

APPLAUSE 2020 HOLIDAY FICTION CONTEST

HIGH SCHOOL WINNERS

FIRST PLACE

The Snowman

Gus Varallo, Junior, Creative Writing



The bluest sky I ever saw was on the day my dad and I built the snowman. After we finished the body, I took a break to make snow angels in the lawn. There were no clouds that day, and the planes above me looked like rocket ships, slicing white lines in the stratosphere. A flock of geese flew by, in a V, and the sky crackled with their calls.

“Could you fetch me a carrot?” Dad said. I got up and headed to the house, my boots sinking into the snow with every step. I walked through the door and saw Mom sitting at the coffee table, filling out multicolored forms. I passed her and got a carrot from the kitchen, then turned back.

“Tell your father to come inside for a bit,” Mom said as I went out the door. “He has to fill out some paperwork with me.”

* * *

Inside, Dad made me a cup of hot chocolate and sat the mug on our kitchen bar. Mom was watching the entire time, manila folders in hand.

“Mommy and I have to do some work now,” Dad said, “but we’ll be all done by dinner.”

He and Mom went into the dining room, and I took a sip of my cocoa. When I put my mug down, I saw Mom had left her wedding ring on top of a damp coaster.

* * *

The next day was warm, and the snowman’s eyes began to sag. My dad had used Hershey Kiss for pupils, and now they were softening, causing them to slide off and drop like dead birds.

I wanted to save the snowman’s sight, but nothing could be done. We didn’t have any coal to replace the eyes, only an empty fireplace with a family photo of us at an amusement park on top of the mantle.

By late afternoon, our snowman had nearly sunk to the soil. Dirt covered its chest like a blanket, and it looked like the ground was about to swallow him whole.

I called Dad outside when the snowman's head began to shift like a tectonic plate. He came out the front door, green shovel in hand, a smile plastered on his face as he walked down the steps.

"Your mom needs help sorting folders," he said, his voice tight. "Why don't you go inside?"

I took a long look at our snowman, now half-sized, head askew. Then I went inside, though I kept watching my father through the front window.

Dad lodged the green shovel into the snowman's chest and kicked the handle, making the snowman collapse. Then he took the shovel and beat down the remains, until there was only a small blotch of white on our lawn.

"Take it!" he yelled, so loud I could hear him through the glass. "It's yours!"

* * *

After the divorce, Mom had a gas log set installed in the fireplace. She showed me how to start it with a wall switch. It shot up in flames as soon as she turned it on.

Mom gave me a weak grin. "What do you think? Does it look real?"

The logs were too smooth to be natural. We didn't have a chimney. There were no pokers or tongs by the hearth. But when I held my hands near the fire, it warmed my fingers.

"It's close," I said.

SECOND PLACE

Cat and Mouse

Sydney Lee, Sophomore, Creative Writing



Natalie ran downstairs at the third of many crashes to occur in the living room. She had dismissed the first one, thinking her mother had just dropped a dish or knocked over a vase. It took a second crash for her to remember she was home alone. The third one happened as soon as she opened her door, the sound magnified to a point where she knew it could not be a dish. From the steps, Natalie could already see the carnage sparkling on the hardwood floor near the Christmas tree. The remains of three glass ornaments lay scattered in front of her. These ones in particular were from

a new, short-lived Walmart set that had only seen the light of day for a few hours since the tree had been up. Natalie did not have time to mourn, however, noticing an unnatural movement from inside the tree.

She approached it slowly, mainly to avoid the glass shards on the ground. A white nose poked through a small opening in the pine, followed by two eyes and the vague outline of ears. Her Christmas present from last year, a tuxedo cat she had promptly named Charlie, sat peacefully on a thin branch in the tree. This deceptive gesture led Natalie to believe he would realize his wrongdoings and leave immediately. Without blinking, Charlie maneuvered around and burrowed back into the tree, shaking it a surprising amount for an eight-pound cat. From this movement, two more ornaments came loose and began to fall. Her first instinct was to try and catch at least one of the descending objects. But, Charlie had prepared his defenses and Natalie could not get past the moat of broken glass in time. She watched as they swiftly impacted the ground, the sound somehow not affecting the cat.

