

## Blood is Thicker than Red Frosting

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Not all Christmases are created equal. For longer than I have been alive, it has been a family tradition to celebrate this specific holiday twice a year—once in California with old friends and once back East with my mom’s side of the family. It is my experience that those Christmases in Minnesota are most definitely *worse* than others. Though to be fair, my baby cousin could probably ruin my festive spirits anywhere she goes.

The first time I met my cousin Alicia, I knew right away that she would be yet another proverbial thorn in my side at the annual Christmas reunion. At that time, she could only “charmingly” gurgle in my general direction and surreptitiously fling peas at her brother, Skylar. I was a newly-turned six year old who had no problem scoffing at her *plebian* behavior from my seat, ignoring the fact that I, too, was placed at the kids’ table.

That year, like any other, the family gathered ’round a twinkling tree in what seemed to be forced seasonal gaiety to belt off-tune renditions of “Joy to the World” and “Silent Night,” which mocked me with its title. After “singing” my required two songs, I managed to escape to the computer room for a game of Nanosaur on my grandparents’ ancient Mac computer.

Alicia, too, was unable to stomach overly boisterous and slightly off-kilter grownups, especially at the age of two. As her brother Skylar had long abandoned the festivities in favor of more entertaining pursuits, she was brought into the computer room and handed off to me. Sitting there in a dark room with a babbling infant on my lap,

listening to the booming voices of my relatives who had ingested one too many cups of “adult” apple cider, was not a six-year-olds ideal holiday. Exasperated at the whole situation, and more specifically at the attention-seeking, drooling mass of blankets on my lap, I began to sing the alphabet backwards in hopes that she would learn it the wrong way. That, for the rest of the visit, was the extent of our relationship, and I was perfectly content to keep it that way.

Not only was I less than partial to babies—really anyone younger than me altogether—but Alicia and I, even at face value, were not remotely similar. I remember her with an obnoxious Polly Pocket compact permanently attached to her hand, a hillbilly gap between her first set of two front teeth, and a piercing shriek of a laugh that just *wouldn't* stop. While I chose to lounge about, unobtrusively reading, Alicia preferred to cavort up and down the hallway roaring the newest Pokémon theme song. She would awkwardly flail her arms around and drag her feet on the ground, like Bambi learning to walk. I took comfort in the fact that her short, *very* blonde hair, known for sticking out in odd directions, was so different from my own—straight and dark. As far as I was concerned, her parents should just change her diaper and stop with the incessant cooing.

Every Christmas Eve, my grandmother would shuffle about in the kitchen, and two hours later, magically produce countless pans of gingerbread men, women, and children. Just three years after I first met Alicia, a new rule was instated, saying that only people under 45 years old were allowed to decorate the first pan of cookies, seeing as all three of those eligible could now talk. From then on, Skylar would monopolize the blue frosting while Alicia and I would bicker over the iridescent baubles that could serve as neckties and shoe buckles. After sufficiently drowning her ginger-persons in the normal

amount of florid garnishes, Alicia would then continue to smother them with thick red icing. In an almost ritualistic manner, she would choose from among the cookies she had personally vandalized—usually the one with the most frosting—and proceed to rip off the head in one fell chomp, giggling all the way. Though a whole five years younger than I was, Alicia looked more like a mini Godzilla, devouring her way through an entire town of horribly sunburned Japanese gingerbread-citizens. The frosting spackled around her mouth was eerily reminiscent of blood. However, the adults catered to her, laughing along while my grandpa snuck some candid shots for the family album. I would hide behind my chair and commiserate with my own gingerbread men, whose fates were already sealed.

After the typical four days of negative-degree weather, portable toothbrushes, and overall Christmas cheer, my mom, dad, and I would return to sunny California. In less than a week, I was easily able to happily readjust to life without Alicia, with her mini-burps and tendency to throw unwanted vegetable missiles at innocent victims. She became the main reason for any and all “scrooge-ish” behavior regarding Christmas in Minnesota.

The next time I saw her, I was entering the undeniably awkward age of “tween-age,” and as a result, shedding my extra-small clothes in exchange for medium, regular-people-sized clothes. Of course, my mom made the realistic decision to pass them off to what I thought was the American Red Cross. There was no problem in underprivileged or disaster victim children wearing my leggings or cast-away turtlenecks—in fact, the whole idea made me feel rather like a regular Mother Teresa. It was to my eternal surprise when, next Christmas, I saw Alicia sporting my favorite white raincoat with sparkly

butterflies. I came to realize that not only had she gotten my raincoat, but she had also received the entirety of my delusionally philanthropic donation. Every Christmas, I began to purposely situate myself on the opposite side of the house so that I wouldn't have to see her prance around in *my* clothes, spilling soy sauce and orange juice on my favorite outgrown items, and being generally *annoying*.

