

Christmas gifts received with ingratitude

CHARLES PINNING

BACK BEFORE the Newport Bridge, when Newport was just a little town and I was 10, my parents gave me \$20 so I could buy Christmas presents. Upon setting out, my first stop was Perrotti's Drug Store, on Broadway, where for two weeks I'd been eyeing a revolving display of Zippo cigarette lighters in the front window. One in particular featured a skier floating in lighter fluid in the bottom half.

This would be perfect for my older brother, John, who loved to ski and kept his metal Head Standards in his closet, where he could handle them regularly and "check the camber." "Getting your Dad a lighter for Christmas, eh?" said Mr. Perrotti. Dumb question — he knew my parents didn't smoke

"No. It's for John," I told him. "He smokes and he loves to ski."

"Oh," said Mr. Perrotti. "How old is Johnny now?"

"He'll be 15 in May," I informed him.

"Would you like that gift-wrapped?" he asked.

"No thank you," I said. When I got home, I was going to have to wipe his fingerprints off and polish it so it was pristine, and then lay it carefully down on its cotton bed, holding it with a Kleenex.

Next stop, further down Broadway, was Mueller's Men's Wear. I went inside and pondered a table of striped ties. In my estimation, my father's ties were too skinny and hopelessly out of fashion. He needed to step up to something cooler, like what John wore, so I picked out a nice wide one with bright blue and gold diagonal stripes.

"Johnny getting a new tie for Christmas?" smiled Mr. Mueller.

"No," I told him. "It's for my father."

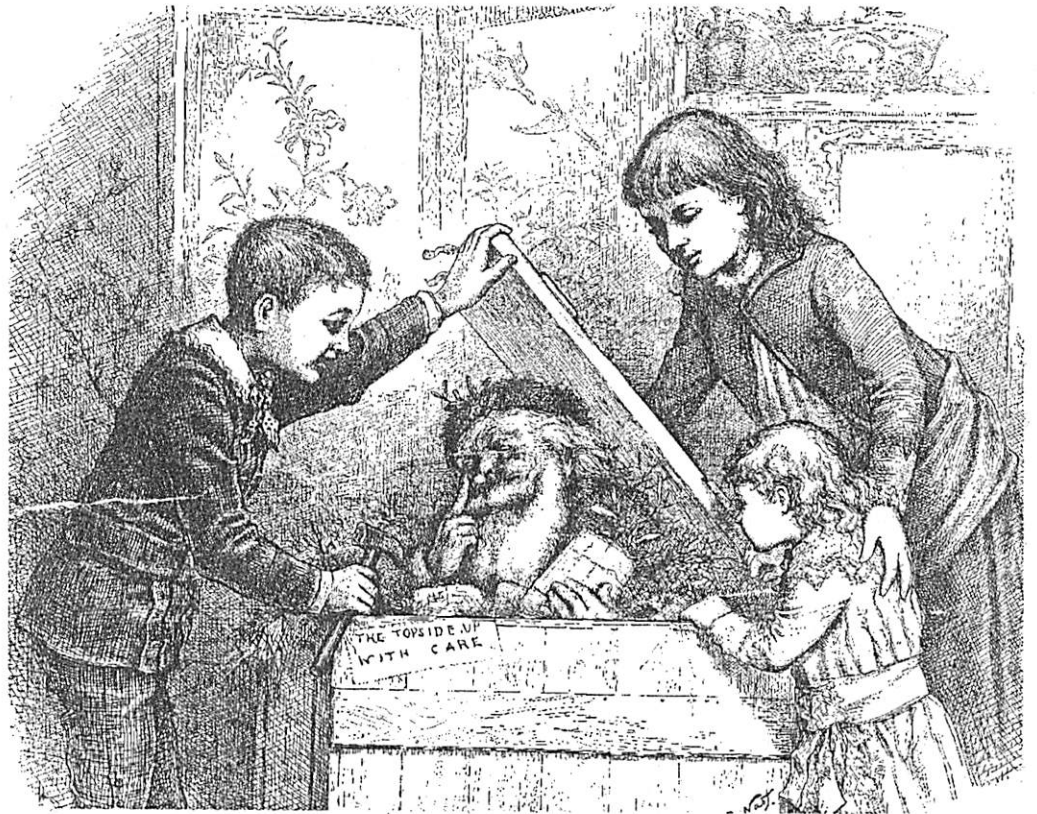
"Oh," he remarked, and folded it into a thin flat box with tissue paper. When I paid him for it, he noticed I had the smaller bag too, with the lighter in it. "Here," he said, opening out a large, brown shopping bag with jute handles. "Why not put everything into this one."