“Demon,” she mumbled in search of a broom and the nearest pair of shoes. Sporting her father’s size twelve work boots, she returned moments later to the tree. She hastily swept

the glass aside and waited for Charlie’s next move. She saw the occasional shudder within the tree, but nothing enough to shake another ornament loose. One especially large shard became wedged under the carpet. She made the mistake of being precise, trying to get every last piece out of the way before proceeding to the real problem. Charlie used this distraction to his advantage, snaking his way up the tree and finding a perch next to the angelic topper. His stance seemed to defy gravity from where Natalie was on the ground.

There were three quick glances before the final blow. Charlie looked down at Natalie, gripping a broom and dustpan of glass. He looked back at the angel next, his eyes tracing the golden wings as if to decide if they were edible. Finally, he looked back at Natalie with wide eyes and a blank expression.

“Don’t do it,” she started, afraid to move any closer to the tree. “Charlie, for the love of God.” At that, the cat pounced on the angel and bit down on the wings. The Walmart ornaments did not matter, but a fall from that height would break the ceramic angel instantly. She lunged forward and scared Charlie, who resorted to knocking the angel out of place. Her approach was immediately grounded by her father’s heavy boots. She tripped as Charlie left from the top of the tree

while sending the angel flying. Miraculously, she was able to catch it in time and hugged it close to her chest as she impacted the ground. Her first thought was a thank you to her past self for promptly cleaning the glass she would now be on top of. But, as the final insult, the tree could not handle being a launchpad and came crashing down next to her.

It was impossible to differentiate between the sounds of ornaments breaking or bumping into each other. Still clinging to the angel, she rolled away from the fallen structure and lay still in defeat. An eight-pound cat had brought down an eight-foot tree. Instead of retreating or hiding under the couch, Charlie stood on the stairs with a scrap of angel hanging out of the side of his mouth.

Natalie released the angel, tilted her head, and spoke to the cat with the calmest voice she could muster. “Merry Christmas, Demon.”



THIRD PLACE
Broken, But Not Shattered
Flora Majkrzakm,
Sophomore, Band

Closest to the tree in the corner of the room lay the beautiful present; wrapped with magnificent paper and laced with festive ribbon. Every year, it was brought out and put in the same spot. The first time Samantha had laid eyes on it was almost a decade ago. Every year she wanted to open it, and yet couldn't bring herself to do so.

It was late December and Sam had just finished buying gifts for both of her parents. She was nineteen years old at the time, and had just come back home from college. Like her parents, Sam had long dark hair, and eyes as green as the trees. Sam was studious, quiet, and a little stubborn. However, both of her parents understood this since they too shared this obstinate trait. Sam also had a little sister named Millie, and she was anything from ordinary. Her personality was as wild as her bright red hair, yet as sweet as a rose.

Although very different from each other and almost ten years apart in age, Millie and Samantha got along quite well. The only brawl Sam could ever remember having with Millie was about five years ago when Samantha had bought her a very special “big girl” necklace. Sam had actually bought herself a necklace that matched up with Millie's necklace to say “Sisters Forever”. The two necklaces were broken hearts that could be

connected to symbolize the sisters' neverending bond. Samantha had bought it for Millie who was only about six at the time. Up to this point in her life, Millie didn't exactly understand the sentiment of gifts. About a week after Sam had given the present to Millie, she had lost the necklace. At first, Sam was quite furious with her and didn't understand how a six year old could be so irresponsible. That is, until Sam realized that she had misplaced her necklace as well. After this, she decided not to give her little sister such a hard time when dealing with gifts and anything else she might not yet understand.

That, however, was almost three years ago. It was December 23rd and Sam only had one more day to find the perfect gift for Millie. This year, she wanted it to be special. Millie was nine years old and Sam thought that it would finally be time for her to get a mature and meaningful present. After two hours of looking with no luck, Sam put some cheap makeup in the shopping cart and checked out. Although makeup had been what Millie wanted, Sam couldn't help feeling disappointed in herself.

As Sam put the vibrant makeup in her car, she received a call from her mother.

"Hi Samantha!" said her mother in a cheery voice.

"Hey Mom." Samantha replied indifferently.

"I just wanted to let you know that we will be a little late coming home tonight from the party."

"Ok, that's fine Mom." Sam said, rather annoyed.

"I love you Sammy," said her mother in a once again cheery voice.

