

NO TIME FOR
CHRISTMAS

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NO TIME FOR CHRISTMAS

There was no time for Christmas this year.
Again.

Each year Candi promised herself that she would take Mike and Joey to early mass on Christmas Eve, and each year, with the shopping and cleaning and decorating and wrapping, there was no time.

Next year, she promised herself. Again.

It was 4:00 AM and she was still wrapping frantically, with only three hours to go till dawn. The wrapping inched forward like a car stuck in traffic while time flew by overhead. Gifts from her. Gifts from Michael, now again Miguel and living down in Santo Domingo with his new girlfriend and son, and with another child on the way.

Gifts from Michael's parents, also back down in Santo Domingo, and from her grandparents in Santo Domingo, who barely knew their own names.

She bought all the gifts, and the cards, and wrapped them, so that the children could wake up on Christmas morning to a tree with a pile of presents underneath it from a loving family. Michael said he would pay her, of course, for the presents from him and his parents, but he said the same thing about child support.

4:30 AM. The car inched a little further forward. She wrapped a play-doh set from Daddy to Mike and a set of ABC blocks from Daddy to Joey,

and then a Candy Land game to both of them from Nana and Pappi, who lived in an old-age home in Santo Domingo because there was no one left there to take care of them.

Candi's parents had always meant to bring them up to New York, but time passed and they had never really wanted to come. Candi, then Candida, remembered presents from them every Christmas that now she knew her parents had bought and wrapped with a card that they had signed. She had never seen Nana and Pappi, though her father had gone back down to Santo Domingo to visit them a number of times. There had never been enough money for the family to go.

And then her parents were murdered, both tied up in bed and shot in the back of the head a few months after Candi had gotten pregnant and moved out to live with Michael. And no one had ever found out who did it or why.

It was Candi's responsibility to bring Nana and Pappi up here in order to take care of them. Dominican families took care of their own. But she worked over 40 hours a week as a medical assistant in a clinic on St. Nicholas Avenue and went to City College in the evening. Her childhood friend Rosa watched Mike and Joey after school and preschool, for money, of course, and gave them dinner. But Rosa wasn't a nurse, which was what Nana and Pappi needed. There was no way Candi could afford a nurse and an extra room, and no way the American government would pay for a nursing home up here. So

Nana and Pappi lived in an American-style nursing home in Santo Domingo, and would probably die there never having laid eyes on their granddaughter and great-grandchildren.

5:00 AM. She wrapped a Transformers Deception Desert Attack 2-Pack from her to Mike and an Alphabet Bus LeapPad from her to Joey.

She knew that mass was more important than toys and that she was depriving her children of something more precious than the excitement of shredding packages on Christmas morning. They would never learn what Christmas meant if they just played with toys under a Christmas tree. They would learn it only in church, which was where she had learned it. Her mother had brought her to church every Sunday, and on Christmas Eve and Easter her father had joined them. As a child she had believed in Jesus, in the way that Mike had once believed in Santa Claus and Joey still did. And even as an adult she still reflexively called out to Him, though she no longer believed in Him. She even felt His love for her. But although that love was something exquisitely beautiful, to her it was not something real.

5:30 AM. The last gifts waited to be wrapped – a My First LeapPad Book from Michael's parents to Joey and a Where's Waldo book from Michael's parents to Mike.

She switched wrapping paper – Rudolf paper for Mike, Donald-Duck-as-Santa paper for Joey. She didn't want to wrap more than two presents in any one kind of paper. The fiction was that they came

from different sources. On top of that fiction was the fiction that they came from Santa, but somehow neither Mike nor Joey saw the incongruity. The gift was from Santa no matter who else it came from.

She had been the same way as a child. She had been born in New York, and her parents had raised her in the American tradition of presents delivered by Santa on Christmas Eve. She had never questioned how Santa could have brought presents from Mommy and Daddy. In fact, she had to write out the "from's" and "to's" on presents to her own children before she realized how naturally she had believed as a child something so obviously nonsensical.

