



# Ornaments

Michael Fishler



# *Ornaments*

Michael Fisher



*Christmas*  
*2015*

## **Ornaments**

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## *Dedication*



To my friends and family.  
Without you, Christmas wouldn't be Christmas.



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## *Introduction*



These stories are a compendium of writings from the last couple of decades that have holiday-related themes. I left these vignettes largely untouched as they are reflections of not only the time in which they were written but also represent somewhat of a timeline of events, albeit out of order, across the Christmas celebrations in my life.

This is my favorite time of the year—even more so now that I have children of my own to share it with. The

holidays have always been magical and even at my current age, they still are.

I'm thrilled to be able to share some of these memories with you in this expanded Christmas card and hope that they remind you of your own holiday celebrations.

Merry Christmas, everybody.

Mike

## *Santa Is Real*



*Christmas Eve, 2007*

Liz and I are so excited, partly because our daughter is coming into a really fun age and we think she'll have a good time tomorrow, but also because we are thrilled to be able to give Christmas to someone else. Giving gifts is one thing, but being able to give this feeling, these emotions, the whole season and reason, is something we've both looked forward to for a long, long time. I hope that many years from now, when Lily looks

back on this, she'll know how much Christmas means to our family and that she will have many, many wonderful memories of the Christmases we have given her.

This is just the beginning. A first in what will become decades and dozens of Christmas experiences for all of us. If there was ever any doubt about the existence of Santa, this feeling alone should be all the proof anyone would need. Liz and I love that we have a lifetime of Christmases to prepare for--to create, to mold, to imagine--and we love that we now have our own beneficiary of all that we dream up for years to come.

Right now, I'm sitting here on the computer; my 10-month-old daughter is fast asleep in the next room. I'm sure the visions dancing in her head are far from sugarplums, more likely they have to do with tissue paper, Cheerios, and Dora the Explorer.

I feel like I've spent my whole life getting ready for tomorrow. I've always loved Christmas and everything associated with it. I love giving gifts and I enjoy seeing the smiles when you surprise someone special with just the right thing!

But never in my life have I been in the position of giving "Christmas" to someone. It's a completely different feeling than giving a gift. I'm about to give a lifetime of meaning and memories and begin a seasonal path that will hopefully lead to a life spent being kind, caring, conscientious, and giving. I feel a little overwhelmed and emotional that I am getting ready to pass on to my child one of the things I've loved the most about life: Christmas.

I feel a renewed sense of hope for a bright future, full of memories waiting to be created. I'm more excited about this Christmas than I think I've ever been.

Tonight's the night that I become Santa.



## *Holiday Blog Bites*



*All of the following are excerpts from the family blog over the last few years:*

### ***Modern Nativity***

So I saw something today that I've never seen before: Mary, Joseph, and the baby Jesus, attended by the "modern" version of the Wise Men: Rudolph, Frosty, and Santa. However, the house where I observed this

normally has yard and porch decorations that include the entire Flintstone and Rubble Families, as well as Garfield and the Pink Panther. Thematically, I'm still trying to figure them out, but aesthetically, it's quite pleasing in a Southern sort of way. At least there are no pink flamingos!

### *Snow Related Injury*

I guess this was inevitable.

Last night, during the TV show LOST, it started snowing. The messages across the bottom of the screen announced "Lake Effect Snow - 2 to 4 inches." I was very excited, but after LOST, went to bed. I dreamed about the snow, and woke up 15 minutes before the alarm went off, so that I could check to see how much snow we actually got.

The house was completely dark.

I got out of bed and walked into the den completely blind—I could see nothing. In my excitement,

I forgot that the large wooden tray that usually sits on our ottoman had been placed on the floor. When I kicked it, I was startled, and felt myself falter. To regain my balance, I stepped fully into the tray and into a small dish of M&M's. Unfortunately, neither the tray nor the dish helped in regaining my footing and I went down like Ollie North in the Iran Contra trial.

