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The Point of a Glass Pen

by Elisabeth Ward

In my day Christmas shopping consisted of going on an expedition into the City. In my children's day it meant going to the Mall. Perhaps the thought of the previously turned century, millennium, or even just another year pushing her past her own quarter century mark, or maybe, quite possibly, just a change of scene, caused my daughter to take advantage of low overseas plane fares from the East Coast and do her Christmas shopping in Venice. But lucky us, we who stayed at home, for we received Venetian glass.

Our Christmas trees have been family affairs, covered with memories of other Christmases, ornaments with names of grandparents and pets, even greetings from friends. What others called debris we called creative. The glitter-sprinkled walnut shells and faded construction paper, knotted and stitched stars and painted blobs of clay described our children's growth, their perceptions of a shared holiday cheer.

First from the box my daughter brought, on Christmas Eve, was a shimmering faceted ball, blown unlike any other. To see the tree, to see the room revolving, against the pale teal was to see the world of Christmas through the eyes of a child, view new wonders at every turn.

Christmas morning brought sunlight glinting from that ball, spinning around the room as our children had once danced, aglow with the warmth of the season. And then other presents. My husband opened his pen first, causing us both to think of an icicle ornament, preparing to hang it upside down from the tree near the gently revolving orb we'd opened first.

"There's more!" our daughter cried, not wanting to give anything more than gifts away, and handed him the wrapped vial that held three ounces of brown, vanilla-scented ink. We each received glass inkwells, mine mounted on delicate legs, the stopper gilded from within.

"You mean this thing's a pen!" we spoke at

once, unusual for us for we two prove that opposites attract.

The handles fit like skin along our fingers, concave in certain spots so we could hold, not grip, the glass. The tips, with welts like cats' tongues, were deeply rutted first to gather, then allow the old-fashioned ink to flow.

When next I looked at our tree my mind swirled round the room with the gathered light. No longer watching, in my head, my children growing up, I gazed through centuries instead. Here was a different time, an era where electric lights, now so easily found and glaringly displayed, were not only uninvented but unneeded. A single candle could glow times ten, and then reflect some more, against a tree filled with such balls as the one now turning on our tree. I saw women in shawls of Italian merino smoothing skirts of rippling velvet, settling at knee-hole desks to write tales of their Christmas wishes, pooling precious ink onto parchment sent into the expanding universe of language.

I'd recapture that time myself, I decided, at dusk when the winter sun cast wan shadows against the hills before peering through our tallest door to wink the day's last blessing. But gathering my thoughts I found they tied me to the present. The current day, that very year, the silkiness of the pen and the smell of that vanilla brown ink, no matter how old the tradition, were new to me, as was the very act of writing with such a delicate tip. Slow down, said the pen, settling smoothly within my fingers, slow down.

In search of a thought through the ages I found a thought on aging instead. My daughter's gifts, like her childhood hung on our Christmas tree, had again taught me more than I knew. For with that glass pen came not only tensile pleasure but advice and good reason as well.

Slow down, it said, and don't press too hard.

