



When I was 11 years old my mother dressed my brother and me up to go to town for the annual parade complete with the appearance of Santa, shopping, and cheeseburgers with fountain cokes at City Café. I wore a red and green plaid taffeta dress with a red bow on the left hip. Plus, several itchy petticoats. That dress made me feel like a million bucks and so very pretty.

Mama gave my brother, John, and me five dollars each to purchase gifts for our family. We lived in Levelland, Texas, a small, dusty, oil-field town that became a wonderland at Christmas. The old-fashioned court house square was hung with white lights, greenery, and bells. Each store had its own decorations and multiple strings of lights. The Main Street light posts had silver bells arching over them.

Mama made us go into the stinky, old department store first to help her choose a gift for Daddy. The floors were scuffed and they creaked with every step, merchandise was crowded together, and the musty odor made my nose itch. We finally found a blue shirt and socks for Daddy, then Mama marched us to the creepy shoe department in the back corner to have our feet measured. I drug my feet and whined knowing full well that the seemingly 300 foot tall grizzly bear with obsidian eyes, dusty fur worn off on its back paws and chest where people had touched it year after year, and yellow claws would tower over me. I was afraid it would topple over on me. Or, worse, come to life.

The clerk measured my feet first and with Mama's permission I rushed away to wait at the front of the store. I stumbled onto a large and deep box covered in red paper sitting next to the door. How had I not seen it before? It was full, really full, of stuffed animals. I dug through it as happy as I could be. A small, reclining tiger kept making its way to my hands and heart.

I begged Mama for it, but she said no and rushed us out to shop at Ben Franklin, the 5 and 10 store wonder. My five dollars started making my hand sweat. John and I were sent our separate ways to find gifts for Mama, Daddy, and each other.

I never wasted time shopping. My gifts were never very creative, but John's were. He spent time thinking and figuring out just what would be the best gift. I quickly found handkerchiefs for Daddy. Three sparkling white handkerchiefs in a small, long, flat box with a clear cover and a gold string tied in a bow to keep it closed. Mama almost always got a small cobalt blue bottle of Evening in Paris perfume. And, probably a car or truck for John.

The thing is, I had some change. I was supposed to save my change. But, I just had to have a quarter pound of hot, roasted redskin peanuts in the tiny paper bag. The best treat ever! I did get in trouble for not saving my change. Sort of. Mama started to get on to me, but stopped, saying “it’s Christmas.”

We hurried through the cold mist for a warm lunch. As we left to watch the parade it began sleeting. The gray sky didn’t dampen our spirits because the parade was set to begin any moment. The gloomy gray actually made the lights seem brighter and more colorful. We watched from the car and waved from lowered windows as veterans with flags, horses, marching bands, twirlers, cheerleaders, floats, and, finally, Santa on the fire truck passed by.

Then . . . Magic . . . The court house bells pealed out the melody of *Silver Bells* and a choir on the court house steps sang. “City sidewalks, busy sidewalks . . .”

And, that memorable day with my mother and brother made *Silver Bells* my favorite carol.

By the way, John and I got new shoes for Christmas and I got that little tiger.