

Christmas on Lasqueti 1950

When I think back to the Christmas I had then it seems like such a long time ago. In time of course it was, but now I realise my life was a side step from the norm as well....a remote island, a hard working logging family just coming out of the Depression and absolutely no commercial distractions, except the Eaton's and Simpson Sears' catalogues. It wasn't until I looked back through an adult filter that I realised we didn't have much money. Our house had no insulation and the machines in the shed always needed repair, but of course none of that matters when you're four.

I lived on Lasqueti Island with my parents, Fred and Evelyn Livingstone. Dad was a handsome, curly haired Scots-Irish man, a story teller, a fiddle player a fixer of anything and forty before he married my eighteen year old mother, a good-looking city girl who had been uprooted from her Vancouver home and not very happy about it. They made a go of it though, and she was a natural teacher, pointing out and naming wild flowers and teaching me to count to ten in French.

Our house was one my dad had cobbled together from a couple of float houses. It had cedar shake sides and roof and the windows were liberated from abandoned homesteads. One was curved and had imperfections that, when you tilted your head, gave a wonderful distortion of the garden. In the kitchen area, wet wool socks hung on a rack over the stove and made hissing pops whenever a drop fell. I liked that we could see up to the corner where the mailboxes were, and you could see cars and trucks on their way to False Bay, our main port.

Down the road lived my grandma Kate Livingstone and her adult children, Edith and Harry. Up from the corner lived Klara Welsh and down to the left lived her sister Rosa and husband Karl Schumack, immigrants from Germany. People rented the log cabin in the field above when transient loggers came to work.

Children were around, but not around me. I was surrounded by adults, often older ones at that, so I lived in their world, a miniature Livingstone, and only child until Donna and Rob.

Life was fairly steady, regularly following the seasons: the garden, the fisheries openings, the haying , but mostly dad's logging and booming -up work.

But then, Christmas!

It was a pretty big deal on the island, and in my small world, Santa was a glorious, magical, benevolent concept and I believed in him with my hot, beating heart. Oh, how I longed to see him from the hallway as he put out the presents! I looked and looked into the night sky for his sleigh. One time dad showed me a boot print on the linoleum that he felt sure was Santa's because he was probably making an early call to check out the house. There were lots of songs on the radio at the time, but the most horrifying was, " I saw Mommy Kissing Santa Clause." I noticed mom got a funny look on her face when it came on and I looked her way. I was quite embarrassed for them all: my mom, my dad and even Santa too. I mean, it wouldn't have been a laugh if dad saw mom doing that. It would have been terrible for dad and the very thought made me want to cry.

The biggest social event was the annual "Christmas Tree" night at the old Tucker Bay Hall. It was a former schoolroom with a simple kitchen on the back and a cloak room with everyone's coats piled on tables and where the babies were put to sleep. A set of wooden steps led up from the yard where all the men went to have their smokes and comment on the women who had to pass them to get something from the car.

None of that mattered to me. All I could think about was Santa. He was coming to the hall and bringing presents and I was just beside myself. Phyllis Wamer was escorting me around and encouraging my rising excitement. All the children were making a lot of noise and I started to panic, so Phyl took me to the cloak room where it was quiet. It had one small window and she looked out and whispered, "He's coming! I just saw his sleigh over the trees! Come and look!" but wouldn't you know, I must have just missed him, but right then outside in the hall was a big, soft voice and a ho-ho-ho and the game was on.

Santa sat down with his big gunny sack and there was a present for everyone. He called you by name and you had to go up and get it. I was nearly paralysed with

fear. I wanted to hear my name but was always relieved when I didn't. I was shy in those days and only vaguely knew any other children. Finally, "Helen Livingstone!" and I had to do it. I can't tell you what the present was, only that every other four year old got the same. Then, away he went, but that was okay because soon after, we had a visit from Canon Allan Greene from the Columbia Coast Mission with his big, soft voice and everyone was smiling. Then home in the cold truck, singing, "Oh Holy Night", mom's favourite, and her low, alto voice settling around me in the dark.

After the Christmas Tree, our house settled into more of a family mode. First came the letter to Santa ritual with my wishes dictated to mom and signed as best I could, then ceremoniously put into the stove so the message would be carried by smoke to Santa, and I had to rush out to see it rise into the sky.

