Angel in a White Box

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We still had the black Chevy with the running boards when it happened, whatever “it” was. No one told me.

It was the dead of winter when the snow banks were so high that I could ski right over the fence into the barnyard, only I shouldn’t because the bull was out. No one told me that either. I was three and a half.

A hush came over the family. Mumma and Daddy packed us all in the car to go to the wake.

“What’s a wake?”

“It’s when someone dies, like great aunt Tillie,” said my sister Chi-Chi who was almost seven.

“Then we wake them up?”

“No, of course not.”

We drove way out in the country to Jerry and Marie’s farmhouse. When we got there, we parked on the road and slipped and slid in our boots past lots of other cars, then over the driveway to the porch. Marie let us in. We piled our coats on the bed in the downstairs bedroom like we did for birthday parties, only I could tell this was sadder. Marie had tears in her eyes.

We went into the front room and there was a big white box, long and narrow, on top of a table. Everybody was praying around it: the ladies in their best dresses, smelling of flowery perfume; the men in suits, stinking of tobacco.

“What’s in the box?”

“An angel.”

“A real angel with wings?”

“I guess.”

“Can I see it?”

“No, it’s in heaven.”

“Thought it was in the box.”

Cyril, Phyllis, and Lois, all younger cousins, were playing on the floor, behind the table with the box. They sat on the wooden boards on the edge of the room, beyond the carpet. I joined them on the floor in my best red dress. I sat on my butt on the floor, with my knees bent on either side of me and my feet out sideways like three year olds do. We bounced a rubber ball with blue and yellow painted swirls. It went back and forth from Cyril to Phyllis to Lois to me. When somebody missed, they crawled under the table with the angel in the box to get it.

Cyril’s brother David brought us frosted white cutout cookies. We ate them as we bounced the ball. Crumbs flew every which way. No one yelled.

I could hear the buzz of the grownups talking. Mumma, as always, was the loudest. They were all “sorry” as they drank coffee and ate cookies and cake. I couldn’t hear the baby.

“David, where’s your baby brother?”

“In heaven, Cookie. He’s an angel now.”