

It's Beginning to Look a Lot Like Christmas

My puffer jacket wasn't thick enough to fight the morning winds on the walk to school anymore. It was winter time, my first one in preserved memory. I learned firsthand that winter rain was cold and heavy, unlike the soft drizzle of a spring day.

I spent afternoons cooped in the after-school building. It was a single room with four bulky computers along one wall and empty tables throughout. There were also large windows, and the sun was the sole source of light. I remember being quite fond of the volunteers and the program overall. They let us do as we wanted, and sometimes unsupervised, but it was better than being home alone.

The volunteers were few and far between, so I occupied myself. I tried to look up Michael Jackson. I was too young to spell. I kept trying but eventually, I had one of the volunteers to do it.

"Can you put Michel jicson on the thing?"

They pulled it up on YouTube, and I asked them when winter was ending. In a few months, they said, which I noted as forever. I wanted to keep talking, but he had to help someone with homework. I put on the clunky headphones over my tiny head, having to hold it up if I wanted it to fit correctly. I let it fall so that the rubbery padding lining the inside of each headphone covered most of my ear. I listened to Thriller while looking out the window at the barren branches and grey skies, wondering when I could go somewhere without asking. I'd go somewhere with no winter. I stared at cars passing by and I felt lonely for the first time.

The next day the teacher told us about Christmas. I also learned that Grandma was a specific woman in your family and not a random old woman.

“What is a present?” said a classmate of mine, with the slow and unintelligible cadence of a child still learning to speak.

“Anything! It depends,” The teacher replied with caution.

“Like what?” another kid said.

“Well, only Santa knows!”

We learned about Santa next.

“But what if I don’t have a chimney?”

“He uses the front door.”

We watched movies like Home Alone, Frosty the Snowman, and Rudolph. We learned about shiny balls, mistletoe, decked halls, and white snow. We colored pointed trees, snowflakes, and cartoon families. Such things fill children’s hearts with desperate wonder. The scenes of beaming gold, deep red, and silver specks fed my fascination – I dreamt of big, tight-knit families, and even bigger Christmas trees; tall, neatly packed presents, and even taller, friendly snowmen. Stockings with your favorite treats, and mothers pulling out baked chocolate-chip cookies. Gingerbread houses and snow angels. Dinner tables with casseroles. For all the grey and short days, winter did have one good thing to give.

I want Christmas. I sat watching the grinch’s heart grow three times its size. Was Christmas something you could take home, like the candy the teacher gave out last Halloween? Or the turkey drawings we did for Thanksgiving?

One day we had streaky hot chocolate at school, and they told us we had a super long break. I wondered if my teacher would even remember me when I came back. Then I went to afterschool, and they had candy. I watched Billie Jean while eating stale tootsie rolls.

When I got home, I pestered my parents about Christmas again. They said it was in two weeks, an eternity. I asked them about grandmas, and if I had any. I did but they weren't coming for Christmas.

We had a baby in the house that couldn't talk still. The baby was much bigger than he was in April, when he arrived bundled in blue. Hurry up and grow, I urged him. He needed to be bigger if he wanted to get toys for Christmas. My mom didn't want him to grow because she'd have to buy him new clothes.

My mother sat me down with my box of toys. We wrapped them in red paper with reindeers steering Santa's sled. We decorated our plastic potted ficus tree with matte red, green, and golden ornaments. We stretched the lights and tinsel over the upwards branches that looked like hands reaching for the sky. We set the pretty presents all around the sparse tree; red, green, silver, gold. A color for each family member.

We ordered Dominoes on Christmas, and it came in less than 15 minutes as the commercials promised. It was piping hot, but it had a weird smell. I wanted to ask them why they weren't home for Christmas but my mom wouldn't let me. I unwrapped presents for the first time, and had already forgotten that I had wrapped them last week. We took family photos, and it felt just like the movies. My little brother wouldn't remember much, but I made sure to remember for the both of us. We had full chocolate bars each instead of sharing one amongst the family, and *Abuelita* hot chocolate instead of the regular hot chocolate.

It was all there – family, presents, a decorated tree; red, green, silver, gold; treats, food, and hot drinks.

“Did you enjoy Christmas, Karina?” My teacher asked on the first day back.

With a pocketful of crushed candy cane, I nodded yes.