Dad was crazy about Christmas and so were all the Livingstones. Mom's parents, Charlie and Helen Bearcroft, were kind enough but more reserved. Mom said at her house there were a few presents, but nothing could have prepared her for the largess of her new family. Yes, there were regular gifts, but then came the shower of small, often handmade, gifts: To Ev from the cat. To Ev from the pet sheep, to the house, to the dog, to the stove. There was often a small clue on the tag. Hand-knit mittens with "To You from Ewe." Stuff like that.

Mom did her part for Christmas though. She baked Christmas cakes, all the moms did, and made a small one in a can from Pacific evaporated milk. You couldn't use the Campbell soup one because the bottom was rounded and couldn't be opened from that end. These small cakes found their way into the Christmas boxes the Women's Institute made up and they were put into the wooden boxes the Japanese oranges came in every year from the Woodward's food order. The boxes were delivered to the island's single seniors. One year old George Douglas found a real diamond in his cake and the news spread like a grass fire, but no woman was missing one, so everyone said it must have come from a factory.

Our house started to look quite festive. Only the living room was decorated. There were crinkly, faded green and red streamers from four corners and meeting in the middle of the ceiling with a big paper bell that started out flat but

became a bell when you opened it and held it together with a little metal tag. Tinsel was carefully draped then, just as carefully, saved in a chocolate box for next year. Christmas cards were hung over strings and festooned doorways. There were shortcakes, gingerbread, carrot puddings with sauce, fancy candy dishes with crazy folded ribbon candy and a bowl of nuts with nutcrackers and little picks.

Mom always had to do the gifts and cards and she quite resented the job. She said the worst was the year everyone gave her money and she had to get gifts for everyone, even herself. She especially loathed wrapping presents or any other fiddly thing like decorating cakes. [Later she made me swear that, as a teacher, I would never ask a parent to make a costume and I never did.]

Not dad. He always brought home a tree he'd spotted in his work and fashioned a stand with four pieces of wood nailed together. By New Years it was a dried, crispy, crinkly thing because watering a tree wasn't a concept then, plus, the room was kept warm by an airtight heater that glowed red when in full throttle. That, plus the kitchen wood stove, the coal oil lamps and the many smokers, it's a wonder we weren't all incinerated.

In later years we got a lighting plant and had a string of coloured lights for the tree that dad took charge of. Well, sort of. Mom wouldn't touch them. Every year was the same performance. Dad would carefully bring out the string of lights and plug them in. No lights. He would start to swear then, like he did when anything didn't work, which was quite often, so I was used to his colourful language. Mom just sat on the chesterfield, calmly smoking and drinking coffee, legs crossed and one slipper dangling.

Sometimes he would yell, "Bald- headed, bald -headed, bald- headed Annie!" and other times he lit into the scriptures, and not in a nice way even at Christmas. "Holy-old, holy-old ,holy-old Jesus and all his disciples! These Christly things worked *perfectly* when I put them away last year and now they don't! Why do these goddamm things always happen?" Then he would calm down and systematically go through the string until he found the one dud bulb, then all would be lovely again.

Christmas dinners were another big event. We alternated between the two grandparent houses. Christmas at one, New Years at the other, turkey at one, ham at the other and then the following year everything in reverse. I was a good and happy eater always but the relatives dished out portions that would stagger a hand logger, and since I had to clean my plate, I was in a stuffed stupor before dessert. I would excuse myself, lay down on an equally stuffed chesterfield, loosen my buttons and pant. The adults would clear away the dishes, talk and laugh and play canasta under the hissing lamps and every so often dad would look my way and say, "How're you doing over there, Helen? Getting hungry yet? Ready for dessert?" And by some miracle, I was.

Things changed eventually. Lumber prices went up. Presents got bigger. Donna and Rob joined the family. Grandparents left us. Kraft food commercials showed us foods we'd probably never have and KVOZ showed us what we'd been missing from the Bon Marche in Seattle. Finally, the wonder of Santa was pointed out to me by Rita Whyte, a younger but much savvier girl than I, who took it upon herself to tell me how babies were made while she was at it.

There have been well over seventy Christmases for me since Tucker Bay hall. These days, Christmas lights work every time. I can go to a fancy restaurant and have turkey dinner if I want to. A group of lovely people from Lasqueti still make up parcels every year for the seniors and presents still arrive from my sister with little clues on the label.

I'm still very fond of Santa, even when he's a puddle of deflated plastic on someone's wet lawn. I always try to give him a kiss when he shows up.

Helen Kathleen Livingstone Hackett

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