

Christmas on the skids

December 20, 2011

My favorite Christmas memory involves torrential rain, then ice, then a car crash, followed by two days iced in a roadside motel, and finally a wild Christmas Eve ride on rutted highways.

It was fantastic.

This happened years ago, when Joanna and I and our daughters, Lindsay and Molly, lived in the southern Midwest, and our extended families all dwelt in the Southwest. So, our Christmas ritual consisted of cramming kids, coats, suitcases and snacks in our compact car and—literally—driving over the river (the mighty Mississippi) and through the woods (western Kentucky, a sliver of Tennessee, western Arkansas) to grandmother's house.

Greatest adventure

Our greatest adventure happened when Lindsay and Molly were in third grade and kindergarten, I guess. The day after school let out, we packed up and headed down the highway. Into a winter monsoon. The rain fell so hard that, if I weren't leaving for Christmas, I would've gathered gopher wood and pitch, built an ark, rounded up animals and prepared to ride out The Flood.

We drove as far as West Memphis, Ark., ate dinner, tucked the girls into bed and prayed for the rain to stop.

The next morning dawned cold and cloudy. But no rain. Thank God, no rain.

We rolled through Little Rock making great time. A few miles later, the drizzling began, and the temperatures started falling. Not far east of

Russellville, Ark., we picked up sleet.

Oh, that little red sportscar ...

That's about the time a gal in a little red sportscar zipped past us. She zoomed under an overpass through a patch on the road where rain froze into black ice. A nanosecond after her brake lights flashed, she spun 540 degrees and plowed up the embankment on the outside of the highway.

As I slowed down to avoid skidding and prepared to check on her, I glanced in my rear-view mirror. It framed a real-life "Far Side" cartoon.

A guy with a scraggly beard gripped the steering wheel of one of those old GM mini-vans with a front-end that looked like needle-nosed pliers. I couldn't tell which appeared larger—his gaping mouth or his bulging eyes. He skidded a little sideways, and I looked over at Jo and said something like, "Oh, boy," before WHAM! He smacked us on the passenger side of the rear bumper, and we caromed across the ice into the median.

I've never heard anything as quiet as that car for the next five seconds. We all looked at each other, and everyone signaled they were OK.

When I climbed out of our car, I could see the driver who creamed us stagger a step or two as he hopped out of his mini-van. I noticed Florida license plates.

As we approached each other, he spoke first, and I swear these were his exact words: "I ain't never drove on nothin' like this afore."

Sometimes, you've just got to laugh. "That's pretty obvious," I chortled, and he looked confused. We both agreed nobody in either vehicle was injured. By that time, other drivers were checking on the gal in the little red sportscar—the gal who started the whole ordeal.

We pulled the fender off our right-rear tire and tied the trunk down with a

bungee cord. Mr. Far Side's car seemed safe to drive, too. So, we exchanged information and headed west.

Sleet really adds up

After Jo, Lindsay, Molly and I stopped for lunch and lowered our blood pressure, Russellville lay under a good quarter-inch of ice. Sleet fell faster than before.

So, we did what intrepid travelers have done in weather like that for generations. We bedded down for the night.

Lindsay and Molly seemed to be the only small children in that roadside hotel crowded with Christmas refugees. We ate all our meals in the coffee shop, pervaded by an atmosphere of storm-weather expectation, ramped up by cabin fever and softened by yuletide goodwill.

Strangers strolled from table to table, telling their stories—where they were from, where they were headed, whether they thought the roads would clear.

'Santy' who?

Inevitably, old people would stop at our table, size up our little girls and offer seasonal words of encouragement: "Don't worry. Santy Claus will find you."

What they didn't know was Santa's tiny sleigh would look like an 18-wheeler alongside our car. Planning ahead, we shipped all our Christmas gifts to Oklahoma. So, I spent my spare moments on Dec. 23 contemplating how many bones I would break in my Christmas Eve slide-walk to WalMart to fetch gifts for Lindsay and Molly. And if you think Jo and I were about to let Santa get the credit for that bounty, well, you probably believe in the Easter Bunny and the Tooth Fairy, too.

At breakfast on Christmas Eve, somebody said trucks had worn ruts on Interstate 40, and a car could put wheels on pavement. So, we said a prayer and headed out. A long and harrowing ride later, we pulled into my parents' driveway, shortly before weathermen across America began reporting low-altitude sightings of a fat man in a red-velvet suit, flying in an open sleigh behind eight reindeer.

Wonderful memories

Our two-day car trip stretched to four. And what I remember most is how wonderful it all was. Stranded in Russellville, we played outside, told stories, read books aloud and watched movies. And we laughed and sang carols and laughed some more.

Scores—maybe hundreds—of times, I've thanked God that everyone survived those wrecks without so much as scratches. And I've thanked God for the grace-gift of an indelible Christmas memory of love, laughter, anticipation and adventure.

I hope you don't endure a car wreck this Christmas. But I pray God surprises you with joy and gladness and memories you'll cherish for decades.

Merry Christmas.