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## Island of the Misfits

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# Island of the Misfits

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**Author Bio**

Lauren Passell is a Religion major from Cleveland, Ohio.

## Island of the Misfts

"Christmas is for children," Gunish said with a wink. He was young enough that I could still see the football-hero frat-boy in his eyes. His flirtation with me was not sexual; it was how he conducted business behind the sturdy wooden bar. It was how he made a living.

I thought about how simple he was and wondered if he read that "Christmas for Children" statement on a bumper sticker.

Gunish might have made a good father or owned a restaurant or something to make him proud. But ever since he got his DUI he would stay after his shift to have drinks with Stella until his mom picked him up.

It was a traditional Passell family Christmas Eve at Tara, a reincarnation of the mansion in *Gone With the Wind*. We found ourselves there every year in the care of my Aunt Stella, who owned the place, and her interesting entourage of employees.

Christmas is the only day the hotel is closed. On this day it is our playground we prance around the lobby in our Christmas pajama sets, overturn the contents of the bar, and pass out on any guest bed of our choosing, as the Christmas Day Twilight begins to strengthen on the horizon.

Christmas is also Stella's only day off, but she always remains inside Tara. I used to think it was proof of her dedication to the white antebellum mansion, the gardens and ponds that sweep over the property and the politically incorrect statues of grinning black slaves. But now it just seems sad that she cannot bring herself to leave.

By the time my parents and I had arrived that afternoon, shielding ourselves from whipping Pennsylvania wind with boxes full of gifts, Stella and the staff were drinking champagne and nibbling on small sausages, cheerful and relaxed ever since they shuffled the last hotel guests out at noon check-out. When the heavy two-story doors shut behind my mother, father and I, sealing us into the warmth of Tara, we know we are in for the night.

I was sitting at the bar, in love with the picturesque snow mounding outside, the cracking in the large fireplace and the dreamy warmth of Frank Sinatra. We were all pretty drunk and throwing around expensive gifts tightly wrapped in small boxes. We used to wait to open them in the morning, like other families, but it's hard to get excited about Jay Stillwater picture frames and Chanel No. 5 when you're hung over.

Stella reigns over the dark cozy rooms of the hotel- it has become a part of her. Sometimes I see her in the foyer staring out the glass doors as if the outside world is another galaxy she is afraid to enter. So we come to her.

That night, she was inside, a regular Marilyn Monroe in a large mistletoe hat, hypnotizing us with magical waves of her hands and rolling laughter.

We often try to convince her to leave the hotel, that she deserves what is on the other side of the fortress-like doors. We used to tell her to leave the hotel to find love, until we realized that love had become her enemy thirty years ago, when in her early twenties, her fiancé was given the choice of receiving his parent's inheritance or marrying Stella, and he chose the money. She has been rebelling against love ever since, working the hotel all day and night to scare it away from entering her thoughts.

"Who needs men?" she will ask with a smile. "This place gives me everything I need."

And she likes to bury herself inside, dealing with people who only come and go and she won't see again. She still gets pissy when she sees too much of anyone- even her family. That's why we only come with the harsh Christmas wind. She can't stop us.

I was still propped against the bar letting the ice cubes mingle in my low glass and listening to Gunish talk about what a pain in the ass his girlfriend was when Stella was at my side shaking a small red box in my face.

"Merry Christmas, Lauren!"

I already knew what was inside. Every year she cleans out her jewelry chest and gives me the pieces she doesn't want anymore- they are too beautiful for me to ever wear. I gushed over the gift and began to slide my finger underneath the ribbon, but Stella had moved down the bar before I had a chance to open it.

"Who's been naughty this year!?" Eric, Tara's event coordinator, blurted out as he entered the bar, suggestively stroking the two-foot Christmas tree hat that was propped on his head. Everyone burst into laughter, except for Dad who just looked miserable. I had seen him slowly and silently securing his tie in the mirror earlier, and rubbing cologne on his blank face, getting ready for the evening like a death-row inmate getting ready for execution.

Draped over Eric's arm was a tiny dog named Maggie wearing a Shakespearean collar of red velvet and small gold bells that rang with every frantic movement of Maggie's head.

"Eric, could you look any gayer?" Blurted a voice from the other side of the bar. It was Cindy Superass. I don't know Cindy Superass' real name, or even who she is. She is only Cindy Superass, rolling off her barstool, her leopard miniskirt hiked up revealing a zebra thong.

Her hair was bleached blonde and crispy after years of too much product, her eyes large, deep pools of black ink. Her pouty lips were being pulled down by some unknown force, as if she were about to either cry or burst out into laughter.

"You're just jealous 'cause I get more men than you do, honey!" sang Eric. He kissed Cindy Superass on the cheek and stuck his chin on Aaron's broad shoulder.

Aaron was sitting even further down the bar, stroking a neat goatee with his hands neatly folded on his skinny knees (that were also neat). He turned to look at Eric and smiled like any other man in love. Divorced Aaron never gets to see his kids, the products of 45 years of denied homosexuality, on Christmas or any other Christian holiday that his ex can use as an opportunity to reinforce Christian values such as the sinfulness of homosexuality.

"That's okay," Aaron once said. "I can't stand that Martha Stewart traditional Christmas bullshit anyway."

He turned his attention to Maggie and let her lick his face.

"Good Maggie, Daddy loves you," he said as he took Maggie into his arms and spun the barstool toward Cindy Superass.

"What'd you ask Santa for, sexy thing?" Eric asked, sauntering over to my drink and me.

I never know how to react to him, so I received a sloppy kiss and handed him a drink that Gunish had slid onto the bar.