I first landed on my right hand and knee, while my left side ricocheted off the couch into the ottoman. It was Pinball-like effect on my journey to the floor. I yelled, woke Liz up, and stayed on the floor for a moment. (I hadn't yet seen the snow.) Liz came to check on me. With her help, I got up; ticked off that I had fallen. I reached across the couch to part the blinds, revealing:

Absolutely not a damn thing.

The little bit of snow we got last night was it, and even that had melted. There wasn't a flake to be seen. However, 2 miles south got 6 inches.

I consider this my first snow-related injury, even though there wasn't actually any snow. I'm very sore now, and the Tylenol is wearing off.

My forecast includes 2-4 more Tylenol and a flurry of sympathy and complaints is due to develop in the next few hours.

### *Attachment Disorder*

Nothing says Christmas like a big steel bolt right in the crotch.

It seems this fad of putting up giant blow up Santas, Snowmen, Reindeer, and Christmas Trees in your front yard is more than catching on. I see at least 5 or 6 dozen of them on the way home from work.

The newest member to join this club is the blow up Polar Bear.

Now obviously, these things need to be secured. I've seen them tied to trees, duct-taped to the side of the house, tied to stakes in the yard, but until the Polar Bear started to appear had I ever seen one nailed to the ground by it's hoo-ha.

It's quite obvious, even just glancing in its general direction, how the inflated beast is managing to stay on the ground; it's quite the obscene sight. You would think the manufacturer would have found a better place to attach it. It would be very interesting to know who was on that design team.

Oh, and before I forget, the poor Polar Bears do not have the winning Christmas smiles of their counterparts. Their faces have tiny little pursed lips which seem to suggest that the ground attachment procedure was not very pleasant. I can't say as I blame them...my lips would be pursed too.

### *Nutcracker*

We just got home from seeing the "Nutcracker" ballet at the University of Buffalo. We sat on the third row and were fairly close to the action.

I found that I was amazed by several things during the performance: A) The dancers standing on their tiptoes

(even the babies), B) The dancers ability to wiggle their pointed feet (in unison), and C) the lack of at least some shorts or something on the male dancers.

The costumes and sets were very colorful, but the constant pointing of toes and wiggling of calf muscles is very distracting. At one point, these 5 or 6 year olds came out in full length angel costumes...right to the floor. When they stood on their tiptoes, their dresses were about two inches off of the stage, allowing a glimpse of their feet, which looked like two twirling Tic-Tacs. It was quite disconcerting.

Just watching the dancers made me want a muscle relaxer...I can only imagine the pain they must all be in, especially their pointy little devil feet. At least it was entertaining and Red Lobster was still open afterwards. I seriously doubt I'll be able to eat Tic-Tacs anytime soon.

## *Mouse Pad*

We finally had some discernable snow. We got about 2 inches of wet, heavy snow and it was beautiful, especially on all of the trees on the way to work this morning.

On a different note, as it started to snow last night, I walked outside because my in-laws, Doug and Barbara, were missing. They were hiding in the front yard with a mouse that was stuck to the adhesive pad Doug had put out.

Moose, the cat who does no wrong in the eyes of those who love him, brought a mouse into the house and set it free. I am the only one who recognizes the cat as the purposeful, instigating, seed of Satan that he is. He brought the mouse in on purpose to see what we would do. Incidentally, he never kills the animals he catches; he just plays with them. Some of you will remember the baby rabbit in the shoe situation earlier in the summer. It was neither pretty, nor was the rabbit dead. Thank God the dogs, the more angelic of the animals in the house,

were there to protect the rabbit, helping it stay alive by licking it while it hid face first in Doug's shoe. When we discovered the rabbit, it was soaked with dog spit. Maybe there are worse things than being eaten by a cat.

But I digress—back to the mouse. The deluxe adhesive that Doug had used to capture the mouse did not kill it. I offered to put it out of its misery, but instead was given a knife and asked to save it. I'm happy to report that the mouse did, in fact, become separated from the adhesive, but there was quite a bit of adhesive left on him when he tried to run away. (And on me...)

In your minds, picture a pirate, with a suction cup on the end of his wooden leg. Hop-stick, hop-stick...you get the picture...the little sucker was never going to be a marathon runner, but luckily, he was able to get to shelter before the cat realized he had been let go.

