or not the next car was dad's '63 Plymouth Valiant. We couldn't see it, but dad's habit of grinding the gearshift often gave it away.

"I hear it," one of us would say with a look of anticipated glee, as we knew it meant the disclosure of our bounty under the tree. It would quickly fade when it turned out to be someone else instead. Winters in Western New York were long, cold and snowy and Christmas Day was always hit the hardest.

The paper route on a Sunday would take our folks over three hours to complete, but on Christmas it was exceptionally longer. Perhaps it just seemed like it was took longer. The paper car had more three foot drifts to plow through as the Village crews wouldn't do it that early on a holiday. And plow it did. We could always depend on "the paper car."

Finally the time would come. The paper car, covered in snow except for the windows, made its last right turn into our driveway. Black ice chucks, called Clinkers, had frozen around the wheels. Mom and Dad emerged, dressed in union suits with hoods, scarves around their necks and thick leather gloves, the kind cowboys use to fix barb wire fences. Jim, Ed and I would cheer and race to the back door to greet them.

"Merry Christmas," exclaimed our mom as she walked in the door. Her glasses would steam up when they hit the warm house air.

"Merry Christmas," we'd say in unison.

Dad would walk in behind her and impatiently try to get around her to get into the kitchen.

"Karl, you can't go in there with all that snow on your boots," mom would warn.

"I just want to get the coffee pot going," he'd say, as he would go in to do just that. Mom would, with glasses in hand roll her eyes knowing there was no stopping him. She'd go downstairs to the basement to remove her wet clothes. Dad would then follow.

One of the greatest things about the paper route was the gifts mom and dad would find in the paper tubes of their satisfied customers. Sometimes it was a bottle of wine or whiskey, but mostly it was some kind of baked good: cookies, kugan, stolen or some other amazing confection. All of these had notes attached announcing their appreciation for such fine delivery service.

Christmas Day offered our family the best breakfast, albeit not overly nutritious, but sweet and satisfying. Mom would put some of them in the oven to warm. The smell of cinnamon and nutmeg coupled with fresh coffee filled the house. So wonderful it was that my brothers and I didn't mind waiting to open gifts. Well, at least until we had eaten our fair share. Then we'd beg mom and dad to move their coffee drinking to the living room and under the tree.

We had a ritual. Dad would hand out the gifts and when they were distributed we would open them. Mom and Dad would watch us, looking on from one kid to the next; getting a charge out of our reactions. Mom and dad didn't have a lot of money to spend on expensive Christmas gifts but the gifts they had for us exceeded the underwear or toys they gave us. I think the paper route helped us all with a tradition none of us will ever forget and it all started on the wooden hill.