

A Winter to remember

One day I was with my grandma at her house. It was cold and snow was falling everywhere. I asked her about her childhood. Then she told me this beautiful story and it touched my heart.

The air was filled with the scent of snow. Winter had arrived, and we were just waiting for that moment when white snowflakes would finally begin to fall from the sky-snowflakes we had eagerly awaited as children. We stood and looked up at the sky, already grey and heavy, and then the snow would finally begin to fall... at first slowly, with small snowflakes, and then larger ones. They fell faster and faster, and we stretched out our hands, trying to catch the flakes and see how each one was different, special in its own way. Snow fell for days, and my street was completely covered with a white blanket. The adults were not thrilled, as they spent hours shoveling snow from the sidewalks and pushing it toward the road. Tall snow walls formed on both sides, which to us children looked like something straight out of a fairy tale. We fought real snowball battles, making weapons out of snowballs and throwing them at each other. There was laughter, shouting, squealing, and sometimes even tears. A snowman also stood in the yard. Of course, the adults helped us, but he was beautiful: eyes made of coal, a carrot nose, and a hat on his head. We called him Snowman White. He stood proudly, as if he were smiling at us. Although cold and unforgiving, winter brought us great joy: snowball fights and sliding on icy surfaces beneath the snowy cover. There were falls, but rarely serious ones-just the occasional scratch or bruise, because the snow softened every fall. No one broke anything; sometimes we would just fall on our bottoms and keep going. We returned home only when our fingers were completely frozen. Ice would form on our gloves, and once inside the warm house, we would warm our hands above the stove. Our grandmothers warned us not to warm our hands too quickly but slowly and patiently. Of course, we rarely listened-we would stand right next to the stove or put our hands into warm water, and the tears would immediately start. The stove crackled softly, heating the entire room and drying our wet clothes. Once everything had dried, a new day would come, and we would once again, eagerly wait to go outside and play in the snow. As the days passed, the long-awaited holidays drew closer.

It was meant to be a joyful time-Saint Nicholas was coming, and with him came Krampus, jumping around with a switch in his hand, ready to swat any child he could catch. As children, we would first hear the sound of a bell entering our yard. There were many of us, and our laughter mixed with a fear that slowly crept into my bones. A tall Krampus walked in, covered with a sheet, with holes cut out for his eyes. He interviewed each child, and when it was my turn, he asked in a rough voice if I had been good and if I had listened to my parents. My legs were shaking, and my eyes were wide open. As I said that I had been good, my voice trembling and close to tears, I suddenly blurted out that it must be my grandmother in disguise. There was no answer-only the words that I had been good, followed by an orange and a juicy apple. To my great relief, Krampus then went on to the next house. I never really knew if it was truly my grandmother dressed up as Krampus. What mattered was that we were all happy. We received gifts, and with them, proof that we had been good. For us children, this meant joy and excitement-we were waiting for Christmas. What people today call a “white Christmas” was always white for us, and I am grateful for that, as well as for the stories my grandmother told. Baby Jesus was born in a stable, lying on straw. We would visit Saint Peter’s Church, which we called the cathedral, and admire the nativity scene: the baby, His mother and Joseph, the shepherds, and the Three Wise Men who came to bow before Him—the King of Kings. That was how my grandmother explained it, and we believed her. Still, I had questions: if He was a king, why was He born in a stable and not in a palace? I was very young, but in my heart, I trusted my grandmother and came to kneel before Him. I lived on Anina Street, and the cathedral was very close-only a few minutes away on foot. On the night of Christ’s birth, I could hear the crunch of boots in the snow as people walked to Midnight Mass. My parents were responsible for buying the Christmas tree and decorating it together with us. Back then, there were no fancy ornaments like today. Instead, we had sweets wrapped in colorful paper-mostly just sugar. After Christmas, we would take them off the tree and eat them, along with the cookies that were left from the holidays. We also made our own decorations. We competed to see who could create the prettiest ones using what little we had-wrapping walnuts in paper to look like ornaments, and making angels, hearts, and other shapes out of paper. All it took was imagination and effort. Seeing our handmade decorations hanging proudly on the tree filled us with joy. We could only dream about Christmas trees from American movies, with big presents and bows underneath. Still, our tree always felt more beautiful. Those movie trees did not have what ours had-laughter, warmth, and

togetherness. Creating something special out of almost nothing made it meaningful. Those were the most beautiful days of the year. As time passed, I grew up. The snow melted, spring came, and school returned, but the joy of holidays and winter breaks stayed the same. Winter continued to bring snow, and for many years we kept building snowmen and playing outside. Now, when I look back on my childhood, I know I would not change it for anything. The joy that filled every home cannot be replaced. A heart filled by simple things cannot be compared to anything else. The bright faces of children, excited over small but meaningful moments, cannot be bought. And when a snowflake lands on your hand, take a moment to look at it-see how beautiful and unique it is.