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What was the best Christmas present you ever received, could ever receive? Maybe it was "an official Red Ryder carbine-action 200-shot range model air rifle with a compass in the stock and this thing which tells time."* Hopefully you didn't shoot your eye out. Or it could be the Teddy that slept with you until you went to college. (Maybe you smuggled him into the dorm and kept him handy to help you through bouts of homesickness, midterm jitters and other important emergencies.) Then again, it could be any or all of the 101 boxes of Legos that came your way or the train set that took over your bedroom floor.

Perhaps a baby doll won you over. Some were beautiful, others bizarre. There was that one that bore a striking and disconcerting resemblance to a head of cabbage. But maybe it was Barbie who stole your heart. Were you one of those kids with a legion of the leggy beauties, enough to field several soccer teams or invade a small country?

Looking back, my memories of Santa's generosity are a bit hazy. I vaguely remember lots of dolls and many party dresses. However, two Christmases stand out for very different reasons. I was seven or eight the year I received the pink plastic office with the pink telephones. The office was at the top of my list to Santa. Looking back, I'm not sure what possessed me. I suspect the pink telephones got me. They worked like a cheap and cheerful intercom system. I think I somehow or other I envisioned having the world at my beck and call at the other end of the phone. Still, what seven year old wants to play office? If you know one, quickly send her out to play in the snow. Hopefully the cold air will distract her and bring her to her senses. There's plenty of time for paperwork later.

My cousins from Buffalo spent Christmas with us that year. We were too many to fit in the dining room so a kids' table was set up in the kitchen. Our parents and grandparents were just on the other side of the wall but I insisted we stay connected with my new, pink phones. We called them not once, not twice but incessantly throughout the meal. And God love him, Grandpa Westland answered not once, not twice but every single time we called the grownups' table. He patiently answered our calls, each time using a different, silly voice. Grandpa kept me giggling throughout the entire feast. Christmas dinner was probably the first, last and only time I played with the pink telephones. Still, they were one of the best presents ever.

When I was eleven or twelve, my parents gave me a blue, three-speed bicycle. I'm sure it was a Schwinn. It was my first brand new, not ridden by someone else, bicycle. To this day I have no idea how or why it appeared under the tree. On the other hand, my parents continue to insist that I campaigned diligently for that bike. Sure, at one point I dreamed of having my very own, not second hand, bike. But that was all in the past, I'd moved on to other things. I was right in the middle of that icky 'tween stage. None of my friends rode bicycles anymore. What did I want with a bike? Especially in the middle of winter?

The bike gathered dust in the garage for five or six years. Finally, bikes became cool again when I was in high school. For two years, I rode that bike to school and all over town. I took it to college and rode it all over campus. It moved to the Berkshires with me where I taught school. It regularly coasted down into Connecticut and traveled north as far as Lenox. It was, eventually, one of the best presents ever. What was the best Christmas present you ever received, could ever receive? Have a wonderful holiday with family and friends!

Bon appétit!

* If you have not seen the 1983 movie, *A Christmas Story*, look for it on cable – it is a real classic.

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Aunt Anna's Pecan Pie

My Nana Westland hated to cook. As far as I know, she never baked, even at Christmas. Her dear friend Anna Foss was famous for her pecan pie and passed the recipe on to my mother. For many, many years, Mom made Aunt Anna's Pecan Pie at Christmas. Enjoy!

Serves 8

- 1 cup brown sugar
- 1 cup light Karo syrup
- 3 eggs
- 1 cup nuts, coarsely chopped
- 2 tablespoons flour
- 1/2 teaspoon salt
- 1 tablespoon vanilla
- Flakey pastry - recipe follows

For garish: 1 cup heavy cream, whipped with 1 teaspoon vanilla

1. Preheat oven to 400 degrees.
2. In a large bowl beat the eggs until light and frothy. Add the brown sugar, Karo syrup, vanilla, salt and flour; whisk to combine. Stir in the pecans.
3. Pour into the chilled pie crust. Bake in the center of the oven at 400 degrees for 15 minutes. Reduce heat to 300 degrees and continue baking for 30 minutes or until firm.
4. Cool completely and serve with whipped cream.

Flakey Pastry

Aunt Anna did not pass on her pastry recipe but I use this one with great success. It is light and flakey, just delicious. Enjoy!

Enough for 1 crust

- 1 cup all purpose flour
- 1 teaspoon sugar
- 1/2 teaspoon salt
- 4 tablespoons (1/2 stick) chilled butter, cut into small pieces
- 3 tablespoons cold vegetable shortening, cut into small pieces
- 2-4 tablespoons ice water

1. Blend the flour, sugar and salt a food processor. Add the butter and shortening; and process until the mixture resembles coarse meal.
2. Sprinkle with ice water, 1-2 tablespoons at a time, and pulse until the dough comes together in a ball. Remove the dough from the food processor and flatten into disk. Wrap the dough in plastic and chill for at least 30 minutes.
3. On a lightly floured work surface, roll out the dough into a round about 11 inches in diameter. Drape the pastry over the rolling pin and ease it into a 9 inch pie plate, pressing it into the bottom and sides. Trim and crimp the edges. Freeze for 30 minutes.

