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WEEKEND BREAK

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CHRISTMAS IN NEW BEDFORD, 1953

A LOCAL AUTHOR REMEMBERS A HOLIDAY ON THE VERGE OF LIFE CHANGES

By MURIEL JENSEN
For The Daily Astorian

With apologies to Jean Shepherd, whose wonderful “A Christmas Story” lights my holiday season every year and reminds me so much of my own childhood, I’d like to share my Christmas story. I’ve had 72 Christmases, all of them wonderful in different ways, but I remember particularly the one when I was 8.

We lived in an apartment over Saster’s Dry Goods in the heart of New Bedford, an industrial town on the southern Massachusetts coast with cotton and woolen mills, and blocks of Italianate buildings.

That year, I was worried about my world changing. My sister, Lorraine, nine years older than I, was entering the convent after graduation, just six months away.

The motherhouse for the Sisters of Holy Cross was in Montreal, Canada, and I couldn’t imagine what I would do without her. She tormented and harassed me constantly, though I was not a helpless victim. I once broke a turkey platter on her backside when she picked on me while we were doing dishes. But I remember wondering where she would find the holiness inside herself to function in a religious order.

I mean, she once dumped me off my sled while pulling me over a curb and across a busy intersection when my mother had sent us shopping. She ran into friends also crossing the street and completely ignored me, as I struggled to get up and out of the way of traffic. Fortunately, a neighbor saw me and came to my aid. That provided valuable blackmail material that I used against her until she left for Canada.

Eying the presents

By the middle of December, a large array of presents stood under the tree, and avarice edged aside my worries. We had a number of relatives, and many friends, and there were always tons of presents for everyone. Anticipation was killing me. (To this day, I can’t receive a present and put it under the tree — and wait. I have to open it now. Even my children remind me that I’ll be disappointed on Christmas morning when they’re all opening presents and I’m not. But I never feel that way. I figure I have a wonderful gift and I didn’t have to wait to find out what it was.)

My father was a foreman in a handbag factory owned and operated by a family that closed the shop for Hanukkah, so he was always home during the holiday. He would take Lorraine and me shopping for our mother and would buy whatever we chose for her. I loved that. Lorraine selected a pretty blue sweater, and I found a matching set of purse accessories in red patent leather — a wallet, a makeup bag, a cigarette case, a coin purse, a key caddy.

Lorraine pointed out that Mom didn’t smoke. Nor did she wear anything but rouge (blush) and lipstick and never took them with her. I insisted that it didn’t matter because she could put anything in the cigarette case, and maybe she would carry makeup with her if she had something to put it in.

Lorraine rolled her eyes and called me Two Ton Tony Galento. I’m not sure who he was — a boxer or a wrestler at the time — but apparently a large man. Lorraine was 17 and willowy, and I was 8 and built like one of those balloons you can knock down and it comes back up again because it’s full of air.

My father interceded before we came to blows and bought the matching purse accessories. Lorraine’s usual response to my victories was, “You get everything!” My mother loved the sweater and the matching stuff. She put gum in the cigarette case and her lipstick rattled around alone in the makeup bag.



Courtesy Muriel Jensen
A young Muriel Jensen, right, in her First Communion dress with her friend Janice



Courtesy Muriel Jensen
A young Muriel Jensen



Courtesy Muriel Jensen
Muriel Jensen’s older sister, Lorraine

Music for mother

Among the many presents we received were a ukulele for Lorraine and a toy piano for me. Most of my gift tags said, “Merry Christmas and Happy Birthday” because my birthday is Jan. 1. But just as I’m never disappointed Christmas morning when my presents are already opened, it never occurred to me that I’d get twice as many gifts if I’d been born on a different day. New Year’s Day always seemed so special with crowds gathered in Times Square and friends partying together everywhere that I always felt a part of the celebration. I wouldn’t have traded my birthday for anything.

Anyway, in a rare effort to work together, Lorraine and I teamed up to play something written for the ukulele and laughed together over a noisy if not great performance. For the first time that I could remember, I really liked her, and that sharpened my concern over losing her to the convent. Our musical careers were shortened, though, when both instruments inexplicably disappeared. Neither parent claimed to have seen them or know what had happened to them. It took me a long time to catch on to the exaggerated innocence on my mother’s face.

Wonderful aromas filled our apartment for weeks. Mom prepared tourtiere and gorton, French Canadian specialties and Linquica, a delicious Portuguese sausage my father loved, was available for sandwiches, crumbled in the turkey stuffing, folded into Christmas morning omelets.

The partying lasted through the week between Christmas and New Year’s and my birthday party. All my friends came, my mother made tinfoil party hats for everyone with colorful streamers wrapped around the top and hanging down our backs — a princess affectation I particularly loved — and we played games. I was in pig heaven. The only thing lacking was the snow I’d been praying for since before Christmas. But even at 8, I realized that no one was supposed to have everything, that nothing was ever really perfect.

My mother predicted that it would snow before the day was out, but when we stood downstairs on the stoop to wave everyone off at the end of the party, the sky was leaden but kept everything it held to itself. Lorraine went on to a friend’s party after dinner, the house was suddenly very quiet. I lay alone in my room in the dark and pondered my future. Back to school, more multiplication tables — that seemed to be all third grade was about — no piano for making music, and soon there’d be no Lorraine.

‘It’s snowing’

It had been a great birthday, though, I admitted grudgingly to myself. I’d gotten a few coloring books and the big 48-colors box of Crayolas. (Anything smaller and the box didn’t include the color “Flesh,” which made it hard to do faces and hands.) I received two sets of twin dolls the manufacturer had already named for me. The box said the boys were called Pete and Repeat, and the girls, Joyce and Rejoyce. I thought that was hilarious.

So I finally drifted off to sleep, still worried about how I would adjust to life without my sister, but also basking in the joy of the afternoon.

I was shaken awake about midnight and found my mother leaning over me, my coat in one hand, my boots in the other. “Get dressed,” she whispered. “It’s snowing.”

I didn’t ask questions, but pulled on my clothes, grabbed a hat and followed my mother out the apartment door. She carried my sled and put a finger to her lips for silence as we left my father and my sister sleeping.

My mother pulled me on the sled just once around the block. It probably didn’t take ten minutes, but I will never forget them. I remember the night being absolutely quiet, falling snow drifting by the old yellow-globed streetlights, snow collected on tree limbs, windowsills, rooftops, parked cars. The air smelled of snow and what

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