The Perils of Believing in Santa Claus

By John DiFelice

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He sat alone in the dark and stared at the multicolored lights strung around the artificial tree he bought at Walmart. His wife had done all of the decorating again; he hadn't helped at all this year, unlike last year when he had at least hung the wreaths outside. With each passing season, he had done less and less, leading to the present display of guilt-free disinterest. Had he any guilt left, it would have broken the inertia that fastened him to the sofa, to the cushion farthest from the kitchen and closest to the front door. The front door had changed. He noticed it back in April, but didn't understand how. It was the same size and mahogany color. He decided it wasn't something intrinsic to the door itself, but in its function, the way it worked within its surroundings, and what it represented: safety and security. The door had always been something that kept things out. Now he saw a new function, one he didn't like.

It bothered him that he felt no guilt. He had felt it in the past, but that was before he quantified how guilt ebbs with time. It decays, and there was nothing he could do to change it. All he had to do was wait, pour himself a glass of Maker's that rounded off the corners of each uninspired day, and squint. When he squinted, he no longer saw the tree. The garlands were gone, as were the old photographs, the heirloom ornaments, and the ones made by their child she had hung with painstaking care. He couldn't see any of it. All he saw were the lights. They could have been the Manhattan skyline, the strip in Vegas, or Bourbon Street, two days before Mardi Gras. They could have been any of those things, but they weren't.

He could hear the ice on the front steps harden as the temperature dropped. The ice in his glass had long since melted, leaving a thin layer of brownish water floating above the whiskey. He swirled the glass to mix it in, and took the last swallow before rising and walking into the kitchen, where more

bourbon awaited him in the back of the corner cabinet, the one near the microwave.

She sat in the kitchen, addressing Christmas cards at the table made for them by the Amish. She heard him approach and looked up at him through the glasses she had bought the previous month. She needed glasses now. He would, too; it was only a few years away. He went with her to pick them out and wanted her to get larger lenses surrounded by black rims, something to make her eyes stand out and look even bigger. She didn't. She was strong-willed when it came to her appearance; it was one of the things he said he liked about her back when they first met. He liked her big eyes then, too. They weren't big, but enormous—enormous and mint green. After he met her, he told his best friend that he was "haunted" by them, and then endured his ridicule for the rest of the dinner. But over the years, her eyes no longer had that effect on him. They seemed smaller to him. They also looked paler, washed out like a photograph left in the sun. He didn't like her new glasses.

"Timmy asleep?" he asked. He reached far into the corner cabinet, not caring if she saw him, but practicing stealth out of habit.

"Yes, he went right out," she replied. "He's so cute in his new PJs."

"Yeah," he said absently.

She removed another return address label and fixed it to the upper left corner of an envelope. "I was thinking it'd be nice to take him downtown tomorrow," she said. "Santa is at Macy's."

"Tomorrow?" he said, and not in a way to promote the idea. He accompanied his question with ice cubes hitting the bottom of the glass. She looked up when she heard them. He shut the freezer door, causing magnets and photographs to fall and hit the tiled floor. Green pine needles from the fake tree lay scattered across the kitchen threshold, near the refrigerator, clinging to the tile grout. "I have stuff to do tomorrow," he said. He bent down and picked up one of the needles. The floor was like ice.

"Tomorrow is the only Saturday before Christmas," she reminded him. "I would have taken him earlier, but you said you wanted to go."

"I know, I know," he said. He stepped on the trash can pedal to open the lid, and let the needle fall, watching it disappear in the spaces between the other trash. "I do, it's just that I have a bunch of work stuff, you know."

"A couple of hours out won't kill you. Who knows how much longer he'll believe in Santa Claus. This could be the last year."

"You said that last year."

"It could be."

"You said it the year before that, too."

"I think it's sweet that he still believes."

"'Sweet' isn't the word I'd use," he said. He twisted off the cap and filled the short glass an inch below the rim. "I've been thinking about this," he said. He left the bottle on the counter. "He's nine years old. Don't you think it's a little...I don't know...Don't you think he should've figured it out by now? I was six or seven when I figured it out."

"Each child's different."

"Clearly," he said. "I hoped he'd be a little more observant, a little more…" He drank down a mouthful of the chilled liquor.

"A little more what?" she asked.

"Intelligent."

The word hung in the silence that followed. He was sorry he had said it. She arched her brow and straightened her posture. "You're questioning his intelligence?"

He was sorry he had said it, but not enough to back down. "That's not where I meant to go, but I guess I am," he said.

"That makes me question yours."

"Be serious."

"I am."

"I'm not the one who believes some obese, elderly man delivers presents to seven billion people in one night." He smiled at his joke.

"It's not about intelligence. It's about faith. One has nothing to do with the other."