"Drink," I urged him. "Grandma started without you."

Grandma's left hand was secured over mine, but her right one was clutching a JB & Water.

She looked up from her glass.

"Merry Christmas, Eric Baby!"

"I know what Joanie wants for Christmas. Joanie wants a man! She wants some uh-huh wham bam sizzlin' looooooove!" Eric said jerking his hips around while Grandma threw her head back and cackled.

The year before Grandma had held up a shaky shot of whiskey, proclaiming to the bar, "This is to Anthony- God help the bastard for leaving me, and may he know that I'm living and beautiful. Let's call him and tell him how happy we are."

Then she started to cry.

But she can't call him anymore. He was hit by a coked-out sixteen-year-old who stole his parents' car on a suicide mission on Memorial Day. The kid lived but Grandpa left behind people who never really got to say good-bye.

Like Dad, who was lurking in a corner, nursing a drink as he became more and more separated from the night. It's okay- they hadn't talked in eight years anyway.

Dad came over and gave me a long kiss on the forehead. He squeezed me a little tighter than usual.

"I love you," he whispered. I knew he was telling the truth, but I wondered why he was so sad.

My mother, who was given the nickname "The Queen of Christmas" after it became obvious that she lived for the holiday, was in a less solemn mood. A long string of fake pearls flew behind her as she darted around the bar. A loose silk blouse, revealing that she still had cleavage, floated around her body, the puffy sleeves like wings of a dove. She was distributing stocking to all of us, like she always does. She still makes me leave carrots for Rudolph and signs all the presents "Love, Santa."

Anyway, the stockings are always a hit, mostly because they are usually filled with little liquor bottles and exotic hard candies.

I let my stocking rest limply in my lap, watching everyone else open theirs. Loud laughter exploded as Eric fished a cigar out of his stocking, and Grandma waved a small bottle of perfume in the air. Dad wasn't paying attention to the red velvet stocking that lay abandoned on the countertop- he stared ahead, but forced a tight smile when we made eye contact.

Our connection was broken when The Queen of Christmas pulled herself to the top of the bar, her arms stretching toward the sky. A radiating light, born somewhere behind her, blurred the outline of her petite figure, like she was on fire. She kicked off her high heels and balanced on tiptoes adorned with deep red polish.

"Hallelujah!" She cried, and without warning, the Hallelujah chorus exploded from the speakers on the ceiling.

Everyone rose, as if in a choreographed musical, and belted out the words. I used the bar to steady myself as I rose to my feet and joined my family in the Hallelujah Chorus. The music was so loud that no voice could be heard.

"King of Kings, and Lord of Lords!" Stella had her big blue eyes closed while she sang, and the Queen of Christmas flailed her arms around, conducting an orchestra of 100 violins.

"And He shall reign forever and ever!" The Queen of Christmas' voice crested over the booming music. She tried to sing a few octaves higher than everyone else, but since we couldn't sing in octaves anyway, she ended up screaming like the rest of us.

How beautiful we sounded! I was overcome with a feeling of gratitude that we were together, that I had these people to sing the Hallelujah Chorus with. But I couldn't help wondering why they didn't have somewhere better to go for Christmas.

When the music died down, I looked to the other side of the bar to see Dad crushing some shiny candy wrappers in his right hand. I slid out of my stool and made my way to him, letting him immediately take my hand.

"Are you not having any fun?"

"What happened to my little baby," he asked.

"Babies grow up," He had been asking me that since I was just learning to talk and the answer hadn't changed.

He sighed before squeezing my hand.

"I'm sad, honey," he said. "I miss my Dad."

I never know what to say to this. I missed Grandpa, too, but my most intense pain was for Dad- I had spent more time mourning for him than Grandpa, wondering if he'd ever be the same. I continued to let Dad hold my hand.

Suddenly, Stella began circling the bar announcing "Christmas photo time!" Dad and I reluctantly followed her to the lobby. Stella had dragged in Gill, the weary security guard, and put a big camera in his hesitant hands. Like an astronaut on an alien planet, he looked at us with uncertainty.

Stella had crammed us together in the lobby in front of an excessively decorated Christmas tree overpowered with lights. The lights were overpowered with gold angels. The angels were overpowered with the beautifully wrapped merchandise underneath. These things made us so happy on Christmas!

Holding up our glasses and each other, we were laughing so hard we couldn't hear Gill say "Calm down, kids. Smile." But we continued to laugh and shriek, and Eric was making these silly little girly yelps. "Come on, guys," Gill pleaded, and when his frustration climaxed, he took the picture.

And it would've been a really nice picture if, at the very last moment, Eric hadn't grabbed my right boob.

"A beautiful Christmas picture of the Island of Misfits!" Stella sang after the family members as they retreated to the bar. The Queen of Christmas could be heard in the background, "the misfits shall inherit the earth!"

Stella took me by the chin.

"You're not a misfit," she said. "Not yet. But all of us, we're misfit toys. Me? Your Dad? Superass? We are all just broken Christmas toys. Lost and broken Christmas toys..." she trailed off, leaving me.

I suddenly felt tired and beaten down. I thought about how tomorrow this day would be over and we would go home and wonder why the hell we had so many bottles of Grappa and boxes of Godiva chocolate. In defeat, I returned to the bar, no longer feeling the Christmas euphoria that the rest of my family were drunk with. I slid onto a large cushioned barstool. Gunish had made me my signature drink, a Cocaine Lady- he knew I was bummed.

"Yep," he sighed. "Christmas is for children."

And I knew what he meant.