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9 May 2025

The Depths of *Home Alone*

For as long as I can remember, my parents and I have watched the 1990 Chris Columbus Christmas classic, *Home Alone*. These days, we do not even watch it in the traditional sense—we quote the lines along with the characters and scan the background for small details we have never noticed before. Yes, there are other Christmas classics like *Elf*, *National Lampoon's Christmas Vacation*, and *Christmas with the Kranks*, but none hit quite like *Home Alone*. Exploring what makes this movie so enduring might help explain what makes it so heartwarming, laugh-out-loud funny, and surprisingly wholesome, even decades later.

Released in 1990, *Home Alone* has become a staple of the Christmas movie lineup. Written by 1980s film titan John Hughes and directed by award winner Chris Columbus, the movie holds a lot of nostalgia for fans, young and old. The story centers on eight-year-old Kevin McCallister, who is accidentally left behind when his large family flies to Paris. This ends up being a blessing in disguise—when Kevin overhears two burglars, Marv and Harry, plotting to rob his house, Kevin takes action, setting up elaborate traps all over the house to stop them. This may be the most quotable Christmas movie ever, featuring unforgettable lines like “Keep the change, you filthy animal,” (48:46, 56:38) and “Look what you did you little jerk,” (10:13) to the iconic scream following the aftershave face pat. After years of rewatching, fans notice new details in the background, deepening their appreciation for the film.

Other Christmas classics like *A Christmas Story* and *Elf* are also filled with iconic quotes—lines like “Fra-gee-leh! It must be Italian,” (*A Christmas Story* 29:17) “You’ll shoot your eye out, kid!” (*A Christmas Story* 1:10:44) or “You sit on a throne of lies” (*Elf* 37:20) have

stood the test of time. Nevertheless, even with all their quotable lines, those movies do not hold the same comedic range as *Home Alone*. An adult version of Ralphie narrates *A Christmas Story*, and much of the humor relies on viewers having an advanced vocabulary or level of irony that children do not possess at that age. In *Elf*, a scene like Buddy pouring ‘syrup’ into his coffee gets adults laughing because they understand what the scene is really doing, but it likely goes over the heads of children. *Home Alone*, by contrast, nails this balance. Its jokes are simple enough for kids to understand, while also offering subtle adult humor that plays differently with age. No scene captures this better than when Harry, played by Joe Pesci, grabs the white-hot doorknob. His pain-induced gibberish is funny to children, but adults see right through it—they know he is holding back a string of expletives, making the scene even funnier. The ability to blend slapstick comedy with humor is what sets this movie apart from other Christmas comedies. As one critic put it “*Home Alone*’s success speaks to the tremendous behind-the-camera talent that elevated the film beyond ‘just a kids’ movie” (Pai). The timing, camera work, and acting put into scenes like this are what make this film what it is.

As a child, I admired Kevin’s sarcastic attitude and often imagined how I would defend my house from burglars if I were ever left home alone. Now, as a young adult, I cringe as he attempts to dodge punishment from his mom because I can see the parallels between Kevin and my younger self. Matt Grant says it best: “The emotional core changes as one gets older, appealing to both children and adults on different levels” (Grant 2016). This is part of what makes *Home Alone* so compelling—it grows up with its viewers. When I was younger, I did not see subtle expressions on characters’ faces. Now, I notice Kevin’s guilt when he mutters “I’m sorry,” realizing he has pushed it too far (11:55). It is not just a throwaway apology; it is the night before an international trip during the biggest holiday season of the year, with the house in

chaos, and tensions rising. His parents are overwhelmed with all the hustle and bustle, so Kevin acting out is the final straw. Putting Kevin in the attic is not just a punishment for him, but an attempt at peace for the reason of the family. This scene adds complexity to Kevin's character. He does not want to be a problem, but when acting out is the only way he will be included, that becomes his default.

Kevin's behavior shifts dramatically depending on whether he is completely alone or surrounded by his noisy family, and this contrast makes the movie so interesting. Kevin is the youngest of five siblings, so he might be used to getting all the attention under normal circumstances. However, now there are four adults and eleven kids, all running around trying to get packed the day before they are set to leave for Paris. When Kevin rams into Buzz at the kitchen island, spilling milk and soda everywhere, his mom considers this the last straw. As a kid, I never noticed the detail that one of the napkins used to clean the mess accidentally covers Kevin's plane ticket, which then gets thrown away. Watching it now, I realize that this was a subtle foreshadowing that sets everything in motion. After this debacle, Catherine O'Hara delivers one of the most memorable lines when she snaps, "There are fifteen people in this house, and you are the only one who has to make trouble," before sending Kevin to the attic—aka "the third floor" (11:29-11:40). The emotional impact of this scene comes from both Kevin and his mother feeling misunderstood. Kevin just wants to be seen, but in a house full of people during the holidays, things are bound to get messy.

