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Holiday Night Lights

BY ERIN BRERETON

Every December, my parents would heat up the car, pour my sister and I into our warmest coats and gloves, and slowly roll down our ice-covered driveway. Sometimes we went to see family. Sometimes we were on our way to Mass. Sometimes we were going to school Christmas pageants. Usually we were looking for lights.

It was an annual tradition to drive around looking for the most outrageous, most illuminated, and somewhat hideous Christmas-covered house. We didn't have to drive far. Stuffed Santa legs protruded from chimneys. Lighted icicles dangled from almost every porch. At least one house each year would display a complete set of reindeer, attached to a sleigh driven by a very surprised-looking Santa, dangling from the roof.

I have lived in Chicago for eight of my adult years now, in cramped apartments that don't lend themselves to decorating excess. A few ambitious neighbors nestle an electric candle in a window or hang some holly on their door. But stringing enough lights to cause a block-wide brownout? That kind of decorating just doesn't happen.

I've grown accustomed to Christmas being an indoor holiday, marked by watching Scrooged on cable and going to a holiday party or two. Which is why, last year, as I ambled down an icy sidewalk on the North Side en route to a yuletide bash, I was shocked to find my first real, outdoor, Chicago Christmas decoration.

This was no a plastic deer with a wreath around its neck—we're talking full-on Christmas sidewalk explosion. I heard it first, as I rounded the corner: The deafening whirring and purring of a motor, which I at first couldn't identify. Was it a car? Or a steamboat?

It was, in fact, a giant, inflatable snow-globe lawn ornament. After a few steps, I came face to face with it. My mouth dropped. Could it be real? Perched in front of a small apartment building, the globe was twinkling and buzzing, the snowman trapped inside excitedly waving a fluffy mitten at me. Pieces of faux snow whizzed about frantically inside. I was mesmerized.

I was also alone on a one-way street far from the nearest thoroughfare. It was 9 p.m. on a Saturday, and there were no other passersby. Just me—and the snow globe.

It was, without a doubt, the most extravagant, extreme, and excessive Christmas decoration I had ever seen. It trumped all the Cro-Magnon man-sized candy canes, all the fake frost sprayed around window corners, all the reindeer footprints carefully imprinted into front lawn snow. It was the spirit of Christmas personified, wrapped in plastic, and plugged into the outdoor outlet of a three-flat.

And suddenly, I understood. It may have been a tad tacky—and with that motor, also loud—but all I saw was the effort. Someone had ordered and installed this giant globe without concern for difficulty or rationality on a dark street with almost no foot

traffic and little chance it would be seen. Its owner merely wanted to celebrate exuberantly.

It was the same reason my friend, the yuletide party hostess, had spent the day baking insanely complex cookies that appeared to be candy-filled bird's nests. It was the same reason I had taken a train, a cab, and made a considerable walk to attend her holiday party. It was the same reason all those people in my hometown had, year after year, tried to top their neighbors by displaying more reindeer, fatter Santas, and odd things with motion detectors that said "ho, ho, ho" when you walked up to their door. It was Christmas, and we were all feeling festive.

It doesn't last long. I knew the holiday parties would be over soon; I'd have given and gotten my gifts; and that globe would be deflated, folded up, and packed away, the limp snowman frozen in his cheery wave until next December.

The globe's owner is undoubtedly anticipating the moment when the decoration can be dug out, plugged in, and the holiday will inflate again. And in my decidedly dimmer neighborhood of the city, I'll be waiting too. **MH**

ERIN BRERETON ANTICIPATES THIS YEAR'S FESTIVITIES FROM HER HOME IN CHICAGO.