

The Age of Innocence

A liveaboard Christmas had some folks worried - especially little Lindsay. After all, there are Grinches about.

by Jane Meneely

Christmas was coming. Holly decorated every door front in St. Michaels. The church bells pealed with Christmas carols. The firemen's oyster dinner had come and gone. Only a few geese picked at the empty cornfields. And the weather was frosty. Decidedly frosty. We could tell, because Clint, Lindsay and I were still living aboard our sailboat, and if there's one thing liveaboards are keenly aware of, it's the weather.

At age 6, this would be Lindsay's fourth Christmas on the boat, and like everyone else in the world, we were gearing up for the coming celebration. Our practice was to adorn the main cabin with the hand-made decorations Lindsay had produced in her school art room, but not much else. There wasn't a lot of room for the tree-in-the-living-room-approach to our Yuletide, and that posed a bit of a problem. Lindsay was decidedly skeptical about the whole Christmas-on-the-boat-thing.

"How will Santa know we're here?" she asked.

"How does Santa ever know where we are?" I said.

"How will he fit down our stove pipe?"

"It's called a Charley Noble," I said.

"Charley Noble, then. Santa's on the lookout for chimneys."

"Santa has been sliding down our Charley Noble ever since we moved onto the boat. Stop worrying."

But Lindsay wasn't the only one who worried. The holidays always seemed to bring an endless round of invitations:

"Why don't you come stay at the house for Christmas," said Grandma.

"We'll have a tree. You'll be nice and warm."

"Why don't you come stay at the house for Christmas," said the other grandma. "I'll make roast beef and Yorkshire pudding."

We didn't particularly want to shack up with either of our respective in-laws, and we certainly didn't want to start the granny wars. Nix that idea.

"You guys wanna come over to our place for Christmas? We'll be in the Bahamas," said one well-meaning friend.

"You guys wanna come over to our place for Christmas? We'll be in Key West," said our other well-meaning friend. "You could feed the dogs."

"No thanks," we said. We'd had our fill of house sitting. Invariably we'd find ourselves in some big drafty place with lots of windows, high ceilings and a pack of Labradors. We'd pile wood into the stove, don sweaters and shiver. (We never could get used to sleeping with the dogs, though I understand a Lab puts out about 5K BTUs.) No wonder our well-meaning friends fled south when the weather turned cold.

We actually preferred our snug boat. When we fired up our kerosene stove, the cabin came alive with warmth. By the time we'd shrugged out of our coats, hats, mittens we could feel its radiance on our skin. We'd be down to T-shirts and skivees in no time. Our boat may have been drafty, but that just meant there was plenty of fresh air to cycle through all that rosy heat. We'd snuggle together on the settee and read—aloud, usually. The space was so tight (this was your standard sailboat, after all), there was only room for one story at a time. It seemed rude to curl up with a book and just keep it all to yourself when others were around. And, well, Lindsay hadn't heard *Treasure Island* yet, or *Swallows and Amazons*, or But I digress.

Christmas had come and gone on the boat before. Lindsay was only two the first time, so she really didn't have anything to compare it to, only a dim awareness that other people stuck huge trees in their houses and passed out a lot of cookies. She was also dimly aware that other kids had real beds and bedrooms full of toys that somehow got transformed during the holidays into piles of new stuff. We would have to remind her periodically that she had a bunk on a boat instead, and could watch the stars at night. Only a real princess had such wealth as that. She wasn't convinced.

"Phoebe says real princesses live in castles."

"That's just in fairy tales."

Lindsay still wasn't convinced. "There's a big present under Phoebe's Christmas tree and it has Phoebe's name on it," she said.

"How nice for Phoebe," I said.

"I don't think a present like that could get down Mr. Charley."

"Mr. Charley?"

"Mr. Noble."

"Sure it could. Santa Claus is amazing that way."

"I don't think a present like that could fit in my drawer."

"Hmmm." That could be a problem. Other children had toy boxes; Lindsay had a toy drawer. She could have anything she wanted so long as it fit inside that drawer (yes, even a pony, if she could find one). It made for interesting conversations at the local toy store. Lindsay knew how to use a ruler at a very young age, which wasn't such a bad thing, really. "I can't believe Santa would ever give you something that you couldn't keep in your drawer. That would be mean."





“Uncle Honey gave me a drum set, and that didn’t fit in the drawer.”
“Uncle Honey isn’t Santa Claus.”

There were plenty of reasons why we were living on a boat, economy being chief among them. We could live on the boat and quietly sock away cash until we had enough to contemplate alternatives. That was our plan anyway. And Lindsay, meanwhile, could grow up with the wild abandon that can only come from not having the burden of chores. She didn’t have to clean up her room; she didn’t have a room to clean up. She didn’t have to take out the garbage; the garbage went out daily, in a small plastic bag. Bugger mowing a lawn; she was

too little for that anyway. And she loved using the dustbuster on those few occasions when we needed to tidy the main saloon, so that hardly counted.

Instead she acquired the agility of a monkey—her favorite rain game was to climb around the cabin without touching the cabin sole. She acquired the grace of a gazelle—I can still see her running down the dock and leaping aboard the boat, easily clearing the two-foot gap between the pier and the deck while her friends crumbled back in terror. For them we had to haul on the dock lines and bring the boat close enough that they could step gingerly, cautiously, aboard. And she had all those stars—she could pick a new one every night and never run out.

