

As a strong believer in giving credit (and blame) where credit (and blame) are due: allow me to say simply, that it was my mother's idea.

One last night in our family home before leaving it forever. That the night happened also to be Christmas Eve made it all the sweeter. There would be magic in the air. We would make sure of it.

In those days, we were a family of five: my six-year-old brother, 39-year-old dad, 40-year-old mom, the dog whose age we never quite knew, and me: a boy who, even at 10, knew a bad idea when he saw one.

Because this had to be a bad idea, didn't it? After all, who in their right minds sells their home, boxes up their belongings, moves them to the new house across town, and then returns to the old house, now empty of everything but a Christmas tree, in order to say goodbye?

This was in 1994: "Hakuna Matata" was on every tongue, *Forest Gump* on every screen, and the Buffalo Bills on every bookee's "Do Not Bet On" list. As for me, I was a scholarship kid fifth grader at a brand-new private school. Had I known anything about tax brackets back then, I'd have known that my family was a couple brackets beneath my fancy new friends. They celebrated Christmas, too, only they celebrated in the Bahamas.

Our last Christmas on Breconshire Drive was a spartan affair by comparison: our purse strings a little closer to Bob Cratchit's than Ebenezer Scrooge's. It was the year we had the least but felt the most. The year we kissed goodbye to the gluttonous revelry we'd grown accustomed to.

Where was the figgy pudding? The cup of good cheer? And the presents! How would Santa know to which house to deliver the loot?

That year, there was no glow from the television set, because there was no television set. My brother and I were forced to stare into the flames in the fireplace, instead. And then, the Christmas miracle occurred: we started...talking to each other. A family, on its own volition, talking to each! Our laughs echoed through the cavernous house as my brother and I chased our dog in all the spots where the furniture used to be.

As bedtime approached, my mom, dad, brother and I unfurled our sleeping bags alongside that hearth—our dog serving admirably as a space heater. Within minutes, my entire family was dreaming of sugar plum fairies, while I spent that night staring at the ceiling.

Our house was full of memories. The height markers on the door frame, sure, but also, the fruit punch stain on the carpet. And the holes in the walls where, once, our family pictures had hung. We would leave it to the future owners to do the dirty work of erasing us. Let them steam clean and spackle us away. We would take no part in it.

As for us, by morning we'd have a new home to christen, a new doorframe to mark, a new carpet to stain, and a fresh wall to hang our family pictures.

Staring at that ceiling, it occurred to me that in a few hours' time, even our memories would become memories. But not before I made one more.

Sometime after midnight, I slipped from my sleeping bag and peered out into the dark. Santa was nowhere. What I saw, instead, were the pair of pine trees I once leapt over with ease; suddenly, they were taller than my head. Just a couple of pine trees, nothing more, and yet I was despondent by the realization that they would continue to grow without us.

In the coming years, our family would grow, too. We'd grow together, we'd grow apart, we'd grow beyond our shared roof. It is the nature of families as it is the nature of trees: in both instances, you hope the roots can hold you.

A quarter century later, my brother and I returned to our roots on Breconshire Drive. Standing across the street from our childhood home, we conjured what we could of that last

Christmas. Within minutes, we were approached by a pair of men who accused us of...casing the joint.

There'd been a few robberies, they explained, and what business did we have there?

We tried to explain that this had been our home once many years ago. That I'd dedicated a decade to scraping my knees on that sidewalk. That my brother and I had built fort after fort in that forest. I knew every cattail in the ditch, every acorn in the tree, the best spots on the block to catch fireflies.

The men didn't buy it. It was easier to believe that we were burglars than sentimental.

There was nothing we could do to persuade them. Every memory of us was now gone. If the pine trees remained in the backyard, I didn't see them. But I like to think they were there.

As my brother and I removed ourselves from the premises, it was clear that our home was no longer our home.

But, of course, home is never a place, it's always the people. It's a lesson better learned late than never.

Like I said, it was my mother's idea. And my mother's lesson.

Every Christmas, I thank her.