

## Christmas Surprise

When I was little, my family lived in an old row house in Philadelphia. From the street, the houses look small, but though they are narrow, they are very deep and usually tall. Ours had three stories plus a basement. On the main floor, the living room was in the front, then the dining room, then the kitchen. In the living room there was a huge winding staircase leading to the second story and a big fireplace. There was also a narrow staircase leading from the kitchen to the second floor. The rooms were all large with high ceilings and plenty of windows. The houses were connected along one wall and just the front of the other wall, so there was a space between every other house which allowed them to have windows in every room that let in a surprising amount of light.

All kids anticipate Christmas, but in the early 50's, when we didn't have TV to bombard our senses with advertising, we had our special Christmas traditions. We would get all dressed up with hats and gloves and go to Wanamaker's in downtown Philadelphia to see the wonderful decorations and of course, Santa.

At home, we would bake Christmas cookies and my parents would make egg nog (it's my mom's killer recipe with lots of alcohol). I never thought it was odd, but we didn't put up a tree or any Christmas decorations inside the house.

On Christmas eve, we would hang our stockings on the mantle above the fireplace and set out a plate of cookies and milk for Santa. (Later, I learned that Santa really preferred the eggnog!) Then my sister and I would go to bed. Of course, it was hard to get to sleep, but eventually we did.

That was when my parents, and some aunts and uncles, would really get to work. They would put up the Christmas tree and decorate it and add all the other Christmas decorations. Then they had to put together the bikes and all the toys that needed assembly (it seems there were a lot more of those then). Often, they would hardly get to bed when my sister and I would wake up.

First, we would find our stocking hung by the foot of our bed. We knew it was OK to look at the little wrapped presents in the stocking but not to open them, and it was not OK to go downstairs until our parents were awake. So of course, we had

to wake them up! Then we all gathered in my sister's bedroom on the second floor. There we would open the stocking presents. Sometimes we tried to peek into the living room from the staircase, but we were never really able to see anything because it was all dark. Then my mother would lead us down the back stairway into the kitchen. In the meantime, my father was busy turning on the tree lights, but leaving all the other lights off. When all was ready, we would open the kitchen door and run into the living room. I can still remember the wonder of seeing the Christmas tree all lit up and all the presents underneath! It was a completely magical experience! Look at all the things that Santa had done while we slept!! He brought the tree and all the presents down the chimney!! What a busy guy!

It's probably no surprise that I believed in Santa for a long time. When I was 8, we moved to Michigan, and that was the year my sister, who was three years older than I, told me that Santa couldn't exist, because there was a Christmas tree in the garage!

When I had daughter of my own, my mother wanted me to carry on the tradition of complete surprise with the tree and presents all magically appearing on Christmas morning, but we had different priorities as parents and other traditions to honor, so we decided instead to make the decorating of the tree one of our whole family holiday traditions. That way, Kelley has always been involved in the decorating part. We still wait until just a few days before Christmas to put up the Christmas tree which we usually cut down ourselves when we were on Lopez. The presents in the stockings and under the tree are what still magically appear in the morning.

The most important part of this story is the total love that went into making Christmas day such a special and magical experience. I know that whatever traditions we keep, our love for our children and our families and friends is what makes the day so magical.

Ann Palmer – my story  
December 2008