

Angels

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—Essay Competition

My grandmother decorates her house around Christmastime with animatronic angels wearing fluffy fur coats. They complement the rooms at first glance; the gold of their halos and the white of their outfits blend with the yellow lights strung on every wall. But they creak when they turn their heads, and some of them used to be able to sing—used to, because the only thing you can hear now is a couple of choppy notes of a hymn that no one can recognize. Grandma has a closet full of replacements—one of my aunts bought her a working version of every angel she had several years ago—but the same nightmarish, decades-old angels continue to stand in every corner of the house. “It’s always been like this,” she likes to say. “It’s too late to change them now.”

Grandma has a rule that we can’t touch the gifts under the tree until all the cousins arrive on Christmas Day, not because of the importance of family or love, but because it’s easier to take pictures for New Year’s cards that way. It’s not a problem for the relatives who don’t live a full day’s drive away from her, but I can always expect dirty glances from my cousins when I get to the house three days after the festivities have ended. Sometimes I’ve entered the living room only to find the floor devoid of presents, a pair of moving angels in their place. Two weeks later, an industrial-sized box of gifts for my parents, my sisters, and me shows up at home, along with an envelope containing a picture of all the relatives who’d made it and an almost-sarcastic note saying, “Wish you were here!”

One year, my family parked on the snow-covered driveway on Christmas Eve, buzzing with the excitement of at last coming to Ohio in time. None of my cousins were there yet, but that wasn’t abnormal; they tended to arrive early on Christmas morning, so I sat on the couch in the living room next to one of the better-quality angels, watching it wave a fake flickering candle back and forth. I glanced at the gifts, what looked to me like hundreds of them, stacked in neat piles around the tree so high that I feared they’d fall if I touched them. I tried to count how many of them were for me—five, not including the ones marked for me and both of my sisters that I knew they’d never be willing to share.

Grandma came in once I’d worked up the courage to pick up a box and shake it to hear what was inside, and she sent me to bed. “The wait will go by faster if you sleep,” she said, but I knew she’d just grown tired of watching me try to sneak around the living room. I fell asleep after gazing up at the ceiling in the dark for an hour, and I awoke close to lunchtime to a silent house. The only sound came from the news playing on the television downstairs and my parents chatting about politics with Grandma at the kitchen counter.

“Your sisters have been waiting for you,” my mother said when I entered. “They’ve wanted to open their presents since early this morning, you know.”

“But where is everyone else?”

“Oh, they’re not coming this year. Look at how bad the snow is!” She pulled the curtain to the side to reveal the backyard blanketed in white. “Now put your clothes on so we can take our picture for the New Year’s cards.”

Later that day, I helped my grandmother pack everyone else’s gifts into giant boxes and load them into her van to take to the post office the next day. I asked her again why she insisted on mailing the presents instead of waiting for the rest of the family to arrive within the next few days.

“I told you,” she said, taking a seat on the living room couch with a glass of water. An angel across the room began to sing its unrecognizable song. “That’s just the way it’s always been.” △



Siblings at Heart

Samantha Holland

Photography