Interview with my dying mom and thoughts on John Patrick

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**THE PRESENCE OF CHRISTMAS PAST GENERATIONS SHARE HOLIDAY'S TREASURES**

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On a dark day late in autumn a year ago, when dead leaves swirled along the banks of the Charles River in a chilly wind that warned of winter, as I maneuvered the car along Memorial Drive toward the hospital, I was overcome by a sense of melancholy. At Mount Auburn Hospital, when the elevator doors opened, I made my way along the corridor, nodded to a nurse I had seen on previous visits, and then, fortifying myself, I pushed open the door and walked into the room where my mother lay dying. "You've got to get better soon," I said as I fed her, "so that we can have our traditional autumn dinner at the Wayside Inn."

She shook her head.

I was startled.

For as long as I could remember, my mother had been a woman of such remarkable strength and self-confidence that never had I heard her admit there was anything she could not do. One day, many years earlier, I had come home from school to discover that she had moved a piano, by herself, from one room to another.

And so I persisted.

"But we can't miss our visit to the Wayside Inn."

"No," she said. "I don't think we're going to make it."

In that instant, I realized she was dying.

As days went by, we gathered our courage to confront the coming of what Lord Byron called the dreamless sleep.

"Where do you think we go after death?" I asked.

"I have the feeling I'm going on a long journey, and I don't know where," she said. "But I hope I see your father."

In the ensuing days, when I telephoned or visited, among those she inquired about was my newborn son, her grandson, John Patrick, then 14 weeks old.

"Does he sleep through the night?" she asked. "Have you bought him a snowsuit?"

She wanted to see him once more, and so, with the approval of the doctor, I brought John Patrick to her bedside one Saturday afternoon. She marveled at the smoothness of his skin and the blondness of his hair, and we talked about his greatest treasure, time.

"Imagine," she said. "He'll live another 80 years."

Knowing she would not survive till December, she reminisced about her favorite holiday, Christmas.

She was contrite about years when the day had been sacrificed to family squabbles, but she rejoiced to recall years when the spirit of the season prevailed.

"Remember when I couldn't finish that blue sweater I was knitting for you," she asked, "and I took the yarn, the knitting needles and the half- finished sweater and wrapped it as a present? You were so mad."

We laughed at the memory of my embarrassment, as a teen-ager, to discover that for years my father had been carrying in his wallet a photograph of me playing under the Christmas tree and wearing a soldier's helmet, but otherwise naked.

She was pleased to be reminded that I had not yet broken the red ornament she had given me when I was 6 years old, and that I had hung it on my Christmas tree every year for half a century.

We remembered the chaos of Christmas Eves, the friends, the cooking, the decorating of the tree and the wrapping of gifts -- not in fancy holiday paper, but in old newspapers secured by mucilage -- after which the family made a frantic dash to midnight Mass in three relays, those who sang in the choir, those who served as altar boys and those who sat in the congregation.

For Christmas dinner, everybody moved from the kitchen table to the formal dining room, where my mother's elaborate dinners were climaxed by plum pudding so heavy my father speculated that the leftovers might be molded into bookends.

"You know," I said to my mother, "Martha Stewart never would have approved of you serving Mogen David wine in green glasses."

She adjusted herself in bed.

"To hell with Martha Stewart."

We recalled my father's iron rule that no gift could be unwrapped until Christmas night -- not until dinner was concluded and the last dish washed and put away. It was a tradition he had inherited from his mother, a Calvinist who found joy in abnegation.

We laughed to recall, at the conclusion of Christmas dinner, my father's announcement, in a loud voice, that he would do the dishes.

"Did you notice," my mother said, "that on every other day of the year, he managed to resist any temptation to do dishes?"

Most of the photographs of those happy days are faded now. My favorites are the ones in which my mother and father hold each other, lovingly.

"Your father and I had you fooled about Santa Claus," my mother said, and she was right.

One day, while Christmas shopping, she was concerned, as we walked from Jordan Marsh to Filene's, that I might become suspicious to see Santa Claus in each store.

"Look," she said, crossing Summer Street. "There he is."

"Who?" I said, looking around.

"Santa Claus," she said. "He just walked from Jordan's to Filene's."

Knowing her future was out of reach, she clung to her past.

"Remember the day your father told you about Santa Claus? He was disappointed you hadn't figured it out yourself, and so he sat you at the dining room table one Sunday afternoon and said, 'How do you suppose Santa Claus gets all round the world in a single night?' "

She laughed.

"You said, 'Well, reindeer can run very fast. . . .' "

My mother had her own traditions, and I have inherited some of them simply because they were hers. She insisted on a Christmas light in each window of one color only -- blue -- and she favored mistletoe in doorways. Not the plastic stuff, but real mistletoe.

I thought of her a few nights ago when I saw Martha Stewart on television preparing not just any gingerbread house, but a two-story Colonial gingerbread house that could be created only by someone with a degree in engineering and 10,000 man-hours to spare. In attaching a roof made of Necco wafers, Martha Stewart advised, "You just have to grit your teeth and do it."

My mother never made gingerbread houses two stories high, and certainly not with a roof of Necco wafers, but I remember her gritting her teeth a lot, especially on winter nights when she'd leave home at nine o'clock to take the trolley downtown to mop floors at Filene's.

On the day we reminisced about Christmas, late in the afternoon, when it was time to go, I leaned down to kiss her goodbye.

"Give me my pocketbook," she said.

She fumbled among the mirrors, combs and credit cards and pulled out a $20 bill that had been tucked away.

"Take this," she ordered, "and buy something for John Patrick and put it under the Christmas tree with my name on it."

A few weeks later, before the first snowfall, she died in her sleep, and she was buried next to my father.

With the $20 she gave me, I bought John Patrick the snowsuit she had worried about.

On the night before Christmas, I wrapped it and put it under a Christmas tree decorated in lights of blue.

On the card I wrote, "With love, from Grandma."