

CHRISTMAS AT 2205 RIDGEWOOD

The Christmas tree was shaking violently as we entered the living room. A black cat suddenly leaped to the carpet from somewhere near the top knocking off ornaments on the way down. It was the week before Christmas and Avon, our elderly real estate agent, told us that she could show us the house while the family was out. The owner wanted to sell the house as soon as possible. She was recently divorced and was at the hospital with her five-year old daughter who had just been diagnosed with leukemia. That cat convinced us to buy the house.

Despite being away from home for Christmas during the next three years, we always made the effort to decorate inside the house with looping green garlands, red bows, and a freshly cut Christmas tree in the living room with brightly wrapped gifts underneath. Outside the house miniature lights were draped on the shrubs and trees in the front. Children and pets had not yet entered our lives.

When we adopted Sophie, a cocker spaniel, we had to move the gifts and ornaments to higher ground after she started to lick and nibble low-hanging ornaments and chew open gifts under the tree. When Paul arrived the following year to share his first Christmas with us, we moved the tree to the den where it could be protected behind closed doors. The year of Gretchen's first Christmas, the tree mysteriously crashed late one night. After that it was discretely anchored to the wall with fishing line and the den doors were kept latched at night.

We began alternating between staying home for Christmas and traveling to visit grandparents in either the southeast tip of Texas or the northeast corner of South Dakota. Finally, we started staying home for Christmas every year and encouraged friends and relatives to visit us instead. One year Jean's estranged father, Phillip, and his fifth wife, Marty, came to visit us on Christmas. When I tried to take some video of gift opening on Christmas morning, the camera broke just as Phillip developed a nosebleed that wouldn't stop. One year my sister, Patty, and her husband, Leon, arrived with their two children. Within a month after visiting us they we learned that they were getting a divorce.

We went through the usual stages of childhood Christmas gifts starting with wrapping paper and cardboard boxes being more interesting than the actual gifts. Then it was on to

stuffed animals, talking dolls, construction sets, board games, and, finally, video games. When Paul was three he got a tricycle from his grandfather. He tried riding it in the living room, tipped over, hit his forehead on the exposed brick of the fireplace hearth, and bled all over the carpet. At the emergency room he had to be strapped to a papoose board while the doctor two levels of tiny stitches to close the wound just above his eyebrow.

We added traditions to the Christmas celebration. When Paul was five and Gretchen four, we taped an advent calendar to the door of the wet bar in the living room. The kids took turns each day reading each advent verse up to the one for the day.

The last Christmas we spent in the house was the year I lost my job. I was able to find another job, but it meant selling the house and moving to Pennsylvania. To get the house ready for sale quickly, we turned the whole house over to workmen who painted, plastered, and repaired while we spent a month in a cramped efficiency apartment. The workmen finished the week before Christmas. We decorated the walls of our home in the usual way with looping green garlands and red velvet bows. The freshly cut tree was anchored to the wall in the den with fishing line. I strung the lights and watched as Jean and the kids hung the ornaments and placed gifts under the tree. We didn't worry about Sophie anymore because she had lost her sight and sense of smell; it was her last Christmas.