Christmas was always my brother’s favorite time of the year. He loved the whole season, the good, the bad, the awkward, and the meaningful. For sixteen years, I had helped him keep a tally of how many times the radio station played a Mariah Carey Christmas tune, and then would chirp along with him, out of tune with the soaring high notes. Every Christmas Eve, we would make cookies that were allegedly reindeer and sprigs of holly, but which always looked more like the indistinct blobs that fill lava lamps. Every year, I had scoffed along with him as the puberty inflicted Joseph stumbled through his lines at our church’s Nativity pageant. Back when we were young enough to participate in the pageant ourselves, Brian and I were always shepherds. I remember one particular pageant when Brian had secretly attached a small teddy bear to the end of his shepherd’s staff. From his seat among the other shepherds and townspeople, Brian would raise his staff, causing the baby Jesus to squeal and giggle with delight. The rest of the kids and congregation struggled to stay focused, not knowing why the baby was emitting peals of laughter.

Although Brian’s car accident occurred in the summer, it’s always winter when I think about him the most.

The most special of Brian’s Christmas traditions was his Christmas Eve gifts. Every year since he was about seven, Brian had given a special ornament to my mother, father, and me on Christmas Eve. These ornaments were always unique, and varied in their level of seriousness as well as quality, some homemade and some store bought. For example, when I was twelve, Brian gave me a fancy blown glass ornament, hand painted with a snowy village scene. The next year, my ornament was a collage of the tackiest holiday sweaters that he had cut out from a Macy’s catalogue. No matter how much money he put into these ornaments, they were my favorite gift every year.

Four years after his death, I still face a mountain of pain when Christmas time rolls around. The worst part about it is how my parents act. I have noticed that since Brian’s death, his ornament gifts have been disappearing, three or four a year. Although I haven’t confronted them about it, I think that my mom has been taking them out of the mix of decorations because they make her too depressed. I’m sure she is stashing them in a drawer or box, although I have yet to actually find the location. This makes me so angry. It’s like she wants to forget about Brian, pretend that he never existed. The one time that my parents do mention Brian is late on Christmas Eve, when they ask if I would like to go with them to visit his grave. Every year so far my answer has been no. I try to convince myself that I say no because I have better ways of remembering Brian, but the truth is that I’m scared. I don’t know if I could handle the thought of Brian in a location that is so dismally uncharacteristic of who he was.

On this particular Christmas Eve, I lounge about on the couch watching Home Alone. This movie is another one of those things that reminds me of Brian. I will never forget the year that Brian and I tried to replicate the elaborate obstacles that Kevin, from the movie, devised to subdue the bad guys.
“Hurry up, Harry and Marv are coming,” Brian urged, using the names from the movie, as I fastened a bucket of water over a door. Even though I was his little sister, I was always the one to complete the tasks that required height as Brian was too short without a chair and often too tall while standing on one. Every time I would climb up onto a chair, Brian would be by my side, holding the base of the chair, so I wouldn’t be afraid of falling. It was the same way every year when I would stand on a chair to place the angel on top of the Christmas tree. Brian was always there to catch me.

As Macaulay Culkin slaps his hands to his face in that now infamous look of terror, my Mom enters my room after gently knocking on the door. “We’re going to visit Brian’s grave…would you like to come, honey?”

My lips are ready to respond “No,” but something deep inside of me forces me to say “Yes.” My mom’s expression is a mixture of slight surprise and joy as she says lightly, “Ok then.”

During the car ride to the cemetery, my Mom and Dad discuss dry, unemotional topics, such as the logistics of the family dinner tomorrow night, trying to remember if Aunt Edna or Aunt Laura is bringing the chocolate pie. I don’t say a word; my throat seemed to have developed some sort of barrier that prevented me from speaking. With every item that we pass that reminds me of Brian, this barrier grows a little stronger. There are memories attached to everything, from the garland adorned displays of cell phones and Ipods in store windows, to the haphazard snowmen that line the streets, all missing an integral body part, like an arm or an eye.

Twenty minutes later, we arrive at the graveyard. I slowly step out of the car, the shivers beginning before the crisp air even touches my face. As I make my way to the middle of the cemetery where Brian’s grave is located, I walk past a number of people of all ages, decked out in winter jackets and gripping flashlights in mitten clad hands. It may sound morbid to be in a cemetery on Christmas Eve, but I feel an unspoken connection between these people, some of whom probably lost a loved one during the holiday season, and some, like me, who remember their loved one the most during this time. I finally arrive at Brian’s grave and am surprised to find that my mother has placed the gold and red “Peace on Earth” ornament that was given to her by Brian when he was sixteen on the gravestone. So I guess that explains where four of Brian’s ornaments have gone, if she puts one on his tombstone every year, but what about the rest of them? I ponder this as I walk back toward the car, hesitating when I come across a middle-aged man standing next to a nearby tombstone. This man is gazing intently at the stone, when his face lights up with a glorious smile. Trying to be inconspicuous, I shine the light on the tombstone he is looking at. Resting on it is the painted glass ornament that Brian had given to me when I was twelve. The light catches the man’s eye, and he looks up at me, still smiling that glorious smile. “Merry Christmas,” he says softly.

“Merry Christmas,” I return, now beginning to smile as well. I keep walking, shining my light on the tombstones that I pass, many of them equipped with a special Brian ornament. I eventually see my mother, who is clutching a bag and bending over to place an ornament on another grave. I rush towards her and embrace her with a hug. I suddenly understand that my parents have no intention of forgetting Brian. Like me, they want to remember and share the very best part of him. The part that never had to be reminded to buy a present for the community’s collection of gifts for children in need. The part that made individual Christmas cards for all of his friends filled with
inside jokes. And the part that held the chair for his little sister as she put the final touch on the Christmas tree.