

I remember how magical the Christmas season was when I was a small child. Decorating the Christmas tree that mysteriously appeared in the house, with its icy cold needles and fresh, pine scent. Boxes of ornaments were brought out of hiding, bright shiny globes with white frosting, little elves, and at Grandma's, a string of electric lights made up of metal candles filled with some sort of oil that would bubble as the tube heated up, causing the lights inside to flicker like a flame in a breeze (try to get that past the Consumer Product Safety Council today) . Metal tinsel was carefully removed from its wrappers and strategically hung gently on each bough as directed by my grandmother, who had an eye for such things. It took hours, but they passed quickly with the excitement of watching the simple evergreen grow into a spectacle of color and flashes of light reflected again and again as they made their way from the tree to our wide little eyes.

The kitchen was always busy as pies and cookies, fudge, divinity, and other candies rolled off an assembly line of female relatives who talked and laughed and sang as they worked, until called upon to chase some thieving man or boy from the kitchen, caught attempting to pilfer some goody or another. The array of cookies and candies was awe inspiring. Cookies made from recipes that had been handed down from generation to generation in my family through time clear back to the old country, round about the time that great, great grandpa's cousin Seamus got caught with that McDonough girl in the horse barn by her father (ahh, . . . , but I'm pretty sure that's another story for another time.) As colorful as the wonderful tree, the cookies were filled with all sorts of cremes and nuts, fruits and with mysterious flavors that only showed up during the Christmas season.

The songs of Christmas filled the house as performed by the great crooners, Bing Crosby, Perry Como, Andy Williams, Robert Goulet. Songs about snow flakes, crackling fireplaces, silver bells, and Santa Claus. We sat about each night, working furiously over letters to Santa. Having been told (by well-meaning parents and teachers) that Santa, sadly, could not read letters from little boys and girls who mis-spelled words or did not use good penmanship, no matter how good they had been all year. Yeah, some people (mostly liberal meadow muffins who believe that children are just little adults and should be treated as such ain't takin' that one back Santa) today would be horrified by that, but you can bet your bottom dollar that in our neighborhood, those properly spelled and beautifully penned letters were read by Santa, . . . every last damn one of them, uh, , darn one of them, sorry Santa. Letters that asked for presents with all the heartfelt desire of a Franciscan monk seeking spiritual grace. Letters that rivaled the most scholarly of legal briefs in their ability to explain away our transgressions from the summer before. The stolen tomatoes, watermelons, the water balloons, the firecrackers, making pretty Debbie, the neighbor girl, cry when we pulled up her dress and ran away laughing. The stuff of boyhood, growing to the seriousness and scale of high grade felonies as we contemplated our many sins right before the big night.

We made snowmen, and snow forts and had snow ball fights till our hands and faces were frozen. We screamed in delight as the old man pulled us on a sled behind his '53 Plymouth through the snow-packed streets. (No, we weren't wearing helmets, kids were tougher in those days and none of us wound up with psychological scars from it either . . .) We carefully piled cookies and cocoa on a table by the tree on Christmas eve, a sacrifice for a fat magical elf who was going to slide down a chimney so small the cat got stuck in it, with a bag containing, a 24" Schwinn bike, a basketball, my brother's BB gun, an electric train, a Brownie Instamatic camera, assorted socks, shirts, oranges, apples, nuts, candy and a whole bunch of chocolates that Santa had to have picked up in England, maybe from our aunts and uncles, just for us. We would go to church on Christmas Eve, dressed in scratchy wool suits, shirts that were so tight at the collar they chafed like sandpaper (they fit you last year!). We would sit as quiet as mice (Santa is watching you) and try to sing louder than anybody else (Santa is listening for you) in hopes that he might choose to forgive our various high crimes and misdemeanors (like the brick I threw through Mrs. Olson's window - - by accident! I was trying to hit that bully Mike from down the street!! Honest!!!!!!) A bum rap, if ever there was one, but ("How do you think Santa felt about that when he saw what you did?" - my mother could lay a guilt trip on you like no one on earth . . .) I was pretty sure I was screwed forever, Santa hated my guts.

