

# CHRISTMAS ANGEL

*By Shannon O'Neil*

Christmas brings about the absolute busiest time of the year. The last minute shopping, decorating, and cooking leaves little time for what the holidays are really meant to be. The advent of technology has become a catalyst for everything, including life. Today, it seems that people live through a blur of experiences that are supposed to be lived to the fullest, but unfortunately seem to be lived in the quickest and easiest manner achievable. Yet even in our ordinarily busy schedules, there is still room around the months of November and December to increase the amount of things one must do in that rapidly shortening period of time.

My family is no different than any other. We let time run its course without any effort to slow it down or even savor the unique events in between the ordinary ones, not even at Christmas time. If our pitiful excuse must be known, it is that our family is far too big and widespread to really be able to make time for each other. Out of the eight kids in our family, five have graduated from high school so far, and those five (my oldest sister Carla, my two older brothers Chip and Corbyn, my younger brother Cayce and myself) we've all moved at least two hours away from our childhood home in the suburbs of the Nation's Oldest City.

This Christmas, however, my parents have finally decided to yield to the advice that I have been giving out for years: slow down and stop missing life. Although they began their holiday preparations late, towards the end of November, they have made up for their procrastination by being extremely adamant in forcing my siblings to return home for Christmas. It has taken many, many phone calls in Colorado, Ohio, Tennessee and Miami, but by the first of December, it becomes official that everyone has made arrangements to be home by five o'clock on Christmas Eve.

The quaint, immense farmhouse outside the St. Augustine city limits was the only house I had ever lived in until I left for college. Although it looks huge on this cold Christmas Eve, as a child it seemed especially cramped. I shared the attic with Carla and our

younger sister, Cora. Chip, Corbyn, and Cayce shared one of the three bedrooms on the second floor while Caelan and Blaze shared another. Blaze was the youngest in the family, born when I was twelve. By that time, my parents had tired of the complaints from my siblings and myself concerning all of our names beginning with “C.” So, they relented and allowed us to name our new baby brother. We wanted an oddball name that a sort of “fire” to it, thus the name Blaze emerged, corny though it may seem.

I arrive at five-thirty on Christmas Eve, the last one present (as usual) although my tardiness goes unnoticed among my family members. Dad and the older boys have already brought in freshly chopped firewood for the brick fireplace in the living room. I take immediate notice of the old family photos, which adorn the mantle in the same positions they did when I was a child.

The tree is beautiful as always, a glorious glow in the corner. So many Christmas memories from my childhood stem from that tree. Every ornament we have ever acquired goes on the tree every Christmas. The tree eventually became incredibly crowded to the point where we had to start buying two trees around the time I was fifteen or so. The second tree tradition has survived the years with this Christmas being no different, although we have gone from having both trees in the living to putting one of them in the dining area.

As the night wears on, my mom busies herself making hot cocoa while my dad prepares vegetable soup. I listen closely as my brothers and sisters recount the events of their lives since our last meeting. Once everyone is caught up on each other’s lives, the focus of discussion switches to the memories of past Christmases. Laughter soon turns to tears as a very unusual sadness creeps over the holiday joy. The melancholy mood becomes unbearably loud, drowning out even the crackling of the fire. It seems as though a single, sullen thought suddenly invades my family out of no where.

The silence is broken when my siblings begin going to their respective rooms for the night. The sorrow slips from everyone’s shoulders as they wipe away their tears and bid a cheerful goodnight to my parents along with a forced smile. Santa will come soon, they say, it’s time for bed.

After a long night of sleeplessness, everyone rises shortly after seven. In the old days, it was the smell of presents under the tree that drew myself and my siblings from bed on Christmas morning. Now it is the familiar aroma of coffee that summons us from slumber. Once everyone has a cup of that wonderful, early morning liquid staple, the slow task of unwrapping gifts begins.

My mother, a forever unchanging soul, is more concerned with passing around a trash bag for everyone to put the remains of their gift wrap into than she is with opening presents herself. More forced smiles appear as that sadness that had come about the night before slowly makes its return with each present that is removed from the colorful stack. Surprisingly, even after everyone leaves from the living room, several presents remain wrapped and tagged under the tree.

Throughout the morning and into the early afternoon, everyone participates in preparing the Christmas meal. Both my parents cook while my brothers put the extra leaves in the table necessary for seating us all. My sisters busy themselves with decorating the table in its Christmas finest. The tablecloth, hand-stitched by my grandmother years and years ago, has let some of its red color fade through the passing of time, but it still retains the same beauty that I saw in it when I was little.

The best of the family's china managers to make it to the table without any major tragedies where it is flanked by green napkins and polished silver. Another family heirloom, two ornate silver candleholders, are in place as the table's elegant centerpiece. My mother pulls out the two green candles that she purchased months ago at Wal-Mart in preparation for this special event. Once the candles are lit, it is time for the oldest Christmas tradition in our family: the pre-dinner prayer.

My father's deep voice permeates the room. Everyone joins hands and bows their heads to listen. Tears slowly slip to the carpet as my father begins to speak of the spirit of those in the family that have passed on. Suddenly, my ears twitch when my father says my name for the first time this Christmas.

“Even though You took Ceana, our precious daughter and loving sister, away from us

before this joyous holiday, we know that she must be near us, as all families come together for Christmas, even those who may only be able to attend in spirit.”

The words ring in my ears as I watch my family begin to eat, the tears still quietly flowing down their cheeks only to plummet into the well-prepared meal in front of them. They miss me, but I'm here. I'll always be here for Christmas.