

My First Christmas in America

I had been in America for only two months when Christmas 1983 arrived—still learning how to speak its language, still trying to understand its customs, still trying to believe that this strange new world was truly mine.

Minnesota in December was colder than anything I had ever imagined. Back home in Vietnam, winter meant a light jacket and rain. Here, the air itself seemed made of knives. The snow fell heavy and deep, quieting the world beneath a soft white blanket. The trees stood as white statues, covered in hoarfrost so delicate it looked like they had bloomed crystal flowers overnight. I exhaled just to watch the small clouds of breath float before me—my own warmth, visible in the frozen air. I had never seen snow. I had never seen the world turned white. I had never had a Christmas.

My new foster family said Christmas was a time for gifts. I did not understand. Growing up, gifts were something from books and dreams—not from life. I had never received any, much less given them.

But on Christmas Eve, wrapped in sweaters and wonder, I was ushered into a living room glowing with soft lights. A tree—taller than any person—sparkled with glass ornaments and strands of gold. Beneath it lay a pile of packages, colorfully wrapped, tied with shiny ribbons.

“For you,” my new sister said, smiling, pointing toward the tree.

At first, I thought she was joking. I had only been in this family for a short time. I barely spoke English. I hadn’t earned anything. Why would there be gifts for me? But one by one, they placed boxes in my arms—more than I could hold. Warm clothes. Toys. Books. Things I never knew to want. Things I never believed would belong to me. I looked at my empty hands, wishing I had something to give in return. My new siblings told me not to worry.

“You’re just a kid,” my new foster mom said. “You don’t have to give anything.”

And so I cried—quietly at first, then openly. Not because of the gifts, but because I did not understand a love that asked for nothing back. I did not know what to do with grace. That night we bundled up and went to church—an old neo-gothic Lutheran sanctuary with high stone arches and wooden pews polished by generations of hands. The candles lit faces all around me. The place felt ancient, yet warm, like it had been waiting for me long before I arrived.

At midnight, the choir stood. Their voices rose, tall and full, singing *O Holy Night*. I did not understand all of the English, but I understood the music. I understood the tenderness of the tune, the ache of beauty that filled the room. I understood a love so vast it crossed oceans, placing a child in a new family, in a new country, under a new sky—yet somehow still held by the same God.

They sang of Christ—born in a manger, a gift to the world. A gift not earned, not deserved. A gift given simply because God loved us. And suddenly, the Christmas gifts made sense.

This is what grace feels like:

Arms full when you brought nothing.

A place at the table when you don't know the rules.

Love that arrives without condition.

That night I realized that the gifts under the tree were only echoes—human reflections of the greater gift given long ago in Bethlehem. I had done nothing to deserve them. And that was the point.

I came to America thinking I might find a new life. Instead, on my first Christmas, I found something deeper—a love that gives before we can ask, a grace that finds us even when we are strangers, a God who comes in the cold darkness bearing light.

I went to sleep that night with new clothes folded in drawers, new toys stacked beside my bed, and a warmth in my chest I could not name.

Later I learned to call it **home**.

Later I learned to call it **grace**.