That’s not to say boat living was a panacea. Lindsay was warm and safe and dry to be sure, but her life lacked certain elements. For example, she never knew the supreme satisfaction that comes from stomping up a flight of stairs and slamming a bedroom door in anger. She had only the companionway steps and a curtain between her bunk and the world, and you can’t slam a curtain. She didn’t know the luxury of running the water while you brushed your teeth—maybe some habits aren’t worth cultivating. And she didn’t know the silence and stillness of sleep; hers was always edged with the lapping of water and the rocking of the boat. (When we did move ashore, that was the hardest adjustment for me.) And there was always the shroud of worry that settled in on the world come Christmas.

“There are already a ton of presents under Phoebe’s tree,” Lindsay said. “Not just the great big one.”

“That’s because Santa has a lot of helpers who deliver presents early,” I said.

Oops.

Lindsay’s eyes welled with tears. “Do they know where we live?” she whispered, her lower lip beginning to tremble. “We don’t even have a tree! Suppose they don’t come?” A wail was lingering just below the surface, waiting for the slightest beckon.

“They don’t always come early,” I said quickly. “Just sometimes. And it has nothing to do with a tree.”

That evening, Clint and I duly set out some gaily wrapped packages that had arrived in the mail. They were small and drawer-sized and each one had a tag with Lindsay’s name on it. (She checked.)

“Christmas isn’t about the presents, you know,” we reminded her.

“I know,” she said solemnly. “There’s cookies and special songs too.”

The weather seemed to be getting significantly nippier as Christmas drew close. A sheet of ice formed on the creek. Come morning, the cabin sole on our bare feet worked better than caffeine. We had to worry about the condensation in the hanging lockers (truly one of the down sides to year-round living aboard on the Bay). But these cold snaps come and go, we told ourselves as we counted out the weeks till spring.

“It’s going to get even colder,” said Grandma. “I wish you’d think about coming ashore and staying with me till after the holidays. I worry about Lindsay.”

“You aren’t going to make Lindsay suffer through all that cold now, are you?” said the other grandma.

“We’re not leaving till Saturday, but you could come ahead now and settle in before we go,” said one well-meaning friend after another.

“No thanks,” we said.

Our Christmas ritual was simple. On Christmas Eve, Clint, Lindsay and I set off to find a tree. Lindsay picked one out—something small that could sit on the “coffee table” in our main cabin. We took it back to the boat, set it up and trimmed it with what few decorations we had saved from the year before (the hand-made ones) and a string of lights. We hung our stockings, set out a plate of cookies and a cup of eggnog for Santa, and we settled down for our Christmas reading: the Gospel of St. John and How the Grinch Stole Christmas. Then we tucked an excited but weary Lindsay into her bunk, counted to twenty (by which time the excited but weary Lindsay was asleep) and went to work. Clint went to his truck and hauled Santa’s bag to the boat. I added some “magic” to the tree, with tinsel and candy and a few carefully chosen decorations. We arranged the presents on the coffee table—it didn’t take many to make a colossal pile. We filled the stockings and set them out. We ate the cookies, drank the eggnog and went to bed.

On this particular Christmas Eve, the weather turned even snappier. As we slept a sleety rain began to fall and the temperature dropped. Pipes froze up and down the Eastern Shore. House lights blinked out as trees heavy with ice fell across electric lines. When we woke, finally, in the first gray glimmer of dawn, ice lay in a thick sheet atop the boat and gleamed wickedly from the surface of the dock.

“The electricity is out,” I said as I tried the 110V cabin light.

Clint switched on the boat’s battery bank. “Try the other one,” he said as he turned up the flame in the kerosene stove.

We had light. We had heat. We had fresh sausage. I fired up the cook top while Lindsay danced around the cabin, doing her monkey walk. “I don’t want to step on any presents,” she said.

That’s when we heard the call—it sounded like someone at the land end of the dock. Clint popped his head out the



companionway. "It's Mom," he reported to us. To her he said, "Wait there. I'll help you."

He pulled on his boots and his jacket and, using the boat hook, stepped gingerly to the dock. In minutes he had ushered Grandma aboard and into the warmth of the cabin.

"Christmas is ruined," she said. "The Grinch took the electricity. My pipes are frozen. Everyone is coming and I have no heat. I won't be able to cook."

"Take off your coat and stay awhile," we said.

She did. We cooked up the sausage. We ate a lovely breakfast. We opened our presents. And Grinch or not, Christmas happened. One by one we heard the call from the end of the dock. One by one, Clint went down and escorted them to the boat: sisters, cousins, brothers, friends. Lindsay's bunk was full of coats and hats and gloves. We were packed. We were warm. No frozen pipes on our watch.

And Lindsay, being the littlest elf, beamed and smiled and beamed and smiled. "Are we going to sing now?" she asked, her mouth full of Christmas cookies.

As if on cue, the string of lights on our little cabin tree came to life and the 110V lamp flashed on. The Grinch must have been listening. "Thank heavens!" said grandma, with relief. Lights flickered on in the houses around the creek. It was Christmas to be sure, in more ways than one. The sound of carols emanating from the hull of the boat must have puzzled the few idle geese poking around the shore.



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