Days after this, I dreamed that the mouse was part of a tiny Nativity scene and he had shown up in a new role as a Wise Man, bringing gifts to frog Joseph, baby bunny Mary, and little sparrow Jesus. After a time, the

members of the scene began to disperse, except for mouse Wise Man. He and his gift were stuck in place.

Merry Christmas, little mouse. If Santa doesn't come through for you, I'm certain that the cat will.



## *Baby's First Christmas*



*Christmas 2012, by Lily*

Baby's first Christmas; everybody loves you.

We are your family on Christmas night.

Baby's first Christmas; Santa leaves presents.

Even for the baby, on Christmas night.

Baby's first Christmas; baby's ornament is on the tree.

You'll be sleeping soon, on Christmas night.



## *Snow*



On a cloudy day in the winter of 1987, I was sitting in my Geometry class at A.L. Brown High School. I found myself daydreaming and often looked out the window for some non-math related solace.

The news that morning had forecast some major snowfall, but as of around 9:00 a.m., nothing had yet happened. I felt forsaken by then weatherman Mike McKay, and my mood was not enhanced by multi-sided polygons.

About the time my frustrations reached a boiling point, I noticed movement from the corner of my eye, turning to see large, bright, white flakes streaming down from the sky. The sky was offering a symphony of winter's grandest gifts, conducted by the temperature and gentle breezes.

As the roads turned white, math class ended and the bell rang. By the time I reached Mr. Roger's English class—school had been called off. We were being sent home.

It snowed all day and into the night, tapering off sometime the next morning. It was a whopper of a storm, and left us with well over a foot of snow.

I was absolutely elated.

We ended up being out of school for over a week, as the temperature settled in low and the unexpected snow took a long time to melt. We had to make it up, of course, but sweet is the unexpected vacation.

Since then, it really doesn't seem to snow that much around Kannapolis. Sure, we get a couple inches here, three or four inches there, but it's just not enough.

Last Friday, when we got a tenth of an inch. I was excited, yes, but also disappointed. I had expected more. Conversely, my wife's parents in Buffalo, New York got three feet.

I've never seen three feet of snow at once. Around here, there has probably only been three feet total since I was born.

Additionally, every time there's even a hint of a flake in the forecast, folks around here empty the grocery shelves of milk and bread, in case they get stuck in their houses until mid-morning, or worse, mid-afternoon. I don't understand that at all, even though I've grown up with it. If the weather is going to be bad, the last thing I want is milk and bread. I want Oreos and Cherry Coke. Or maybe wine and Cheetos.

I like the snow. I know many of you don't particularly care for it, but for me, I think it's a case of wanting what you can't have. The weather doesn't often cooperate for me anyway, regardless of any rain dancing, prayer, or just down-right begging I do.

Maybe we shouldn't even call this season "Winter" in the South. It's more of an extended "Fall" that we endure until the beginning of our "Summer" around the first of March. I'm thinking maybe we should just have two seasons: "Hot," and "Not So Hot."

At any rate, I don't think that the forecasters should be allowed to say that we are going to have snow unless it's going to accumulate more than 5 inches. Anything else is just a dusting and shouldn't count.

## *Ornaments*



### *Christmas 2015*

December has crept up on me again.

The older I get, the faster the years seem to fly; though everything I've experienced is still quite memorable and vivid. The sweater I received last Christmas in 2014 is just as fresh in my mind as the bicycle I got on Christmas morning in 1981. And now, suddenly, I'm approaching my 44<sup>th</sup> Christmas.

When faced with such things, people often wonder where the time goes and I guess I'm thinking the same thing right now. I'm both in awe and horrified. It's incredible that I've been able to participate in this celebration for so many years. But "so many years" sounds so, I don't know, old?

Maybe I'm being too philosophical.

I think that for many people, holidays such as Christmas are a time for introspection, perhaps even more so than a birthday or other memorable occasions. It's a time to think about the year we've had, the upcoming year's expectations, how we can be better, how we can forgive, how we can contribute to the world as we get older.