Now she had to make out the cards and put everything under the tree. And then, if the kids weren't sneaking out of the bedroom yet, she could begin cleaning up the kitchen.

Rosa and Manuel were coming for lunch at 1:00, perhaps with their children. Candi had presents for all four of them – Rosa, Manuel, Bob, and Caroline – under the tree, though it wasn't certain that Bob and Caroline would come. They were still living at home but already, in American fashion, breaking away from family. And Rosa and Manuel would bring presents for Candi and Mike and Joey, putting them under the tree as they came in.

There would be cold cuts and cheeses and store-made salads and a bakery cake and bakery cookies. What else could Candi do? It was pitiful, but it was all she could manage. And lentils and rice, the lentils from a can. And fried plantains.

She felt like Atlas, exhausted from holding up her world. But she was out to do more – to move this world out of its Washington-Heights orbit and get Mike and Joey out of here before they got too far into school. When she got her degree in three or four years she would be a nurse, and they would move to a house in a much nicer place, and Mike and Joey would go to good schools and make something of themselves.

"Oh, sweet Jesus!" she thought. "Help me!"

What was it? It wasn't that she was on a sleepless marathon, or that she didn't sleep much even on good days. Or that she lived in a slummy one-bedroom apartment in a dangerous neighborhood and had a rotten job with years to go in school. Or that she hadn't allowed herself to be touched by a man for four years now, since Michael had left when she was pregnant with Joey, and was unlikely to for another fifteen years or so, until the boys were old enough to be on their own and she was off this treadmill, and her youth was gone, sacrificed to the American Dream. Or simply that she was failing to give her children any spiritual life at all.

6:00 AM. They could be stirring any minute now. On normal days she was just waking up to the normal morning sounds of traffic starting the day four stories below on St. Nicholas Avenue, the buses groaning out of the stop below her kitchen window, the delivery trucks idling double-parked in front of the bodega across the street, the sounds of water running as people took showers or flushed toilets in the apartments all around her, the renewed pounding of

feet across the ceiling from the family of four crammed into the apartment upstairs.

But just now it was as quiet as an open field in the dark hour before dawn, as the Earth held its breath before the sun came up and turned on the birds and set life moving again. That was it, yes! she thought in the sweet silence. It was only that she wanted Christmas, the real Christmas, the one that gave her Jesus Christ, to come once again into her heart.

Candi gathered up the cards and presents and began to ferry them into the living room, which doubled as her bedroom. But the tree took up too much room for her to pull out the sofa-bed, and so during the week of Christmas, until after the Day of the Kings when the tree was dismantled and put back into its box for next year, she slept on the couch as a couch.

She set the gifts out under the tree as artfully as she could, mixing shapes and colors so that even though it looked like a haphazard heap, the bows and curlicues stood out, and one could see all of the patterns, the sheen and the shine.

She stood back and admired the effect. For this she had foregone the real Christmas, the babe in the manger. In church there was a *nacimiento*. It was a Dominican custom to put one under the tree at home, but she had never had one as a child and had never gotten one for the house. In church the nativity scene was large and beautiful and full of mystery, and Mike and Joey's Christmas would have been full of the miracle of God-as-man. They would have gotten into

the habit of praying to Christ, who would have become a presence in their lives.

In the Dominican Republic presents were given on the Day of the Kings, in memory of the presents the three kings had brought to the infant Jesus. And although Candi's parents had, following American custom, switched the day to Christmas, she had gotten gifts on the Day of the Kings as well – little token gifts, like a bag of homemade jelly balls dipped in coconut, or a card of jacks with a tiny rubber ball. Something to remind her of the Christ in Christmas.

As a child she had loved Jesus and believed in Him. And now her children believed in Santa Claus, though Mike was already outgrowing that. Children needed such stories to make the world seem safe and beautiful, as it should be rather than as it was.

And not only children, she thought. Not only children.

Next year, she promised herself. Again.

Then she heard footsteps emerging from the bedroom and the high-pitched murmur of her children's voices. Their excitement sounded like an angel's flute singing through the brightening skies, and Candi smiled as she slipped back into the kitchen to listen unseen.