Director Chris Columbus also included moments designed to tap into childhood fears—things that might seem silly to adults but feel genuinely scary when viewing the film as a kid. Take the basement furnace for example, which growls and hisses like a monster, or the creepy neighbor across the street, Old Man Marley. Even the visual choices support this childlike

perspective. *Home Alone*'s cinematographer, Julio Macat, explains, "We thought about every shot in terms of the point of view of the kid... Because we thought that kids see everything in an amplified way, we made the lights in the house feel a little bit brighter" (Pai). These deliberate choices in cinematography and lighting help immerse the viewer in Kevin's heightened emotional world. Even now, the sudden upward zoom on the Santa Claus' head mounted to the front door still gives me chills. These touches show how *Home Alone* captures a child's imagination in fun and frightening ways.

Children are known to have wild imaginations, and John Hughes, who wrote *Home Alone*, was famously a kid at heart. The idea of a family accidentally forgetting one of their children, and that child defending his home with traps, is so over-the-top that only a child or Hughes) could dream it up. While the premise is far from realistic, this kind of fantasy taps into the child within the viewer. Kids love pretending they are in charge, and *Home Alone* is the biggest "what if" scenario a kid could dream up. Who else but Kevin would think that using paint cans or an iron dropped down a laundry chute would stop "The Wet Bandits"? Even when he is caught by the leg, Buzz's pet tarantula just happens to show up, giving Kevin the perfect tool for escape and triggering (arguably) the greatest scream in the film.

The church scene is one of the most powerful scenes in *Home Alone*. The ethereal voices of the children's choir underneath the solum and reflective conversation Kevin has with Old Man Marley make the huge church a much more intimate place. The atmosphere is shaped by John Williams's moving score, which netted *Home Alone* two Oscar nominations, including one for Best Original Song for "Somewhere in My Memory" (Pai). As a kid, I saw Marley as a sad, lonely man who missed his family. Now, I understand the emotional complexity—his sense of pride, fear of rejection, and regret about being estranged from his son. Both characters find

themselves at their lowest emotional points in the movie here. In his immense youthful wisdom, Kevin asks, “If you miss him, why don’t you call him?” Marley replies, “I’m afraid if I call him, he won’t talk to me.” Kevin shares an analogy about overcoming his fear of the basement, and concludes, “My point is, you should call your son” When Marley asks, “What if he won’t talk to me?” Kevin replies, “At least you’ll know. Then you could stop worrying about it, and you won’t have to be afraid anymore” (1:10:53-1:11:48). In this quiet moment, Kevin takes a complex idea—how fear holds us back—and expresses it with such honesty and simplicity that it can resonate with audiences of all ages.

Following a nighttime storm that causes the power and phone lines to go down, the McCallister family oversleeps, triggering one of the most memorably chaotic sequences in the movie. The juxtaposition of Kevin walking around the quiet and calm house contrasts perfectly with the rest of the McAlister family racing like madmen through the airport. The shift in volume between Kevin leisurely wandering around the house and the roaring plane engine is so stark that it almost catches the viewer off guard. This clever contrast shows how alone Kevin is and how oblivious his family remains until they are already in the air. When Kevin wakes up and realizes his house is empty, he says, “I made my family disappear” with a mix of shock and excitement—as if the wish he made the night before came true (21:30). For younger viewers the sequence that plays—and this film in general—is “a wish fulfillment fantasy for kids (and their grown-up counterparts)” (Pai). What they would not give to be left alone in their house for a day eating junk food, “watching rubbish,” and jumping on their parent’s bed (24:18). However, watching this movie back as an adult, the implications feel heavier. Kevin genuinely believes his wish came true, and it is never clarified if he finds out that his family just accidentally left him behind. Later in the film, Kevin stops by to see ‘Santa,’ and says all he wanted for Christmas is his

family back. This scene shows he may still believe he caused them to “disappear”. At the end of the movie, when his mom finally returns and Kevin looks at her with puppy dog eyes, I have always wondered—does he want an apology, or is he trying to guilt-trip her a little because he realized at some point that they left him?

Ultimately, this blend of humor, heart, and childlike wonder makes *Home Alone* feel so timeless. It is more than just slapstick traps and holiday chaos—it is about family, forgiveness, and growing up just a little bit.

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