However, over the years, it became harder and harder to completely avoid her. It became clear that *she* was seeking *me* out, for reasons unknown to me at the time. My mom would say things like, "Just put up with her for one game of Monopoly," or "We'll be home in two days; be patient." I was the only other girl there within twenty years of her age, and I suppose this only similarity was enough to give me some sort of big-sister quality. Alicia began to imitate me as well. It took me a while to catch on, but I did. I would take a sip of my orange juice; she would take a sip of her orange juice. I would draw a picture; she would draw a picture. I would take a walk; she would come with me. While the adults thought this was the most "adorable thing *ever*," I had no idea how someone I disliked so passionately, albeit in silence, had grown so parasitic.

I would never insult Alicia to her face, as much as it delighted me to think about doing so. Instead, I fumed over her exasperating antics to my parents when the three of us were back in our hotel room. It was more out of the fear of being punished than through the kindness of my own heart that I managed to quiet my growing complaints against her.

After dinner at my grandparents' house, there was truly nothing to do, and so Skylar, Alicia, and I fell into the habit of occupying ourselves with board games—Apples to Apples, Life, Scrabble, and the like. It was when Skylar started to teach me Dungeons and Dragons that I knew I had truly reached rock bottom. Alicia never held sway over

what game we were to play. As her brother was rather vindictive and competitive in his own right, Alicia would demand to be on my team. She was eight when we finally acquired a Monopoly board. Because even at that age both Skylar and I were math-averse, Alicia filled the role of banker. When Skylar wasn't looking, she would sneak me hundred dollar bills. Although I appreciated it, I viewed it as vengefulness towards Skylar rather than generosity towards me.

While Alicia was the youngest of those attending our Minnesota family reunions, I have traditionally filled that role during our Sacramento Christmas celebrations. Our Sacramento Christmas includes a morning of excited present-opening and an evening of socializing with my parents' college buddies and their children, the majority of whom bring deliciously aromatic homemade pies. There are three girls I see every Christmas, all of them five years older than I am. Two years ago, they were already attending college. It just sounded so *awesome*—they gossiped idly about dorms and double majors; the tingle of freshman excitement had long faded, and they appeared to be seasoned college veterans. That Christmas was the only time I broached the subject of Alicia and her outrageously irritating disposition. At the time, I was desperate to say at the least *something* in between their tales of censored romance and inebriation.

“God, she’s soooo annoying! She copies everything I do and acts all freaking innocent. I don’t get her. I hate little kids,” I complained, at yet another “children’s” table as I engineered a volcano out of my mashed potatoes and gravy.

I noticed the other girls exchange looks and try to stifle their snickering into the Santa Clause napkins I had neatly folded earlier that day. Ellen, the most outspoken, commented.

“She sounds like you—no offense or anything. It’s just that you used to imitate us and that sort of thing, you know? Like, remember one time, I was wearing my holiday sweater—you know, the red one with a tree on the front?—and by the end of the night, you had changed into that weird shirt with a light-up Rudolph.” She wiped off the remnants of cranberry sauce on her plate with a thick slab of bread.

Another girl, Anne, couldn’t contain a grin. Apparently my embarrassment was a source of amusement. She finished chewing and patted her mouth primly before speaking.

“Oh, that was like only... four years ago? Something like that. I think little kids just always do that kind of stuff.” Two other mumbles of accord were heard from the other two as both their mouths were full with stuffing. I could feel my face warming in mortification at the sudden attention. My parents always told me that I was a well behaved child—I couldn’t recall acting like that at all. I was only trying to impress them.

I muttered. “I *know*. She’s really fine or whatever. I just mean that relatives can be ...” I shrugged my shoulders and purposefully concentrated on my plate, averting my eyes from theirs. Growing bored with this topic and ignoring my abrupt discomfort, Anne skillfully maneuvered the conversation, mentioning the new coffee house down the street with the cute barista.

By then, my gravy lava had overflowed from my mashed potato caldera, instantly cremating the peas in their miniature yam huts. I squished them mercilessly with the rounded surface of my spoon. As much as it pained me, I could see the disconcerting parallels between Alicia and me. I wasn’t about to waste my New Year’s resolution on

her, but I did resign myself to endure her company with a little more enthusiasm than I had previously.

Maybe this year I would give her a Christmas present that wasn't one of my old stuffed animals.