

O Night Divine!

This is my favourite Christmas memory, which I have written about many times in many places. Repeating it has become a Christmas tradition.

Fresh-fallen snow protested beneath the crush of my gumboots breaking trail down the unplowed lane. Dry, sharp squeaks, not unlike the cries of cheap chalk cruelly scrapped against too clean a blackboard.

Skuur-eek, skuur-eek.

The boots ignored the sounds. They moved on, ribbed rubber bottoms and laced high leather tops creating a meandering wake in the ankle deep snow.

From each side of the trail, drifted snow leaned tiredly against the backsides of the bungalows, dropped there to rest by an impatient blizzard just passed through. Their crests were indistinguishable against the white stucco walls but nearly reached tufted piles of fluffy snow clinging nervously to windowsills and eavestrough lips.

The squeaks flew through the still night air, dodging fat flakes that fell heavy and straight onto my cap bill, but occasionally splashing into my face flushed warm from the walk. I could have rode back home from Christmas Eve Mass with the family, but the teenage mind always prefers independence, and it was a chance to visit friends along the way.

Faint strains of music joined the squeaking as I approached our back fence. I stopped to hear the music more clearly, now identifiable as singing voices escaping through an open window.

I shuffled forward and listened to the notes float out crisply and clearly, then mingle with smoke rising from the chimneys. Notes and smoke rose together into an icy sky illuminated by frost crystals set shimmering by thousands of stars and the frosty moon the Ojibwe called Minidoo Geezis, the little spirit moon that appears small and cold early in winter.

I held my breath to hear better and determined that the music was 'O Holy Night,' and the notes came through the window in my grandmother's room. It was open to the cold because most people smoked cigarettes back then and at gatherings cracked a window to thin the smoke.

They sang the first verse, and, when they reached the sixth line, the other voices ceased and one voice carried on alone:

'Fall on your knees! Oh, hear the angel voices! O Niiii ... iiight Diii...vine! ...? That's the part where the notes rise higher and higher until the singer reaches an awesome note.

The solo voice belonged to my grandmother, and I knew she was hitting that high note while sitting on the edge of the bed that crippling rheumatoid arthritis had made her prison for 16 years. She was unable to walk without assistance and had trouble holding a cigarette between her gnarled fingers.

The others had stopped singing to listen to her. The second time she hit the high notes at the words 'O Night Divine,' a shiver danced on my spine. When she finished singing 'O Holy Night,' the other voices started up again, this time with 'Silent Night' and other favourite carols.

I went into the house and found Christmas Eve celebrants - my mom, dad, and some neighbours - crowded into the 10-by-10 bedroom that was my grandmother's world. They sang long into the night, mostly in French because the neighbours were the Gauthiers who seldom spoke English to my grandmother and my mother.

After the singing ended my mother served tourtière, which I slathered with mustard. Then we gathered at the tree and opened our gifts.

I have long forgotten what present was under the tree for me. It doesn't matter, because my real gift came many years later: the gift of realization that those high notes were not solely the products of the lungs. They were driven by something stronger than flesh - an unbreakable spirit. They came from strength far beyond anything that a mere body can produce.

The memory of that unbreakable spirit is the best Christmas gift that I receive every year.

-Jim Poling Sr.