

Wilderness House Literary Review 18/2

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Cold Runs Deep

Two days ago I took down my Christmas tree. The last remaining proof that Christmas had even happened. There is a trail of pine needles leading from my front door all the way to where we lifted it into the truck. When I walk up my front steps I hear their dry crunch underfoot crackling over the cement.

Ten years ago I lived in a garage with a cement floor. The kind you would expect to see in any garage: the familiar gray covered with fractures and stains that seem to appear with no causation.

I remember getting home from school and playing outside for as long as possible with my little sister before our mother called us into our home. No, not a home. It was more like a prison—a cold, dark, concrete prison where the windows were too high to see out of and our only belongings consisted of our overflowing backpacks. In the corner was a metal bunk bed given to us by the landlady. Our mother slept on the bottom while my sister and I slept on top together. We would take our shoes off by the door and sprint with bare feet across the icy floor, leaping into bed as fast as humanly possible and diving under the blankets, holding on to each other for warmth.

We lived in this garage for a long time. Just my sister, my mother, and me. Oh, and I'll never forget the rats. Rats took sanctuary in this prison alongside us, eating our food, nibbling holes in our clothes, keeping us up at night with their rhythmical scratching.

The Christmas we were living there, the landlady who was allowing us to stay with her invited us in for dinner. My sister and I had been warned countless times to never get near her front door where there hung a sign saying "DO NOT DISTURB". So, when the menacing mistress gestured for us to come inside, my body froze, terrified. Gradually, with reassuring looks from my mother, I took nervous steps until there was only one more step to take. I extended my leg and put my foot down. Inside her house. A real home. It was warm. Cozy. Bright. Happy. Is this what a real home is supposed to feel like? There was a beautiful Christmas tree decorated in the corner of the living room to the left of the cozy fireplace where presents were delicately wrapped and placed underneath. Then the smell of food overcame my senses. I turned my head in the direction of the aroma and saw food spread out on the table. This was unlike the boring top ramen and oatmeal we would eat every day. There were mashed potatoes, corn, stuffing, biscuits, turkey, and even pie! The moment it was offered to me I forgot all of my fears and I ate. I ate until I couldn't eat anymore.

Afterwards, my sister and I each got to open a present. My sister got a Barbie doll and I got a stuffed animal horse. With permission from my mother, we all watched *A Christmas Story* on the television. The night ended earlier than I wanted it to. We were told we had to go to bed.

The walk back to the garage was cold and dark. Even though it was still Christmas, the feeling of safety diminished the moment I stepped inside of the garage. Why did we have to sleep in the cold when other families didn't have to? Why do we go to bed starving every other night?

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I finally realized how unfair the world was. I remember telling myself to just look forward to next year's Christmas, because I was certain that no other day would be as peaceful.

I now have my own home. Even though I took down my Christmas tree two days ago, the feeling of comfort remains. When I get home I still take my shoes off at the door, but I don't have to run to warmth. Instead I walk barefoot on my carpet, allowing the soft ringlets to peek out from between my toes. I feel the gentle blow of the heater warm my skin. I stay up late making meals for myself, eating until I'm full. While getting ready for bed, I'll hear scratching sounds, but I don't worry because it's no longer rats. It's just my cat coming to snuggle with me. I lay down and replay the best parts of my day behind closed eyelids until I fall asleep—feeling safe at last