

2023 FDL Holly Jolly Writing Contest: Third Place Winner

Home for the Holidays

By Megan McCoy

As I descended the oak staircase my father built, I sighed deeply and tightened my robe. Replaying the day's events in my mind, I realized it had been one for the record books; 20 people plus 7 dogs equaled absolute madness and merriment. My mom snoozed peacefully in her favorite recliner: a celebratory long winter's nap for pulling off yet another successful Christmas. Seeing as her coffee mug was still full and a half burnt cigarette lay in the ashtray, it could only be ascertained that this was an unplanned reward. My mother indulges all major holidays, but Christmas is by far her favorite. She gets downright jolly come December 1st, and between the baking, shopping, wrapping and caroling, one could swear she was part elf. I stopped before reaching the landing to admire all of the marvelous eye candy she displayed every year.

I'm unsure if "favorite" is a strong enough word to describe her feelings towards the big day. Everywhere you looked, there was Christmas paraphernalia: Candy canes (of both the edible and non-edible varieties), Santa Claus's of all shapes and sizes (most with a matching Mrs. Clause, of course), mischievous elves, bashful snowmen, bountiful reindeer, boughs of evergreen, and of course bows and ribbon in the classic color scheme of crimson and pine. Out of all of her swag, she loved the lights most of all. Assorted strands were exhibited in practically every corner, highlighting the fabulously festive décor. An antique bucket held glowing tree branches, extending light to the original 5 stockings her children had used into adulthood, and now shared with their families. A beautiful spruce swag adorned the double dining room window, casting shadows across the Amish table we'd shared meals at for decades. Even in the dimness I could still distinguish a few of its more noticeable scars, one of which I was responsible for.

I reached the hardwood floor gently, skipping the last squeaky step so as not to disturb the old elf snoring sweetly. I smiled in spite of myself, thinking of the many happy Christmases she had afforded me throughout my life. I never grew up wanting, for toys or holiday cheer. I turned my gaze to the empty chair across from her and felt the smile fade. Her partner in crime, our patriarch, had not been here for 3 Christmases now. He had always helped the elf pull off her holiday hijinks, being her sleigh driver from store to store and wrapping accomplice all of those late nights. The loss we suffered was profound, but her grief still lingered, felt deeply between the season's moments of merriment.

I shuffled towards the kitchen, hoping to find some tasty leftovers. The light above the stove cast a relaxing glow across the cabinets; the yellow hue was most likely due to years of nicotine and grease buildup, rather than an intentional design choice. However that kind of authenticity, those tiny flaws that really weren't,

is what made this house a home. I admired the refrigerator door, lovingly adorned with hand drawn pictures, notes and ancient magnets that never ceased to disappear, despite the many tiny hands that had grabbed, dropped and rearranged them over the years. Suddenly I heard a crackle on the baby monitor I was toting in my bathrobe pocket; I instinctively pulled it to my ear, simultaneously holding my breath and saying a silent prayer that it was static and not a stirring. I heard her yawn loudly and then, silence. In that moment I felt so grateful that my daughter was one of the many tiny-handed magnet bandits, and that she was making memories here just as I had.

I noticed a flurry of movement out of my periphery. I looked out the foggy window to find fat, fluffy flakes effortlessly floating down to the Earth, dancing in the icicle lights' glow. I grinned widely, as the white Christmases of my youth were now legend. I impulsively headed for the living room to notify the elf, but as I reached the back of her recliner I heard a particularly loud snore permeate the silence. Maybe it was best this surprise be left for morning.

I took a few steps backward, tiptoeing to the coat rack near the entryway. The real trick would be getting the front door opened whilst remaining undetected by the vicious hounds that guarded the house: aka mother's neurotic Labradoodles that, at any time, could bark loudly and wake her or, worse yet, my child sleeping directly above the living room. I was as discreet as I could be bundling up and slipping on my boots. I glided to the front door, watching the canines curled up on the couch for any sign of distress. I turned the knob and opened the door with a painful slowness. Once I made it over the threshold successfully I paused for a moment to make sure I had not caused my undoing; luckily for me, there was no sign of detection.

I walked over to the wicker loveseat and slowly descended onto the cold cushion. The flakes fell faintly behind the icicle lights glowing with hope, gently illuminating the porch where I'd drawn my best sidewalk chalk work. The porch that held the double swing I'd lazily inhabit every summer, watching cars drive by. The porch that even held a piece of me: my kindergarten handprint from the day it was poured. I don't know if it was from the cold or the nostalgia, but I could feel my eyes fill with tears. Suddenly, I heard a small twinkly tone and turned my head in its direction. A lone wind chime, separately from its 4 counterparts on that very porch, chimed melodically and peacefully.

As I walked inside and wiped away the tears, I felt two undeniable truths take root inside my heart: that I was finally home, and that he hadn't missed this Christmas after all.

THE END