Weird or not, one of my favorite things to do during the holidays is to sit alone in my living room, all of the lights off except for the Christmas Tree, just looking at the glow and peacefully meditating on the day, the month, the year, a lifetime...

I look at the ornaments that decorate our tree and how we've added to our ornament collection over the

years. We've still got some of the cheap ornaments we bought when we first got married. There are ceramic moose that my in-laws buy us every year. There's a presidential one, a princess one for the kids, little coffee cup replicas from our favorite cafes, and many others that we've bought or received as gifts. Each one represents a memory, a moment in time that we get to revisit every year when we decorate our tree.

That's what I'm meditating on tonight. That's what I'm thinking about when I stare at the tree. I do the same when I look at other people's trees, in particular when I look at trees of family and friends where I know the rationale behind their ornament choices and the memories that are associated with them.

When my brother, sister, and I were young, my mother bought us each an ornament every year—a flat golden and shiny ornament with our names and the year etched on it. Over the years, my parents' Christmas Tree has bloomed into an artwork masterpiece of gold and green and white.

And now, here I sit, 44 years in.

44 years of tree observations.

While the ornaments and even the trees have come and gone, all of the memories are intact and all of those memories are what make Christmas *Christmas* for me. I save all of this inside. Every memory, every family member and friend, every gift, every gathering, every ornament placed; all are remembered. All are valued and precious.

All are ornaments on my inner Christmas Tree. Just like our physical tree, I bring these ornaments out each Christmas season and remember the joy of every Christmas past. They decorate my holidays every bit as much as the tangible ornaments on the tree right now.

## *We Are All Shepherds*



As far back as I can remember we always went to the late night Christmas Eve service at our church. When my brother and I were really young, my grandmother made cookies and hid them in her purse for us to eat—I'm sure to keep us quiet while the pastor shared the birth of Jesus and the description of the Nativity scene.

As we got older, my brother and I, and eventually our sister too, moved from the congregation to the front of the church, participants in the sharing of the Christmas

story. We've been shepherds, wise men, angels (significant stretch of acting skills), and choir members.

In Youth Groups, we planned Christmas parties, went caroling, drank gallons of hot chocolate, and worked on performances for Christmas programs that we would present to the congregation either on one of the Sundays in Advent or on a special night leading up to Christmas.

Our local middle school had an interconnected internal television system that would play announcements, local news channels, and at Christmas, whatever Christmas movie was popular at the time. This particular year, it was *The Best Christmas Pageant Ever* with Hot Lips Houlihan from M.A.S.H. and that weird chick from the movie *The Craft*.

The story was engaging. Hot Lips had to get a bunch of bad kids to put on a Christmas pageant at their local church. The kids really had no idea of the culture around how Christmas was celebrated by the church folk and really only participated to get free snacks during practice. Spoiler alert—they ultimately realize the

wonder and awe that Joseph and Mary must have felt bringing Jesus to the manger hundreds of years ago.

All the kids I knew thought the story was hilarious. These bad kids were *really* bad and gave us ideas of stuff to do that we had never considered.

We shared how awesome this movie was with our Sunday School teacher. In middle school, our teacher was a woman named Ruth Dysart. I remember Mrs. Dysart being both very stern and very loving to all of us and she regularly ditched our Sunday School lessons in favor of conversations about issues that mattered to us. She was one of those adults that just “got” kids. We loved her back.

She listened to us talk about the movie and all of the bad things that the Herdmans did. She laughed right along with us and pretended to frown on the really bad choices that the kids made, reminding us that she hoped we’d never consider something so heinous as sneaking sips of communion wine or taking money from the offering plate.

I remember this 7<sup>th</sup> grade Christmas at church in particular because of how she brought us back around to a religious takeaway, a lesson objective that she might not have intended or planned but one that has stuck with me these many decades later.

“Isn’t it interesting that the kids’ last name is Herdman,” Mrs. Dysart asked.

We weren’t sure where she was headed. She continued.

“What do you think of when you hear the word ‘Herdman?’ Break it apart, ‘herd’ and ‘man.’”

Some of the kids offered responses about herds of animals or herds of people. Mrs. Dysart pressed on.

