

M E R R Y C H R I S T M A S
F R O M T H E
K E N S I N G T O N S
B Y L E W I S S H I N E R

I 9 5 2

ALL OF THE CARDS are the same size, each longer and narrower than a standard picture postcard. The early cards are in black and white. This first one contains the greeting MERRY CHRISTMAS FROM THE KENSINGTONS on the right side, followed by the year, 1952, and four handwritten first names that clearly correspond to the four people on the other half of the card, left to right.

Bill, the father, is kneeling in front of a large Christmas tree that is decorated with glass balls and candy canes and tinsel. He is a slim white man in his late twenties, dressed in slacks, cardigan, and an open-collared shirt. His handsome face reflects calm confidence. His left hand is on the shoulder of a boy of about 3, Tommy, who is dressed in a cowboy outfit: Stetson-style hat, fringed jacket, gunbelt. Tommy points an enormous toy Colt .45 at the camera, and laughs with fierce pleasure. Next to him, in a pale playsuit, is Janey, not more than a year old, sitting with outstretched legs inside the protective right arm of her mother, Nancy. Nancy is also white and in her twenties. She sits with her legs folded to her left, her skirt tucked primly under her knees. She wears a hand-knitted reindeer sweater that shows off her shapely figure. Her dark, wavy hair is tucked behind her ears and her smile is radiant. A black Labrador retriever sleeps contentedly in the foreground.

I 9 5 3

THE MOST OBVIOUS change from last year is the addition of a new family member, Bobby. He is in Nancy's arms, only a few weeks old. From Nancy's expression, he is the center of the universe. He and Nancy sit in an armchair with Tommy and Janey posed on either side of her crossed legs. Tommy has one arm around the dog. Bill leans over the back of the chair, smiling easily. His face has filled out since last year and his posture seems more comfortable. The Christmas tree, even taller than last year's, is at the far left side of the card.

I 9 5 4

THIS LOOKS LIKE a different living room, in a newer and larger house, and in

fact the return address on the back of the card shows a different house number on the same street. The family is arrayed on a staircase to the viewer's right of the towering Christmas tree. Bill is at the top and Tommy, who has had a growth spurt, is on the next step down with the dog. Janey stands shyly two steps further down, one finger in her mouth. Nancy and the baby are at the foot of the stairs and the baby is crawling toward her contented smile.

I 9 5 5

BILL IS DEFINITELY gaining weight, though not yet enough to look heavy. He stands with one arm around Nancy, watching the children on the floor in front of the tree. Tommy is a private eye in a fedora, shoulder holster, and tie, all of them too large for him. He is pointing out something in the newspaper to Bobby, who gazes at him worshipfully, as does the dog. Janey sits a few unbridgeable feet away with a doll at her feet, looking on.

This is the card that first grabbed my attention, lying on top of a couple of hundred commercial post cards in a box at the flea market near my house, nearly lost in a sea of diners and motels and vistas of the Grand Canyon and the Golden Gate. Maybe what I felt when I looked at it was what anyone would feel, spying on this intimate moment that had been intended only for friends and family and not for a stranger 57 years in the future. Maybe it was the fact that I had been Bobby's age in 1955, that I had craved that exact Mattel snub-nosed revolver in Tommy's shoulder holster. Maybe it was the way I had wanted a brother so badly as a kid, somebody to buffer me from my father's violent temper, to give me continuity in our restless moves from one coast to the other.

I 9 5 6

THE FURNITURE HAS BEEN cleared away except for the Christmas tree, which is once again in the corner by the stairs. Tommy, at age 7, is well over four feet tall. He has taken a batter's stance over the wrapped package that is serving as home plate. In the foreground, Bill is grinning at the camera as he pretends to wind up for a fastball. Janey, in a tomboy phase, stands to one side in cap, jeans, and tiny fielder's glove. Nancy, behind the plate, is incongruously holding out her arms in the umpire's "safe" signal while Bobby waves his cap in excitement and the dog barks and wags his tail.

I 9 5 7

THE FAMILY STANDS in the driveway on an overcast day, lined up next to the station wagon, apparently en route to church. The men are in coats and ties, the women in long dresses, hats, and veils. A bit of snow is visible on the roof of the house next door. Tommy and Nancy are waving at the camera.

This is the Mystery card, the one I come back to again and again. It's the only photo taken outdoors, the only one with a sense of weather, the only one

that feels like it might have been intended for something else. The thing that I can't get over is that Tommy and Nancy are the only ones waving, as if they had some bizarre premonition. I have searched Bobby's face countless times for a clue as to what happened to him, but all I can see is a four-year-old boy who's happy to be in his dress-up clothes, to be with his brother and his family, to be in the midst of the comforting ritual of Sunday and church.

I 9 5 8

TOMMY IS IN his Cub Scout uniform and Janey in her Brownie uniform. Bobby has a miniature Cub Scout uniform of his own. Bill and Nancy bracket the children. They have both gained weight and Bill's hair is thinning in front. The Christmas tree and the stairs are visible in the background once more, but there is no sign of the dog.

I 9 5 9

THE PHOTO IS from the previous Halloween. Tommy and Bobby are dressed as pirates and both brandish plastic swords. Janey is a reluctant princess. Bill and Nancy look on from the left and right sides of the picture.

