

Christmas Morning 1964

By John Pepper

Christmas morning 1964, my father put his head around my bedroom door at 6.15 and said, "*John, we need to get ready for Mass*". I jumped out of bed, washed my face and hands, got dressed, putting on the shirt and jumper that had come some days previous in the big box from my uncle Tom in Canada. I also donned my short pants, my knee-length socks and my black shoes polished the night before. I had a cup of water, as we had to fast for 3 hours before receiving Holy Communion.

I took my surplice and soutane from the hanger over the cooker, both of which my mother had starched and ironed, and I carefully folded them before putting them in my small black bag.

We took our two bicycles from the barn and I placed the black bag securely on the silver carrier of my red Humber bicycle, which had been purchased the previous June in McQuillan's in Capel Street and was brought home in the boot of our neighbour, Patsy Kieran's, white Ford Anglia car, YZA 136.

My father and I headed off on our bicycles for the three Masses in St. Mary's Church, Inniskeen, which were celebrated on the hour: 7.00, 8.00 and 9.00.

The morning was so bright - lit up by a beautiful full moon, clear sky and twinkling stars - that we hardly needed to switch on the flash lamps on the bikes. I have a vivid recollection of the beautiful image of the morning as we dismounted from the bikes to walk with them up Murphy's hill. The air was sharply cold as I inhaled its invigorating purity. The silence of the

morning was magical, apart from the occasional interruption by cattle calling in the distance. I shall never forget that very special experience.

I don't believe that I've ever seen the moon shine so brightly, as it highlighted both our shadows, the sparkles of ice on the rough surface of the road, and the white frost on the hedgerows. This is one of the most truly magical and spiritual experiences I've ever experienced in my life - being with my father, just the two of us, as we pushed our bikes up Murphy's hill at about 6.30 on Christmas morning 1964. That uniquely spiritual experience revisits me every Christmas, and whenever I travel up that hill towards Inniskeen, from all those 61 years ago.

Some years later during my time at the CBS Secondary School in Dundalk, I came to appreciate the writings of the great poet, Patrick Kavanagh, also from Inniskeen, especially '*A Christmas Childhood*'. This extract from that beautiful poem resonates with that precious memorable experience:

*'In silver the wonder of a Christmas town land,
The winking glitter of a frosty dawn'.*

Further on down the road, we were overtaken by a neighbour and his family in his brand-new dark-brown Volkswagen Beetle. I confess that, although I'd been taught at Inniskeen National School, to avoid the sin of envy, and had been to confession for Christmas, my human frailty kicked in and I resented the socio-economic gap that separated our respective families, that morning.

On arrival at St. Mary's Church, we parked our bicycles at the usual place beside Ned Keenan's house, and as my father chatted with other Mass-goers, I ran to the church vestry to get into my Mass serving outfit. Inside the vestry, there was a respectful quiet excitement as, with the other four boys, I speculated on Santy's generosity.... although some of the boys had already seen their presents, including one who'd got the Meccano Set that he'd asked for, from Santa. I had made the same request, so was eager in my expectation to be treated no less favourably.

About 6.50, the Curate, Father McDermott, entered the vestry in his customary breezy manner, with the aroma of Malton tobacco wafting from the furnace of his pipe, which was in full tilt. He briefly checked with us our respective roles during the three Masses, and reminded us of some of our additional duties, given the morning that was in it. Then off we headed through the doors of the vestry, ahead of Father McDermott, on to the altar. The congregation stood to greet us, and to the left of my eye I saw my father, in his usual place at the end of the third row, on the right-hand side, holding his rosary beads.

In 1964, the call from Vatican 2 had not yet fully permeated the ecclesiastical psyche of the Catholic Church in Ireland. Mass was celebrated through the medium of Latin, with the celebrant facing the altar, his back to the congregation, the people of God. We, Mass servers, answered the prayers in Latin.....*Dominus Vobiscum, Et cum Spirite Tuo, Deus Caritas Est, and Pater Noster (Our Father)*. Furthermore, microphones had not yet arrived in the little hills of Monaghan, so the celebrant's exhortations to Heaven, and our responses, had to be pitched at decibels that were respectful, while at the same time, could be heard by the congregation.....all in a language

that the natives of South Monaghan did not know, or could not understand!

While serving Mass that morning, I rotated between ringing the bell, bringing the water and wine up to the priest for consecration, and holding the paten, while Father McDermott placed the host on the tongues of the faithful, who knelt at the altar rails with their hands carefully concealed under the starched, white altar cloth. This was to ensure that if the Body of Christ happened to fall as the priest was placing it on the individual tongues of the communicants and bypassed the paten in the server's hand, it would not fall to the floor of the Church.

After the three Masses, Father McDermott opened a big box of sweets as a reward for our efforts during the year.

I cycled home in front of my father with great energy and in the expectation that Santy would grant my wish that a Meccano Set would be waiting for me when I arrived home.....Anyway, Christmas 1964 was not to be the year I would have my wish granted.

That year, Santy brought me a Compendium of Games, which contained Snakes & Ladders, Ludo, Draughts and Tiddlywinks, along with the Dandy and Beano Annuals for that year.

Although somewhat disappointed, I ate the steak which my mother had fried, as was the customary breakfast on Christmas mornings, and then headed out to the byre to hand-milk the cows.

The following year, 1965, Santy was no further persuaded by the case I made in my letter for a Meccano Set. In fact, I was

treated even less favourably than the previous year. On returning from the three Masses on Christmas morning 1965, I found waiting for me, a silver torch with a bright red plastic surround on the front of it to keep the glass securely attached, along with three Ever Ready batteries. This torch was supplemented with that year's edition of the Hotspur, for which I hadn't the slightest damn interest....!

My bitter disappointment was compounded when, after Christmas dinner, at about 4.30 that afternoon, my father politely asked me if he could borrow "*Santy's torch*" to go out to the fields to collect the cows in the dark! I was utterly disgusted, but managed to muster up a grudging reply, and handed him my torch.

This episode merely reflected the reality in the Pepper household in the mid-sixties, where my mother and father, like many others at the time, had to stretch the pounds, shillings and pence to try and make ends meet. Sadly, I was not as aware of their daily miracles, "*of the loaves and fishes*", as I should have been at the time, as I was still a firm believer in the mystery of the generosity of Saint Nicholas.

In later years, I was to become familiar with the adage, "*Fool me once, shame on you, fool me twice, shame on me*". And despite my faith in Saint Nicholas, and the hope that Santy would come good on the second asking for the Meccano Set, I was bitterly disappointed with his conduct. I felt I deserved better treatment from him!

I was determined that Christmas 1966 was not going to herald a further "*obair in aisce*" with the third attempt to make a case to Santy for my much-coveted Meccano Set. So, I set out on St.

Stephens night '65, to make certain that would not happen. I decided that in the event of the third attempt not being lucky, I would have a fall-back position. This would involve my accumulating every red penny and halpenny during the following 12 months so that if Santy ignored my request, the following Christmas, I would hopefully have sufficient financial reserves to purchase the coveted Meccano Set.

Thankfully, it was third time lucky. I did get my red and green Meccano Set, complete with screws, washers, nuts, bolts, spanners and screwdrivers, with instructions for assembly.

But, sadly, in the process of making sure I eventually got my wish from Santy, I encountered, yet another disappointment on Christmas Eve 1966.

That is for next year's Christmas Story.