“What do we call someone who leads those herds?”

One of my classmates offered a timid, “shepherds?”

“That’s right,” said Mrs. Dysart, “That’s exactly what I was thinking every time any of you said the name ‘Herdman.’ I kept thinking how the author must have done that intentionally. If the Herdmans are shepherds,

what did they lead? What did they do beyond just performing in the pageant?”

This blew my mind. I had never considered the connections that Mrs. Dysart explained. Neither had my classmates. We were eventually able to articulate how the actions of the Herdmans actually brought people together, specifically, everybody came to church to see the spectacle.

Mrs. Dysart continued, “All of you are like the Herdmans. You’re all shepherds too.”

I’m sure she shared a lot more profound words as she continued the lesson but my memory falters after this conversation. This entire teachable moment came out of our conversation and Mrs. Dysart caring about what mattered to us. She skillfully brought it back to a spot-on and timely message about how we contribute to our church.

Everything we do either helps keep the church together or helps to bring others into the church.

“You are all shepherds.” It’s a message I’ve never forgotten.

Over the years, the book and the movie have become a solid Christmas classic. It still plays during the holiday season and every time I see it I think about shepherds and Mrs. Dysart and the timeless message of joy coming from unexpected things.

Mrs. Dysart was a shepherd.

She was also an angel.

## *A Time of Remembrance*



In November of 1941, Japan was advancing into China as an ally with Nazi Germany. The United States hoped that an oil embargo would slow them down, and Japanese-U.S. relations deteriorated. While diplomats of the two countries met, Japan readied itself for war, sending a secret team to sea with Pearl Harbor as their target.

Early on the morning of December 7th, the USS Condor spotted a periscope slicing through the dark

water. Shortly after, the first team of fighters, bombers, and attack planes navigated the skies to the north of Hawaii.

While the US Destroyer Ward was busy sinking the sighted submarine, radar operators on the other side of Oahu spotted dozens of planes, flying directly towards them. With clear skies, and the element of surprise, the Japanese swarmed Pearl Harbor.

After two waves of attacks in just over two hours and with more than 2000 dead – that day, in President Roosevelt’s words, would become “the day that will live in Infamy.” Unfortunately, it wasn’t our country’s last infamous day.

Almost two weeks after the Pearl Harbor tragedy, my grandfather Henry Fisher, and his brother Walt, got their notices in the mail to join the Army. Married for just over a year, my grandfather left to join a war that the public wasn’t happy about. Parents, children, and spouses watched as their sons, fathers, and husbands went to fight all over the world, wondering if they would ever see them again.

My grandfather and his brother asked to join the Navy instead. They left Kannapolis and were sent to Camp Perry, Virginia. From there, they went to Gulf Port, Mississippi, where they shipped out, went through the Panama Canal, and headed for the Galapagos Islands.

In the Construction Battalion, my grandfather helped to build an airport at Galapagos, strengthening the U.S. presence in the Pacific Ocean. His brother was in the Motor Pool, and both of them were able to stay together for much of their four-year tours.

The highlight of their time away was a visit from Eleanor Roosevelt. She flew down to visit the troops and my grandfather said that the men were thrilled to meet her and that it did a lot to boost morale.

We've recently passed the anniversary of that day in 1941, and we're approaching the anniversary of my grandfather leaving to join the war effort...right after Christmas.

What our nation is going through right now with the Middle East is so similar to what was happening

during World War II. It was a time of anxiety, a time of fear, but eventually, a time of healing.

Right now, it is a time for remembrance, of Pearl Harbor, of our World War II veterans, of September 11, and of our service men and women overseas right now. It is a time to remember the families of those left behind, worried about the safety of their loved ones, especially here at Christmas.

In 1946, my grandfather came back into the country unannounced. He went to Norfolk, Virginia to check in and then came back to Kannapolis early one morning. When he got home, he knocked on the door and waited for my grandmother, Marguerite, to answer.

She had no idea who could possibly be banging on her door at this time of the morning and was deeply shocked and surprised to see my grandfather on the other side of it. Except for a couple of weeks of leave, he had been gone for four years.

