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Holiday cheer By Brandon Iam Smith

I never saw such great happiness on my parents' faces as when they watched my siblings and I tear through giftwrap. The act of unwrapping seemed to have some mystical power I didn't quite understand.

Later I realized our surprise and joy each Christmas kept them going until the next — maybe even kept them together as a couple.

In the true spirit of American consumerism, they ditched the normal budget every December. How much did they spend? I don't know. Other families in our town put us to shame, but my siblings and I always got at least a couple things we had begged for in the previous months. To that end, my mom would keep a little list of what she wanted to get us, usually on the back of some electric bill envelope.

The following incident occurred when I was seven or eight years old, which would put Mom at 36. That day she was running errands in the car, with me in the passenger seat. Her olive skin, just like mine, never faded over the winter months. She had some attractive smile lines — “been there forever,” she had told me — but I was beginning to notice a wrinkle here and there besides. Her nose, big and Jewish like mine. Her hazel eyes were deep and kind; curly black locks like a Spaniard's tumbled down her cheeks.

When Mom headed into a pharmacy to pick something up, I fished through her purse. On one side of an envelope, Dayton Power and Light. On another, jackpot. I don't remember if I was trying to be mischievous or just looking for a pen. But I had always, always, at all costs, wanted to discover what I was getting before I got it.

So when I found the list, returning it was not an option. I pocketed the thing, and read it whenever Mom left the car to do other errands. Once I had practically memorized its contents I returned it discreetly. But one item plagued me, because I couldn't figure out what it was. I had read:

“Captain Planet, Cred Armor.”

This must be some sort of action figure, I determined, but what the devil was “Cred Armor?” I had to know.

So as I can remember, once we returned home I worked up the guts to ask, “Mom, what’s cred armor?”

Her look was blank. She didn’t understand.

I clarified: “Captain Planet, Cred Armor?”

In the span of four seconds — no more, no less — my mother’s face was overcome. Starting from her eyes a sadness crept, filling her forehead, her cheeks, and erasing those pretty smile lines. Her proud shoulders deflated.

“That wasn’t a ‘C,’” she said. “It was a parenthesis.”

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