Back out on the sidewalk, with \$8 left, I now had to confront the monumental question of what to get my mother. Mom is always a boy's biggest worry, because what gift is worthy of that person who packs your lunch box, takes care of you when you're ungodly sick, hides your worst crimes from your father so he doesn't have to take off his belt and chase you around the house?

Despairing and glum, I dragged myself up Touro Street to Bellevue Avenue, where all the fancy women's stores were. I'd never been in any, but one that struck me as being the most chic had a sign above it in gold lettering against black that said Ladies' Apparel.

Pressing down the broad brass tongue of the door latch, I let myself in. Dense carpeting. The scent of perfume. Hushed tones...

"Can I help you?" asked a woman impec-



BY THOMAS NAST (1890)

cably dressed in a gray skirt and white blouse, her shining chestnut hair pulled into a bun.

"Just browsing," I replied.

"Well, if you need any help, I'll be just back there," she said, gesturing to the far end of the store, where a stout woman in a navy-blue suit was trying on hats. I looked at jewelry, I looked at dresses, I broke into a cold sweat. Nothing was less than \$75!

Finally, I spied a table with some jewelry boxes and there was one, it was perfect — white with embossed gold striping and little drawers lined with red velvet. Twenty dollars and from a luxurious sounding company called Buxton. I only had eight bucks left, but I was going to get that Buxton jewelry box, no matter what. I noticed that underneath the table was a stack of cardboard boxes, and some said Buxton-White on the outside. I cruised around the store some more, rustling my bag, making myself noticed so that I could be ignored, and then circulating back to the table with the jewelry boxes, I bent my little self over and slipped one of the jewelry boxes that said, Buxton-White into my big bag.

Calling out a cheery, "Thank you," to the saleswoman at the far end of the store, I nonchalantly made good my escape. On Christmas morning, I watched keenly as my gifts were picked up.

My brother opened his first, and when he revealed the lighter in the small box, everyone fell silent.

"Isn't it cool?" I finally said. "Sure," replied John. "I can use it to start my Boy Scout fires."

When my father began unwrapping the

slender box that contained his gift, my brother said, "Gee, I wonder what this could be." Of course it was the tie, and my father held it up like something nasty he'd just pulled out of a trash barrel. "Well," he said, unable to muster up even fake fatherly enthusiasm. "Very attractive. Thank you."

Finally, my mother got to her gift. Carefully unwrapping the paper, she slid the beautiful white jewelry box out of the cardboard box, and opened the top, revealing the red velvet interior. Then she shut it. "How nice," she said, and placed it down on the floor. My mother was not then, nor has she ever been, a plastic "How nice" kind of person, and I was just dashed.

No one had liked my gifts, not even the best one! Later that day, John informed me that Mom and Dad didn't know he smoked. The tie I'd given to my father eventually ended up in John's closet. And the jewelry box? Sometime after that, my mother and I were downtown looking into a store window. The air was so cold we could see our breath up against the glass. I remember my mother's white mittens and her red lipstick. She was patting her hands together and telling me how she learned to window shop when she was a girl, because her parents were too poor to afford a lot of things. "We just did without," she said. "But we were happy. We had each other."

As for that damn jewelry box, after Christmas Day, I never saw it again.

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