

The Santa Truth

The “talk,” the one where parents sit their kid down and tell them that Santa isn’t real, is never the first time those kids have heard it. I think it’s merciful that way. Having your parents be the ones to shatter our world and dreams of sugar plums can’t be a pleasant experience—that’s how serial killers are made. No, it’s much better that they hear it second hand from their friends. Or, better yet, TV. That’s where their real respect is.

When I was first told, I was eight. Now, I’m still trying to figure it out for myself, much like most twenty-some year olds are looking for their religion. Back then, though, I didn’t worry about today’s disasters that cause the very core of the world to crumble: earthquakes, famine, disease, hurricanes, divorced parents. Concepts like that weren’t tangible to me, but I certainly felt the effects of them. Apparently I had a sister, but she died before I was even born. The house I lived in, the beautiful castle my parents put their life savings into, burned down two years prior to my birth as well.

Maybe all of that was why I had to hide my head under the pillow every night to block out my parent’s screams. Sometimes it was fighting, and sometimes it was what I would later learn was called sex. Both were equally passionate. To a child, to me, parents loved each other and that was all there was to it. That was most evident at Christmas time, when we would sit at the table around the biggest meal of the year that we couldn’t afford.

Father (stone sober, but wishing he wasn’t): How’d work go last night?

Mother (ran off coffee, not sleep): Another girl got fired.

Father (with the comforting smile of a husband/father): Wasn’t you, was it?

Mother (times were hard): Well if it was, we’d better enjoy our last meal then.

Father (times were harder): Our last meal and you burn the rolls?

We all laughed. I laughed the hardest.

Mother (always burns the rolls): Hey pal, if you don't like it, you can leave. Again.

The conversation trailed off then, making a careful switch over to the topic of the presents Santa had given me earlier that morning. They were still smiling, but they were only smiling because of me.

I never caught on to their subtle, or not-so subtle, fights like that. Even the violence, physical or otherwise, became the ingrained picture in my mind of what a healthy mommy-and-daddy relationship should be. They never hurt me, though. Maybe I was just a selfish kid and that made it all ok to me.

My mornings were always the same. The Santa morning didn't stand out anymore than the Tooth Fairy morning, or the lice-check morning. Since it seemed like my mother worked thirty hours a day, and my dad was often nowhere to be found, I quickly learned how to get myself around for school in the morning. This was probably that morning, with the addition of the dramatic details of a child's unreliable memory.

My alarm clock went off and I allowed myself the usual half-hour of snoozing. It was a shower-skipping day. A box cold cereal was all I needed for breakfast, so I carried it over to the living room and sat down on the couch. Next to me was, sleeping, my father. Normally, he had already gone to wherever fathers go. But not today. Maybe today he had hit his snooze button, too. I spoke to him.

Me (quietly): Hey Dad. I'm excited for Christmas, aren't you?

Me (almost like a real conversation): I bet you are. Know what I always ask Santa for?

Me (hoping Dad would hear): I'll just tell you. I always ask him to make you and Mom stop fighting, just for a day. He always brings it.

Maybe he heard it in his dreams. I hoped he did, at least. After getting dressed, and before heading out to the bus, I kissed him goodbye. Back then it didn't matter who kissed who. It just meant that he loved me.

It was probably that conversation's fault that I went to the principal's office after knocking Johnny Oates' lights out. It was recess, and I was eagerly anticipating Christmas with Rick, Stevie, and Johnny Oates. The conversation went something like this:

Rick: What are you asking Santa for?

Stevie (with enthusiasm): That new giant squirt gun on the commercial!

Rick (because he was better than everyone): For Christmas? The water is gonna freeze.

Stevie (not bright, but trying): Then I'll just save it for spring.

Rick (attitude hasn't improved): That's what birthdays are for. Ask for it then, and get something better for Christmas.

Stevie: My parents don't usually get us much for our birthdays.

Johnny Oates (not the reason I punched him): Yeah, that's 'cause you're so poor!

Stevie (really was poor): Well, at least Santa will get me something, since I'm a good kid.

Johnny (the reason): Oh no, I'm so scared! Too bad Santa isn't *real*.

And it was right then that I snapped. He had insulted all that was sacred to my childhood, the only solid thing I had to hold on to. I jumped Johnny because he denied Santa's existence, Stevie jumped Johnny because Jonny had insulted his family, and Rick jumped Johnny because Rick couldn't be near a fight and not in it. The others fought for the victory of a schoolyard tussle, but I fought for the kill. I punched and swung and hit and punched. The fight was only over when the recess supervisor had lifted the three of us off of Johnny.

Being eight, I hadn't done any real damage besides a bruise or two—to Johnny, anyway. The big injuries would be inflicted on my permanent record, and those scars never went away. I was escorted immediately to the principal's office to answer for my crimes.

The principal's lackeys threw me in the chair and under the lamp, and the big man himself stood over me as my interrogator.

Principal (scarily): Why did you do it?

Me (would never give in): ...

Principal (as if they'd care): Do you want your parents to hear about this?

