

## Jesus, Mary, Joseph and Mikey

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*Published in Seattle City Arts Magazine, 2011. Leah Baltus, Editor.*

**M**y little brother Frank's tiny wire rim glasses are steaming up from laughing so hard. Dad has been soaking pieces of Mom's pot roast in his glass of whiskey and throwing them to the dogs. The dogs are starting to act funny, wobbly and eager.

Dad is not allowed to go to church with us. Last Easter, when he picked us up from Sunday School, he told all the kids that he had spied the Easter Bunny in our back yard ("Cool!") and had shot it with his double-barrel shotgun ("No!"). Mom has given him explicit instructions to stay away from Santa. And Jesus.

My mom is a Christmas expert. Addict. Fanatic. She has two storage spaces filled with antique train sets, fancy Santas from around the world, jumbo outdoor Nativity sets and ornaments we're not allowed to touch. We put our stockings out for St. Nicholas on Dec. 6, dutifully attend mass on Christmas Eve, spend Christmas morning with an extravagant parade of presents, rent the local American Legion for a potluck with my mom's fifteen brothers and sisters and their dozens of kids on Christmas Day, find gold and jewelry under our dinner plates on Three Kings' Day in January and then enjoy "Christmas in July" parties all summer.

We're eating Christmas Eve dinner early because this year, we're going to do it: We're going to get to church early enough to get the good roles in the children's Nativity play. Usually we roll in just before the choir starts and get stuck playing lambs and shepherds, but not this year. Mom's got a plan and I'm with her.

"So Marya, what are you hoping Santa will bring you tonight?" My dad is running out of pot roast.

"Besides playing the blessed Virgin Mary in front of everyone at church, I'm hoping to get a videotape of The Wiz starring Michael Jackson and Diana Ross so I can watch it a hundred times and learn all the dances."

"What?" Mom interrupts. "I thought you wanted a Barbie Dream House."

"I did, but now I want to dance. Don't worry, I told Santa."

"Oh. Great. How about you, Frankie?" Mom asks.

Frank's calmed down now and is studying his chicken soup. He eats chicken soup every night. He doesn't like meat, vegetables, fruit or leftovers. "I just hope it'll snow," he says.

“Me too, bud. How about you, Adam? What do you and Mikey want for Christmas?”

Adam doesn't answer, but shoves candied yams into Mikey's mouth. Mikey is a Charlie McCarthy dummy with two levers in his back to flap his jaw and make his eyes look around. Dad bought Mikey for Adam because he and Mom hope Adam will start speaking more. Better. I think they think if he uses Mikey to speak, talking will seem like more fun? Adam has a bunch of words he uses well – “No” – “Now” – “TV” – but mostly he expresses himself by pointing, punching, throwing himself on the ground and crying. So far, the only phrase the dummy has added to Adam's vocabulary is “Mikey bites.” Which he does.

“I have a feeling Santa's bringing something nifty for everyone.” Mom starts stacking dishes.

“Now let's shake a tail feather and get into town.”

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From where I'm kneeling, I can see a drip of snot collecting under Father Dom's nose. He'll have to wipe that. I don't think he can use his robe, or probably even his hand. I wonder if he has a hanky.

The altar is crowded with kids, wriggling and whimpering, the girls scratching themselves under thick cotton tights. Here we are, right smack dab in the middle of the scene, me in the awesome light blue polyester Mary scarf, Frank reluctantly draped in the burlap brown Joseph scarf and, between us, Adam and Mikey wrapped in a white sheet sitting on a pile of hay. When Mom suggested Adam leave Mikey with her in the pew, she got bit. So here we are, all four of us in the middle of the sweet Christmas action.

“Pssst!”

I try to maintain my practiced praying pose while I turn around to see Shannon Nichols in angel wings. She's the tiny, mean girl who sits across from me in Mrs. Boorman's class.

“Pssst! That's doesn't look like Jesus to me.”

“What?” I whisper back.

“I said that doesn't look like Jesus. That just looks like a dummy holding a dummy.”

Frank suddenly looks up from memorizing the floor. “What did you say?”

“You heard me, or are you a dummy too?” The angel girls huddled around Shannon Nichols start to giggle.

Frank goes quiet. He looks straight ahead. Father Dom is reading something about peace on Earth and good will toward men.

“What? Can’t talk? Wow, a whole holy family of dummies,” Shannon hisses.

I can’t turn around fast enough to see it or stop it, but I hear the crack when Frank grabs Mikey and swings his big, plastic head to nail Shannon Nichols right in the face. At the sight of Mikey flying across the room, Adam explodes into the middle of the altar, arms and legs flailing, interrupting the sermon with guttural protestations of “No!” and “Frankie bad!” and sending a half-dozen over-tired, sugar-glazed kids into a cascade of tantrums. I try not to eat hay while I hug Adam around the middle to get him to calm down. Shannon is crying and her mom’s heels are catching on everybody’s party dresses as she rushes past all of us to get to her tiny, nasty daughter.

“Can we have some parental support up here?” Father Dom tries to smile as a first grader named Bobby Bablock crawls between his legs and under the offering table, “We seem to have run into some Christmas chaos.”

Frank is shaking in the hallway, when Mom collects Adam and me, and hurries us out of the sanctuary.

“Here, bud,” Frank hands Mikey back to Adam, who’s still flushed from his stint as Baby Jesus. “Sorry, Mom,” he says.

“Oh, Frankie.” Mom navigates Frank’s arms into his green puffy coat. “That’s okay. I got a couple of great pictures before mass started, and I bet one of ’em is going to make a beautiful Christmas card next year.”

I take Frank’s freezing hand in mine and thank God for him, for his bravery and fast thinking. I also thank God that we’ve got another week before I have to go back to school and face Shannon Nichols. Together, the four of us—plus Mikey—step outside into the cold dark. It takes a moment for me to realize that a soft shower of fat, fluffy snowflakes is falling over the sidewalk, the crammed parking lot, the lawns traced with strings of colored lights. The small flurries glowing under the streetlamps look like magic.

“Frank!” Adam says, suddenly lucid and clear. “It’s snowing for you!”