

The Tiny Box

In my sleep, my thought of Christmas morning woke me with a start. My eyes snapped open from a deep sleep, my teenage legs moving slowly as though I was on guard, protecting my toes. Dream-clouded thoughts jumbled together, moving out of the way for my first awakening moments. It was Christmas morning, right? Meantime, my toes discovered the end of the top sheet and the edge of the blanket, before stepping firmly onto the floor next to my bed.

Stepping through my bedroom door, turning towards the living room at the end of our hallway, I saw our Christmas tree next to the large front window. Then, I spotted packages reflecting in the morning light coming through the window. Packages with ribbons, with bows, with tags. Packages of all sizes and shapes, wrapped in papers in different colors. Clearly, Mom had stayed up wrapping the “Santa” presents, well after we all went to bed. Early this morning, she remained asleep.

I located the oversized stockings, stuffed with playing cards, a Whitman’s chocolate sampler, homemade cookies, and various age-appropriate little somethings, designed to keep us occupied until she awakened, had her first cup of coffee, and could no longer stand the noisy impatience from her children, including me. By the time she woke up, I had examined all the presents, read the name tags on each, and determined what was inside each flat box, round box, tall box, short box, long box, fat box, and small box.

But, there was that one box. Tiny in size, not very tall and not too long. Touching it, I could feel that it was heavy for its dimension. There was no name tag. She would do that, every year. Her mirthful, devious nature found its way into the packaging of the presents. A book would be wrapped inside a grocery-store bag which was inside a box designed for a blouse or slacks to which small, flat rocks would be taped to make the unwrapped present feel really heavy.

Not knowing for whom the present was intended, I left it alone in its place behind the tree next to the living room picture window. Besides, movie theater tickets were discovered in my stocking and we kids argued over whether I had to share them. Being kids, we argued over everything. Being Mom’s children, we knew I would be sharing those tickets. Besides, I only needed a couple of them to see a favorite new release over and over. I knew how to just hang out somewhere inside the theater.

But the unknown contents of that box gnawed at me.

Like every child of any age, I carried dreams of Christmas-gift wishes coming true. This particular year, I wanted a bicycle. Wild turkeys have a daily range of 250 miles in circumference. I'd come to age where my daily territory had expanded beyond peddling my stingray bicycle with the chopper-like handlebars beyond my neighborhood. I was now in junior high school and my larger cadre of friends lived in neighborhoods further distant from my own.

Though I had wishes, I knew reality. Few if any of my wishes for Christmas morning would come true. Single mom with kids. Limited income. Rent, utilities, food, and clothing to pay each month. Barely enough for a tree to decorate. But you wouldn't hear a complaint from any of us. What was the point? Complaining didn't change anything. We had a great phonograph, a television that finally actually worked when it was supposed to work, books to read, conversation to share. Mom was a great conversationalist, engaging each of us at our age-appropriate level.

Finally, sitting around the tree, we each took turns handing out gifts to each other. We took our time because we weren't going anywhere. It was our year to host the dinner gathering of friends with their friends. Mom was only in charge of getting each of us to help "thoroughly" clean the bathrooms and the main living areas. She'd already made the pies, the sweet potatoes, and the Jello. There's always room for Jello, just ask her. Or now, her children.

There were shirts, blouses, shorts, socks, books, records, sweatshirts, pants, paint materials, family games, and a full-sized guitar for my sister. She was beyond ecstatic. Her guitar playing was actually fairly pleasant to have in the background of the house humming along. Mom announced we were done, asking us to help her clean up the debris from the presents, which we did with practiced diligence. There were pancakes to make and devour.

"Mom?" my sister asked getting Mom's attention. "There's that present behind the tree. Who's that for?" Mom looked over at the present and back to her. "That's a present for later." Big help, Mom.