"I never bought into that," he said. "When I was seven, I didn't believe in Santa Claus and knew where babies came from. I knew how they were made and everything—none of that stork business either, I knew the real deal."

"Congratulations."

"What I'm saying is I was curious. I wanted to know things, I wanted to understand why things happen. He doesn't seem curious at all. He just accepts things, whatever's told to him. Where is his intellectual curiosity? Don't you care about that?"

"I like that he's still innocent. There's plenty of time for him to learn the truth about life."

"You got that right," he said, and took another drink. "But what if he still believes in Santa Claus when he's thirty-five? What then? Would you like that kind of innocence? No, you'd think something was wrong with him, and you'd be right. There would have to be something wrong with him."

"Nine is far from thirty-five."

"It wouldn't be sweet, is what I'm saying."

"It could be," she said. Her eyes glistened.

"Yeah, but—

He started to say something, then let it die. He brought the glass to his lips again. He looked at her over the rim and watched her sign Christmas cards without asking him to help. She never asked him to help. She never asked him to do anything, never demanded that he do anything of any kind. Maybe that was part of the problem: she had set the bar too low. Maybe that's why he had gotten so lazy. His friends said he was lucky because he seemed to do as he pleased. He could go out as often as he wanted, not that he did, but he could.

That part of his life changed during the past year. He'd been staying later and later at the office, and then going out to bars with some of the young people right out of college or business school. Next to them, he felt ancient. He viewed them as a different species. They had their own language, their own customs. They also had their own look, especially the women who dressed in outfits better suited for a club than the office. They wore lace tops and skirts that clung to their hips before flaring out and drawing the eye to skinny legs in black stockings. Their eyes popped from halos of poker-straight hair and smoky eyelids lined with black.

He made a mistake. He had lingered too long after a work happy hour, when the group had dwindled to just him and a flirtatious young woman with large brown eyes that she accentuated with black-framed glasses. She was much too young for him. She asked if he'd mind walking her home. She lived nearby, and there had been an assault in the area; she couldn't be too careful. He walked with her down dimly lit streets and squinted at the lights to make them shine brighter. He swore to himself that he wouldn't go up to her apartment. They arrived at her door, and she asked him in. When he left hours later, he swore it wouldn't happen again—another broken vow.

But guilt ebbs with time.

He watched his wife stick another return address label on an envelope. How could she not know? He was glad she didn't know, but it still bothered him. Where was her intellectual curiosity? How could she not know?

The silence caused her to look up at him. She smiled.

He spoke: "So why don't you still believe in Santa Claus?"

"How do you know I don't?" she said.

"So you do?"

"Yes, and I'm...how old am I now?"

"You're thirty-nine, darling."

"You're sweet, dearest, but we both know I'm forty-two. I've been forty-two for almost a

year. That means soon I'll be forty-three."

"Funny how numbers work," he said. "We're all helpless captives of them, aren't we?"

"If you want to be negative, you could say something like that."

What's wrong with being negative, he thought. There's a name for people who are happy all the time. They're called fools. Having an analytical mind and seeing the world as it is can cause negativity, but it's better than being blindly faithful. It's better than believing in Santa Claus at the age of thirty-five.

"So, you believe in Santa Claus even though you're the one buying all the gifts?" he asked.

"Maybe I am Santa Claus," she said.

He laughed. "OK, Santa. What do I get?"

"Were you good this year?"

He stared at her. "You tell me."

She stared back at him. "You already know you're getting a new iPhone. But I don't think we should share an ID anymore. I read that if two people share an Apple ID like we do, they can sometimes get each other's text messages."

In one-millionth of a second, her big eyes flashed at his, and the amount of information they conveyed surpassed what could be transferred and processed by all the supercomputers in the world. She knew. She knew everything, and he now found it impossible that he ever thought she couldn't know. He could see how much smarter she was, how much smarter she had always been. There was never a chance she wouldn't know.

He put the glass down on the counter to silence the faint, high-pitched rattling of the ice. He stared at the glass until he could no longer avert his eyes. He looked at her.

"Do you know how smart our son is?" she asked, rising from the table. "His friend Jim was over the other day, and I heard Timmy confide that he doesn't believe in Santa Claus anymore but plays along for our sake because he knows how much it means to us. He's only nine. To have that kind of empathy at nine is remarkable, don't you think?"

She gathered the stack of cards. They were the typical store-bought kind, the ones with clichés splashed across the fronts in big letters. But inside were her personal notes, each one unique, meaningful, and sincere. She signed them with love from herself, her son, and her husband.

He watched her leave the room and listened as the living room carpet swallowed the sounds of her footsteps. She turned and ascended the stairs and out of view. Still watching, he reached for the bottle but knocked it over. It hit the counter and spun a half turn, but he had nothing to clean up because it was empty.