"I love ya too Mom!" Sam said whilst rolling her eyes. She absolutely hated being called Sammy.

The entire car ride home, Sam blasted classical music with the windows rolled down. She enjoyed the fluidity and gracefulness of the music like nothing else. For the next few months, this would be the only thing that would bring her comfort.

Soon after Sam had gotten home, she received a call saying that her mother and sister were in a car accident. Her mother recovered, however not the same could be said for Millie. The only remnants of Millie that Sam had was a small present beneath the Christmas tree. In years to come, Sam would finally open this present to find both halves of the necklace she had thought she'd lost. Months after this, Samantha would realize that neither of them had ever lost their half of the

necklace. Millie had taken both because she had felt that both halves kept her safe. It was only now, after three years that Millie had finally given the necklace back. However, the curious thing was that she had given both pieces to Samantha. It was almost as if she had known all along, that one day, Samantha would need the necklace more than she ever would have. Although devastated, Sam felt that even with her sister gone, she still had a piece of her that she could hold on to.

HONORABLE MENTION

“The Meaning of Christmas,”

Henry Hipp, Freshman, Theatre

The sun had been shining all week but it was still pretty cold. It woke me up and I turned to look at my watch; it was 11:30. My watch had Mickey Mouse dressed as Steam Boat Willy on it. It was a Christmas gift I got from my dad when I was 7 years old. I'd been pretty rough on it but it still worked. It was a happy memory, one of the few I had.

I needed to get up but what was I supposed to do? All my friends were out of town visiting family. I had to stay in New York. My mom promised she would cook Christmas Eve dinner for John, her crappy boyfriend, and me.

John was one of those guys who wanted everyone to like him. He called me Champ. And would act so cheery. I hate John. He has been dating my mom for 11 months now; he just started living with us. Great.

I walked outside of my room and walked into the kitchen. My mom was pulling mashed potatoes out of the microwave. John was sitting over at the kitchen table reading a newspaper. His dog was sitting on his lap. My mom turned around and said, “Hey Jess, Merry Christmas”.

John looked up from his newspaper and said, “Merry Christmas, Champ”

My mom was smiling her ‘please get along with him smile’ and said, “I poured you a bowl of cereal and we’re eating dinner around 5 o’clock”

I sat at the table and ate my bowl of cereal. Then I went to Facetime Kate. Kate was the only person in the entire world that I could just talk to. Kate and I would talk about random things. We would talk about Mr Jackson’s class and how he gives way too much work. We talked about Kate’s grandmother’s house and the weird smell. And then we watched Kate’s favorite christmas movie: Elf. People ask me all the time if I liked Kate and yeah, I do, but I couldn’t ask her out. I just couldn’t.

It was time about for dinner so I walked to the kitchen. My mom saw me and cheerfully said, “Are you ready to eat?.” The

dinner table was full of food; it looked good. Then John said grace, and all heck broke loose.

John's dog started running around the table trying to get the food. He ran under John's legs which caused him to trip and bump into me. I fell on the table and knocked over a candle which lit the tablecloth on fire. I hit John again and fell to the ground. I looked down and my watch, my one memory of my dad, was shattered to pieces.

I stared at the broken glass; the last thing my dad gave me before he died. All of sudden I didn't care about anything else. Not the fire, not John's cursing, not even my mom crying. I ran. I ran out the door. I ran down the stairs. I ran as fast and as far as I could. When I stopped, I was in the park. I sat down and did something I hadn't done since my dad died. I cried. I cried because the one thing that reminded me of my dad broke. I cried because as much as I wanted to date Kate I couldn't because she sees me as a older brother. I cried because I was alone. I hated my life, I hated John, I hated the apartment, I hated everything except my...mom. My mom loved me and I'd left her alone on Christmas Eve. I left her because I was depressed about a parent I lost 9 years ago instead of being happy about the one I had at home. The person who loved me and cared for me and spent all day putting a dinner together just so she could spend some time with on Christmas. I realized, that's what you're supposed to do on Christmas: spend time with the people you

love. I forgot that. In my selfishness, I had forgotten the meaning of Christmas.

I had to get back to my mom as soon as possible. I could worry about John and his stupid dog later. I could worry about Kate later. I could worry about all the other crap happening in my life later. The only thing I had to worry about tonight was my mom and dinner. `