Breakfast came and went. The midday drifted into late afternoon. The small house was cleaned, the furniture made decent, most of the dust swept up and carried to the outside garbage can. We each made our bedrooms as respectable as time allowed. At least the beds were made. That last one became a lifelong habit. Finally, family friends began to arrive. Food was put out, all of us quickly involved concurrent laughter and deep conversation.

Somebody noticed the lone present behind the tree, and inquired.

Mom pretended to ignore the inquiry. When it came time to pass around dessert, Mom casually reached for the unopened gift. She even more casually placed it in my lap walking past me to the kitchen. “You should open this one,” she said smiling, her eyes twinkling. I tried to be as casual as a teen boy could be. Casual takes a lot of years and even more practice. I was okay for my age. Peeling back the wrapping paper, I expected something heavy on top of the box that was revealed underneath. No rock. I sliced the tape, expecting a heavy piece of clothing as yet another disguise. No cloth of any sort. Pulling back the tissue paper that was wrapped around whatever was the present, I reached into the box, pulling the present from within for all to see.

I produced a heavy bike chain attached to a heavy lock.

Not skipping a beat and meaning every word I spoke; I informed the gathered throng that “now I have a solid lock with chain for that bike I’ll now be saving up to buy.” That was going to take some time. Probably until my retirement, I thought to myself. I busied myself with taking the lock and chain to my room, saving the box, disposing of the wrapping. “Would you take this out to the garage?” Mom asked me, handing me the collection of smaller boxes fit into slightly larger boxes all fitting into much larger boxes. It was box collection season.

Stepping into the garage, I flipped on the light simultaneously walking to the far end to deposit the boxes. I had to squeeze between Mom’s car and the 21-speed touring bicycle. The only bikes we owned were youth bikes. Placing down the box collection, I walked towards the touring bike. On it was a ribbon and an oversized card with my name only written on that card. Touching the handlebar, I heard voices from the door to inside the house, and Mom’s voice. “Merry Christmas handsome boy.” Laughing and crying at the same time, I hugged her and didn’t let go.

Anticipating running a marathon is just like the anticipation of Christmas morning. I know the result I want, but I don't know if the marathon course, the weather, and my training will all agree on my attaining that result. My hope for a great result is consistent with each one I've started. While not always realized, I feel no failure in failing to achieve my hoped-for goal. Failure is choosing not to try. Not trying is not in my thought process.

Two weeks out, I begin scoping out the weather pattern for the area where the marathon will be run this time. From that information, I mentally begin gathering the clothing I need for the 3-4 day trip, both for running the race and for tooling about the town hosting the marathon. In the days just before the trip, I revise what is going and what is staying, based on the weather forecast changing. Still need race shoes, race shorts, racing top which may be layered, accompanying socks, gloves, hat, sunglasses, gels, nutrition. Casual wear will be fit into around the important items.

After my weekend long(ish) run the weekend before, I'll pull out the training log beginning when I paid the registration for the marathon. What runs in that time show me that I can finish the distance? always the number one goal. I didn't finish my first Boston Marathon and the sag bus took longer to get me to the finish than if I had walked the distance. Do the long runs, the tempo runs, the repeats, all show I can handle the pace I expect? Or, do those runs combined, tell me to reassess my hopes for my reality.

But the best part of anticipating racing the marathon is the ying and yang, the push me pull me, of my anticipating the race is my daydreaming. I have visions of running each of the 26.2 miles as if I were floating in effortless pacing, qualifying for another Boston Marathon, my first attempt in my first year of retirement age. The magic shoes will do all the work. All I need do is lift my feet in consistent rhythm. I'll finish well under the required qualifying time.

There is another part to my daydream. This is my last marathon. Cuz slow. I am now too slow to enjoy running a marathon. A race I could run in just over two and one-half hours now takes over four hours to complete. That's too long a time for me. Running shorter distances makes more sense. I have so many marathon finishes in my resume, running along a river amidst fall foliage is a nice one to end the effort. But if the weather is cool, the course is smooth, and I have that day, there could be a tiny gift still behind that tree.