Then, knowing I wouldn't crack, he picked up the phone. He had ways of making me talk. Except today. I was too fixated on that horrible statement, that denial of Claus's existence, to answer either way. He called my mother, but got no answer. Then he called my father, and got no answer. I didn't know why he insisted on trying every time. He *never* got hold of my parents. And this time, like all the other times, the principal got that same sad look in his face that I didn't understand and said:

Principal (with mercy): Go back to class, but try not to come back here again.

If they didn't want me back in there, maybe they should stop bringing me in.

I was a wreck for the rest of the day. Like usual, I paid no attention in class, but today it was different. I was usually distracted by all the good things in the world that treated me nicely. Santa, the Easter Bunny, the Tooth Fairy, etc. It just depended on the season. Now all I could think about was the seed of doubt that Johnny Oates had planted.

My teacher let me sit in the back of the class, alone and daydreaming, like she always did. Never concerned about what was wrong, and never trying to see if I needed help at home.

That was ok, though. That's how I liked things. I could sit back next to Rick, enjoy the benefits of selective hearing, and not get yelled at.

Teacher (like Charlie Brown's): Wah woh woh wak wak

Rick (man, he loved fights): Dude, we showed Johnny.

I shrugged.

Teacher (switching back to English): Blah wok and don't forget to give your parents those letters you all wrote to Santa, so they can send them. If not, they'll never get there, and wok wah blah blah...

Little did she know, I had already mailed mine personally. Not that it mattered, if Santa wasn't real. No, that was blasphemy. For now all I needed to do was finish up my day lost in doubt and despair and ruined childhood, and ride the bus home. The good old bus, where I was surrounded by my like-minded peers, people whose word I knew I could trust beyond any doubt. Determined to prove Johnny wrong, I took a survey.

Me (with authority): Hey! Everyone! Raise your hand if you believe in Santa.

My poll pulled a perfect split (as far as I could count). That's when all of the Stevies and Ricks jumped all of the Johnny Oates. Arguments sprang up everywhere, somehow making the bus even louder than it usually was. Everyone gave their own reasons as to why the others needed to shut up, and why they were right because their parents had said so.

I wondered what my parents would have said about the matter.

When the bus stopped in front of my house, the fight was still going and the bus driver was still not caring. She had always bought a particularly well-made brand of earplugs. I slipped through the chaos, out of the bus, and into my home.

It was empty, just as I had left it. There was an empty beer bottle on the table, a sure sign that my father had stopped by for at least a little while. I cleaned it and all the rest of his mess up, and then fixed myself dinner. When nobody was there to tell you what time dinner was, dinner time happened whenever you wanted it to. What you ate? Also whatever you wanted it to be. That night, it was Oreos and milk—a personal favorite.

After dinner I suffered from a particularly bad tummy ache, and treated myself to the best medicine: a night spent watching TV. Whether it was on *Spongebob* or the History channel, my mind was fixated on Santa (or the possible lack thereof).

At some point I fell asleep. At around one in the morning, I woke up to the sound of the door opening and groceries dropping to the floor.

Mother (didn't know I was there, so cursing was ok): Shit!

That was surprising. She usually wouldn't be home for another hour, at which point she would go to bed and then get back up four hours later without saying hello. I realized then that there was a question that had to be asked if I ever wanted to be able to sleep again.

Me (with little hope): Mom? Is Santa Claus real?

She didn't answer me. Whether she didn't hear me or pretended not to, I wasn't sure, but I wasn't going to bed until I found out. I followed her around as she put the groceries away and lit a cigarette. I loved these times when she wasn't in a complete hurry. A chance to see my mother whom I loved so very dearly was a rare treat, like lunch money.

I crawled into her lap and rested my head against her chest. She wrapped her free arm around me and squeezed. A mother hug. I couldn't remember the last time I had gotten one. We sat like that for a while as I immortalized the moment, temporarily forgetting about my problems with the big man in the red suit. I felt wetness land on my cheek. It turned into a steady stream,

and I started to cry too. I was crying because my mother was crying. And when my mother was crying, life was worse than usual.

Me: What's wrong?

Mother (speaking the truest word I'd ever heard): Everything.

My personal scope of "everything" was limited at eight years old, but broad enough to know that it really could all be wrong.

Me (happy to be with her despite the tears): How come you aren't going to bed?

Mother (as if reading an obituary) I don't have to get up for work in the morning anymore, dear.

As a child, I should have been happier to hear that. It was good news. But I had been doing math since earlier that day, and I realized that if Santa weren't real, the presents came from my mother. If there were no presents, there was no Christmas. And if there was no Christmas, I wouldn't have the one day that I could be sure my parents would be happy and smiling and maybe even kissing: kissing each other and kissing me. Santa needed to be real or else that equation would fail.

Me (child comedian): Does that mean I don't have to go to school anymore?

My mother sighed, she cried, she laughed, she did all of it in the same exhalation.

Mother (having heard me earlier): Do you believe that Santa is real?

Me (with conviction): I want to.

Mother (holding me and the world together with both of our dreams): So do I.