

THE SWAN MAG

By Emma B., Moorestown, NJ

The warm house spreads an aura of holiday cheer throughout the crisp, cool air. Hoards of family members pile through the front door, with young couples stopping just below the archway for a little peck under the mistletoe.

I leap out of my uncle's beat-up car, officially bored out of my mind from Christmas mass. My breath creates a hazy cloud in the dark sky. The dim luminaries along the sidewalk guide me to the door, and I am escorted inside by my "Santa Claus" uncle. It's a family tradition to dress as famous Christmas characters; there's something truly bizarre about seeing your cousins dressed as Dancer, Prancer, Comet, Cupid, and of course, Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer. After 13 long Christmases, I have thankfully gotten myself out of having to dress up as a holiday enthusiast. It's not that I'm anti-holiday or anything, I just don't see the point in going overboard with "holiday spirit."



Image Credit: Garrett P., Reno, NV

Once inside, I meander past the piles of gifts, greeting relatives along the way. I enter the kitchen and am immediately hit with the aroma of hoagies, chips, and orange soda – a feast fit for pigs. Dozens of family members surround the kitchen island, and it's a literal push and a shove to grab a plate and small sandwich. I take a seat on the fireplace bricks next to my cousin Kimberly, who is in third grade.

"Who did you have for the present swap?" she asks.

We make small talk for a few minutes, and then she starts to go off on how popular she is. I politely excuse myself. It's hard to find someone to talk to at these gatherings. Relatives are either too old or too young; I'm awkwardly in the middle, bouncing back and forth. After what seems like an eternity, my mother brings out the Christmas cookies, the dessert liquor, and all the gifts. My dad, it seems, has gotten something "special" for her.

"We'll save the best for last," he boasts.

We begin to open gifts, in order from youngest to oldest. As hours pass, the gifts progress from Limited Too attire to top-grade cigars, and finally the cycle is complete. My dad removes a small box from his coat pocket and hands it to my mom. Questioning looks cross my relatives' faces as my mother carefully removes the bow.

"It's another wedding ring," jokes my cousin. Laughter boomerangs around the living room.

"A ... a swan," says my mother with a fake smile on her face. She lifts what appears to be a diamond encrusted swan-shaped pin from its cotton packaging. In the awkward silence, one unknown relative, who has had too much egg nog, snores loudly on the plaid armchair in the corner.

My dad looks around the room, half-confident, half-embarrassed. "Don't you like it?" The Christmas tree emits a radiant glow that seems to illuminate his face.

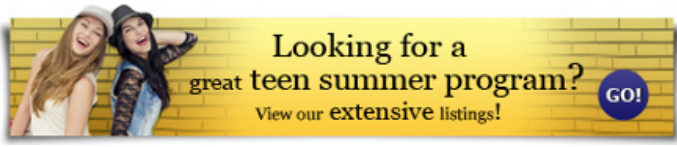
"It's beautiful," she answers, "just ... random."

"But I thought you liked swans. I remember when you were reading that book. Oh, what's the name ... I can't remember now." He shoots me an awkward glance, as if begging for help.

My mother lets out a cackle – a mean, critical laugh. I see the disappointment in my dad's eyes and decide to give him a hand. "Well, I think it's pretty. Dad put a lot of effort into finding you this." I knew I should hold my tongue, but words flowed from it like a never-ending waterfall. "Do you really think I like everything you get me for Christmas? No. But I say thank you. Remember what they taught you in second grade?"

And with that I am sent to my room. I start to cry, but I'm happy with my decision to stick up for Dad. And I'm thankful I didn't wear my Dasher costume or I would have had brown face paint trickling off my chin like raindrops from a soggy tree.

When I venture downstairs a few hours later, the house is empty. The mistletoe hangs lonesomely in the doorway, and the crumbs from the half-eaten hoagies have been swept into the trash. My parents are sitting on the couch, talking, laughing, and acting like nothing happened. And my mother is wearing her pin.



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