But then, two days before Christmas, in the depth of my gloom, a chance at salvation arose. David, an even bigger bully from down the street, sent my little brother home wailing in anguish, tears flowing like gushers. Why? Pure spiteful meanness. How? Simple, he told him that Santa Claus did not exist. All the presents came from our parents. Rudolph and Dasher and Dancer and Prancer, Vixen and Donder and Blitzen weren't real. Comet and Cupid were just lies told to small children. My brother flung himself on the floor and kicked his feet and wailed like his poor little soul

had been ripped from his body. Well, I had suspected for some time that there might be some exaggeration going on. I did, after all, catch Mommy and Daddy under the Christmas tree, late the Christmas Eve before, (but that, ahh, that's another story too.) Got beat like a red-headed step-child, and all I did was ask, "Whatcha doin?"

Anyway, I stood there feeling helpless, my mother stood with tears in her eyes, the old man was still at work and suddenly I knew what I had to do. Right then, I was the man of the house, I was the guy in charge. I stormed out the door and down the street like a Tasmanian Devil, a missile of violence seeking only one target. I found him bragging about his accomplishment at the doorstep of my first true love, Nancy Knowles, the little girl who shared my porch and the ice chunks from the dairy deliveryman on warm, soft, summer mornings. I caught him from behind, going full speed and rammed headlong into the small of his back so hard it almost knocked me out. It really ruined David's day too 'cuz he lay there on the ground making sort of weird wet animal like sucking noises while he tried to get his lungs to reinflate. I jumped on top of him and waled away, punching and clawing and kicking with reckless abandon. Not very scientifically by the later standards of my adult instructors in such things, but enough to get the job done. (We were allowed to occasionally beat each other up in those days without criminal charges, hosts of counselors and a platoon of probation officers to reform our fragile little psyches . . . if you got your ass kicked back then, you usually deserved it)

Afterward, I marched home in triumph. I had been blessed with a hole card. How could Santa refuse me now? I had faced the bully who had denied his very existence and had triumphed over the evil Goliath (I was six, he was eight, okay?) Surely Santa in his mercy could see that my heart was in the right place. The nasty David would live, but never again would he blaspheme and slander Santa's name. And my little brother, convinced now that I was somehow a god among mortals, listened intently while I told him that David was full of sh . . . ah, full of stuff, wrong, dumb, misguided. Santa not only was real but he would be there at our house that very night, and would take extra time to eat the wonderful cookies my grandmother and mother made . . . because he wouldn't be stopping by David Hungerford's house that Christmas. And my little brother believed - because I said it, so it must be so. And true enough, the old man did not turn me over his knee that Christmas for walloping the nasty David Hungerford (that was the first time he ever shook my hand, like I was a grown up and everything . . .). Santa came on schedule, ate the cookies, drank the cocoa and left the 24" Schwinn bike, the basket ball, the BB gun, the electric train (it smoked and smelled like 3 in 1 oil, it was cool as hell ahh, heck, cool as heck, sorry Santa), the Brownie Instamatic and all the candies and fruit and shirts and socks. And the world was good and the new fallen snow lay all about, with the moon shining down upon it, giving a luster of midday to objects below (yeah, I stole that, so sue me . . .).

And since then, there have been other Christmases. Some good, some not so good, some really, really bad. Christmases where I came to doubt whether Santa was real. Christmases when I was alone, away from home, in places where I saw so much hatred and violence, death and destruction that I wondered if the world had somehow gone mad. But I did, somehow throughout it all, cling to the belief that Santa, after all, is simply a reflection of the true spirit of giving that pervades the Christmas season. Just as God has given us the special gift of life, we give gifts to one another as a means of sharing that gifting spirit. A spirit that makes the heart feel light and the eyes twinkle. One that makes us dig deeper at the Salvation Army kettle, one that helps us understand that giving is so much better than receiving. That stepping forward to help those in need gives us a new lease on life that removes the sludge of the workaday world from our hearts and makes them light as a feather, like Scrooge's on Christmas Morning.

So, if I may, at this most special time of year, give to each of you, my friends and the people who are special to me (and even the three or four of you who are a giant pain in the . . . rear), a gift. It is a gift of belief, a gift of wonder, and of magic. Believe in Santa for all you're worth. Let his spirit fill your hearts with joy and the pleasure and purpose of giving. We are truly our brothers' keepers and Santa is watching and listening each and every day. As the ghost of Christmas Present thundered at Scrooge, "Mankind is our business."

So, Merry Christmas to each of you. Nancy Knowles, where ever you are, I still love you. And David, you rotten little bas, . . . ahh, damn it,, uh darn it, okay, okay. Merry Christmas, David, I really mean it, no King's X.

James B. Fleming