I 9 6 0

THE FAMILY IS lined up across the living room floor. Bill is holding a nine iron, Tommy a hockey stick, Bobby a baseball bat, Janey a badminton racquet, all in identical poses. Nancy, at the far right, holds a broom and shakes her finger at them in mock protest.

I 9 6 1

FROM HERE ON the cards are in color. Tommy now signs his name as "Tom." He holds a small US flag as the other family members pretend to examine his Science Fair project, set up on the coffee table in front of the Christmas tree. Mounted to the posterboard backing are the parts, replicated in balsa wood, of a Project Mercury space capsule.

I 9 6 2

THE FAMILY IS in a huddle, open to the camera, and in the center is Tom, on one knee in jersey and helmet, one arm extended in classic blocker's posture, a football tucked under the other.

I 9 6 3

THE FAMILY GROUPING is similar to the previous year's, but the mood is more

somber. Wearing dark clothes, they kneel with joined hands around a framed photo of JFK. The usual Christmas greeting is replaced this year with the words **THE KENSINGTON FAMILY HONORS JOHN F. KENNEDY 1917-1963**.

1 9 6 4

TOM IS NOW 15 and taller than his father. Janey is an uncomfortable 13, arms folded over her chest. Bobby, now Bob, takes up a new position at the far left of the photo, with his mother between him and his siblings. The tree is smaller this year and the camera seems to have caught everyone at an awkward moment. The caption once more reads **MERRY CHRISTMAS FROM THE KENSINGTONS**.

1 9 6 5

A PROFESSIONAL FAMILY PORTRAIT taken at Olan Mills. Everyone is dressed up, but Bob, now Robert, age 12, has the first hints of peach fuzz on his upper lip and pimples on his forehead, and he looks as if his clothes belong to someone else. Bill is now wearing black-rimmed glasses and has a pronounced widow's peak. He and Nancy, whose hair has an artificial auburn sheen, are in the center, Tom to their right, Janey and Robert to their left, Robert not touching anyone else.

1 9 6 6

A STAGED "evening at home," with everyone in exaggerated poses. Bill is in front of the TV with his feet on an Ottoman, feigning an open-mouth snore. Janey lies with her back on the floor and her legs against the wall, talking on the telephone. Robert is earnestly strumming an acoustic guitar. Tom is doing pushups as Nancy heads for the front door with bags of Avon cosmetics to deliver.

1 9 6 7

TOM IS IN his Marine dress blues. Bill and Nancy flank him, each with a hand on one of Tom's shoulders. Bill looks proud, Nancy brave. Janey, who has begun to blossom into a beautiful young woman, stands in front of him with a neutral expression. Robert, to the right side of the photo, smiles bitterly. His hair has crept over his collar in back and his sideburns flare below his ears.

1 9 6 8

THERE IS NO card from 1968.

I 9 6 9

BILL, JANEY, NANCY, AND ROBERT, who is now Rob, sit on the couch, smiling with varying degrees of success. The tree is even smaller than before, with only a few presents under it. Only their four signatures appear under the caption SEASON'S GREETINGS FROM THE KENSINGTONS.

I 9 7 0

JANEY IS NOW the center of the photo, her arm around an athletic-looking young man with short blond hair. Everyone but Rob is smiling with real pleasure. Rob, who now has shoulder-length hair and a mustache, appears to be trying. The signatures read "Bill, Nancy, Rob, and Brian and Janey Davis."

I 9 7 I

ANOTHER FAMILY GROUPING on the couch. Janey is again in the middle, this time holding a baby in her arms, whose name is Belinda. Brian is next to Janey, smiling proudly. Bill, who has gained quite a bit of weight, is at one end of the couch. Nancy, at the other end, has lost weight and, although she is also smiling, her face seems drawn. The caption reads HAPPY HOLIDAYS FROM THE KENSINGTON AND DAVIS FAMILIES. Rob is not in the picture, though his name appears in a handwriting that looks like Nancy's.

I 9 7 2

THE FAMILY IS in some kind of public building, a waiting room. There is an abstract painting in cool greens and blues above their heads. There are sitting together on a couch with a steel frame and blue vinyl cushions. Nancy is in the center. She wears a turban and she is very, very thin. She is wearing a good deal of makeup and a forced smile. Janey is on one side and Bill on the other, each with an arm around Nancy. Brian sits next to Janey, holding the baby. A small, artificial Christmas tree sits on an end table to Brian's right. Rob's name appears again, this time as "Bobby," in Janey's hand.

I 9 7 3

THERE ARE NO MORE cards after this one. Writing to the return addresses and searching on Facebook have yielded nothing. These 21 cards are all I will ever have of the Kensingtons.

The final photograph is captioned MERRY CHRISTMAS FROM THE DAVIS FAMILY. The names at the bottom read, "Brian, Belinda, Janey, and Grandpa Bill." Janey has written all of the names herself.

The colors are warm and intimate. There is a large stone fireplace in the background with a fire blazing. Bill is in a recliner, watching the others. His expression is impossible to read.

Brian and Janey have Belinda, now two and a half, by her hands and are swinging her in the air. Janey has her other hand resting on the swollen mound of her belly. They are clearly full of joy and you can almost hear their laughter ring.

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