



1819 NEWS

Allen Mendenhall: Waiting once meant wonder

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My mother, with her loving, endearing, maternal tyranny, refused to allow Christmas its entrance until Thanksgiving had properly departed. No carols before their time. No tinsel prematurely gleaming. Yet those weeks that followed – a brief, shimmering passage between turkey and presents – became, and remain still, the most treasured coordinates on my map of childhood.

Time operated differently then. A fortnight stretched into what felt like seasons. Each morning, I raced to the Advent calendar with an urgency that now seems almost comic, tearing back those little cardboard doors as though they concealed not chocolate but prophecy itself. We may have done this only one year, perhaps two – memory is such a generous liar – but it lives in me as if we'd done it every year since the beginning of time.

Then there was Santa. Mom had imposed her edict: only one request from the Fat Man per child. Simple, autocratic, cruel.

But my sister, Ansley, bless her heart, possessed even then a magnificent disregard for arbitrary limits. There exists a video – a document as damning as it is delightful – of her reciting a list to Jolly Old Saint Nick, a veritable litany of desires, most of them orbiting that expensive constellation known as Samantha, the American Girl Doll.

My brother, caught in the frame, laughed with that peculiar embarrassment that is the condition of early adolescence, or of someone who doesn't want to laugh but cannot, for all the world, stop himself. I saw that same snicker years later, when we were no longer children, as our father tried to nose the old Suburban through a half-raised barrier at one of those manicured lake enclaves where folks behave as though some unnamed threat is forever pressing at the glass. The tire caught, and down came the gate, the whole apparatus crashing with a sound that was both catastrophic and farcical. My brother laughed exactly that way: mortified, helpless, human.

We weren't much help with the decorations, truth be told. Children rarely are. But the tree – ah, the tree was different. That was democracy in action, a family expedition complete with debate and veto power.

Always a real tree, because my mother believed in certain authenticities, certain inconveniences that made things matter. Then my father, alone in his labor, would wrestle it into submission with straps, screws, and tools whose purposes I never quite understood.

Could he really have done all that himself? The mechanics of it escape me now, vanished like so much else. But I remember him there, patient or impatient – it hardly matters – making Christmas stand upright.

What remains of Christmas past is this: the feeling of those weeks, compressed now into something both smaller and larger than they were. How the waiting itself became the thing we waited for. How we rushed toward events that we also wanted never to arrive, because arrival meant ending, and ending meant the long, ordinary months that followed.

We were happy, I think. Though happiness in childhood was, for me, such a given that it was invisible, like air. You don't know you're breathing it until, years later, you find yourself gasping for it in memory's thinner atmosphere, trying to recall not just what happened but what it felt like when things were still happening, when the calendar promised secrets and your father could make a tree arise through force of will and hardware, and time was so abundant that a few weeks could contain a whole forever.

Cherish these small, shimmering interludes, my friends. Years later, they're the only infinities we get.

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