I asked Grandma to recall what happened next, but she could only remember saying, “Henry Fisher! What are you doing here?” She must have been so excited that

everything after that was a blur. There's no way I can imagine how that must have felt, but I hope it's a feeling that many of us get to experience soon, when our family and friends can finally come home.

I sincerely hope all of our service men and women get to have their own reunions with loved ones soon.

What a wonderful gift that will be.



## *All Hearts Go Home For Christmas*



### *Christmas 2004*

They say all hearts go home for Christmas, and mine is certainly in Kannapolis right now. Christmas has always been my favorite holiday, and I'm missing being there the most during this time of the year.

I have wonderful memories of Christmas in K-Town, the lights downtown, and the Santa that used to float in the mill lake. Those times are still magical and

vivid, especially in my homesick mind, and I can't help but to try to relive them every chance I get.

Christmas always officially started for my brother, sister, and I on the day that school would let out early for the Kannapolis Christmas parade. My parents would park in the Aycock Elementary School parking lot, and we'd hike over the railroad tracks to "our" spot across the street from Table Supply.

The streets would fill up, the parade would start, and we would jump and peek, trying to spy Santa first. My mother would make popcorn, filling paper grocery bags, and we would stand together, bundled in blankets and laughing out loud.

Following the parade, we helped finish the last of the decorating that my father would start on the day after Thanksgiving. There were candles to put in the windows, ornaments for the trees, and my brother, sister, and I were always responsible for the downstairs tree...because that was where Santa would come.

The excitement and magic would increase exponentially for us as Christmas drew nearer. One year,

we went to McAdenville—an entire town that puts lights on everything that stands still—and I remember sitting on the exit ramp in the backseat of a gigantic station wagon, waiting in a long line of traffic to see the spectacle.

My mother asked my father if he heard noises and my father said that he did. She looked out the front window, and the side ones, and this intense look came over her face. She turned to us in the back seat, and whispered, “Look out the back window. Be very, very quiet. Do you see anything?”

A red light was soaring through the sky. “Looks like a reindeer to me,” she whispered. My siblings and I were awestruck, staring at the backdrop of stars that the red light was moving through. Only seconds passed, it seems, until we were in McAdenville, the lights even more magical with the possibility of glimpsing more reindeer, or perhaps Santa himself.

Our weekends would weave through Christmas parties and last minute mall shopping. There’d be Christmas pageants at church, and fun activities at school—all leading up to Christmas Eve.

My mother's entire extended family gets together on Christmas Eve, and everyone takes a turn hosting. As kids, we always enjoyed Aunt Peggy's house, as well as Aunt Ann's and Uncle Mel's. All the cousins would be there, and we'd play, poking around the Christmas tree trying to figure out what may be in the biggest boxes. Grandma Adams used to give the kids these giant boxes of Juicy Fruit gum. We would try to chew whole packs before we got noticed and reminded to chew just one piece at a time.

After the Christmas Eve gathering, we'd drive home, scouting for reindeer, looking for snowflakes—wondering if Santa had already come in our absence. Later, we'd go to church for Christmas Eve services and sing carols by candlelight. It would be after midnight before we got into bed, exhausted, but still more than excited.

Early Christmas morning, one of us kids would wake up early, and get the others out of bed. We would stand in front of my parents' door and whisper, "I think Santa has been here." We would whisper increasingly

louder until we were acknowledged and then wait impatiently for our parents to get up and get ready.

My father would go downstairs first and get the fire going. Then he would position himself at the bottom of the stairs with the video camera. My mother would go down to the couch and my father would give the signal that we could come on down.

We would bolt like lightning down the steps to see what Santa had brought, always in a frenzy, with wrapping paper flying and gasping in magical wonder. We'd spend the day with grandparents and other family, coming home to nap in the midst of torn paper and new toys.

As I get closer to Christmas this year, the homesickness is increasing as much as the excitement. The memories help, but the only gift that matters to me is being with the ones I love.

I hope you and your families have a wonderful, memorable, and blessed holiday. I can't wait to get home for a visit and see all of you that I miss so much!





